

Wednesday, 6 December 2023

(10.00 am)

**LADY HALLETT:** Mr Keith, before we start, I would like to express my concern about reports in the press over the last few days of the contents of Mr Johnson's witness statement to the Inquiry and what his evidence will be.

Until a witness is called, and appears at a hearing, or the Inquiry publishes the witness's statement, it's meant to be confidential between the witness, the Inquiry and the core participants. I wish to remind all those involved in the Inquiry process that they must maintain this confidentiality so as to allow the sharing of materials prior to hearings between those most involved in the Inquiry process. Failing to respect confidentiality undermines the Inquiry's ability to do its job fairly, effectively and independently.

**MR KEITH:** Thank you, my Lady.

**LADY HALLETT:** Thank you.

**MR KEITH:** Well, my Lady, today's witness is Boris Johnson.

**MR BORIS JOHNSON (sworn)**

**Questions from LEAD COUNSEL TO THE INQUIRY**

**MR KEITH:** Could you commence your evidence, please, by giving us your full name.

**A.** Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson.

**Q.** Thank you, Mr Johnson. Thank you for attending today,

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though I am to the hundreds of thousands of healthcare workers and many other public servants and people in all walks of life who helped to protect our country throughout a dreadful pandemic, I do hope that this Inquiry will help to get the answers to the very difficult questions that those victims and those families are rightly asking, so that we can protect ourselves better, help each other to help protect ourselves better in the future, and prevent further suffering.

And it's if not too impertinent, may I say, as the person, as you rightly say, Mr Keith, who set up this Inquiry, how grateful I am to you for what you're doing and for the immense care that you're plainly taking.

**LADY HALLETT:** Thank you.

**MR KEITH:** Mr Johnson, just a few more questions more, please, in relation to your career.

On 9 June 2023, did you announce your intention to stand down as the Member of Parliament for Uxbridge and South Ruislip? You then, I think, formally resigned the following Monday, 12 June, when you were appointed Steward and Bailiff of the Three Hundreds of Chiltern. You were, of course, previously Foreign Secretary and Mayor of London.

You correctly observe that you yourself announced

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and for the provision of your witness statement, INQ000255836. It's dated 31 August, as you know, and it contains the usual declaration as to the truth of its contents on the final page, I think, page 233.

Mr Johnson, you were, of course, Prime Minister between 24 July 2019, when you were invited to form an administration following the resignation of Theresa May MP as leader of the Conservative Party, and 6 September 2022, you having announced your resignation earlier that year on 7 July. Is that correct?

**A.** Yes, it is, Mr Keith.

By your leave, my Lady, can I just say how glad I am to be at this Inquiry and how sorry I am for the pain and the loss and the suffering --

**LADY HALLETT:** Please stop, Mr Johnson.

Please sit down. Please sit down or I'm afraid you'll have to leave the hearing room. I'm sorry, if you don't sit down, I'm going to ask the ushers to get you to leave. Right, ushers, could you ask them to leave.

**(Pause)**

**A.** Could I say, by your leave, that I understand the feelings of these victims and their families, and I am deeply sorry for the pain and the loss and the suffering of those victims, and their families. And grateful

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the institution of this statutory Inquiry on 12 May 2021. You ordered the institution of a full and independent public inquiry, did you not?

**A.** I did, Mr Keith, and I believe that's the right way forward.

**Q.** When you made that announcement, you said this:

"Amid such tragedy, the state has an obligation to examine its actions as rigorously and candidly as possible ..."

The number of deaths across the United Kingdom, calculated whether by registration on the death certificate "through Covid" or the measure of excess deaths, is now over 230,000. By any measure, Mr Johnson, that is a shocking figure and a terrible loss of life. Is that the tragedy to which you were referring when you said, in this tragedy, "the state has an obligation to examine its actions"?

**A.** That is certainly the core of the tragedy, yes.

**Q.** Do you agree that if the protection of life is the pre-eminent duty that every government owes to its citizens, then the number of those who died is an important, if not the most important, marker against which your administration must be measured?

**A.** I certainly think it's the -- it was -- what we were trying to prevent was the loss of life, absolutely.

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- 1 Q. The virus left in its wake, of course, not just death  
2 but injury and misery, and indirectly through the  
3 lockdowns it left pain and incalculable economic and  
4 societal damage. Were those and are those impacts which  
5 you also envisaged this Inquiry would look at when you  
6 ordered its institution?
- 7 A. Of course.
- 8 Q. Do you accept, and we may, I think, presume from your  
9 opening remarks that you do, that the bereaved and those  
10 who suffered, of whom there are very many in number, are  
11 entitled to no less than an absolutely full and rigorous  
12 scrutiny?
- 13 A. Of course.
- 14 Q. When you made that announcement, you also said that this  
15 process will place the state's actions under the  
16 microscope, and the government would be required to  
17 disclose all relevant information. In light of those  
18 words, could I just ask you, please, to confirm what  
19 your approach has been to the disclosure of your own  
20 Covid related emails, WhatsApps and notes?
- 21 A. I've done my best to give everything of any conceivable  
22 relevance.
- 23 Q. Has that always been your position, Mr Johnson?
- 24 A. Yes.
- 25 Q. Could we have INQ000265619, please, page 68.

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- 1 You made clear, I think, through your solicitors,  
2 however, that you had a phone which you used from  
3 May 2021, and you've made available the WhatsApps and  
4 the emails from that phone, therefore, between May 2021  
5 and February 2022, the end of the period that  
6 the Inquiry was requesting about.
- 7 But following a well publicised security breach, you  
8 had not been able --
- 9 A. Yeah.
- 10 Q. -- to access the previous phone because you'd stopped  
11 using it and you were fearful that if you tried to  
12 access it you'd delete its data. Is that right?
- 13 A. That's right.
- 14 Q. Were you able to get access, ultimately, to the contents  
15 of that first phone, the old phone?
- 16 A. Yes, so we sent it off to some technical people and they  
17 activated it.
- 18 Q. Was there a time gap, as your solicitors have described  
19 it, on that phone, a period between 30 January 2020 and  
20 June 2020 during which time the WhatsApps have not  
21 been --
- 22 A. Yes.
- 23 Q. -- capable of being reinstalled --
- 24 A. Yeah.
- 25 Q. -- and disclosed?

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1 This is a WhatsApp between your former  
2 permanent secretary in Number 10 and then latterly  
3 Cabinet Secretary and your principal private secretary,  
4 Simon Case, and respectively Martin Reynolds, and the  
5 Cabinet Secretary said:

6 "[The Prime Minister] is mad if he doesn't think his  
7 WhatsApps will become public via Covid Inquiry ... he  
8 was clearly not in the mood for that discussion  
9 tonight!"

10 That date, 20 December 2021, was just five days  
11 after you had, in fact, appointed my Lady as the Chair  
12 of this Inquiry. Was there a debate at that time within  
13 government as to whether or not your WhatsApps should be  
14 disclosed and, if so, whether or not they would become  
15 public by virtue of their disclosure in this process?

16 A. I don't remember that conversation to which the  
17 Cabinet Secretary is referring, and I've handed over all  
18 the relevant WhatsApps.

19 Q. The Inquiry has indeed requested all the key  
20 Covid-related texts, WhatsApps and so on from  
21 January 2020 to February 2022, and it must be made  
22 absolutely clear that throughout the course of the  
23 litigation in the summer and throughout these  
24 proceedings, you have made available, it would seem,  
25 everything in your possession.

6

- 1 A. That's right.
- 2 Q. Do you know why your phone was missing those 5,000-odd  
3 WhatsApps?
- 4 A. I don't know the exact reason, but it looks as though  
5 it's something to do with the app going down, and then  
6 coming up again, but somehow not -- automatically  
7 erasing all the things between that date, when it went  
8 down, and the moment when it was last backed up. So  
9 I -- I can't give you the technical explanation, but  
10 that's the best I'm able to give.
- 11 Q. The technical report that your solicitors kindly  
12 provided demonstrates that there may have been a factory  
13 reset of the phone at the end of January 2020 and then  
14 an attempt to reinstall the contents later in June 2020.  
15 May I just ask you this: was it you, if that was  
16 a factory reset that was done, that tried to reset the  
17 phone or not?
- 18 A. A factory reset?
- 19 Q. There was a -- there is a device or a capability on the  
20 phone which allows its contents to be entirely reset.  
21 That wasn't you?
- 22 A. I don't remember any such thing.
- 23 Q. All right.

24 During the course of the litigation this summer  
25 between the Inquiry and the Cabinet Office, did you

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1 of course make plain your stated wish that the WhatsApps  
 2 which were the subject of that litigation should be  
 3 disclosed --  
 4 **A.** Yes.  
 5 **Q.** -- they being your own WhatsApps? All right.  
 6 **A.** Can I, for the avoidance of doubt, make it absolutely  
 7 clear I haven't removed any WhatsApps from my phone, and  
 8 I've given you everything that I think you need.  
 9 **Q.** I ask, Mr Johnson, because this issue has been trailed  
 10 in the press --  
 11 **A.** Yeah, no, I get it.  
 12 **Q.** -- and it's important that you have an opportunity of  
 13 explaining why those WhatsApps are not available.  
 14 In your witness statement, at paragraph 10, you say,  
 15 Mr Johnson, that unquestionably mistakes were made, and  
 16 for those you say you unreservedly apologise. We have  
 17 the statement there.  
 18 I'd like you, please, to set out in broad terms --  
 19 of course we'll be looking at detail of it later -- what  
 20 mistakes you refer to there, bearing in mind that we are  
 21 only concerned in this module, Mr Johnson, with the core  
 22 decision-making, with the lockdown decisions, the NPIs,  
 23 the non-pharmaceutical interventions, and so on, not  
 24 vaccines, therapeutics --  
 25 **A.** Yeah.

9

1 in paragraph 10 when you say "There was terrible  
 2 suffering", but in relation to which "where we failed,  
 3 I apologise again"? For what are you apologising in  
 4 that statement?  
 5 **A.** Well, I think, just to go back to your main point, which  
 6 is that so many people suffered, so many people lost  
 7 their lives, inevitably in the course of trying to  
 8 handle a very, very difficult pandemic in which we had  
 9 to balance appalling harms on either side of the  
 10 decision, we may have made mistakes. I think it --  
 11 I don't want to try to anticipate the discussion which  
 12 I'm sure we will get into about the timings of NPIs, of  
 13 lockdowns ... inevitably we got some things wrong.  
 14 I think we were doing our best at the time, given what  
 15 we knew, given the information I had available to me at  
 16 the time, I think we did our level best. Were there  
 17 things that we should have done differently?  
 18 Unquestionably. But, you know, I would struggle to  
 19 itemise them all before you now in a hierarchy,  
 20 I'm afraid. I think it would be -- I'd find it easier  
 21 to try to explain what happened as we went through.  
 22 **Q.** You say in your witness statement:  
 23 "We -- I -- unquestionably made mistakes ..."  
 24 Can you draw a distinction for us, please, between  
 25 yourself personally and the government? To what extent

11

1 **Q.** -- antivirals.  
 2 **A.** Okay.  
 3 **Q.** What mistakes do you unquestionably accept were made?  
 4 **A.** Well, I think if you look at my statement, I point out  
 5 that we were relying so much on messaging to help  
 6 contain the virus, and we needed a -- the public to  
 7 understand the message in as straightforward a way as  
 8 possible. And they really did, by and large. One  
 9 problem we had that I mention is that because of the  
 10 very, you know, natural and proper right of the devolved  
 11 administrations to have their own approach, sometimes  
 12 there was a bit of -- so the BBC News would have one  
 13 message from Number 10, then a slightly different one  
 14 from Scotland or wherever, and that -- I think we need  
 15 to sort that out in future. And, you know, I'm sure  
 16 there are plenty of other things that we could have done  
 17 differently, but I've no doubt we'll come to them in the  
 18 course of the examination.  
 19 **Q.** So your position today is, and you've appeared to refer  
 20 to it as the first issue, that the primary mistake made  
 21 rests in the context of the messaging and your  
 22 communications with the devolved administrations?  
 23 **A.** Well, you asked me to cite a mistake that we made,  
 24 I didn't say that was the primary mistake, but --  
 25 **Q.** What primary mistakes, Mr Johnson, are you referring to

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1 do you accept --  
 2 **A.** I take --  
 3 **Q.** -- personal responsibility as opposed to accepting it on  
 4 behalf of your administration?  
 5 **A.** So I take personal responsibility for all the decisions  
 6 that we made.  
 7 **Q.** It's obvious, Mr Johnson, that many of the most  
 8 difficult and momentous decisions rested upon your own  
 9 shoulders as Prime Minister. Do you take responsibility  
 10 for whatever my Lady makes of the speed of the  
 11 government's response in January, February, March of  
 12 2020?  
 13 **A.** Of course.  
 14 **Q.** And the way in which the various moving parts of the  
 15 government, the advisory committees, the departments,  
 16 the agencies and so on, responded?  
 17 **A.** Of course.  
 18 **Q.** Do you take responsibility for the lockdown decisions,  
 19 whichever way they went, and their timeliness --  
 20 **A.** Of course.  
 21 **Q.** -- whatever my Lady makes of them?  
 22 **A.** Of course.  
 23 **Q.** The manner in which patients were discharged from  
 24 hospitals into the care sector?  
 25 **A.** Of course.

12

1 Q. The explosion of the virus within the residential care  
2 sector?  
3 A. Yes.  
4 Q. The general speed at which the restrictions were eased?  
5 A. Yes.  
6 Q. The Eat Out to Help Out scheme?  
7 A. Yes.  
8 Q. And then latterly in 2020 the decision not to introduce  
9 a circuit-breaker in September or October or to  
10 introduce a tier system earlier, when the prevalence of  
11 the virus was lower, for good or ill?  
12 A. Yes, though we did have local restrictions from a very  
13 early date.  
14 Q. You did.  
15 May I just ask you, please, this question, also: you  
16 refer to mistakes; it's very important that the Inquiry  
17 understands to what extent it's accepted that there were  
18 mistakes as opposed to an acceptance that with hindsight  
19 the government could have done better. Do you mean  
20 there were failings, things or decisions that you got  
21 avoidably wrong, whether because they were the wrong  
22 decisions or because your management and leadership  
23 meant that the right decisions were less likely to be  
24 taken, or do you mean with hindsight you just could have  
25 done better?

13

1 other countries suffered terrible losses from Covid.  
2 Q. They did.  
3 A. And the evidence that I've seen suggests that we were  
4 well down the European table and well down the world  
5 table. Though that is of course no comfort to the  
6 bereaved and their families, that seems to be the  
7 statistical reality.  
8 Q. The evidence before my Lady is that the United Kingdom  
9 had one of the highest rates of excess death in Europe,  
10 almost all other Western European countries had a lower  
11 level of excess death.  
12 A. Not that I've seen.  
13 Q. Italy was, tragically, in a worse position than the  
14 United Kingdom.  
15 A. Well, I don't wish to contradict you, Mr Keith, but the  
16 evidence -- the ONS data I saw put us, I think, about  
17 16th or 19th in a table of 33.  
18 Q. In Western Europe, we were one of the worst off, if not  
19 the second worst off.  
20 You must have long reflected since that time why  
21 that was so. Why do you think that we had the rate of  
22 excess deaths in this country that we did ultimately  
23 have?  
24 A. As I say, I think that the statistics vary, and I think  
25 that the -- every country struggled with a new pandemic,

15

1 A. Well, that's a sort of deterministic question, isn't it?  
2 Q. Well, it's an important one.  
3 A. I think the answer is that with hindsight it may be easy  
4 to see things that we could have done differently, or it  
5 may be possible to see things that we could have done  
6 differently. At the time, I felt, and I know that  
7 everybody else felt, that we were doing our best in very  
8 difficult circumstances to protect life and protect the  
9 NHS.  
10 Q. It is impossible, and arguably improper, to attribute  
11 any individual death causally to any particular  
12 governmental decision, as I know you know, and no  
13 possible purpose would be served in such an exercise.  
14 But do you accept that overall the government  
15 decision-making, not the pandemic, but the government  
16 decision-making in response, led materially to there  
17 being a greater number of excess deaths in the  
18 United Kingdom than might otherwise have been the case?  
19 A. I can't give you the answer to that question. I'm not  
20 sure. I notice the -- that in your opening preamble  
21 a few months ago you produced a slide saying that the UK  
22 was, I think, second only to Italy for excess deaths.  
23 Q. Correct.  
24 A. That's not, to the best of my knowledge, the case. And  
25 I think that many other -- all I would say is that many

14

1 and I think the UK, from the evidence that I have seen,  
2 was well down the European table and obviously even  
3 further down the world table.  
4 If I had to answer why I think we faced particular  
5 headwinds, I would say it was irrespective of government  
6 action. We have an elderly population, extremely  
7 elderly population, we do suffer sadly from lots of  
8 Covid-related comorbidities, and we are a very densely  
9 populated country, the second most densely populated  
10 country in Europe, and that -- that did not help.  
11 Q. Do you accept that government actions materially  
12 contributed to that outcome? It wasn't just a matter of  
13 the state of the healthcare system, density, age of  
14 population and, in fact, the geographical location of  
15 the United Kingdom?  
16 A. Given that other countries have excellent healthcare  
17 systems and faced similar problems and ended up in a --  
18 statistically with more excess deaths per 100,000, the  
19 answer is I don't know. I don't know.  
20 Q. You are obviously extremely well aware of the argument  
21 that the lockdown decisions themselves cumulatively and  
22 individually contributed to the number of excess deaths.  
23 What do you say to that?  
24 A. I say that I don't know, but I'm aware of the arguments  
25 that are made. What I would say respectfully to people

16

1 is that they were very, very difficult decisions, and  
 2 the issue of the timeliness of lockdowns was clearly one  
 3 that we considered very hard at the time, and you will  
 4 have seen from the evidence that there were strong  
 5 arguments against going too early into lockdowns,  
 6 especially when it came to that first series of March  
 7 NPIs. And you'll remember the arguments that were made,  
 8 two arguments, against early action, and they were the  
 9 risk of behavioural fatigue and then the risk of  
 10 bounceback or what you've called uncoiling of the  
 11 spring, and they were made powerfully and they certainly  
 12 had a big effect on me.

13 **Q.** Could you assist the Inquiry, please, with something  
 14 about the nature of the heavy responsibility which  
 15 rested on your shoulders. It is perhaps self-evident  
 16 that only the most difficult and momentous decisions  
 17 come from the Prime Minister.

18 **A.** That's correct.

19 **Q.** Were there any good or easy decisions to be made in this  
 20 context?

21 **A.** No. I can't think of a single -- well, I suppose, it  
 22 was an easy decision to say that we should go ahead with  
 23 the roll-out of both Pfizer and AstraZeneca as soon as  
 24 they had been approved by the MHRA. But there were  
 25 no -- when it came to the -- forgive me, Mr Keith, but

17

1 open-endedly made by Cabinet?

2 **A.** That's a very good question, because I think it was  
 3 both. A huge number of decisions, because they had to  
 4 be taken so fast, were funnelled up directly to me, but  
 5 there were also a large number of decisions, and I do  
 6 think this maybe hasn't come out as much as it should,  
 7 that were the subject of exhaustive Cabinet discussion.

8 **Q.** In his witness statement, Michael Gove has said that the  
 9 wider Cabinet was brought into decisions at times too  
 10 late and too little. Mr Javid has said in his witness  
 11 statement that the Cabinet was designed, in his view, to  
 12 place Dominic Cummings and the Prime Minister as the  
 13 decision-makers, to centralise power in Number 10.

14 In his own witness statement, Mr Cummings has said  
 15 that the Cabinet was largely irrelevant to policy or  
 16 execution, on account of the leaks, your inability to  
 17 chair it, and because it was seen by Number 10 as not  
 18 being a serious place for serious discussion.

19 **A.** I don't think that's true. I think there were some  
 20 really excellent Cabinet discussions about the  
 21 trade-offs. If I had to make a comment about Cabinet as  
 22 a whole in terms of the speed of lockdowns, which was  
 23 your -- what we're talking about, I think it probably  
 24 would be fair to say that the Cabinet was, on the whole,  
 25 more reluctant to impose NPIs necessarily than I was.

19

1 when it came to the balance of the need to protect the  
 2 public and protect the NHS and the damage done by  
 3 lockdowns, it was incredibly difficult.

4 **LADY HALLETT:** Pause there, please. I do understand  
 5 emotions are running very high, I do, and I think it's  
 6 most unfortunate when I have to ask people to leave, but  
 7 we have to ensure that this hearing is effective, and  
 8 it's got to be effective not just for people in this  
 9 hearing room but for people watching on the online  
 10 streaming. So, please, make sure your behaviour is  
 11 appropriate to a public hearing of a statutory inquiry.  
 12 Thank you.

13 Sorry to interrupt.

14 **A.** No, it's fine.

15 **MR KEITH:** We'll look at the nature of the particular  
 16 decisions in greater detail later, but broadly speaking,  
 17 so that we know the lie of the land and we know how you  
 18 approached these issues, were the majority of the most  
 19 momentous decisions, the decisions, for example, to  
 20 impose the lockdowns and social distancing measures and  
 21 so on, were they decisions that were in practice made by  
 22 you --

23 **A.** Yes.

24 **Q.** -- even if they were affirmed or endorsed by the Cabinet  
 25 later, or were they decisions that were entirely

18

1 That wasn't true for every member of the Cabinet, but  
 2 that would be a general comment.

3 **Q.** The lockdown decision of 23 March 2020 was debated, as  
 4 you rightly say, at great length on the Sunday, on the  
 5 Monday by the various bodies but in particular COBR, but  
 6 it was debated in COBR on Monday the 23rd, a public  
 7 announcement we'll all recall was made that day, that  
 8 evening in fact, and then it went to Cabinet on the  
 9 Tuesday. So in relation to the first lockdown decision,  
 10 it's obvious that Cabinet debated it after the event.

11 In relation to the second lockdown, that of  
 12 November 2020, Mr Johnson, do you recall whether or not  
 13 that decision was made by a Covid ministerial committee  
 14 or by Cabinet?

15 **A.** I'm afraid I can't remember the sequence there. But  
 16 just picking you up on the first -- the first lockdown,  
 17 which was actually a sort of crescendo of measures, I'm  
 18 fairly certain we had a long Cabinet call, at least, to  
 19 discuss it.

20 **Q.** Well, we'll look at that in detail later.

21 The Inquiry's heard a great deal of evidence,  
 22 Mr Johnson, about the way in which your  
 23 secretaries of state would naturally and permissibly  
 24 come at the same issue, whether to have a lockdown,  
 25 whether to ease, whether to have a tier system and the

20

1 like, from different angles. The Secretary of State for  
 2 Health and Social Care understandably would promote the  
 3 public health consequences, and the need to act in the  
 4 public health. The Chancellor would frequently promote  
 5 the economic considerations. But all, it's obvious,  
 6 were aware to greater or lesser degree of the societal  
 7 and economic harm that would result from the decisions  
 8 that you were having to contemplate making.

9 Who ultimately had to weigh up and determine the  
 10 competing public interest considerations, public health,  
 11 societal harm, economic damage and so on? On whose  
 12 shoulders rested that debate?

13 **A.** That's the job of the Prime Minister, and there's only  
 14 the Prime Minister that can do that, but I think that  
 15 that wasn't actually a bad way of doing it, to have  
 16 different interests represented by different secretaries  
 17 of state and different departments.

18 **Q.** Presumably you needed the advice of your close advisers,  
 19 Cabinet Secretary, and those in the civil service, in  
 20 addition to the advice that you were receiving from --

21 **A.** Of course.

22 **Q.** -- your secretaries of state.

23 Could you give, please, the Inquiry an indication as  
 24 to the identity of the persons upon whom you were most  
 25 reliant in that debate, in that weighing-up exercise?

21

1 **Q.** -- Mark Sedwill and then latterly Simon Case.

2 You received advice from the CMO --

3 **A.** Yes.

4 **Q.** -- and then the general Chief Scientific Adviser --

5 **A.** Yes, I'm sorry, I should have cited them first, yes.

6 **Q.** It's apparent that on top of the formal advisory  
 7 structures, the meetings with the CMO and GCSA, the  
 8 meetings with the Cabinet Secretary, the meetings with  
 9 your ministers, you had a profusion of meetings with  
 10 your chief adviser, Mr Cummings, with your  
 11 Cabinet Secretary, with your principal private  
 12 secretary, and so on. There were a huge number of  
 13 rolling meetings with your innermost group of advisers,  
 14 and I want to know to what extent, therefore, you came  
 15 to rely upon them in the ultimate decision-making  
 16 process?

17 **A.** I of course relied on the advice I was given, but the  
 18 way it works is advisers advise and ministers decide,  
 19 and that was what happened.

20 **Q.** You received a great deal of advice from the Chief  
 21 Medical Officer --

22 **A.** Yes.

23 **Q.** -- and the Government Chief Scientific Adviser; they  
 24 were a vital source of advice --

25 **A.** Yes.

23

1 **A.** Well, I don't -- I don't wish to embarrass distinguished  
 2 public official by naming them, my Lady, I don't know  
 3 what the --

4 **Q.** Well --

5 **A.** I've found that civil servants on the whole are quite  
 6 happy to remain anonymous, but I can certainly tell you  
 7 that I had superb deputy private secretary,  
 8 a mathematician, an economist, who is brilliant at  
 9 understanding healthcare issues, and an absolutely  
 10 brilliant private secretary for healthcare.

11 **Q.** The Inquiry's obviously heard from a number of advisers  
 12 and civil servants --

13 **A.** I think you've heard from both those individuals.

14 **Q.** -- so there's no debate about their identity,  
 15 Mr Johnson.

16 **LADY HALLETT:** I think you may need to make the question  
 17 a bit more specific, Mr Keith.

18 **MR KEITH:** The evidence is, Mr Johnson, that you received  
 19 advice from advisers in Number 10 --

20 **A.** Yes.

21 **Q.** -- obviously your chief adviser, Mr Cummings.

22 **A.** Yes.

23 **Q.** You received advice from the Cabinet Secretary,  
 24 firstly --

25 **A.** Yes.

22

1 **Q.** -- that's obvious. You were aware that SAGE met  
 2 hundreds of times?

3 **A.** Yes.

4 **Q.** That's to say the Scientific Advisory Group for  
 5 Emergencies. Did you ever read their minutes or were  
 6 you wholly reliant on the CMO and the GCSA to relay to  
 7 you what SAGE had said?

8 **A.** I think I did once or twice look at the -- or maybe more  
 9 than that, I looked at what SAGE had actually said, and  
 10 SAGE certainly produced a lot of documentation. But  
 11 I think that the CSA and the CMO did an outstanding job  
 12 of leading SAGE and of distilling their views and  
 13 conveying them to me.

14 **Q.** The SAGE minutes were described as consensus minutes,  
 15 because they were designed to be read at speed, to be  
 16 able to get to the heart of the issue immediately on  
 17 reading them, and to ensure that the advice that was  
 18 being given --

19 **A.** Yes.

20 **Q.** -- would be readily and speedily understood. Did you  
 21 ever think of calling, as a general practice, for those  
 22 minutes so that you could yourself read them? Many of  
 23 them were only eight or nine pages long.

24 **A.** As I say, I think I did from time to time look at the  
 25 consensus minutes, and I think in retrospect it might

24

1 have been valuable to try to hear the SAGE conversation  
 2 unpasteurised itself, but I didn't -- I was more than  
 3 content with the very clear summaries that I was getting  
 4 from the CSA and the CMO.

5 **Q.** There were hundreds of consensus minutes but you read  
 6 only or were given only a fraction of them?

7 **A.** That sounds right to me, yes.

8 **Q.** All right.

9 We'll look in detail at some of the scientific  
 10 debates that engaged government, particularly in the  
 11 middle of March: behavioural fatigue, herd immunity, the  
 12 debate about the reasonable worst-case scenario, and so  
 13 on.

14 **A.** Yes.

15 **Q.** Did you not think of looking at -- the scientific horse  
 16 in the mouth and seeing what was actually being said by  
 17 the government's primary scientific advisory committee  
 18 on these issues, when, as now appears to be the case,  
 19 you were -- you became engaged particularly in the  
 20 debate of behavioural fatigue? Why didn't you call for  
 21 the primary material?

22 **A.** I think that's a good question. I was very, very much  
 23 impressed and -- by and dependent upon the CMO and the  
 24 CSA, both of whom are outstanding experts in their  
 25 field, and it felt to me that I couldn't do better than

25

1 and I think for all its difficulties, I think it -- it  
 2 did work well in allowing me to get a balance of the  
 3 argument.

4 **Q.** The evidence appears already to suggest that the  
 5 Chancellor of the Exchequer and then Her Majesty's  
 6 Treasury had considerable influence over the ultimate  
 7 decision-making process because the Chancellor would  
 8 come and see you in bilateral meetings, there were  
 9 bilateral meetings in the week of 16 March --

10 **A.** Yeah.

11 **Q.** -- before the first lockdown decision, in late October,  
 12 before the second, in the summer of 2021, and then again  
 13 in December of 2021 in relation to Omicron, and also Eat  
 14 Out to Help Out.

15 But that advice was given to you by the Chancellor  
 16 and Her Majesty's Treasury in a way that wasn't openly  
 17 transparent in the way that the SAGE advice was provided  
 18 to you. There were no minutes disclosed, of the advice  
 19 that you were being given, to the public. There was no  
 20 regular production of material or any kind of published  
 21 transparent economic analysis provided to you. Do you  
 22 think in hindsight that that was an error?

23 **A.** I think that there was certainly transparent economic  
 24 analysis of the cost of some of the measures that we  
 25 were obliged to enact, and the fall in GDP, the cost of

27

1 that.

2 **Q.** The CMO and the CSA were of course concerned with  
 3 medicine and science, and SAGE was concerned, as it says  
 4 on the tin, with science.

5 **A.** Well, the CMO is a professor of public health. I mean,  
 6 he knows an awful lot about epidemiology and public  
 7 behaviour in an epidemic.

8 **Q.** He does.

9 You had no advisory structure around you, however,  
 10 and by contrast, that dealt with matters such as the  
 11 economic damage --

12 **A.** Yeah.

13 **Q.** -- that would be done by the lockdown decisions. There  
 14 was no pandemic or civil emergency or societal advisory  
 15 body which might be thought to be analogous to SAGE. In  
 16 hindsight, and with the passage of time, do you suggest  
 17 that there was an absence of a proper advisory structure  
 18 to deal with the other issues and the other  
 19 considerations which weighed in the balance when you  
 20 came to make those final decisions?

21 **A.** I've thought about that a great deal, and I think in the  
 22 end that there is such a body, and it's called  
 23 HM Treasury, and that is what they do. And you referred  
 24 earlier on, Mr Keith, to the competing perspectives of  
 25 the Whitehall departments and the secretaries of state,

26

1 the CJRS, the -- and the other schemes was plain for all  
 2 to see. That was all -- that was all public.

3 Of course what was not public and is not  
 4 traditionally public is ministerial conversations and  
 5 discussion between ministers. But, again, I think the  
 6 perspective that I was being offered by the Treasury was  
 7 a very useful one, just as a perspective of the  
 8 Department of Health was a very useful one.

9 **Q.** The material, so that's to say diary entries and  
 10 read-outs from minutes and so on, Mr Johnson, show that  
 11 the Chancellor of the Exchequer would, in this difficult  
 12 context of making the ultimate decisions about lockdowns  
 13 and easing and tiers and so on, often get the last word  
 14 by way of a bilateral meeting that would take place just  
 15 before you made a final decision, and also that the  
 16 Secretary of State for Health and Social Care was  
 17 occasionally excluded from meetings when public health  
 18 matters were being discussed. Were you aware of that?

19 **A.** I -- I think that's -- I don't -- I reject that  
 20 characterisation of what took place. The overwhelming  
 21 priority of the government was protect the NHS, save  
 22 lives. That was our objective. And that was where my  
 23 officials were coming from, that was what we wanted to  
 24 do. And I think it was important in that context to --  
 25 you know, there were lots of things we had to do that

28

- 1 were very difficult, very costly, and it was right to  
 2 have endless conversations with the Treasury, which is  
 3 what we did.
- 4 **Q.** You know of course that a great deal of evidence has  
 5 been given to my Lady about the operation and the  
 6 competence of your administration. It needs to be  
 7 stated absolutely plainly that the Inquiry has  
 8 absolutely no interest in the salaciousness or the  
 9 nature of Mr Cummings' linguistic style or the  
 10 WhatsApps. But it does have an interest, of course, in  
 11 whether or not his communications revealed an abusive  
 12 and misogynistic impact. The WhatsApps and the texts  
 13 shed a direct light on the competence of the government,  
 14 how well or not the government machinery operated, what  
 15 you all thought about each other, and what some of you  
 16 thought privately about the decisions that were being  
 17 taken.
- 18 We're going to look in detail at them later, but  
 19 it's fair to say that, in the round, that material  
 20 paints --
- 21 **A.** Yes.
- 22 **Q.** -- an appalling picture, not all the time, but at times,  
 23 of incompetence and disarray.
- 24 **A.** Can I comment on that?
- 25 **Q.** Please.

29

- 1 of course asked to move on, and we'll come to that  
 2 later, in May 2020, described, according to  
 3 Sir Patrick Vallance, your administration as "brutal and  
 4 useless" and observed that it was hard to motivate  
 5 people in Number 10 in such terrible times if they were  
 6 being "shot in the back".
- 7 That would appear to be a reference to the doings,  
 8 as you say, of Number 10, to the process, and the  
 9 operation of government, as opposed to the atmospherics.
- 10 Would you not agree?
- 11 **A.** Again, I think that actually what you're looking at in  
 12 all this -- this stuff is a lot of highly talented and  
 13 highly motivated people who are stricken with anxiety  
 14 about what is happening, about the pandemic, who are  
 15 doing their best, and who, like all human beings, under  
 16 great stress and great anxiety about themselves and  
 17 their own performance, will be inclined to be critical  
 18 of others. And I think that that would have been the  
 19 same of any administration facing the same sort of  
 20 challenges on that scale.
- 21 **Q.** But do you accept that there is a considerable body of  
 22 material which addresses not just their private thoughts  
 23 of the other individuals in government, of them  
 24 personally, but relates to the performance of  
 25 government, to the way in which your administration

31

- 1 **A.** I think that the two things need to be separated out  
 2 there. I think it is certainly true that this Inquiry  
 3 has -- and I'm glad of it -- dredged up a phenomenal  
 4 quantity of the type of material that would never have  
 5 been available to any previous Inquiry into doings in  
 6 Number 10, because it's WhatsApp communications of  
 7 a kind that would not have been possible, and that's  
 8 a good thing because you can get a texture of the --  
 9 a feeling for the relationships and the human beings.
- 10 I would make a couple of points.
- 11 First of all, a lot of the language, the style that  
 12 you refer to is completely unknown to me, or indeed to  
 13 anybody else not on the -- on that group. I've  
 14 apologised to one particular person who suffered abuse  
 15 in that -- in one of those publicised WhatsApp  
 16 exchanges. But I would make a distinction between the  
 17 type of language used and the decision-making processes  
 18 of the government, and what we got done. And I would  
 19 submit that any powerful and effective government has --  
 20 and I think of the Thatcher government or the Blair  
 21 government -- has a lot of challenging and competing  
 22 characters whose views about each other might not be fit  
 23 to print, but who get an awful lot done, and that's what  
 24 we did.
- 25 **Q.** Your own Cabinet Secretary, Mark Sedwill, he was

30

- 1 actually operated? Do you accept that as a general  
 2 proposition?
- 3 **A.** Yes, I do, and I think that was a good and a healthy  
 4 thing, because we needed constant -- given the scale of  
 5 what we were facing, we needed constantly to challenge  
 6 ourselves, and constantly to try to do better.
- 7 **Q.** Your own chief adviser, Mr Cummings, described on 4 May  
 8 something the government had done as being the best  
 9 success of the "whole criminally incompetent government  
 10 performance". How could that be a good thing?
- 11 **A.** Because what he is trying to do is to -- he's -- it's  
 12 not for me to explain his quotation, you can ask him  
 13 yourself, but what we were generally trying to do was to  
 14 make sure that we delivered the best possible service  
 15 for the people of the UK, who were going through  
 16 an absolutely terrible, terrible time, and it would not  
 17 have been right to have a load -- if we'd had a load of  
 18 WhatsApps saying, "Aren't we doing brilliantly, folks,  
 19 isn't this going well?" I think your criticisms might  
 20 have been, frankly, even more pungent.
- 21 **Q.** On 27 March, after Mr Cummings had asserted that  
 22 Whitehall had "nearly killed huge numbers of people and  
 23 cost millions [of] jobs" and that Mr Hancock had failed  
 24 to get on top of the testing problems, you yourself said  
 25 these three words, "Totally fucking hopeless". That was

32



1 a reference to the performance of an important part of  
2 government?  
3 **A.** I'd stress the word "nearly" in that --  
4 **Q.** No, it's your response, Mr Johnson.  
5 **A.** -- and I would say that my job was not to -- not  
6 uncritically to accept that everything we were doing was  
7 good, though I -- as it happens, as I said to you, I do  
8 think that there were -- the country as a whole had  
9 notable achievements during the crisis. My job was to  
10 try to get a load of quite disparate, quite challenging  
11 characters to keep going and -- through a long period --  
12 and to keep doing their level best to protect the  
13 country. That was my job.  
14 **Q.** Do you accept the evidence from Helen MacNamara, about  
15 which you will be aware, and also from former  
16 Cabinet Secretaries that Mr Cummings himself contributed  
17 to such a toxic atmosphere that civil servants simply  
18 didn't want to work in the heart of government?  
19 Helen MacNamara said the relationships at Number 10 and  
20 the Cabinet Office had a real and damaging impact. You  
21 were told directly by Simon Case on 2 July lots of  
22 "top-drawer people" had refused to come to work because  
23 of the toxic reputation of your -- I emphasise "your" --  
24 operation.

25 Were you aware that there were individuals, civil

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1 come because of the "toxic reputation of [your]  
2 operation".  
3 **A.** Well, I don't remember that.  
4 **Q.** What did you do?  
5 **A.** I don't remember that, and my impression was that the --  
6 we had no difficulty recruiting the best possible  
7 people.  
8 **Q.** Could we have, please, INQ000048313, page 16, on the  
9 screen. These are communications between Mr Cummings  
10 and yourself in May 2020, we're concerned with the  
11 bottom half of the page.  
12 **A.** Sorry, can you expand it, because I can't --  
13 **Q.** Yes. 7 May:  
14 "Hancock is unfit for this job. The incompetence,  
15 the constant lies, the obsession with media  
16 bullshit ..."  
17 Reference to testing:  
18 "... you must ask him when we will get to 500k per  
19 day and where is your plan for testing ..."  
20 If we can scroll back out.  
21 **A.** But, sorry, I don't --  
22 **Q.** Just pause a second, Mr Johnson.  
23 If you then scroll in, please, to the bottom half of  
24 the page, the last part, Mr Cummings says:  
25 "It will certainly be a cock up like everything

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1 servants and advisers, who were not prepared to work in  
2 your administration because of the atmosphere and the  
3 working relationships which were in play?

4 **A.** First of all, no. Second -- I was not aware of that.  
5 Secondly, I didn't see any sign of that. I saw  
6 brilliantly talented people. When we wanted -- when we  
7 advised for a post, when we wanted to recruit for  
8 a position in my private office, we had, as far as  
9 I could see, no difficulty getting wonderful people to  
10 step forward.

11 I think, if I might make one -- I think one  
12 self-criticism, or another self-criticism, I think that  
13 the gender balance of my team should have been better,  
14 and if -- to your earlier question, looking back at it,  
15 when I was running London, it was great, and it was  
16 50/50, and it was a very harmonious team. I think  
17 sometimes during the pandemic too many meetings were too  
18 male dominated, if I'm absolutely honest with you. And  
19 I think that was a -- I tried sometimes to rectify it,  
20 I tried to recruit a former colleague from City Hall,  
21 but I think that was a -- that was something we should  
22 have done better.

23 **Q.** Simon Case, who was then the permanent secretary in  
24 Number 10, WhatsApped you yourself on 2 July to say that  
25 lots of people, lots of top-drawer people had refused to

34

1 else but ... it will be far from the worst of our  
2 cockups over next 8 weeks.

3 "You need to think ... of binning hancock."

4 And so on and so forth.

5 You cannot suggest that you were unaware of the  
6 opinion taken by your chief adviser over your Secretary  
7 of State for Health --

8 **A.** Of course.

9 **Q.** -- you cannot suggest you were unaware of the concerns  
10 expressed by your Cabinet Secretary about the toxic  
11 reputation of your operation, because he WhatsApped you  
12 directly. You cannot suggest that there weren't grave  
13 concerns being expressed in Downing Street that there  
14 were people who simply would not come and work for you  
15 because of the atmosphere you allowed to develop.

16 **A.** So, first of all, in politics, there's never a time when  
17 you're not -- if you're Prime Minister, you are  
18 constantly being lobbied by somebody to sack somebody  
19 else. It's just what, I'm afraid, happens, and it's  
20 part of life. Everybody's constantly militating against  
21 some other individual for some reason of their own.  
22 It's just -- I'm afraid that's the nature of it.

23 It is perfectly true that this adviser in particular  
24 thought -- had a low opinion of the Health Secretary.  
25 I thought he was wrong. I stuck by the

36

1 Health Secretary. I thought the Health Secretary worked  
 2 very hard and, whatever, he may have had defects, but  
 3 I thought that he was doing his best in very difficult  
 4 circumstances, and I thought he was a good communicator.  
 5 **Q.** Could we have INQ000303245, your first and then your  
 6 second Cabinet Secretary communicate by WhatsApp,  
 7 page 9.  
 8 Mr Case refers at the top of the page to how you  
 9 have told Mr Cummings outright to stop talking to the  
 10 media in his presence:  
 11 "This place is just insane, Zero discipline."  
 12 And then at the bottom half of the page:  
 13 "These people are so mad ... madly self-defeating."  
 14 "It's hard to ask people to [march] [it should be]  
 15 to the sound of gunfire if they're shot in the back."  
 16 Then the Cabinet Secretary -- the Cabinet Secretary  
 17 is the head of the civil service, is he or she not?  
 18 "I've never seen a bunch of people less well  
 19 equipped to run a country."  
 20 That's not a matter of atmospherics or lobbying or  
 21 part of the general day in, day out friction within  
 22 government, is it?  
 23 **A.** Yes, I think it is, and I think that if -- as I say, if  
 24 you'd had the views of the mandarin about the  
 25 Thatcher government, in unexpurgated WhatsApps, my Lady,  
 37

1 produced to this Inquiry.  
 2 Then page 245:  
 3 "[The Prime Minister] ... begins to argue for  
 4 letting it all rip ... 'they have had a good innings'.  
 5 And there is a reference there to "lack of  
 6 leadership", the last line:  
 7 "This all feels like a complete lack of leadership."  
 8 **A.** Look --  
 9 **Q.** Let me put the question.  
 10 Whether or not this significant number of advisers  
 11 correctly stated the position, whether or not this was  
 12 genuine, whether or not there were significant failings  
 13 in your own and your government's competence, would you  
 14 accept that it is extraordinary that the Government's  
 15 Chief Scientific Adviser, its chief adviser, its  
 16 Cabinet Secretaries, its Deputy Cabinet Secretary,  
 17 should all be commenting in these terms about --  
 18 **A.** No.  
 19 **Q.** -- competence and about performance and you?  
 20 **A.** No, I think this is wholly to be expected, and this is  
 21 a period in which we are -- where the country is going  
 22 through a resurgence of the virus, you're looking at the  
 23 October period, and the -- Patrick, the CSA, talks about  
 24 inconsistency, and we've just got to face the reality --  
 25 I've got to face the reality as Prime Minister that  
 39

1 I think you would have found that they were pretty  
 2 fruity. It's -- WhatsApp conversation is intended to  
 3 be, though clearly it isn't, ephemeral, it tends to --  
 4 to the pejorative and the hyperbolic, and I think  
 5 that -- the worst vice, in my view, would have been to  
 6 have had an operation where everybody was so deferential  
 7 and so reluctant to make waves that they never expressed  
 8 their opinion, they never challenged and they never  
 9 doubted.  
 10 It was much more important to have a group of people  
 11 who were willing to doubt themselves and to doubt each  
 12 other. And I think that that was creatively useful  
 13 rather than the reverse.  
 14 **Q.** Some of these senior advisers didn't just lack  
 15 deference, to use your word, Mr Johnson, they doubted  
 16 you, and they doubted your ability and your competence,  
 17 as you now know from having seen the material.  
 18 Could we have, please, INQ000273901, page 188.  
 19 That's from 19 September. Page 229, there is  
 20 a reference to leadership position.  
 21 **A.** Would you like me to comment?  
 22 **Q.** Yes, I'm just going to put, because it's right and  
 23 proper and fair that you're asked to give your --  
 24 **A.** Sure.  
 25 **Q.** -- response to some of the material which has been  
 38

1 the -- the virus seems to be refusing to be suppressed  
 2 by the measures we've used so far, we're going to need  
 3 different measures, we've come out of lockdown, we're  
 4 going into the tiering system. Of course we're --  
 5 of course we're changing, but so did the collective  
 6 understanding of the science.  
 7 And if you look back at what happened during Covid,  
 8 we had radically different views over the period, over  
 9 the efficacy of masks, over whether asymptomatic  
 10 transmission could take place. We had a totally  
 11 different view within months about whether ventilators  
 12 would be needed. I was told to begin with we needed --  
 13 25% of patients would need ventilators, that turned out  
 14 not to be true.  
 15 Then on this particular issue, you've got the  
 16 scientists calling for us to go early and go hard, and  
 17 this takes us back to your initial line of questioning,  
 18 when earlier on they had been saying expressly that if  
 19 you go hard too soon then you have two problems,  
 20 behavioural fatigue and bounceback. And the problem  
 21 that I was facing, and it was an appalling problem, in  
 22 October, was that we didn't have therapeutics, or we  
 23 didn't have -- well, we had some therapeutics, but we  
 24 didn't have a vaccine, we didn't have a way out,  
 25 a medical solution, we were being forced to use NPIs,  
 40

1 and at this particular moment -- I'm sure we'll come to  
2 the October/November lockdowns -- my anxiety was that we  
3 were going to have to do the same thing over and over  
4 again. And I think what those notebooks reflect and  
5 what all those comments reflect is the deep anxiety of  
6 a group of people doing their level best who cannot see  
7 an easy solution and are naturally self-critical and  
8 critical of others.

9 **Q.** All right.

10 It's obvious that these things were said at the  
11 time, you say not to you, although I've put to you  
12 a WhatsApp which was sent directly to you, and there are  
13 obviously others.

14 **A.** Well, there's a WhatsApp that claims to have said  
15 something directly to me.

16 **Q.** Well, the WhatsApp has been taken, of course, from the  
17 material which you have provided and from obviously the  
18 phones from other people who were interlocutors --

19 **A.** Sorry, if I may correct you, Mr Keith, what that  
20 WhatsApp was, was a WhatsApp from the Cabinet Secretary  
21 saying that he'd had told me directly something; I don't  
22 think I saw the WhatsApp directly to me.

23 **Q.** Mark Sedwill on 2 July WhatsApped you directly to say  
24 lots of top-drawer people had refused to come because of  
25 the toxic reputation of your operation.

41

1 my Lady sees fit, make recommendations about the way in  
2 which a character such as Mr Cummings, about whom some  
3 extremely strong views have been expressed, should be in  
4 the position that he was, views on whether or not the  
5 Prime Minister had access to the correct and proper  
6 forms of advice? Are these not issues that you've  
7 thought about?

8 **A.** Yes, but I think overwhelmingly that I did have access  
9 to the correct and proper forms of advice. And if you  
10 ask upon whom I relied for that advice, it was the CMO  
11 and the CSA, together with the experts -- well, the  
12 officials in my private office.

13 **Q.** You lost confidence in your Cabinet Secretary in  
14 May 2020, did you not?

15 **A.** Well, he asked to step aside.

16 **Q.** Did you lose confidence in your Cabinet Secretary in  
17 May 2020?

18 **A.** Yeah, he asked to step aside.

19 **Q.** Did you lose confidence in your chief adviser, whom you  
20 described as engaging in an "orgy of narcissism" at the  
21 heart of your administration?

22 **A.** Well, I think he also stepped aside.

23 **Q.** Did you lose confidence in those senior advisers,  
24 Mr Johnson, and effectively dispose of them both?

25 **A.** Well, they both stepped aside from government, but it

43

1 **A.** I'm sorry.

2 **Q.** Whether this material indicates a significant failing at  
3 the heart of government and in failures of competence,  
4 they undoubtedly -- these opinions were expressed at the  
5 time, and you no doubt accept you're responsible for  
6 that state of affairs.

7 You must have reflected, Mr Johnson, long and hard,  
8 both whilst in office in your dealings with Mr Cummings  
9 and afterwards, on what lessons can be learned from the  
10 way in which power is exercised and the way in which  
11 government performs at the highest level. Have you  
12 reflected upon whether or not the system of SPADs, the  
13 system by which you receive advice from your political  
14 advisers needs to be reformed? Have you reflected on  
15 the functions and powers and the extent of powers of  
16 SPADs or on the competence of the ministers whose advice  
17 you accepted?

18 **A.** Well, I think with hindsight there's all sorts of things  
19 you could do differently. I think at the time I decided  
20 that it was best to have an atmosphere of challenge with  
21 some strong characters giving me advice, and I valued  
22 that advice.

23 **Q.** Well, with hindsight, you can now see what was going on,  
24 and you've had this material for some time; have you  
25 reflected on whether or not the Inquiry could, if

42

1 was a very difficult, very challenging period, people  
2 were getting -- as you can see from the WhatsApps, they  
3 were getting very frazzled, because they -- they were  
4 frustrated, Covid kept coming at us in wave after wave,  
5 and it was very, very hard to fight it, and people were  
6 doing their level best. And I don't -- you know, when  
7 people are critical of the guy at the top or they're  
8 critical of each other, that's a reflection of the  
9 difficulty of the circumstances. When it became easier,  
10 in the spring, and after the -- during the vaccine  
11 roll-out, people's tone changed, of course it did, but  
12 it was a reflection of the agony that the country was  
13 going through, and that the government was going  
14 through.

15 **MR KEITH:** My Lady, is that a convenient moment? I'm about  
16 to turn to a completely separate topic.

17 **LADY HALLETT:** Right. I shall return at 11.20.

18 **MR KEITH:** Thank you.

19 (11.07 am)

(A short break)

20 (11.20 am)

21 **LADY HALLETT:** Mr Keith.

22 **MR KEITH:** Mr Johnson, we're now going to turn to look at  
23 the events of January and February.

24 **A.** Yes.

44

1 **Q.** In your witness statement you say that Mr Hancock spoke  
2 to you about his concerns around about 7 January, you  
3 say he rang you again on 22 January. To put this in its  
4 chronological, proper chronological place, the first  
5 SAGE had taken place on 22 January, the first COBR on  
6 24 January.

7 He says, however, in his witness statement, that he  
8 called you directly on at least four occasions during  
9 January to try to impress upon you his concerns.  
10 Although he does not say so, the implication is that he  
11 was at pains to try to alert you to the problem as he  
12 saw it and he was required to raise the matter with you  
13 repeatedly.

14 Do you recall a repeated number of attempts to raise  
15 the alarm with you in that way?

16 **A.** I certainly recall the conversation on 7 January, and  
17 the -- the context, and I remember thinking about it and  
18 saying to him, "Well, you know, keep an eye on it", and  
19 I've set out in my statement my initial instincts about  
20 it.

21 I don't, to be frank, remember all those  
22 conversations, but it's true that we would have spoken  
23 on many occasions because we generally spoke quite  
24 a lot. I think that in that period, January really to  
25 the end of February, towards the end of February, Covid

45

1 **Q.** It's plain that was quite permissible, COBR doesn't have  
2 to be chaired by a Prime Minister --

3 **A.** Yep.

4 **Q.** -- indeed it can be chaired by an official.

5 But the sheer frequency of those COBRs, there were  
6 then five COBRs within one month, all on the same issue  
7 of this emerging virus, didn't the seriousness of the  
8 position in late January make itself plain to you? How  
9 could there have been a need for a COBR every week for  
10 five weeks in relation to an issue that didn't require  
11 your direct involvement as the Prime Minister?

12 **A.** I think for the reason you've given, which is that  
13 a COBR is a regular occurrence in government when  
14 there's something that a particular government  
15 department is leading on, in this case it was health.  
16 The possibility of a coronavirus pandemic, which was  
17 only declared by the WHO on 12 March, was not something  
18 that had yet been -- it hadn't really broken upon the  
19 political world, certainly in my consciousness, as  
20 something of real potential -- you know, a real  
21 potential national disaster and --

22 **Q.** Did you --

23 **A.** -- and, you know, in that period, end of January,  
24 beginning of February, end of January, beginning of  
25 February, it's not much in the political world.

47

1 was pretty much like a cloud on the horizon, no bigger  
2 than a man's hand, and you didn't know whether it was  
3 going to turn into a typhoon or not and -- I certainly  
4 didn't, I was unsure. And it became clear much later.

5 **Q.** The matter was first raised with your Cabinet Secretary,  
6 Mark Sedwill, formally on 21 January, which was the date  
7 in fact of the World Health Organisation first Novel  
8 Coronavirus Situation Report. Do you recall when the  
9 matter was first brought officially to your attention?  
10 You were obviously aware from news reports and you'd  
11 been aware from your conversations with Mr Hancock as to  
12 the possible crisis or the emergence of this virus in  
13 China, but when officially do you recall it was put  
14 before you?

15 **A.** I'm sure it's in my -- in what I've submitted to  
16 the Inquiry, Mr Keith. I think certainly there are  
17 Cabinet discussions in January and in February, and  
18 a crescendo of activity about it, but in government it  
19 wasn't yet being escalated to me as something of really  
20 truly national concern.

21 **Q.** Indeed. A COBR was convened, chaired by Mr Hancock, on  
22 24 January, and then he chaired a further COBR meeting  
23 on 29 January, then 5 February, then 18 February, and  
24 then 26 February.

25 **A.** That's right.

46

1 I wasn't asked about it, for instance, at all at PMQs.

2 **Q.** Were you aware that Mr Hancock was chairing COBRs to  
3 deal with a new and emerging respiratory virus on those  
4 five dates?

5 **A.** I think that I was aware that Matt was handling it.  
6 I couldn't swear that I was aware that he was handling  
7 it in that way on all those particular dates. My  
8 instructions to him were to keep me posted and I would  
9 do whatever I could. By the end of the month, clearly  
10 by the end of February, I'm getting anxious about what  
11 we're doing.

12 **Q.** We'll come there.

13 Did you or do you recall having any debate with your  
14 advisers as to whether or not you should be chairing  
15 those COBRs or whether or not the seriousness of the  
16 position required you to chair the COBRs at the end of  
17 January and throughout February?

18 **A.** Yes, I think there's an exchange -- I remember talking  
19 to my private office and saying, you know, "This is  
20 clearly becoming an issue of national concern" --

21 **Q.** 24 February.

22 **A.** Thank you.

23 **Q.** Before that date, for the month beforehand, did you  
24 think to say to your officials, "The Secretary of State  
25 for Health is chairing a COBR now on a weekly basis to

48

1 do with a fatal viral pandemic which currently is  
 2 just"---  
 3 **A.** But it hadn't yet been declared as a pandemic, by the  
 4 way.  
 5 **Q.** It hadn't been declared as a pandemic, but by 16 January  
 6 it had spread to Thailand and Japan. The scientists in  
 7 the United Kingdom had reported on the 12%  
 8 hospitalisation rate, it was clear from the material in  
 9 government that only a small fraction of the infections  
 10 in Wuhan were being debited, and there was already  
 11 evidence of limited human-to-human transmission, all by  
 12 16 January. So in an overarching sense, why do you  
 13 think that the Prime Minister, yourself, was not  
 14 informed earlier as to those extremely worrying features  
 15 of this emerging virus?  
 16 **A.** I think the -- here's what I really think happened.  
 17 I think that actually everybody, had they stopped to  
 18 think about it, could see the implications of the data,  
 19 the implications of what was happening in -- the  
 20 numbers, the percentage of fatalities in China, but  
 21 I don't think that they necessarily drew the right  
 22 conclusions in that early phase, and -- which is no  
 23 fault of theirs, I think this -- what happened was  
 24 something that was completely outside people's living  
 25 memory. What we were dealing with is like

49

1 But unfortunately what we did remember was not helpful,  
 2 because what we did remember, what the system did  
 3 remember was things like SARS and MERS and swine flu and  
 4 so on, other zoonotic diseases that certainly had  
 5 an impact in Asia, which is what we were seeing, but  
 6 ultimately were relatively, if not wholly benign in the  
 7 UK. And if I had to guess an answer to your question,  
 8 Mr Keith, I would say that that was probably the default  
 9 mindset, and, you know -- and that was basically because  
 10 of people were operating on the basis of their lived  
 11 experience.  
 12 **Q.** So a failed mindset?  
 13 **A.** I think it was a human natural response of people based  
 14 on what they had themselves seen and observed in their  
 15 lifetimes.  
 16 **Q.** But from the context, from the prism or from the  
 17 viewpoint of the efficacy and the competence of the  
 18 government response, regardless of the psychological  
 19 issues that may have been preying on the minds of its  
 20 constituent individual parts, the government failed to  
 21 wake up, did it not? It failed to understand the  
 22 significance of the crisis and therefore, it must  
 23 follow, failed to take steps speedily enough?  
 24 **A.** I think that it would certainly be fair to say of the --  
 25 of me, the entire Whitehall establishment, scientific

51

1 a once-in-a-century event, and I just don't think people  
 2 computed the implications of that data, and it wasn't  
 3 really escalated -- it wasn't escalated to me as  
 4 an issue of national concern until much later, and as  
 5 you say, I said, "Look, I think I've got to chair these  
 6 COBRs".  
 7 **Q.** You were the Prime Minister. You're obviously  
 8 an extremely skilled politician and you have direct  
 9 intimate experience of running government. From the  
 10 viewpoint of the bereaved and those who were terribly  
 11 damaged and harmed by this pandemic, how could  
 12 a government have generally failed to stop and think?  
 13 The system is there to make you think.  
 14 **A.** Yeah.  
 15 **Q.** The risk assessment processes and civil emergency  
 16 procedures are there to make sure you don't have to stop  
 17 and think; it responds. But on this occasion,  
 18 generally, and it's not a personal point, generally the  
 19 system did not stop and think and say, "This data shows  
 20 there is a greater problem than we currently  
 21 understand".  
 22 **A.** I think that's -- look, I think -- I've tried in a way  
 23 to give you the answer to that. I think that what  
 24 really happened was outside our living experience, we  
 25 hadn't seen something like this for a century or more.

50

1 community included, our advisers included, that we  
 2 underestimated the scale and the pace of the challenge.  
 3 **Q.** The --  
 4 **A.** And you can see that very clearly in those early days in  
 5 March, from late February through to the sequence of  
 6 NPIs, of lockdowns, you can see that we were all --  
 7 **Q.** System failure?  
 8 **A.** We were all collectively underestimating how fast it had  
 9 already spread in the UK. We underestimated -- we put  
 10 the peak too late, the first peak too late, we thought  
 11 it would be in, you know, May/June. That was totally  
 12 wrong. I don't blame the scientists for that at all,  
 13 but that was -- that was the feeling, and it just turned  
 14 out to be wrong.  
 15 **Q.** But the evidence before my Lady shows that the  
 16 scientists, at least in part, were aware by the end of  
 17 January of the hospitalisation rate, of the fact that  
 18 the number of infections was being grossly  
 19 underestimated, that there was self-sustaining  
 20 human-to-human transmission. They were aware by the  
 21 beginning of February that there was no effective test,  
 22 trace, control, isolate system in the United Kingdom, so  
 23 once the virus spread beyond China and became  
 24 self-sustaining, there was no effective means of  
 25 stopping its entry into the United Kingdom. That was

52

1 all known to the scientists, at least by the beginning  
 2 of February. Why wasn't it known to the --  
 3 **A.** Well, on the test, trace --  
 4 **Q.** -- ministers?  
 5 **A.** On the test, trace and isolate, on the whole diagnostics  
 6 question, I think if you look at the evidence you can  
 7 see that actually that we were being assured -- I was  
 8 being assured that we were in a good place on that,  
 9 until, you know, it became clear that that wasn't quite  
 10 right.  
 11 So --  
 12 **Q.** Forgive me, I'm asking you about the system. If the  
 13 scientists knew and had the data from which the  
 14 government could draw the proper conclusions, why didn't  
 15 the government systemically --  
 16 **A.** I think.  
 17 **Q.** -- rise up in light of these alarm bells and do  
 18 something?  
 19 **A.** Well, I don't wish to say that we were oblivious,  
 20 because we weren't, and actually a lot of work went on,  
 21 a lot of planning, a huge amount of discussion, so  
 22 I think -- you know, I'm talking quite a lot now to --  
 23 so I think the CMO first briefed me about it on about  
 24 4 February, and we talk about what could happen. SAGE,  
 25 as you say, is meeting. It's not as though nothing is

53

1 a point quite early on when I think Chris or Patrick  
 2 said, "Look, you know, test and trace isn't relevant  
 3 anymore, because of the spread of the disease", but  
 4 I couldn't date that.  
 5 **Q.** From which you then, of course, appreciated that if the  
 6 virus spread outside China and was self-sustaining, and  
 7 it had already of course --  
 8 **A.** Yes, sorry, that was probably much later, in March.  
 9 **Q.** All right, you think that was later in March?  
 10 **A.** I think so, but I couldn't -- I couldn't swear to it.  
 11 **Q.** There is a box note on 30 January, INQ000136734, this is  
 12 an email from a member of your office, Mr Johnson, to  
 13 POST, the private office support team:  
 14 "Grateful if you could include the below in the box  
 15 tonight.  
 16 "[Prime Minister],  
 17 "To be aware the Chinese government granted the  
 18 permission for the flight to evacuate British nationals  
 19 from Wuhan."  
 20 So we're concerned here with repatriation.  
 21 If we then go over the page, there is a reference to  
 22 "The WHO ... expected to declare a Public Health  
 23 Emergency of International Concern", and then:  
 24 "Also to be aware, the FCO is drawing down  
 25 non-essential staff across the network in China."

55

1 happening.  
 2 **Q.** No.  
 3 **A.** I think that what is going wrong, possibly, is that we  
 4 are just underestimating the pace, the contagiousness of  
 5 the disease. And, you know, you can see very clearly  
 6 from the -- that crucial moment of transition on -- from  
 7 12 to 13 March how radically the scientific appreciation  
 8 of the situation changed, because --  
 9 **Q.** I'm asking --  
 10 **A.** -- SAGE on one day was -- I'm sorry --  
 11 **Q.** Forgive me, Mr Johnson, but I'm asking about January and  
 12 February, we haven't got to March yet.  
 13 When did you first become aware that the test and  
 14 trace system, whilst extremely efficient in practice,  
 15 could not be extended beyond the first few hundred  
 16 cases, that it was a system designed for high --  
 17 **A.** Yes.  
 18 **Q.** -- high-consequence infectious diseases --  
 19 **A.** That's right.  
 20 **Q.** -- it dealt with travellers, it dealt with index cases,  
 21 but it couldn't really be expanded beyond 10 or 20 index  
 22 cases and 500 or 600 contacts?  
 23 **A.** Yes, you're going to have to forgive me, Mr Keith,  
 24 I can't remember exactly when I -- it became obvious  
 25 that test and trace wasn't going to work, but there came

54

1 The day before, on 29 January, there was a COBR,  
 2 INQ000056226. You weren't, of course, at that COBR,  
 3 Mr Johnson, you've explained how you didn't chair a COBR  
 4 until March.  
 5 If we look at page 5, we will see that the chair,  
 6 Mr Hancock, hears from the CMO and Public Health England  
 7 about the fatalities in China:  
 8 "... there was evidence of human to human  
 9 transmission and Germany had four confirmed cases."  
 10 And then at paragraph 3:  
 11 "The CMO said that the UK planning assumptions were  
 12 based on the reasonable worst case scenario. There were  
 13 two scenarios to be considered. The first was that the  
 14 spread was confined within China, the second was that  
 15 the spread was not limited to China and there would be  
 16 a pandemic like scenario, with the UK impacted. The  
 17 second scenario was plausible but it may take weeks to  
 18 months."  
 19 The CMO sets out there in COBR, and my Lady has  
 20 heard evidence on this, that it was understood that if  
 21 the second scenario came to pass, there would be  
 22 a pandemic, because once control had been lost, a viral  
 23 wave was inevitable?  
 24 **A.** Yes.  
 25 **Q.** This is a COBR that takes place on that day, 29 January.

56

1 The following day you receive a box note which appears  
 2 to be solely concerned with repatriation. The question  
 3 is: why were you, the Prime Minister, not being told  
 4 directly, "This is a virus which if it escapes China  
 5 will result in a pandemic, there is information already  
 6 that it has a very serious fatality rate, and a very  
 7 serious hospitalisation rate"? Why was that basic,  
 8 lightbulb information not brought to your attention so  
 9 that you could see the true nature of this emerging  
 10 crisis?  
 11 **A.** I think -- I can't give you the exact reason why that --  
 12 that COBR was not brought to my attention, or that  
 13 detail of the COBR was not brought to my attention. But  
 14 I can -- I can say that at that stage I think that even  
 15 the concept of a pandemic did not necessarily imply to  
 16 the Whitehall mind the kind of utter disaster that Covid  
 17 was to become.  
 18 And if I may -- and that may sound odd, but what I'm  
 19 trying to say is that I think people were still  
 20 operating in the -- they were still thinking about  
 21 things like an influenza pandemic or some of the other  
 22 diseases that I've mentioned.  
 23 **Q.** Well, this material, along with a plethora of other  
 24 documents, shows that the reasonable worst-case scenario  
 25 was already being envisaged, and that was a reasonable

57

1 **A.** Yes.  
 2 **Q.** -- and the mortality rate at 2%?  
 3 **A.** Yes.  
 4 **Q.** So if the reproduction value is two and a half to three,  
 5 that is to say one person will infect two and a half to  
 6 three people in an unimmunised population and the  
 7 mortality rate 2% of people who were infected or perhaps  
 8 confirmed cases, it's not clear, means a very, very  
 9 large number of people will die; correct?  
 10 **A.** That's right.  
 11 **Q.** The debate in Cabinet, pages 10 and 11, deals with  
 12 repatriation:  
 13 "a) the Department for International Development  
 14 [examines] developing countries where the risk of spread  
 15 of the disease was high. Spread of the disease globally  
 16 would be a big problem for these countries, and could  
 17 also mean further evacuation of British nationals ..."  
 18 So the debate focuses almost exclusively around the  
 19 position abroad, the repatriation issue and, despite the  
 20 reference to the mortality rate, the reproduction figure  
 21 and the knowledge which was already in the possession of  
 22 government that there was confirmed cases outside China  
 23 with sustained human-to-human transmission, nobody  
 24 stopped to say, "This means, inevitably, a huge number  
 25 of deaths, a wall of death, and this country, if it

59

1 worst-case scenario which denoted deaths to the tune of  
 2 800,000 people, so it couldn't have been unknown to  
 3 Whitehall, but you say the eventuality --  
 4 **A.** No, I -- right, well --  
 5 **Q.** -- was not aware?  
 6 **A.** I didn't see that figure, and -- I mean, I saw  
 7 a different figure, I think, to towards the end of  
 8 February, by which time our -- you know, our alarm was  
 9 really, you know, truly raised. But I'm trying to give  
 10 you my best explanation for why people were in the  
 11 mindset that they were in.  
 12 **Q.** There was a Cabinet on 31 January.  
 13 INQ000056125.  
 14 If we go to page 10, please, we can see the nature  
 15 of the debate. It was of course chaired by you that  
 16 afternoon, and:  
 17 "THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE  
 18 [Mr Hancock] said that two cases ... had been confirmed  
 19 in the [United Kingdom]."  
 20 They had been of course confirmed on 30 and  
 21 31 January.  
 22 "It was a very serious problem in China ..."  
 23 A large number of cases and fatalities. And then  
 24 the debate moves on to the typical infection rate of  
 25 two and a half to three people --

58

1 escapes China, being overrun by the virus"?  
 2 **A.** Yes, I think the word "inevitably" there is the one that  
 3 I would pick up on, because I think if you look at what  
 4 the Secretary of State for Health told the Cabinet, he  
 5 said, "If the Chinese grip it, then it won't be  
 6 a problem, but if China don't grip it then that could be  
 7 very serious".  
 8 But your point is still basically a good one, which  
 9 is that, you know, we had to think about what happened  
 10 if China didn't grip it, and I think we just have to,  
 11 you know, put our hands up here and say, look, I think  
 12 because of the absence of collective memory, because we  
 13 were operating under a different set of assumptions,  
 14 I don't think that we were able to comprehend the  
 15 implications of what we were actually looking at. And  
 16 I think that -- or, sorry, let me put it a different  
 17 way. I think if we -- as I said right at the beginning,  
 18 if we had collectively stopped to think about the  
 19 mathematical implications of some of the forecasts that  
 20 were being made, and we'd believed them, we might have  
 21 operated differently.  
 22 The problem was that I don't think we attached  
 23 enough credence to those forecasts, and because of the  
 24 experience that we'd had with other zoonotic diseases,  
 25 I think collectively in Whitehall there was not

60

1 a sufficient, loud enough claxon of alarm. I don't  
 2 blame people, I just think it was because of the  
 3 experience that they'd had all their lives.

4 **Q.** The material, Mr Johnson, shows how at various stages  
 5 you warned against overreaction, you made the point that  
 6 SARS and MERS had not turned out to be as serious for  
 7 the United Kingdom as some had feared at the time, BSE  
 8 had not resulted in the levels of deaths which some had  
 9 forecast. So may we take it that you put yourself in  
 10 that category of people who had --

11 **A.** Oh, I was --

12 **Q.** -- insufficient credence?

13 **A.** I was -- I was agnostic. I ... yeah, I thought --  
 14 I took what Matt had to say very seriously, I thought he  
 15 wasn't, you know, badgering me without a reason, but on  
 16 the other hand I'd had the experience that you describe,  
 17 so I was waiting to -- waiting for the advice and  
 18 waiting for that to change.

19 **Q.** In your statement, you say:  
 20 "Looking back, it is clear [and this is in the  
 21 context of January] that we vastly underestimated the  
 22 risks in those early weeks. If we had properly  
 23 understood how fast Covid was spreading and the fact  
 24 that it was spreading asymptotically, there are many  
 25 things we would have done differently."

61

1 **A.** Right, okay.

2 **Q.** -- you were told that by the Health Secretary.

3 **A.** So there seemed to be a great deal of doubt -- you know,  
 4 I'm sure you're right in what you say about the evidence  
 5 that was being -- that was knocking around about  
 6 asymptomatic transmission and infection. I think if  
 7 we'd known, and fully understood, to answer your  
 8 question, the speed of transmission and the infection  
 9 fatality rate, case fatality rate, I think clearly we  
 10 would have acted immediately to accelerate test and  
 11 trace, to -- we'd have put huge quantities of time and  
 12 effort and money into diagnostics, into PPE, into all  
 13 the things that we were going to need. I'm not saying  
 14 that that work didn't begin, it did begin, but I think  
 15 the panic level would have been -- would have been much  
 16 higher. I'm trying to explain as honestly as I can why  
 17 I think that panic level wasn't sufficiently high.

18 **Q.** Let me make plain, the reason I put the question to you  
 19 in the way that I did in relation to asymptomatic spread  
 20 is that your own statement says it was not known:  
 21 "If we had properly understood ... the fact that it  
 22 was spreading asymptotically, [then] there are many  
 23 things we would have done differently."

24 **A.** Yes, so, sorry, I should say --

25 **Q.** You didn't know -- you've explained that you didn't know

63

1 So first, it was nevertheless clear that Covid was  
 2 spreading, because you knew that it had spread outside  
 3 China to Thailand, South Korea, Japan, and there is  
 4 material or a growing understanding that it can be  
 5 transmitted asymptotically, but what things --

6 **A.** Well, there is now.

7 **Q.** No, there was dawning realisation, Mr Johnson, the  
 8 material shows, for example, NERVTAG on 14 February,  
 9 scientific reports to SAGE in the first week of  
 10 February, Diamond Princess and so on and so forth  
 11 throughout the middle of February, so it was clear it  
 12 was asymptomatic.

13 **A.** Could --

14 **Q.** But what are the many things that you would have done  
 15 differently, had you, as you say, properly understood  
 16 the true nature of the crisis?

17 **A.** Well, could I just come back on the asymptomatic point  
 18 quickly?

19 **Q.** Please.

20 **A.** Because I do think it's important. The information that  
 21 I was getting, and I think, you know, this went up right  
 22 till the middle of March, was that you were unlikely to  
 23 have Covid unless you had the symptoms. And I think --  
 24 I think I had that from the Health Secretary.

25 **Q.** You did, at a Cabinet meeting --

62

1 it was spreading asymptotically, but my suggestion to  
 2 you is: important parts of the government knew by  
 3 mid-February that it was spreading asymptotically, and  
 4 that there was, therefore, a governmental failure to act  
 5 on that information in the way that you have very  
 6 eloquently described it?

7 **A.** Well, I can't comment on that, because I don't know what  
 8 people thought about the issue of asymptomatic  
 9 transmission in February. I do remember what we were  
 10 being told, I do remember the view around the Cabinet  
 11 table.

12 I mean, the one thing that has troubled me a lot,  
 13 I'm sure we'll come on to it, is the March discharge  
 14 policy where clearly the question of asymptomatic  
 15 transmission --

16 **Q.** Can we come --

17 **A.** -- would have been relevant.

18 **Q.** I'm so sorry to interrupt. Can we come back to that?

19 **A.** Of course.

20 **Q.** There's an important contextual position which has to be  
 21 set out for the purposes of that debate.

22 There is evidence before the Inquiry that the Chief  
 23 Medical Officer told Mr Hancock at a meeting on  
 24 28 January that there was credible evidence of  
 25 asymptomatic transmission within Germany. Was that

64



1 a fact of which you were aware?

2 **A.** Of that --

3 **Q.** Did you know that?

4 **A.** No, of the CMO's --

5 **Q.** That Mr Hancock had been told there was credible  
6 evidence of asymptomatic transmission within Germany at  
7 a meeting on 28 January.

8 **A.** Well, if I was told that, I've completely forgotten it.  
9 My memory of asymptomatic -- the asymptomatic  
10 transmission issue is as I've told you.

11 **LADY HALLETT:** Not you, Mr Hancock was told.  
12 It's all right, Mr Johnson --

13 **A.** No, sorry -- I'm sorry, I understand, my Lady. What  
14 I meant was if I knew that Chris had told Matt that, at  
15 some stage --

16 **LADY HALLETT:** I follow.

17 **A.** -- it's completely gone from my mind. What I remember  
18 about asymptomatic transmission is that we -- the --  
19 insofar as I paid attention to it, it was that it was  
20 not thought to be taking place.

21 **MR KEITH:** Borders.  
22 Your statement states that the advice that you got  
23 consistently from the CMO, the Government Chief  
24 Scientific Adviser and SAGE was that closing the borders  
25 wouldn't work, if you closed them dramatically or

65

1 try to understand that point and to explain it to the  
2 public, because I think the public really believe  
3 instinctively that you can fix this with tough border  
4 controls, or often do, and it's a difficult point  
5 sometimes to get over.

6 **Q.** Mr Cummings says in his statement that you asked  
7 rhetorically:  
8 "... aren't ... people going to think we are mad for  
9 not closing the borders?"

10 **A.** Well, I may well have said something like that, but  
11 I think that the -- I think it was a question that  
12 people raised --

13 **Q.** People were asking?  
14 He also says, Mr Johnson, that because of your  
15 general attitude that Covid was like swine flu, you  
16 weren't particularly inclined to challenge the  
17 scientific advice at all to the effect that border  
18 restrictions would make no difference. Is that true?

19 **A.** Well, the two statements seem to me to be inconsistent.

20 **Q.** Well, just is it true or not?

21 **A.** Well, I certainly thought it was -- I thought it was  
22 a point worth picking up with the scientists. I wanted  
23 to understand the reason why border controls didn't  
24 work.  
25 But, in retrospect, you can see that they were

67

1 stringently, then of course there are very real -- well,  
2 intensely difficult practical consequences, and if you  
3 just have screening or light touch restrictions, then  
4 they may achieve very little.

5 Will you just explain how you received that advice,  
6 in fact consistently, from a COBR or the time of a COBR  
7 on 5 February through a Cabinet meeting on 14 February  
8 and through to the end of February? It was consistent  
9 advice that you received.

10 **A.** Yes, thank you, and that is one of the most fascinating  
11 things about the scientific advice during this pandemic  
12 and the view about behaviours. Many, many things  
13 changed, as I've said -- you know, masks, other NPIs,  
14 were thought -- they moved up and down in the value that  
15 people put on them.

16 But when it came to borders, there was  
17 an overwhelming scientific consensus, as far as  
18 I understood it, that trying to interrupt the virus with  
19 tougher border controls bought you really very little.  
20 You might delay by a matter of days, or perhaps weeks,  
21 but you would not stop the virus from entering the UK.  
22 And I think that was -- I think a lot of people in the  
23 country found that very hard to understand, because  
24 I think intuitively we think, if you -- just stop this  
25 thing coming in. And it was very important for me to

66

1 right. Countries that did try to use borders as a way  
2 of containing Covid really didn't succeed in that.

3 **Q.** So did you pick the point up? You say, "I think it was  
4 a point worth picking up with the scientists". Did you  
5 push back in any way with the scientists and say, "Can  
6 that be right? Is there not anything that can be done  
7 to at least restrict the spread of the virus now that  
8 it's left China?"

9 **A.** I certainly remember many conversations about borders.  
10 Quite how adversarial I was, I couldn't now tell you.

11 **Q.** All right.  
12 There was a stocktake meeting on 4 February --  
13 INQ000146558 -- when, in the context, Mr Johnson, of  
14 a general debate about the DHSC, hence the description  
15 "stocktake meeting", the Chief Medical Officer gave  
16 an update.  
17 "Following an update from the CMO, the  
18 Prime Minister stressed the need to continue to explain  
19 our stance to maintain public confidence in the plan.  
20 On further travel restrictions, your Secretary of State  
21 was engaging [Foreign and Commonwealth Office] and  
22 European colleagues and would revert with  
23 a proposal ..."

24 According to the permanent secretary,  
25 Sir Chris Wormald, Mr Johnson, and to notes kept by

68

1 Imran Shafi, your private secretary, of this meeting,  
2 you were in listening mode, there was a discussion about  
3 possible fatality numbers, but you expressed scepticism  
4 about those figures, the fatality numbers, and you  
5 noted, they say, that high fatality figures had been  
6 given for BSE, bovine spongiform encephalitis, and  
7 swine flu.

8 Is that right, that you expressed scepticism about  
9 the possible number of deaths?

10 **A.** I don't remember that, but I do remember -- I certainly  
11 remember the BSE scare, and I remember the immense  
12 destruction that that did to the agricultural sector in  
13 this country and, you know, the way that all turned out.

14 I think, you know, it would be fair to say that  
15 I was -- I wanted to probe them on their forecasts, and  
16 to try to understand, you know, the basis on which they  
17 were making them.

18 **Q.** You've described how the Whitehall system, the process  
19 of government in Whitehall, failed to have a lightbulb  
20 moment and appreciate the seriousness of the position.  
21 Would you accept that being informed about the possible  
22 fatality numbers but expressing scepticism and drawing  
23 a false analogy, as it turned out, with BSE, was a lost  
24 opportunity on your part to drive the system further  
25 forward with rather more urgency than appears to have

69

1 Now, putting aside the issue of whether or not what  
2 you said about the mindset of government applied to  
3 Mr Cummings or the Chief Scientist who refer there to  
4 "[probably] out of control now and will sweep world",  
5 why was there a focus by way of the singular response to  
6 that information on comms? Why didn't any of you say,  
7 "Well, if this virus is probably out of control now and  
8 will sweep the world", bearing in mind the fatality  
9 numbers, the IFR, the hospitalisation rate, why did none  
10 of you say, "We need to take steps now to deal with  
11 infection control, prevent the spread, alert the  
12 population, we have a major problem", not focusing on  
13 communications?

14 **A.** Because I think that the ... it's your point about the  
15 infection fatality rate, the consequences. I think that  
16 when you read that an Asiatic pandemic is about to sweep  
17 the world, you're -- you think you've heard it before,  
18 and that was the problem.

19 So I say we need to talk about it, but I think it  
20 would be fair to say that the scientific community  
21 within Whitehall at that stage was not telling us, I was  
22 not being informed, that this was something that was  
23 going to require urgent and immediate action. And --

24 **Q.** But you knew -- forgive me.

25 **A.** -- I think that although you're right that we could see

71

1 been the case?

2 **A.** Well, look, I certainly -- I certainly would accept that  
3 my mindset, like the mindset of, I think, the  
4 overwhelming majority of the ministers and officials in  
5 Whitehall in that period, Jan to mid-Feb, was not as  
6 alarmed as we -- as we should have been. That's ...  
7 that's definitely right.

8 **Q.** INQ000236371, page 37.

9 Mr Cummings sends a text to what was called  
10 a Number 10 action group. It's dated 6 February, so  
11 it's early in February. We know that you were party to  
12 this WhatsApp group because your name appears at the  
13 bottom, Mr Johnson.

14 "Dominic Cummings: [we] Need a briefing on corona  
15 [tomorrow]. Chief scientist told me today it's  
16 [probably] out of control now and will sweep [the]  
17 world. Will be major comms exercise."

18 Sir Ed Lister then refers to the COBR meeting, which  
19 was:

20 "... clear that China is probably [losing] it and  
21 once it reaches us [not if it reaches us] it will not  
22 peak for three months. Dom is right the Comms is  
23 key ..."

24 And then you say:

25 "Yes please. Need to talk coronavirus comms at 9."

70

1 the mathematical implications of the reasonable  
2 worst-case scenario, I think the problem was that we  
3 didn't think -- and this was our mistake -- we didn't  
4 think that the RWCS was very likely to happen. That was  
5 the problem.

6 **Q.** We'll come to that.

7 **A.** So when I get told -- anyway, forgive me.

8 **Q.** But BSE did not have a 2% fatality rate, swine flu did  
9 not have a 2% fatality rate, so when you say there was  
10 an institutional failure to realise the seriousness of  
11 the position because of Asiatic, prior Asiatic,  
12 epidemics, or because of BSE or swine flu, the  
13 difference, and it was known to government, was that  
14 Covid had a 2% fatality rate and BSE and swine flu had  
15 not.

16 **A.** And that is entirely correct, but I think the tragedy is  
17 that we were operating, as I said in my statement, on  
18 a fallacious inductive logic about previous reasonable  
19 worst-case scenarios and this one, and we just -- this  
20 was -- this was the one where I'm afraid the worst  
21 predictions turned out to be or almost the worst  
22 predictions turned out to be correct.

23 **Q.** INQ000056137 is a Cabinet meeting on 6 February which  
24 you of course chaired. On page 6 -- so that the public  
25 can understand, Mr Johnson, this document, which is

72

1 minutes of the whole Cabinet meeting, has large parts  
2 redacted as being sensitive and irrelevant because,  
3 of course, Cabinet dealt with many other issues other  
4 than just coronavirus.

5 But on this page, page 6, Cabinet turns to update on  
6 coronavirus. It's "very serious":

7 "... official estimate was ... around 28,000 cases,  
8 but that was likely to be a significant underestimate."

9 The virus didn't appear to have been contained in  
10 Wuhan. The mortality rate was only around 2%.

11 There is a reference to a ministerial exercise on  
12 this page.

13 **A.** So what date is this Cabinet --

14 **Q.** This is 6 February. There we are:

15 "There would be a tabletop exercise the following  
16 week."

17 What was your understanding of that tabletop  
18 exercise? Did you attend it?

19 **A.** I didn't --

20 **Q.** Did you have any role --

21 **A.** -- I didn't attend it and I'm sure my officials did.

22 **Q.** All right. Then just three lines above it:

23 "The central point to make was that the Government  
24 had a plan to deal with this illness, and this was  
25 guided by science."

73

1 about infection control measures, the practicalities,  
2 the nuts and bolts of stopping the virus from spreading  
3 irrevocably throughout the United Kingdom, now it had  
4 left China?

5 **A.** Well, I'm not certain that the -- so, first of all, on  
6 messaging, messaging was incredibly important.  
7 Messaging, in the end, was the most important tool we  
8 had to deal with the virus. I don't wish to -- I don't  
9 think we should deprecate the importance of messaging.

10 As for measures to tackle infection, spread of  
11 infection within the country, we've talked about borders  
12 and we've talked about test and trace. Borders didn't  
13 really offer a panacea. Test and trace, we were sadly  
14 not as well prepared as we should have been.

15 **Q.** So the borders were never going to work. The test and  
16 trace couldn't work because it was only for a handful of  
17 cases. You've identified no other practical means at  
18 the disposal of government to prevent the spread of the  
19 virus. Why doesn't somebody say, "We have a major  
20 problem here. Not only is it coming but the two  
21 measures, which you've just identified, aren't going to  
22 work and will never work"?

23 **A.** Because -- for the reason I've given you, which is that  
24 we, although we can see the RWCS, and we're seeing these  
25 numbers, we are not yet believing, perhaps irrationally,

75

1 Did you ask in the course of that Cabinet meeting  
2 what, bluntly, is the plan?

3 **A.** I understood the plan to be, from what Matt had said and  
4 from the discussions I had had, that we would try to  
5 isolate, test and trace people as they arrived, that was  
6 what I thought the plan was, and my impression was that  
7 we had a good testing system.

8 But I don't -- to answer your question directly,  
9 I'm -- I can't be confident I said in that meeting "what  
10 is the plan", but that is my understanding of what it  
11 was.

12 **Q.** A week later on 14 February, Mr Johnson, there is  
13 another Cabinet meeting, and another update.

14 INQ000056138.

15 Page 1, we see the attendees, page 6, the update on  
16 coronavirus:

17 "The Prime Minister said that the Government and the  
18 country needed to be ready for the coronavirus situation  
19 to get worse. The public messaging so far had struck  
20 the right balance between preparing the public for what  
21 might happen and not causing unnecessary alarm."

22 Your focus there, Mr Johnson, appears to be on  
23 messaging, on communications, on ensuring that the  
24 public are aware but they're not caused undue alarm by  
25 an overreaction. Where was the debate, at your urging,

74

1 but we're not yet believing that the RWCS or anything  
2 like it is going to happen, and that's -- that's  
3 fundamentally the problem.

4 **Q.** Page 7, there is another reference to the government's  
5 plans. There were plans in place. At the top of the  
6 page:

7 "Concluding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER  
8 said that if the virus became widespread in the  
9 [United Kingdom] ..."

10 Widespread in the United Kingdom.

11 "... there were plans in place ..."

12 When the Chief Medical Officer told you that, what  
13 did you make of it, bearing in mind that if the virus  
14 was widespread, it would necessarily have extended  
15 beyond the limited test and trace system about which you  
16 were beginning to understand something, and the borders  
17 have obviously failed? What were the plans, did you  
18 think?

19 **A.** I think that he's referring there to testing and  
20 tracing, but plainly that was -- that was inadequate.  
21 At a certain stage later in the month, as I think I say  
22 in my statement, Chris did brief me about NPIs, about  
23 lockdowns and other measures.

24 **Q.** Indeed.

25 On page 8, you sum up the meeting, Mr Johnson.

76

1 You're grateful to the Secretary of State for Health.  
 2 It was challenging to convince people --  
 3 "... grateful to the Secretary of State for Health  
 4 and Social Care and his department for their work and in  
 5 particular for getting the balance of communications  
 6 right. There was potential for the virus to have  
 7 a large impact on the UK's economy ..."  
 8 Was it because of the mindset to which you have  
 9 referred the Inquiry that you didn't say "There is  
 10 potential for this virus, indeed a probability now, that  
 11 it will kill" rather than focusing on the economy?  
 12 **A.** Because -- and I didn't say that because I -- because  
 13 you used the word "probability" in the sense of,  
 14 I suppose, meaning an overwhelming likelihood. That was  
 15 not what we thought. It was not what I thought,  
 16 certainly.  
 17 **Q.** All right.  
 18 **A.** But I did think that we were now in a situation, almost  
 19 certainly, where we were going to have to take a lot of  
 20 measures to contain it that would be costly and  
 21 difficult. So that's the point I -- and if you think  
 22 about it, that's -- that was why BSE, notwithstanding  
 23 your excellent point that it wasn't nearly as fatal as  
 24 people had originally said, it cost an awful lot of  
 25 money.

77

1 days went on.  
 2 And clearly one of the things I hope from this  
 3 Inquiry is that we will have a much better system of  
 4 planning for these types of events.  
 5 **Q.** INQ000146563 is an email chain between your private  
 6 secretary, Imran Shafi, the Government Chief Scientific  
 7 Adviser, Sir Chris Whitty, and Katharine Hammond,  
 8 concerning the coronavirus in Italy. To get your  
 9 chronological bearings, on 21 February, so three days  
 10 before, Mr Johnson, 11 municipalities in Italy --  
 11 **A.** Yeah.  
 12 **Q.** -- you'll recall, had locked down the population of  
 13 those municipalities.  
 14 **A.** That's right.  
 15 **Q.** And also, I should say, the Diamond Princess affair,  
 16 that is to say the explosive outbreak of the virus on  
 17 that cruise ship, had become apparent, as had the  
 18 figures of the number of people who showed no symptoms  
 19 on that boat.  
 20 But, to turn to the document itself, your private  
 21 secretary says:  
 22 "It'd be good to see where we get to post SAGE  
 23 tomorrow. At some point soon, I'd like to start  
 24 exposing the [Prime Minister] to the potential decisions  
 25 he might have to take in short order on this -- at the

79

1 **Q.** COBR, on 18 February, was not a meeting that you were  
 2 present at, but if we could just have up INQ000056227.  
 3 In broad outline, Mr Johnson, and we can see this,  
 4 I think, from page 7, the director of the Civil  
 5 Contingencies Secretariat says to Mr Hancock, who  
 6 chaired the meeting, paragraph 17:  
 7 "... there was work to be done to create a clear  
 8 plan of activity ..."  
 9 It's not appropriate for me to ask you what was  
 10 meant by that phrase.  
 11 **A.** Sorry, this is Matt speaking, is it?  
 12 **Q.** No, that's the -- it's paragraph 17 on page 7:  
 13 "The CHAIR invited the Director of the Civil  
 14 Contingencies Secretariat ..."  
 15 **A.** Yeah.  
 16 **Q.** This is her responding.  
 17 **A.** Yeah. This is Katharine Hammond.  
 18 **Q.** Indeed.  
 19 Were you aware, as Mr Hancock has acknowledged and  
 20 has told the Inquiry, by this date, 18 February, that  
 21 there was no rulebook, the system had to "build many  
 22 parts of [the] response from scratch", and that there  
 23 was no central government plan other than the old 2011  
 24 pan flu strategy. Were you told that?  
 25 **A.** I was not told that, but that became apparent as the

78

1 moment it's been fairly abstract with him I think."  
 2 Now, plainly, Mr Johnson, you can't go digging  
 3 around in other people's emails or in government systems  
 4 to find out for yourself what's happening; you have to  
 5 be reliant upon what you're told. What was your general  
 6 state of information, the general level of knowledge at  
 7 this date, now in the dog days of February?  
 8 **A.** Okay, so -- I mean, my memory now is that I think the  
 9 scenes from Italy really rattled me, and it was,  
 10 I thought -- and I remember seeing a note somewhere  
 11 saying that, you know, the fatality rate in Italy was 8%  
 12 because they had an elderly population. I thought,  
 13 well, my God, we've got an elderly population, this is  
 14 appalling, and this can't be -- and my instinct was this  
 15 cannot possibly be right, you know, this number.  
 16 And, I mean, you know, just so you know, I look at  
 17 all this stuff in which we seem so oblivious with horror  
 18 now. I mean, we should have twigged, we should  
 19 collectively have twigged much sooner, I should have  
 20 twigged.  
 21 I think what Imran is trying to do here is to get  
 22 the scientists to take me through the NPIs, the idea of  
 23 the NPIs, and what that would involve.  
 24 **Q.** This is the 24th. There had been a COBR on the Tuesday  
 25 before, 18 February. There wasn't a COBR, in fact,

80

1 again until 26 February. This was just on the cusp of  
2 half-term. There was no Cabinet between Friday  
3 14 February and Tuesday 25 February but SAGE and NERVTAG  
4 continued to convene.

5 Despite being, as you've said it yourself, seriously  
6 rattled by the news of Italy, did the tempo of work on  
7 coronavirus nevertheless dip during the half-term break  
8 that followed?

9 **A.** I notice that, you know, you've been over that period in  
10 your previous interrogations in this Inquiry, and I hope  
11 the Inquiry, you know, is satisfied that actually there  
12 wasn't a long holiday that I took in that period --

13 **Q.** You personally. Well, let me ask you --

14 **A.** -- because I think that there was some misapprehension  
15 about it.

16 **Q.** You carried on working --

17 **A.** I did and, for instance, on the 18th -- sorry.

18 **Q.** If you will allow me to set out the picture, Mr Johnson,  
19 it may make things a bit easier.

20 You returned to Downing Street three times, I think,  
21 during that half-term break from Chevening where you  
22 were -- you weren't at Chequers. You received a number  
23 of notes in your red box. You didn't, though, receive  
24 a daily update, I think, dealing with coronavirus  
25 expressly or exclusively until your return from the

81

1 reference to the fact that the tempo increased after the  
2 half term break, between 14 February, when Cabinet  
3 discussed the plans that would need to be drawn up, to  
4 25 February after half term --

5 **A.** Yeah.

6 **Q.** -- relatively little overall was done in terms of  
7 responding to this immediate crisis, was there?

8 **A.** I think that -- sorry, forgive me. Mr Keith, forgive  
9 me, I was referring to a conversation I happened to  
10 catch on the -- between you and a previous witness in  
11 which I thought the impression was being given by  
12 somebody that I was relaxing during that period,  
13 I was --

14 **LADY HALLETT:** I think it was Mr Cummings.

15 **A.** It may have been.

16 **MR KEITH:** And not given by me, Mr Johnson --

17 **A.** I take it back unreservedly, Mr Keith, and I apologise.

18 I was working throughout the period, and the tempo  
19 did increase, particularly during, you know -- when we  
20 got the -- when I saw the message from Katharine Hammond  
21 on, I think it was 2 March but I'm told it was  
22 earlier --

23 **Q.** But there was a meeting on Friday 28 February that you  
24 attended --

25 **A.** That's right.

83

1 half term break on Monday 24 February, and the question  
2 to you is: in the box returns, the box notes that you  
3 did receive, what proportion focused on coronavirus?

4 **A.** Well, I can -- I can't tell you that, because I can't  
5 remember. But I remember there were certainly  
6 conversations going on about Covid with my officials,  
7 and in that very period I rang President Xi of China to  
8 offer the UK's condolences for what was happening in  
9 China, to discuss the origins of Covid, and to compare  
10 notes on what was happening.

11 I also, I think a couple of days later, rang  
12 President Trump in America to discuss exactly the same  
13 thing.

14 So it was -- despite what has previously been said  
15 to the Inquiry by some of the evidence, there was a lot  
16 going on, and it really starts to mount in tempo round  
17 about the time that we get Katharine Hammond's note of  
18 the --

19 **Q.** On the 28th?

20 **A.** On the 28th, yes.

21 **Q.** So the question to you, Mr Johnson, is this -- and  
22 nobody is suggesting you put your feet up at Chevening  
23 during that week.

24 **A.** Apart from you, that is.

25 **Q.** Well, what I'm suggesting to you is, by your very own

82

1 **Q.** -- with the CCS.

2 **A.** That's right, and what troubled me was the sheer number  
3 of potential fatalities under the RWCS, and this was  
4 just a horrifying figure, and I couldn't believe it.

5 I've got to be honest with you, I thought this --  
6 because what the paper also said was it may be like  
7 a bad flu pandemic or it may be milder than that. But  
8 I thought, well, we have plenty of bad flu pandemics in  
9 the UK, and we also have -- and if it's milder than  
10 that, then it won't be an exceptional thing at all, so  
11 why am I also being told that the RWCS is 520,000?

12 **Q.** Well, that was of course a meeting on 28 February, but  
13 I want you, please, to answer the question about the  
14 tempo of work on coronavirus between 14 February and  
15 28 February when that paper was produced to you.

16 Would you accept that there was a lost opportunity  
17 on the part of government to react with sufficient speed  
18 and attention to the nature of this crisis in that  
19 two-week period, for whatever reason -- because of the  
20 mindset, because parts of government were away, it  
21 matters not. Overall, the government took its eye off  
22 the ball in that two-week period by failing to act  
23 sufficiently speedily?

24 **A.** I think that there were clearly things that we could  
25 have done if we'd -- and should have done if we'd known

84

1 and understood quite how fast it was spreading, but we  
2 didn't.

3 **Q.** All right.

4 **A.** And that was the -- that was the reality.

5 **Q.** There was a COBR on Wednesday 26 February, INQ00056216,  
6 page 6. This is a crucial moment, although it's not,  
7 again, a COBR that you were present at, Mr Johnson, but  
8 it is a COBR of the utmost seriousness, because on  
9 page 6:

10 "The CHAIR [Mr Hancock] said ... the reasonable  
11 worst case planning assumptions looked close to becoming  
12 the reasonable planning assumptions as cases in Italy  
13 demonstrated the need for heightened alertness ..."

14 Turning that into plain English, what Mr Hancock was  
15 saying was that the government, which had hitherto been  
16 working on the basis of planning for a reasonable  
17 worst-case scenario, planning for the worst, but hoping  
18 for a better outcome, had realised that the reality of  
19 the scenario identified by Sir Chris Whitty in January,  
20 the second scenario, was looking close to becoming the  
21 reality; that is to say. The reasonable worst-case  
22 scenario was indeed coming to pass, not there quite yet  
23 but it was looking close.

24 Would you agree that that understanding was  
25 a crucial moment?

85

1 It's the first sentence of this report.

2 Did you ask Ms Hammond: how can it not yet be  
3 certain when the virus has escaped China, there is  
4 sustained human-to-human transmission outside China,  
5 there are cases now in the United Kingdom, and we have  
6 no means of preventing its spread? Why is she saying  
7 it's not yet certain?

8 **A.** I think -- I don't know the answer why she's saying  
9 that, and I think formally speaking it had not yet been  
10 declared a global pandemic, and I think it was up to  
11 Tedros Ghebreyesus, at the WHO, to do so and maybe she  
12 is referring to that. But I read it as meaning it's not  
13 yet certain to be a major problem.

14 **Q.** Paragraph 2:

15 "Based on existing assumptions for a severe [pan]  
16 flu outbreak, in a reasonable worst case scenario about  
17 half of the UK's population would become ill ... and up  
18 to 520,000 people could die as a direct result of  
19 Covid-19."

20 Just pausing there, note the reference to "could  
21 die" as opposed to "would die" once the virus has  
22 self-sustaining community transmission.

23 "The scientific advice is to use these numbers for  
24 planning -- they are not a prediction ..."

25 Did anybody at that meeting, the meeting which you

87

1 **A.** Sorry, what date is this?

2 **Q.** This is 26 February. It's a COBR you weren't present  
3 at, and it's in advance of the receipt by you of the  
4 civil contingencies paper.

5 **A.** It does look as though that meeting informed Katharine  
6 Hammond's -- well, helped to inform Katharine Hammond's  
7 paper and perhaps was the reason why I was -- I got  
8 the -- had the meeting I did. But I couldn't swear to  
9 that.

10 **Q.** I haven't asked you that, in fact, but it may well be,  
11 and it's a matter for my Lady, the material shows that  
12 the CCS were tasked to provide the paper for you before  
13 this meeting.

14 **A.** I'm sorry, okay.

15 **Q.** But the question from this paragraph for you is: as the  
16 Prime Minister, were you told that the COBR, which you  
17 had not chaired, had been told that the reasonable  
18 worst-case scenario --

19 **A.** No, I wasn't.

20 **Q.** -- was looking close to becoming the reality?

21 **A.** I don't remember that. I don't remember that.

22 **Q.** The CCS paper, 28 February, is INQ000182331. The first  
23 paragraph, Ms Hammond says:

24 "Covid-19 looks increasingly likely to become  
25 a global pandemic, although this is not yet certain."

86

1 had -- and we'll come to the actual meeting itself in  
2 a moment -- but did anybody at the meeting at which this  
3 paper was discussed ask Ms Hammond: why is the sole  
4 paper from the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, the  
5 crisis management body in the heart of government,  
6 suggesting that these figures are not a prediction,  
7 when, as you've just described, the information to COBR  
8 on 26 February was saying the reasonable worst-case  
9 planning assumption looks close to becoming reality?

10 **A.** I can't answer that question.

11 **Q.** All right.

12 **A.** But it's a very good question.

13 **Q.** Page 2, paragraph 9, the report says:

14 "We need to strike a balance between taking  
15 precautionary steps and overreacting ... as cases  
16 spread ... the risk of overreacting is reducing. We are  
17 now planning for a potential global pandemic that would  
18 inevitably spread to the UK ..."

19 So it would, in this paragraph, inevitably spread.

20 Did you assess, reading this report, Mr Johnson,  
21 that the reference to overreaction was long past and  
22 that, in fact, in the striking of that balance there was  
23 now a real emergency and a need to take precautionary  
24 steps straightaway?

25 **A.** I think that the -- I found the paper very alarming,

88

1 arresting, I went -- I think I remember going to talk to  
2 my officials about it, saying, you know, which is it,  
3 a severe to mild flu pandemic or an RWCS of 520,000?  
4 Because I just, I couldn't understand what I was being  
5 asked to anticipate.

6 **Q.** So I've referred to the meeting. Your private  
7 secretary, Imran Shafi, refers at INQ000146636, to the  
8 meeting. It's difficult to read his writing, but there  
9 is a reference to the PM asking "what's the strategy" --  
10 there we are, thank you.

11 "[Prime Minister] -> what's the strategy.

12 "- when are we going to take big decisions, of what  
13 evidence."

14 On what evidence, of what evidence? And then you  
15 say:

16 "- biggest damage done by overreaction."

17 So it looks, from the face of this note, that your  
18 sense that there was a real crisis, that you were  
19 extremely rattled, is prevalent in the first sentence,  
20 but in the second sentence, perhaps in reflection of the  
21 CCS report, you say the biggest damage is done by  
22 overreaction.

23 **A.** I think -- I think I'm leaving both possibilities open,  
24 because that's how it's still -- it still struck me.  
25 I think that in disasters such as this, the actions that

89

1 this?

2 **Q.** The read-out from the meeting, INQ000136750, shows that  
3 you called for a major ramp-up of OGD, other government  
4 department activity on domestic preparedness.

5 **A.** And that was the least we could do.

6 **Q.** Yes, I think if you go over to the second page.

7 No, there we are, it's the top of the page,  
8 thank you, I missed it:

9 "We need a major ramp-up of OGD activity on domestic  
10 preparedness -- and we should use the COBR meeting on  
11 Monday to land this point with Secretaries of State;

12 "The [Prime Minister] agreed with the approach to  
13 publish an action plan ..."

14 That's the plan that was published on 3 March, was  
15 it not, "contain, delay"?

16 "... (he will review the plan itself over the  
17 weekend ..."

18 You read the draft plan over that weekend, did you  
19 not, 29 and 30 February --

20 **A.** The first plan, yeah.

21 **Q.** 28 February and 1 March. And you "agreed with the need  
22 for early emergency legislation", and then there is  
23 a debate about repatriation.

24 Do you, with hindsight, and I emphasise hindsight,  
25 Mr Johnson, accept that the level of seriousness may not

91

1 government take inevitably also have costs, and I'm sure  
2 we're going to come on to this, but that's the balance  
3 you have to strike.

4 **Q.** As the Prime Minister, instead of directing government  
5 to respond to the threat of a near existential crisis,  
6 you instead warned of the dangers of overreaction?

7 **A.** No, I said -- no, no, no, that's -- well, forgive me.

8 I say:

9 "- when are we going to take [some] decisions, [and  
10 on] what evidence."

11 Because I'm looking at a problem that's been  
12 presented to me. I need to know what the plan is going  
13 to be. I've told you that I don't like the look of the  
14 way it's going in Italy at all, and we need to do  
15 something. And that is the day, I think, the 28th, when  
16 I remember, though I'm not sure if Chris would confirm  
17 this, I remember having a long conversation with him at  
18 some stage around that date when he takes me through  
19 NPIs, what were later referred to as lockdowns, and he  
20 tells me about the pros and cons, about -- he gives  
21 a sketch of the behavioural fatigue argument, and he  
22 takes me through the issues.

23 So I'm -- so I think what I'm saying is: well, if  
24 this is the problem, then when am I going to be given  
25 the menu of options about what we're going to do about

90

1 have been sufficiently communicated in this direction  
2 from you? Do you say you did enough?

3 **A.** I think that I did what I could. I think the problem is  
4 that actually if you exclude borders, and test and trace  
5 is not as good as it cracked up to be, and if you're  
6 told that we've got ample supplies of PPE -- I was  
7 finding it hard to conceptualise exactly what we should  
8 be doing except for the NPIs, and that was the only  
9 thing that I'd been given. And we had no plan for that.  
10 And I don't think the concept of lockdown or even the  
11 word "lockdown" had yet emerged.

12 **Q.** Indeed not. There was a 25 February SAGE meeting where  
13 non-pharmaceutical interventions were debated, but they  
14 didn't include lockdown. There was a debate about  
15 extreme social distancing at the beginning of March,  
16 "lockdown" doesn't appear until later.

17 **A.** It doesn't.

18 **Q.** But your answer, Mr Johnson, is:

19 "I think the problem is that actually if you exclude  
20 borders, and test and trace is not as good as it cracked  
21 up to be, and if you're told that we've got ample  
22 supplies of PPE -- I was finding it hard to  
23 conceptualise exactly what we should be doing ..."

24 That debate, that realisation on your part that  
25 there is no effective border control, that PPE may be

92

1 deficient, that there is no effective test and trace or  
 2 scaled-up test and trace, isolate, contact system, is  
 3 absent from all this material. That debate simply  
 4 doesn't take place. There is no general realisation the  
 5 virus is coming, it's at 2% fatality rate or 1% fatality  
 6 rate and we haven't got the measures in place to be able  
 7 to deal with it. That debate doesn't take place --

8 **A.** I think that's -- and I think that's right, and I think  
 9 it's basically for the same reason that I've given,  
 10 which is that although people intellectually can see  
 11 that the RWCS could happen, as Katharine Hammond puts  
 12 it, they still don't think that it's very likely to  
 13 happen. And that's the reality.

14 **Q.** Now, in March, on the 2nd, you chaired your first COBR.  
 15 INQ000056217.  
 16 If we look at page 5, paragraph 2, we can see that  
 17 you're told that:  
 18 "... contact tracing for the source of infection for  
 19 the last two cases in the [United Kingdom] had not been  
 20 successful ..."

21 So just pausing there, even the limited test and  
 22 trace system in the United Kingdom had failed to pick up  
 23 what was still then only a relatively few number of  
 24 cases, it had not picked up the last two, and that in  
 25 both France and Germany there was now sustained

93

1 wasn't just the CMO who articulated the concept of  
 2 behavioural fatigue, if you look at the many other  
 3 meetings, or look at the press conference of 12 March,  
 4 you can see that the CSA gives a very full description  
 5 of what happens if you go in hard and early with  
 6 a population that has no immunity, and then you release  
 7 the measures, it bounces back -- or, as I think you've  
 8 described it, the spring --

9 **Q.** Will you forgive me if I pause you there, Mr Johnson.  
 10 I was asking you questions about this idea that the  
 11 population mustn't have measures imposed too early  
 12 because they will become tired of it --

13 **A.** Yes.

14 **Q.** -- there is an issue about maximum effectiveness.  
 15 I wasn't in fact asking you about the recoiled or  
 16 uncoiled spring.

17 **A.** Forgive me, you're quite right, but the two things are  
 18 connected, because what the CSA went on to say on  
 19 12 March was that people get fed up and you lose the --  
 20 so if you have to keep -- and we'll come to this, I'm  
 21 sure, in the matter of the October/November lockdowns --  
 22 you have to keep doing it, and so my anxiety was, in the  
 23 absence of therapeutics, and without a vaccination  
 24 programme, what would happen if we simply went into  
 25 a hard lockdown early and then had no alternative but to

95

1 community transmission. So in terms of infection  
 2 spread, it may be thought, "Well, game over", in terms  
 3 of infection spread.

4 "... the aim for the DELAY phase, if CONTAIN failed,  
 5 was to delay the peak of infections, to reduce the peak,  
 6 and to minimise loss of life."

7 Then in paragraph 3:  
 8 "... the CMO said that interventions to delay the  
 9 spread of the virus must not be implemented too early in  
 10 order to ensure maximum effectiveness."

11 There is material from SPI-B, one of the SAGE  
 12 subcommittees, on 4 and 9 March, also COBR on 4 March  
 13 and 9 March, which demonstrate that the Chief Medical  
 14 Officer in particular said timing of implementation is  
 15 crucial, compliance or despondence is heavily dependent  
 16 on timing. I'm going to use the well known phrase  
 17 "behavioural fatigue"; although it has no scientific  
 18 genesis you understand the phrase and its meaning.

19 To what extent were your decisions, and we're now  
 20 getting into the phase at which social distancing  
 21 measures were starting to be contemplated, to what  
 22 extent was your decision-making process influenced by  
 23 this notion that interventions should not be imposed too  
 24 early?

25 **A.** Well, it was the prevailing view for a long time, and it

94

1 come out. And so to answer your main question, that was  
 2 a -- it was an anxiety, a problem that was very  
 3 prevalent during those early days.

4 **Q.** This issue appears to have been raised with you at  
 5 a relatively early stage, on 2 March: we must not  
 6 implement "too early in order to ensure maximum  
 7 effectiveness".

8 To what extent do you think it likely that you would  
 9 have proceeded to implement measures earlier than you  
 10 did had you not been told, "You mustn't go too early to  
 11 ensure maximum effectiveness"? What is the impact of  
 12 this? What should the Inquiry make of this debate? Is  
 13 it important --

14 **A.** It's very -- it's fundamental. And it's -- it goes --  
 15 because I'm afraid it's what happened. We have to be  
 16 realistic about 2020, and the whole year, that whole  
 17 tragic, tragic year. We did lock down, but then it  
 18 bounced back, after we'd unlocked, and --

19 **Q.** I'm so sorry, Mr Johnson, may I bring you back, please,  
 20 to the first week in March.

21 **A.** Sorry.

22 **Q.** Had you not been told, "Don't go too early, because  
 23 there is a limit to which the population will be able to  
 24 bear the implementation of these measures" --

25 **A.** I --

96



1 Q. -- would have gone earlier than you did and by what time  
 2 were you effectively forced to delay?  
 3 A. I don't think I can -- I can't say that I would have  
 4 gone earlier, because I think I would have been guided  
 5 by what advice I was getting about when to put NPIs in.  
 6 Don't forget that this is a once-in-a-century event.  
 7 We're doing things, we're enacting policy that has never  
 8 been enacted in our lifetimes in this country, and to do  
 9 it at the drop of a hat is very -- it's very  
 10 logistically difficult, but it was, you know, not  
 11 something you rushed into.  
 12 Q. But having been told by the CMO: be careful, don't go  
 13 too early because the population might not wear it, did  
 14 you consider saying to him, "Well, in this general  
 15 debate about non-pharmaceutical interventions and social  
 16 distancing, the public health demands, the likelihood of  
 17 death and hospitalisation, demand that we take these  
 18 measures regardless of whether the population are  
 19 prepared to put up with it over time"? Did you push  
 20 back against this notion of "don't go too early"?  
 21 A. I thought that the -- the short answer is no. I don't  
 22 remember -- so I don't remember saying to myself --  
 23 absolutely candidly, I don't remember saying to myself,  
 24 "This is so bad, they must be wrong, I must overrule the  
 25 scientists or I must ignore the scientists, I must

97

1 LADY HALLETT: Mr Keith.  
 2 MR KEITH: Mr Johnson, may we start with a WhatsApp message  
 3 that Mr Cummings sent to Lee Cain, INQ000048313. This  
 4 is dated 3 March, and Dominic Cummings says:  
 5 "He doesn't think it's a big deal and he doesn't  
 6 think anything can be done and his focus is elsewhere,  
 7 he thinks it'll be like swine flu and he thinks his main  
 8 danger is talking economy into a slump."  
 9 There are a number of parts to that message, and I'd  
 10 just like you, please, to say whether or not you accept  
 11 that there is any truth in this message, bearing in mind  
 12 it's dated also 3 March, or whether you think there is  
 13 a degree of accuracy in it?  
 14 A. Well, we've just had the previous day, Mr Keith, we've  
 15 just had the COBR that I've chaired, I think, were  
 16 planning to deal with something that I actually think,  
 17 as I've told you, is starting to be an issue of concern  
 18 to me. I was, as I say, rattled by the images from  
 19 Italy, I couldn't figure out why I was getting these  
 20 conflicting messages about whether something could  
 21 happen, the scale of the RWCS and what it was going to  
 22 be. I think the part of the message that is still  
 23 correct at that point is that, if I -- if at that point  
 24 you had asked me, "What is going to be the lasting  
 25 damage from this?" I still would have probably said it's

99

1 go" --  
 2 Q. No question of overruling the scientists, you were  
 3 following the scientists.  
 4 A. Correct, forgive me.  
 5 "I must ignore the" -- and that's a very important  
 6 distinction -- "I must ignore the scientific advice and  
 7 the threats to public health and of worse outcomes if we  
 8 go too early and I must simply maximise. I've got to  
 9 deal with the problem in front of the windscreen, I've  
 10 got to deal with it now."  
 11 I didn't -- I didn't do that, and I -- perhaps with  
 12 hindsight I should have done, but, as I said to you  
 13 right at the outset of this hearing, I just don't know  
 14 the answer.  
 15 Q. That's clear.  
 16 LADY HALLETT: Mr Keith, is that a convenient moment?  
 17 MR KEITH: By all means.  
 18 LADY HALLETT: It's just that we usually break every hour  
 19 and a quarter, and I think that's probably enough for  
 20 this morning.  
 21 THE WITNESS: Thank you.  
 22 LADY HALLETT: 1.40, please.  
 23 (12.41 pm)  
 24 (The short adjournment)  
 25 (1.40 pm)

98

1 going to be what we do to fight it, rather than the  
 2 actual impact of the disease. But I was -- I was  
 3 increasingly concerned about it.  
 4 Q. You have in fact already given evidence to the Inquiry  
 5 in relation to why as -- at, you suggested, an earlier  
 6 stage there were comparisons properly to be drawn with  
 7 swine flu, and you've described the importance to you of  
 8 not talking the economy down. The first line "he  
 9 doesn't think anything can be done", may I just ask you  
 10 this: this date, 3 March, comes of course after your  
 11 meeting with the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, it  
 12 comes after the COBR at which there is some early debate  
 13 about measures and what can be done, and if you did say  
 14 on 3 March to Mr Cummings, "I don't think anything can  
 15 be done", that casts a very significant light upon what  
 16 you were being told around that time?  
 17 A. I don't think -- I can't say exactly what I said to my  
 18 adviser, nor would I necessarily place too much reliance  
 19 on his reporting of what I said, but I think my  
 20 impression was at that time that -- you know, because of  
 21 what we've said about borders, because of what we've  
 22 said about the other measures open to us, that --  
 23 you know, it goes back to the questions I was asking,  
 24 you know, I couldn't see yet the plan, I couldn't see  
 25 what ... so the NPIs were, to me -- this is probably

100

1 what Imran is getting at in his email -- pretty,  
 2 you know, far-fetched still in my imagination, I was ...  
 3 I was still gestating that.  
 4 **Q.** At a press conference on 3 March you said that we were  
 5 as a country extremely well prepared. Of course, as it  
 6 turns out, that was not so. But I want to ask you: the  
 7 weekend before you had received the draft action plan,  
 8 the "contain, delay" document which you'd been shown in  
 9 draft form, and in that document there is that  
 10 assertion, "We are well prepared and we have plans in  
 11 place", et cetera.

12 Do you think you told the world that we were well  
 13 prepared on the 3rd because you had seen it in that  
 14 action plan, the draft of which you had been reading  
 15 over the weekend?

16 **A.** Yes, this is the second -- this is the weekend of the --

17 **Q.** 28 February/1 March.

18 **A.** Was there a leap year? Was there a 29th?

19 **Q.** I really don't know, Mr Johnson, I can't assist you with  
 20 that.

21 **A.** Anyway, it's certainly true that I was -- the general --  
 22 the general reassurances I was getting were that,  
 23 you know, we were well prepared. So the scales had not  
 24 yet fallen about, for instance, test and trace.

25 **Q.** Indeed, and you shook hands with patients at the Royal  
 101

1 **A.** No, and in fact I think I gave a clip to the media in  
 2 which I gave some figure for the number of daily tests  
 3 that we -- or I believed then that we were doing, and  
 4 I do remember Chris being -- the CMO being, you know,  
 5 quite -- sounding confident, at least to me, about the  
 6 number of tests we were capable of doing at around that  
 7 time. I now can't remember the exact date.

8 **Q.** All right.

9 COBR on 4 March, you chaired that. You were  
 10 presented with a paper "Potential impact of behavioural  
 11 and social interventions", INQ000056158. It's  
 12 illustrative of what you were being told at the time,  
 13 Mr Johnson, because it makes plain that:

14 "... behavioural and social interventions ... [can]  
 15 be applied as part of [an] HMG response ... including  
 16 the expected impacts ... The note does not cover  
 17 economic, operational or policy considerations.

18 "2. SAGE has not provided a recommendation of which  
 19 interventions, or package of interventions, that  
 20 Government may choose to apply."

21 So the first question is: did you understand that  
 22 SAGE was never going to be telling you, "Mr Johnson, you  
 23 must do this", it could only ever provide advice about  
 24 the nature of the interventions and the consequences and  
 25 the risks and so on, it could never tell you what to do  
 103

1 Free Hospital --

2 **A.** Yes.

3 **Q.** -- on 1 March. You know that, of course, you were later  
 4 criticised for that. May we take it that you hadn't  
 5 seen, or at least you hadn't been advised of the  
 6 contents of the SPI-B paper of around that time -- in  
 7 fact the paper came later, 3 March, but advice was given  
 8 generally before that -- advising against greetings such  
 9 as shaking hands? Did you know?

10 **A.** I didn't, but I do think that it was -- I shouldn't  
 11 have. I shouldn't have done that in retrospect. And  
 12 I should have -- I should have been more precautionary.  
 13 But I wanted -- I wanted to be encouraging to people  
 14 and -- so I think it's on that day that I go to  
 15 Colindale, to PHE. And although I'd been told -- sorry,  
 16 this is in my statement -- but although I'd been told  
 17 that, you know, we have a fantastic belt and braces  
 18 system, I was a little bit concerned about -- I had  
 19 a feeling that perhaps they weren't really as across the  
 20 situation as I'd been led to believe.

21 **Q.** Mr Hancock gave evidence to the effect that he was told  
 22 on 18 February by Public Health England that the test  
 23 system was unsustainable, that it wouldn't be able to  
 24 operate beyond the handful of first few hundred cases,  
 25 did you know that when you visited Colindale?  
 102

1 or what you had to consider doing?

2 **A.** That's right. I mean, SAGE is -- SAGE is like a --  
 3 you know, it's a doctor/patient relationship. The  
 4 doctor can't order you to do things, the doctor is not  
 5 responsible for what you do, the doctor says: if you do  
 6 this, then that, if you do -- if you fail to do it, then  
 7 the other. And that's basically how it works, and  
 8 should work.

9 **Q.** Was the Chief Medical Officer around that time, 4 March,  
 10 telling you, however, you must now start considering  
 11 these behavioural and social interventions? And  
 12 of course the first one, you'll recall, is imposed on  
 13 12 March.

14 **A.** Yes, so --

15 **Q.** We don't know when you first started to --

16 **A.** So, as I said before the break, actually we'd -- the CMO  
 17 and I had had a heart to heart about non-pharmaceutical  
 18 interventions, about a lot of aspects of it --  
 19 particularly, from a public health point of view, the  
 20 costs. And he really stressed that.

21 So we had thought about it, and I could see that  
 22 that was the direction in which things were starting to  
 23 go. And it's only a few days later when I actually tell  
 24 the public, I think for the first time, I think on  
 25 the -- I think it's the 9th or thereabouts, "We're going  
 104

1 to have to start restricting social contact".

2 **Q.** And that answers, perhaps, my next question, which is:  
3 why was there a delay between the first debate between  
4 you and the Chief Medical Officer about the possible  
5 imposition of these behavioural and social interventions  
6 and 12 March when the first really significant  
7 intervention was imposed?

8 **A.** I think there we have to go back to the earlier  
9 conversation that we had about --

10 **Q.** Mindset.

11 **A.** -- timeliness -- no, not timeset(sic) but mindli- --

12 **Q.** Going early.

13 **A.** About going early, about the issues that were raised by  
14 going hard, going early, which later became the mantra,  
15 but which in March the -- the problem was that if you --  
16 so I was told repeatedly, by both CSA and CMO, you know,  
17 you risked bounceback and behavioural fatigue and get  
18 more behavioural fatigue as a consequence of  
19 bounce-back.

20 **Q.** There is a graph on page 2 of this document which shows  
21 what the waves, that's to say the transmission of the  
22 virus, would be likely to be depending on whether or not  
23 there was mitigation, that's to say intervention, or no  
24 mitigation or moderate intervention, and you can see the  
25 different colours of the lines, Mr Johnson, depending --

105

1 first curve, first wave, were all very much couched in  
2 the -- with caveats about timeliness and not going --  
3 going at the right moment.

4 **Q.** And it's right to say, isn't it, that the wording that  
5 the Chief Medical Officer used with you and spoke in  
6 COBR on 2 March, "must not be implemented too early",  
7 was with reference to interventions plural?

8 **A.** Yes. And if I could offer a suggestion as to, you know,  
9 what was really going on, I think that -- you know, this  
10 is clear -- we simply didn't realise how fast the  
11 disease was spreading. And if you remember, the  
12 predictions were that the peak was going to come in  
13 mid-May or June, I think, and it was really well in  
14 advance of that.

15 **Q.** If we go back to page 2, and the graph, you can see that  
16 it's put there in terms of spring, summer and autumn?

17 **A.** Yeah.

18 **Q.** But there was no suggestion on that graph that the peak  
19 of the black unmitigated wave would be the end of March,  
20 beginning of April?

21 **A.** That's correct.

22 **Q.** Speeding up now, because we're coming now to the final  
23 decisions in March, WhatsApp messages from Mr Hancock,  
24 or rather his WhatsApp group, the WhatsApp group he  
25 shared with Mr Cummings and Mr Slack, suggests that

107

1 **A.** Yeah.

2 **Q.** -- on whether or not they were very stringent or less  
3 stringent. So it was plain to you, wasn't it, that if  
4 no steps were taken, there would be a massive first  
5 wave, that's the black wave, but if it was reduced to  
6 some extent there would be moderate transmission, the  
7 blue wave, and then a more severe intervention would be  
8 the high transmission reduction.

9 But to make absolutely plain, if we look at page 5,  
10 there was at this stage on 4 March no mention of  
11 a lockdown as such --

12 **A.** No.

13 **Q.** -- there were a range of potential interventions from  
14 stopping large events, closure of schools, home  
15 isolation, whole household isolation --

16 **A.** Yes.

17 **Q.** -- social distancing, impact, we can see there on the  
18 right-hand --

19 **A.** All these things.

20 **Q.** But no lockdown?

21 **A.** No, and that's quite right, so this is the sort of the  
22 double hump graph that really became very influential in  
23 all our thinking, and indeed is what, I'm afraid,  
24 tragically, is more or less what happened.

25 But the measures that we could take to depress the

106

1 around this time on 5 March they debate telling you to  
2 "STOP saying 'business as usual'". Do you recall that  
3 debate with them?

4 **A.** I don't, and nor do I even remember saying that, but --  
5 using the phrase -- but I think what I might have said  
6 is, you know, "Until such time as we tell you to do XYZ,  
7 it's business as usual", but I don't -- I don't remember  
8 that debate.

9 **Q.** You have described the genesis of the herd immunity  
10 debate. May I just please show you a WhatsApp entry or  
11 WhatsApp communication from 14 March, so running forward  
12 a bit to the weekend at which there was a distinct  
13 change in strategy.

14 **A.** Yeah.

15 **Q.** If we could just look at 14 March, 7.17 am.

16 So I think it's page 3 of INQ000048399, we can  
17 see -- I'm not sure that's the correct document. 48399.

18 Ah, yes, it is.

19 **A.** Ah, yes.

20 **Q.** Thank you very much.

21 So just to put it in its context, Mr Johnson, over  
22 the weekend at which there was a change in strategy,  
23 there were repeated conversations between you all,  
24 of course, but you raise at this point the point of the  
25 impact of a herd immunity debate, and you make the point

108

1 further down the page, I think it's at 6.49 --  
 2 **A.** Yeah.  
 3 **Q.** -- 39, yes:  
 4 "Here's the [problem with] herd immunity argument."  
 5 So just very shortly, you've described to  
 6 the Inquiry how the herd immunity debate arose at the  
 7 beginning of March, 5 March. It appears that you were  
 8 still debating, or your advisers and you were still  
 9 debating the full meaning of and the nature and the  
 10 extent of the herd immunity debate as late as 14 March.  
 11 It appears to have trundled on as a bone of contention  
 12 for weeks.  
 13 **A.** Can I -- I think I can understand what's -- I mean, I'm  
 14 looking at this for the first time, but let me try to  
 15 explain what I think this is about.  
 16 What happened on 12 March was that there was a press  
 17 conference in which we were trying to deal with the ...  
 18 I had to level with the public and say I'm afraid  
 19 a large number of people are going to lose their loved  
 20 ones before their time. It was a pretty grim press  
 21 conference. And in that discussion we were asked about  
 22 how -- the way through, and I think Patrick said the  
 23 idea was to flatten the curve, suppress the virus, with  
 24 some measure of herd immunity by September being,  
 25 I think, a good outcome, was what he said.

109

1 because of the risk of an uncoiled spring, of it  
 2 bouncing back --  
 3 **A.** Yes, correct.  
 4 **Q.** -- a second wave.  
 5 If we could just have that document back,  
 6 INQ000048399, and 7.39.42 am, please, 14 March, probably  
 7 page 3 of that document, 48399.  
 8 It appears that this debate about herd immunity and  
 9 the debate about uncoiled spring had caused you  
 10 considerable concern, because at 7.39.42 you say:  
 11 "That's why I was concerned when some on team were  
 12 suggesting last week that we actively need a proportion  
 13 of [population] to be infected."  
 14 Then you say:  
 15 "Civil service need to grasp."  
 16 What did you mean by that?  
 17 **A.** So can't say exactly what civil servants I was thinking  
 18 of in that context. I think probably what I mean is:  
 19 look, we've set a hare running by mistake -- and I think  
 20 Patrick, you know, really did a huge job to try to clear  
 21 it up -- we all need to set the public's mind at rest  
 22 and explain what we're doing. It's protect the NHS and  
 23 save lives, and that's the priority.  
 24 **Q.** Further down the page at 10.49.15, in fact it's  
 25 15 March, page 6 of this document, you can be seen to be

111

1 I think he also said something to the effect of,  
 2 you know, it might not be -- you needed to suppress the  
 3 curve, but not -- it might not be necessary to stop  
 4 everybody or even desirable to stop everybody getting  
 5 the -- getting the virus, because again you might want  
 6 some, I think, some measure of herd immunity.  
 7 Anyway, that was the moment when people all pricked  
 8 up their ears and say, "Are they trying to allow this  
 9 thing to just pass through the population unchecked with  
 10 a view to establishing herd immunity?" Which is not  
 11 what we wanted, not what Patrick meant, and we had to do  
 12 quite a lot of work to clear it up.  
 13 Because it -- what we -- our objective was to  
 14 protect the NHS and save life, and to save life by  
 15 protecting the NHS. That was our objective. Our  
 16 strategy was to suppress the curve and to keep the R  
 17 below 1, as much as we could. We were going to use  
 18 everything we could to do that. Herd immunity was going  
 19 to be, we hoped, a byproduct of that campaign which  
 20 might be very long and very difficult.  
 21 **Q.** At the same time, in COBR on 9 March, in SAGE on  
 22 12 March, in COBR on 12 March, and in an interview that  
 23 the Chief Medical Officer gave to the press on the 13th,  
 24 there were repeated references to the need to delay the  
 25 peak of the virus as opposed to suppressing it entirely,

110

1 saying:  
 2 "[Given] what happened in Italy we simply have NO  
 3 TIME."  
 4 **A.** Yeah.  
 5 **Q.** And we can see that.  
 6 **A.** This is the 15th.  
 7 **Q.** 10.49.15, there we are. Two-thirds of the way down the  
 8 page, 15 March, "we ... have NO TIME". We've jumped  
 9 forward but that, of course, is the Sunday 15 March, in  
 10 the middle of all the debates that you were having with  
 11 your advisers?  
 12 **A.** Yes.  
 13 **Q.** All right.  
 14 Just to finish off some other points which you've  
 15 addressed, in relation to behavioural fatigue, and you  
 16 being told that the timing of implementation of  
 17 interventions was vital, the evidence before the Inquiry  
 18 shows that the SAGE meeting on 13 March --  
 19 **A.** Yes.  
 20 **Q.** -- that's to say on the Friday -- you weren't of course  
 21 an attendee at SAGE --  
 22 **A.** No.  
 23 **Q.** -- was told, and the minutes of the SAGE meeting make  
 24 this plain:  
 25 "Difficulty maintaining behaviours ... should not be

112

1 taken as a reason to delay implementation ..."

2 **A.** Ah.

3 **Q.** Ben Warner, your adviser, was present at that meeting  
4 and he was reporting back to Number 10. Were you told  
5 that, in contrast to what you had been told about the  
6 need for timing and behavioural fatigue and so on, SAGE  
7 was in fact saying by the 13th, "Don't take that as  
8 a reason to delay implementation"?

9 **A.** Well, in effect, yes, in the sense that that was the --  
10 I mean, I wasn't told that particular detail about  
11 behavioural fatigue not being a reason to delay  
12 implementation, but what I was told was that we had a --  
13 new data, we were at least, you know, five to seven days  
14 further on, possibly more, in the curve than we thought  
15 we were, and that the margin of manoeuvre that SAGE had  
16 seemed to think we had and was offering to us on  
17 the 12th -- if you remember they say then, you know,  
18 there are four things you can do: self-isolation for  
19 seven days if you've got any kind of symptoms (though  
20 even that we say we can postpone until the Monday  
21 the 16th), then there's household isolation of 14 -- for  
22 14 days, then there's a couple more measures --

23 **Q.** Advice.

24 **A.** -- advice for the --

25 **Q.** Elderly?

113

1 graphs the red line, "Freeable beds", and the black line  
2 "Total NHS beds", make plain that whatever you do,  
3 unmitigated or mitigated through measures 1 and 2, the  
4 NHS will be --

5 **A.** Totally.

6 **Q.** -- massively overwhelmed?

7 **A.** Yes.

8 **Q.** What did you make of that?

9 **A.** I was bewildered, to be honest. I remember --  
10 I remember looking at that graph and thinking in either  
11 case we are facing an absolutely intolerable situation,  
12 and I ... but although I clocked it, I ... I thought,  
13 well, there must be a reason why we're not being told to  
14 go urgently. Maybe that reason is all the things that  
15 we've discussed. So I have to admit, and I think I say  
16 in my statement, that I think at this point there is  
17 a certain amount of incoherence in our thinking, because  
18 that graph makes it clear that things are going wrong,  
19 and that is cleared up the following day.

20 **Q.** But you didn't yourself ask, firstly, what can be done  
21 to bring the blue --

22 **A.** No.

23 **Q.** -- part of the chart below the black line, why are we  
24 talking in terms of these modest measures which may or  
25 may not even be imposed this week when we've got to

115

1 **A.** -- for the vulnerable, and then for those over 70. And  
2 those last three they say can actually be put off for  
3 one to three weeks on the -- on the 12th. Then on  
4 the 13th that's the key moment, really, because that's  
5 when I get called back on the Friday evening. I come  
6 back on the -- first thing in the morning, and  
7 you know -- you know the rest.

8 **Q.** On 12 March there was a COBR meeting which you chaired,  
9 INQ000056209. There is, at page 6, a graph.

10 **A.** Yeah.

11 **Q.** And --

12 **A.** No, I remember looking at this.

13 **Q.** And this page is entitled "What would be the effect be  
14 on the NHS of interventions?"

15 **A.** This is the -- what date is this again?

16 **Q.** This is 12 March. So this is the Thursday.

17 **A.** Yeah.

18 **Q.** On the right-hand side you can see "Graph A: no  
19 measures", so that's to say no interventions, and at the  
20 bottom right-hand corner, "Graph B: measures 1 & 2  
21 implemented"?

22 **A.** I know.

23 **Q.** 1 and 2 were seven-day isolation and number 2 was  
24 household isolation.

25 If we could scroll back out again, please, in both

114

1 bring the blue part below the lines?

2 **A.** I didn't and that's --

3 **Q.** And, secondly, why didn't you ask: why are you  
4 presenting me with this and at the same time telling me  
5 we mustn't go too early with interventions?

6 **A.** Well, because I was, I'm afraid, listening to the advice  
7 I was being given about timeliness and I was -- and  
8 looking with puzzlement at the graphs. And what  
9 I should have done, and I -- though thankfully it was  
10 only a matter of a day or two before the thing was  
11 resolved, what I should have done was, as soon as I saw  
12 that graph, said, "Hang on, this is not coherent with  
13 what you're telling me about timeliness". Because I do  
14 remember looking at it and thinking there was something  
15 amiss.

16 **Q.** Around this time, on 5 March -- going back to the  
17 beginning of the week, on 5 March there was a Covid-19  
18 meeting at which advice was given to the effect that  
19 a prohibition on mass gatherings was not necessary. Did  
20 you throughout that week, as you had in fact during  
21 earlier weeks, receive advice that, for epidemiological  
22 purposes at any rate, there was no need to shut mass  
23 gatherings, sporting events?

24 **A.** That was the -- but to be fair to the people who were  
25 giving the advice, it sounded reasonable at the time,

116

1 given what we knew, because what they said was: look, if  
2 you do this, what you will do is push everybody into the  
3 pubs and the warm enclosed spaces where transmission  
4 will be even faster. So that was the point that was  
5 made.

6 **Q.** You were, by your own words, of course, only following  
7 the science rather than being directed by the science?

8 **A.** Correct.

9 **Q.** It must have been apparent to you that this was  
10 presentationally disastrous, to keep mass gatherings  
11 open whilst you were debating the closure of schools as  
12 one of the possible interventions?

13 **A.** That's true, but I felt that -- it was -- certainly the  
14 public didn't get it, just as -- but that was true of  
15 many of the measures that we put in place throughout the  
16 pandemic. There was often a more -- there was often  
17 a gap between the public conviction about something and  
18 the scientific certainty about the effectiveness of that  
19 measure. Borders would be an example, masks might be  
20 another example.

21 **Q.** You've highlighted the importance of communications,  
22 Mr Johnson. In terms of leadership and in terms of  
23 beginning to direct the country that there were terribly  
24 difficult times ahead and impossible choices to be made,  
25 the closure of mass gatherings would have sent a vital

117

1 **A.** Well, at every stage I was weighing the massive costs of  
2 what we were doing to people's psyches, to people's life  
3 chances, to the whole -- you know, when you talk about  
4 an economy, you're talking about people in all walks of  
5 life who suddenly can't get to do the thing that they  
6 need to do to earn a living, and it's a -- it's a --  
7 what we were obliged to do was very, very destructive  
8 for a lot of people who were least able to bear the  
9 costs, and least able to manage it.

10 **Q.** Over the weekend of 13/14 March, there was what has been  
11 described by a variety of witnesses as that change in  
12 strategy, and it matters not for these purposes,  
13 Mr Johnson, whether it was an acceleration of the  
14 existing plan, a change in strategy or a redirection;  
15 there was, on any view, a significant change.

16 It's plain from the evidence, but obviously the  
17 ultimate decision is for my Lady, that there were  
18 a number of individuals who were pushing for change.  
19 Mr Cummings, with his colleagues Ben and Marc Warner,  
20 and also Helen MacNamara and Imran Shafi all met on the  
21 Friday night, and with Mr Cummings' whiteboard they  
22 worked out that immediate much more stringent measures  
23 were required to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed.

24 During the course of that week, the days before that  
25 weekend of 14/15 March, it's obvious from data being

119

1 message, would it not?

2 **A.** And I had already told people on the 9th, so several  
3 days before, that they were going to have to restrict  
4 social contact, and on the 12th I had given them a --  
5 I think, a pretty powerful and in many ways frightening  
6 message about what was going to happen.

7 **Q.** But Cheltenham took place --

8 **A.** And the effect --

9 **Q.** I'm so sorry.

10 **A.** Forgive me. The effect of that, I think, did show up in  
11 people's behaviour.

12 **Q.** So that we are clear, the Cheltenham Festival continued  
13 the week of the 10th, there was an Atlético Madrid  
14 match --

15 **A.** Yes.

16 **Q.** -- and mass gatherings, sporting events, were not in  
17 fact shut --

18 **A.** Yes.

19 **Q.** -- until the following week?

20 **A.** Yes, and as a -- with hindsight, as a symbol of the  
21 government's earnestness, rather than just as a --  
22 you know, being guided by the science, we should perhaps  
23 have done that, and I agree with you.

24 **Q.** And no doubt that was in accordance with your own  
25 libertarian instincts?

118

1 provided to Number 10, we've seen part of it in that  
2 memo to SAGE, showed the likely impact on the NHS.

3 Why wasn't the lead government department, the DHSC,  
4 responsible for public health, pushing you harder during  
5 that week to introduce the more stringent changes? Why  
6 do you think that department, it appears from the  
7 evidence, was still trying to go for the squash the  
8 sombrero, part mitigation, herd immunity route as  
9 opposed to recognising "we must have suppression, we've  
10 got to stop this now before it's too late"?

11 **A.** I think probably -- so my interpretation -- my memory of  
12 it is slightly -- is slightly different from that  
13 account, or maybe it might be the same. But what I felt  
14 happened was that we were -- we were in a state now  
15 where we knew we had a massive problem, we knew we were  
16 probably going to have to act in ways that we didn't  
17 really -- hadn't bargained for and didn't -- and were  
18 still being developed. We still thought we had a bit of  
19 time, but not very much, probably, and that was what the  
20 scientific guidance seemed to say. And if you look at  
21 those -- that long paper by SAGE on the 12th, you can  
22 see that, and I've quoted a bit of it.

23 My impression, and I may be wrong about this, but my  
24 impression was that on the 13th the radical change that  
25 you refer to is really one about the timeliness thing,

120

1 and what I think SAGE saw, and this is what was conveyed  
2 to me by CMO and CSA, was that the virus was now  
3 spreading much more rapidly in the UK than they had  
4 bargained for, and therefore we had to accelerate. And  
5 so I think that it was a confluence of opinion, but the  
6 people I talked to on the Saturday morning were the  
7 people you'd expect, it was Chris, Patrick, Imran, Stu,  
8 my other advisers.

9 So I wouldn't want to -- I wouldn't want to allow  
10 the Inquiry to -- just to run away with the idea that it  
11 all would have sailed on had it not been for the  
12 intervention of Number 10. I think that SAGE  
13 themselves, on the 13th, had seen very seriously and  
14 very clearly that something needed to be done. That  
15 was, at any rate, my impression.

16 **Q.** Until Saturday 14 March, when Mr Cummings presented his  
17 whiteboard in the middle of numerous other meetings and  
18 talked about plan B, until that point, no one in the  
19 DHSC had said, "We're off the mark, we've gone wrong,  
20 we've got to accelerate and impose more stringent  
21 measures", did they?

22 **A.** My impression is that the critical moment was indeed, as  
23 you say, that SAGE meeting when I think that a number of  
24 scientists, epidemiologists, looked at the data and  
25 said, "We are -- I'm afraid we're off the pace here",

121

1 this?" Do you recall that debate?

2 **A.** I think -- I don't recall it, but what's certainly  
3 possible is that I was alluding to -- I was looking  
4 with, you know, dismay at what was happening, dismay  
5 about what we were going to have to do, and reflecting  
6 that, you know, this was not the message I -- I mean,  
7 I'm conjecturing, I mean, this is not the message that  
8 I'd been having from them in the past few days.

9 **Q.** You don't recall?

10 **A.** I don't -- I don't recall saying that.

11 **Q.** All right.

12 Let's have a quick look at one of the papers, the  
13 briefing on the Covid response that was put before you  
14 on the Saturday.

15 INQ000183889. This is the document which sets out  
16 the current plan and the proposed alternative plan,  
17 briefing on Covid-19 --

18 **A.** Yes.

19 **Q.** -- response. There's a variant on the graph that you  
20 saw before, but --

21 **A.** Yes, I saw this.

22 **Q.** -- you can see at the bottom of the page, "The current  
23 plan" -- if you scroll back out again, we can see "The  
24 current plan", "An alternative plan", at the bottom of  
25 the page.

123

1 and that -- I think that was what happened.

2 **Q.** In his evidence to this Inquiry Mr Hancock said that on  
3 that Friday 13 March he called you to tell you there  
4 that there needed to be an immediate lockdown. Do you  
5 recall that call or not?

6 **A.** I'm afraid I don't, but it's been a long time.

7 **Q.** In his witness statement Mr Cummings says, at page 49,  
8 during the course of the Saturday:

9 "The [Prime Minister] ... asked reasonable  
10 questions."

11 Including:

12 "... 'why aren't Hancock, Whitty, Vallance telling  
13 me this?'"

14 Do you recall that discussion?

15 **A.** I remember them being there, but I might be --

16 **Q.** There was a meeting -- well, there were four meetings.  
17 There was a meeting with Sedwill, Vallance, Whitty, then  
18 a meeting with Cummings, Reynolds, Shafi, Lister, Whitty  
19 and a host of others, then a follow-up meeting yourself  
20 with Mr Cummings and the Warners, then a second  
21 follow-up meeting, and then another meeting.

22 You had a lot of meetings that day.

23 **A.** Yeah.

24 **Q.** At one of them, Mr Cummings says you turned to him and  
25 said "Why aren't Hancock, Whitty, Vallance telling me

122

1 In summary, is that correct, Mr Johnson --

2 **A.** Yes.

3 **Q.** -- throughout that weekend of 14 and 15 March there were  
4 multiple meetings, a variety of different people pushed  
5 for different speeds of intervention? We can see from  
6 the WhatsApps that some people said "Go now", other  
7 people said "We've got to move fast", but there was in  
8 any event a very real understanding that more had to be  
9 done, more stringent measures had to be imposed, and  
10 COBR would have to consider all that on the Monday when  
11 it next convened?

12 **A.** Yes. So my impression was that what Ben Warner and  
13 others were doing, and I don't know about the  
14 differences in views but what they were doing was trying  
15 to take the SAGE meeting of the previous day and really  
16 give to me the logical consequences of that.

17 **Q.** But only you could decide the strategies, and you  
18 decided, did you not, by the Sunday night, when you  
19 called Sir Patrick Vallance and Sir Chris Whitty to  
20 another meeting, you decided that the alternative plan  
21 would have to be followed, and you gave, as we will see  
22 in a moment, a number of directions as to what needed to  
23 be done?

24 **A.** Yes, I mean, it became -- it was absolutely clear by the  
25 Saturday that we had to act. We were out of time.

124

1 **Q.** The Inquiry needs to ask you this: to what extent did  
2 you appreciate, by the Sunday night, that a lockdown  
3 decision, a stay-at-home mandatory order, was  
4 inevitable? It obviously wasn't imposed until Monday  
5 23 March, and during the course of the week there were  
6 a great deal many complex, extremely complex operational  
7 issues to circumnavigate, a shielding system having to  
8 be built effectively from scratch, getting hold of data  
9 from the NHS. We can see there were real issues about  
10 the preparedness of the Cabinet Office around that time,  
11 from Mr Cummings' WhatsApps that refer to CABOFF being  
12 "terrifyingly shit, no plans, totally behind the pace".

13 Was it a question (a) of you deciding that there had  
14 to be a lockdown but that time would be needed to put it  
15 into place, or (b) you would start the arrangements  
16 which could accommodate a lockdown but that that  
17 decision wouldn't be then taken for another week?

18 **A.** I think that, looking at the graphs, I was reconciled,  
19 or getting increasingly reconciled, to the fact that we  
20 were going to have to do a huge amount more to suppress  
21 the virus, and I ... you know, just to go back to  
22 an earlier point, this was not something we'd done  
23 from -- the country had been through, it was hard to get  
24 one's head round, the legal complications were enormous,  
25 how to do it. As you rightly say, Mr Keith, you know,

125

1 is it fair to say that you made your doubts and your  
2 oscillation clear to those around you?

3 **A.** I think it was my job to address all the consequences of  
4 what we were doing, and to test the policy, which I was,  
5 as you can see, determined that we deliver and get on  
6 and do, and it was, even though it was a completely  
7 novel policy, absolutely dramatic thing to do.

8 I -- what he's referring to here is a conversation  
9 with the Chancellor where I'm talking about the  
10 downsides and I'm talking about the costs, and how  
11 negligent -- it would have been totally negligent not to  
12 have had such a conversation, not to have gone through  
13 with the HM Treasury the economic ramifications of what  
14 I was proposing to do. And I need to do that.

15 It didn't in any way -- just I think the key thing  
16 is it didn't in any way stop us or divert us from the  
17 crescendo of actions that we took.

18 **Q.** Forgive me, the suggestion is not being made here that  
19 you, having reached a view on public health grounds,  
20 took yourself off to speak to the Treasury and see what  
21 arguments needed to be made properly on behalf of the  
22 economic consequences that would ensue from a lockdown.  
23 It is that your own decision-making, your own judgement,  
24 backed and veered and that, by implication, this is  
25 a poor example of leadership function. You couldn't

127

1 all that needed to be worked through. We had started  
2 the Bill a long time ago. I mean, 5 February we start  
3 the Coronavirus Bill.

4 But I think my state of mind then is I'm now more or  
5 less in virus-fighting mode. I'm thinking we --  
6 you know, this is -- you know, there's absolutely  
7 nothing -- we've got to throw -- we've got to sort this  
8 out. So there is then a series of things that we do  
9 leading up to the 23rd.

10 **Q.** But you weren't entirely in virus-fighting mood. If we  
11 look at INQ000273872, page 55, we can see part of the  
12 seemingly perennial debate in your own mind as to what  
13 should be done. Mr Cummings asks Lee Cain, if you could  
14 just scroll into that screenshot:

15 "Get in here he's melting down.

16 "Rishi saying bond markets may not fund our debt ...  
17 He's back to Jaws mode ...

18 "I've literally said the same thing ten ... times  
19 and he still won't absorb it. I'm exhausted just  
20 talking to him ...

21 "I've had to sit here for 2 hours just to stop him  
22 saying stupid [things]."

23 Mr Johnson, you would be inhuman, perhaps, if you  
24 hadn't, in that terrible week, oscillated and backed and  
25 veered in your own mind about what had to be done, but

126

1 make up your own mind as to what should be done.

2 **A.** No, on the contrary, I've made up my mind. We are  
3 getting on and doing it, we are not being diverted,  
4 I'm -- I've got the Chancellor of the Exchequer with me  
5 saying that there's a risk to the UK bond markets and  
6 our ability to raise sovereign debt. This matters  
7 massively to people in this country. It matters to the  
8 livelihoods of people up and down the land. I have to  
9 go through the arguments, and that is what I was doing.

10 **Q.** At INQ000146636, page 92, your own private secretary,  
11 Imran Shafi, recorded in his notebook that on Thursday  
12 19 March, the same day in fact as those communications,  
13 you said:

14 "- 'we're killing the patient to tackle the tumour'.

15 "- large [people] who will die -- why are we  
16 destroying everything for people who will die anyway  
17 soon.

18 "- Bed blockers."

19 Is that not indicative of an absence of consistent  
20 position by you and a clear decision that on the basis  
21 of the scientific advice that you had received, these  
22 stringent interventions were necessary?

23 **A.** No, it's -- no, it's an indication of the cruelty of the  
24 choice that we faced, and the appalling balancing act  
25 that I had to do throughout the pandemic, and in order

128



1 to -- if indeed I said something like that, what I was  
2 saying, which is the truth, which is that in order to  
3 drive down the virus, to stamp out the virus, you have  
4 to do things that are going to be very damaging in all  
5 sorts of other ways.

6 Perhaps it's not -- it wasn't designed to be  
7 publicly broadcast, but I was trying to find a way  
8 crisply to summarise what I saw as part of the problem.  
9 And I needed people to -- and I think, by the way, that  
10 what I hope the Inquiry will be able to do, I needed  
11 people to be able to do a faster reckoning of the  
12 benefits, the impacts of the NPIs and the costs at the  
13 same time.

14 As for the reference to so-called bed blockers, that  
15 is -- I assume this is 19 March, is it?

16 **Q.** Yes.

17 **A.** Well, we've only a couple of days previously decided to  
18 do the March discharge strategy, and the issue there is  
19 that we're facing a crisis in that we only have about  
20 100,000 beds in the NHS, in the acute sector, and  
21 plainly, sadly, many of those were delayed discharge  
22 patients, and we needed to sort that out.

23 **Q.** Two other issues in relation to the Thursday and the  
24 Friday. On 19 March, that Thursday, you had a meeting  
25 with a newspaper proprietor. Mr Cummings has suggested

129

1 **A.** Yeah, that's exactly right.

2 **Q.** All right.

3 The final weekend of 21/22 March, Sir Chris Whitty  
4 produced a paper dated 22 March, in fact, called  
5 "*Coronavirus: summary of strategic and tactical approach*  
6 *to the epidemic*", and that was presented to you at the  
7 second of a -- Covid-19 strategy meeting on the 22nd.

8 The lockdown was of course ordered on the 23rd,  
9 following a meeting of COBR and a strategy ministerial  
10 group meeting.

11 The material put before you, Mr Johnson, over that  
12 weekend shows that, whilst there were some positive  
13 trends, the level of compliance by the population in  
14 relation to the measures which had --

15 **A.** That's right.

16 **Q.** -- previously been imposed on 16 and 20 March failed to  
17 reach the necessary 75% required to have some degree of  
18 certainty that the R number could be brought below 1.  
19 Is that a fair summary?

20 **A.** Yeah, that's completely right and I remember I think  
21 Patrick making some point -- making points about there  
22 being too much social mixing in parks and so on.

23 **Q.** Now, obviously, schools had been shut from the 20th, you  
24 had directed the closure of non-essential retail and  
25 leisure outlets and everything else on Friday, the 20th.

131

1 that that meeting, which appeared in your diary as  
2 a personal social matter, was not perhaps the best use  
3 of your time in the middle of this crisis.

4 **A.** Well, all I can -- I can't remember exactly what  
5 happened at that meeting, it was a very brief meeting.  
6 Mr -- the newspaper proprietor in question doubtless  
7 wanted to know about what was happening to London and  
8 why -- and where he owns -- and indeed the whole  
9 country, and wanted to be informed and I wanted him to  
10 be supportive.

11 **Q.** Was the meeting to do with Covid? Was it Covid-related,  
12 Mr Johnson?

13 **A.** I can't remember but I'm absolutely certain it must have  
14 been.

15 **Q.** On that Thursday and Friday there was then debate also,  
16 wasn't there, about whether or not, in light of the  
17 figures showing that the NHS in London would be  
18 overwhelmed sooner, there might have to be a lockdown  
19 for London first --

20 **A.** Yeah.

21 **Q.** -- before the rest of the country, but that debate  
22 resolved itself, didn't it, when it became apparent that  
23 there was little point in locking London down if the  
24 rest of the country was going to be locked down just  
25 a matter of days thereafter?

130

1 **A.** Yes.

2 **Q.** A few days before, on the 16th, you had had the first  
3 set of interventions. Why on that Monday did you not  
4 wait to see whether or not the measures from the  
5 previous week, which had of course been imposed in good  
6 faith, and specifically designed to bring the R below  
7 1 --

8 **A.** Right.

9 **Q.** -- which was your overriding strategy, might work? Why  
10 didn't you wait to see whether or not those measures  
11 would, over the course of that week, start to bring R  
12 down below 1, as you had fervently hoped and properly  
13 believed they would when you'd imposed them the week  
14 before?

15 **A.** I think that by this stage the -- for the simple reason  
16 the scientific advice was starting to become much more  
17 precautionary, and I think that the -- I sensed, from  
18 what I was being told about the effectiveness of the  
19 previous messages, that we -- we had to do more and,  
20 looking at the shape of the curves that I had seen,  
21 I thought that we -- you know, we'd run out of -- we'd  
22 run out of wiggle room, and I thought we had to do what  
23 we could.

24 **Q.** There was no hard data, of course, as to when the NHS  
25 would be overwhelmed. You were not in the position of

132

1 being able ever to have been given hard data as to when  
 2 that could be, because you were in the context of  
 3 an epidemiological exponential curve?  
 4 **A.** And nor was it.  
 5 **Q.** You could not know exactly how many additional deaths  
 6 would be spared if you took the measures on 23 March as  
 7 opposed to waiting to see whether the measures from  
 8 the 20th would work.  
 9 You just weren't in that territory, and that being  
 10 so, why didn't you wait to see whether or not the  
 11 previous measures should be allowed to work?  
 12 You say:  
 13 "... looking at the shape of the curves ...  
 14 I thought ... we'd run out of wiggle room."  
 15 "I sensed" more needed to be done.  
 16 That was a very, and this is the suggestion to you,  
 17 a very uncertain foundation upon which to order the  
 18 ultimate sanction, the mandatory stay-at-home order.  
 19 **A.** I accept that. I think that -- and, you know, I'm  
 20 troubled by the decisions that I took for all sorts of  
 21 reasons, and none of them, as we said at the beginning,  
 22 were easy. I've been -- you know, the government  
 23 clearly from some quarters gets criticised for going  
 24 ahead with a lockdown and, you know, as we were  
 25 discussing earlier, the very word "lockdown" doesn't  
 133

1 changed, and I thought that we were going to have to do  
 2 whatever it took.  
 3 **Q.** INQ000056213, page 4, is the relevant part of a meeting  
 4 of COBR, the COBR decision, the COBR meeting that took  
 5 place on the Monday after you had given the directions  
 6 on the Sunday night. COBR considered whether or not  
 7 that additional social distancing measure, that is to  
 8 say a mandatory stay-at-home order, should be imposed.  
 9 This meeting took place at 5 o'clock on that Monday.  
 10 If you look at the current situation update in the  
 11 first three paragraphs, you will see a reference to the  
 12 figures for compliance being positive in part:  
 13 "... for social distancing measures, the figures  
 14 were positive and showed that there had been  
 15 an encouraging drop in footfall, but in some areas these  
 16 were not ... yet at a level that was acceptable ..."  
 17 But park attendance, paragraph 3, had gone up by  
 18 200%.  
 19 You will recall in the press pictures of --  
 20 **A.** Yeah.  
 21 **Q.** -- thousands of people attending parks across the land.  
 22 "... and queues in shops had increased. There were  
 23 regional differences and there were lower compliance  
 24 rates in some areas outside London."  
 25 If we just scroll, and we needn't pause for long,  
 135

1 really appear in government vocabulary until the 14th,  
 2 but we did it completely on the 23rd.  
 3 I think it was really a measure of my anxiety about  
 4 the curve. It just -- it seemed to me that the ... I no  
 5 longer had the luxury of waiting. I just -- it was  
 6 over. We had to -- the ...  
 7 What I was hearing from the scientists, the -- my  
 8 sense that probably they were right to be doubtful about  
 9 the efficacy of the measures, I had a hunch that that  
 10 might be correct, though I couldn't know. I thought we  
 11 could no -- I thought, you know, we were out of time and  
 12 we had to do everything that we could, and so that's why  
 13 we went to -- you know, we closed schools on the Friday,  
 14 we closed non-essential retail, and then we do the stay  
 15 at home on the Monday.  
 16 **Q.** But on the Friday when you closed the schools and you  
 17 shut the retail, you weren't at that stage -- you hadn't  
 18 at that stage already determined that there would be  
 19 a lockdown on the Monday. That decision was only made  
 20 in light of the information over the weekend about  
 21 levels of compliance.  
 22 **A.** I think that ...  
 23 **Q.** That's correct, isn't it?  
 24 **A.** I think that's -- that's probably true, but I think that  
 25 my general sense of where we were likely to be going had  
 134

1 but if you just scroll over the document, we can see  
 2 there is much more detail provided about levels of  
 3 compliance, the tube, and then on page 6, at the top:  
 4 "... the CHAIR said that the measures were not to  
 5 stop all work, there was work in government and other  
 6 offices that must be maintained. That there was  
 7 a balance ..."  
 8 The Attorney General gave advice on legal matters.  
 9 Some points were made about enforcement and deterrence.  
 10 At 12:  
 11 "... the measures needed to be taken as social  
 12 distancing was not being adhered to at present."  
 13 It appears, Mr Johnson, from that paragraph that you  
 14 understood there to be a binary issue: either the  
 15 20 March measures were being adhered to. Or they were  
 16 not, and, if they were not, there was no option but to  
 17 go the ultimate step and impose the lockdown.  
 18 There was no debate in that meeting, was there, as  
 19 to whether or not, to use the words of the Chief Medical  
 20 Officer, "the measures from Friday might yet do the  
 21 job"?  
 22 **A.** I think that's fair, but I want to try to explain to you  
 23 why I still thought it was right to throw everything at  
 24 it, and the basic reason is that I had seen from the  
 25 events of the last -- which we've discussed  
 136

1 extensively -- of the last two/three weeks that we'd  
 2 systematically underestimated speed, underestimated  
 3 prevalence, and we didn't have any other -- we didn't  
 4 have the systems to control the virus that, you know,  
 5 perhaps I'd believed earlier in the month that we did.  
 6 I didn't know what other tools I had, as  
 7 Prime Minister, to protect large numbers of people from  
 8 this virus, and I felt fundamentally that I was out of  
 9 time, and what I'd believed in the previous week was  
 10 that we still had some wiggle room, because that seemed  
 11 to be what I was -- I was hearing. I might have been  
 12 wrong, but I took the view on the Sunday and Monday that  
 13 we were just out of time, and the thing was too big and  
 14 the curve was too aggressive.

15 **Q.** The Inquiry has put this proposition to Sir Chris  
 16 Whitty, and also to Mr Hancock: did you act because in  
 17 effect you were told by the Chief Medical Officer and  
 18 the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser that the  
 19 nature of the exponential growth was such that,  
 20 regardless of the actual number of NHS places,  
 21 regardless of any data that might indicate that the NHS  
 22 would be overwhelmed or when it would occur, and  
 23 regardless of the number of additional deaths that would  
 24 be caused if you didn't act, the nature of the  
 25 exponential growth was such that huge numbers of

137

1 in Lombardy was very real. And thank heavens that did  
 2 not happen, thanks to the amazing work of the NHS and,  
 3 you know, as I said right at the beginning, hundreds of  
 4 thousands of people. But I felt I had to do what  
 5 I could to give them the best possible chance, and I had  
 6 no other -- I had no other tool, literally nothing else.

7 **LADY HALLETT:** Thank you.

8 **MR KEITH:** And is that why, Mr Johnson, examination of the  
 9 Covid-19 strategy ministerial group meeting on the  
 10 Saturday, the Covid-19 strategy ministerial group  
 11 meeting on the Monday morning at 9.15, and of the COBR  
 12 meeting that we've looked at at 5 pm on the Monday,  
 13 shows very little, if any, debate about the  
 14 countervailing non-public health argument? It's just  
 15 not there.

16 **A.** That doesn't mean that it wasn't happening and you've  
 17 seen a reference to it in my conversation with the  
 18 Chancellor. There was a huge amount of thought going  
 19 into it, but the higher objective had to be saving human  
 20 life.

21 **Q.** And it is perhaps not surprising, but within three days  
 22 of that momentous decision -- INQ000048399, page 17 --  
 23 having seen an article in the press -- and it's a matter  
 24 entirely of course for my Lady -- you ask the extremely  
 25 salient questions -- although I now can't see them. If

139

1 additional deaths and collapse were inevitable at some  
 2 point, and you simply couldn't gamble that they would  
 3 not eventually occur? Is that the nub of it?

4 **A.** I ... I took very seriously, and I listened very hard to  
 5 Chris and Patrick, and it felt to me as though they were  
 6 basically saying that the UK was now in a position where  
 7 we had to do everything we could to restrain, contact,  
 8 and that that was our best shot at protecting the NHS  
 9 and saving life, and so that was what I did.

10 **LADY HALLETT:** Can I interrupt for a second. Forgive me.

11 **MR KEITH:** I'm so sorry, my Lady.

12 **LADY HALLETT:** No, it's just you mentioned earlier,  
 13 Mr Johnson, about how some would say you shouldn't lock  
 14 down at all. When you did decide that we had to lock  
 15 down, did you consider the arguments to say you should  
 16 never go that far and impose that kind of level of  
 17 draconian restriction on the liberty of the population?  
 18 Did you consider the argument against lockdown or did  
 19 you --

20 **A.** I did, and, I mean, I didn't -- I'm afraid to say at  
 21 that stage I gave it pretty short shrift, because  
 22 I thought that my job was to protect human life, and  
 23 that is the number one duty of government. And  
 24 I thought that if the NHS was overwhelmed, then the risk  
 25 of truly tragic scenes in the UK of the kind we'd seen

138

1 we could scroll back out? Yes, please, if we could  
 2 scroll back out, please:

3 "I must say I agree [with] every word of this weeks  
 4 spec [Spectator, perhaps] cover story by  
 5 professor John lee  
 6 "1 we have no idea how many Covid deaths are truly  
 7 additional  
 8 "2 when Covid fatalities are recorded we have no  
 9 idea whether it is merely present or actually the cause  
 10 of death  
 11 "3 we have no idea what proportion may have had the  
 12 disease asymptotically already  
 13 "4 So we have taken these extraordinary steps  
 14 without being truly sure how deadly it is."  
 15 Is it those expressions of doubt, Mr Johnson, why  
 16 you said earlier that the basis upon which you proceeded  
 17 was one of precautionary approach in public health  
 18 terms --

19 **A.** Yeah.

20 **Q.** -- because in the absence of any hard data you believed  
 21 you had no option?

22 **A.** I couldn't take the gamble with public health, but I was  
 23 conscious that -- you know, we've had the argument  
 24 about -- the discussion about behavioural fatigue. That  
 25 takes many forms. One is that the media,

140

1 understandably, certainly a lot of the media need --  
 2 they need a proper explanation of why this is necessary  
 3 and how it's working, and they need -- and I really  
 4 think that we need -- you know, there is still work to  
 5 be done in this area. And so here I'm saying, you know,  
 6 we need to -- if we're being attacked for, you know, not  
 7 standing up our actions, then we need to substantiate  
 8 it. We need to say, "No, no, no, this is what public  
 9 health requires."  
 10 **Q.** So on this essential issue, the Inquiry wants to ask  
 11 three direct questions.  
 12 Firstly, from what you've said, Mr Johnson, and this  
 13 may be entirely obvious, was it your position that the  
 14 lockdown measures, the stay-at-home mandatory order of  
 15 23 March, was absolutely necessary?  
 16 **A.** I believe that it was, and I believe that it helped to  
 17 suppress the R. I think that it was cumulative.  
 18 I think that the R started to go down as a result of  
 19 a series of things that we did and also, frankly, as  
 20 a result of popular anxiety about Covid anyway.  
 21 But I've got to tell you, in all honesty, I can't --  
 22 I find it difficult to quantify the impact that those  
 23 measures had, and the more we can do to explain why  
 24 NPIs -- why NPI measures of any kind work, why they're  
 25 necessary, to the satisfaction of everybody, the easier

141

1 **A.** That's right.  
 2 **Q.** All right.  
 3 On that first proposition, you accept of course that  
 4 because the government did not wait further to see  
 5 whether the measures of 16 and 20 March would work, we  
 6 will never know?  
 7 **A.** Yes, but I -- but I had got -- and I suppose that's  
 8 scientifically, you know, regrettable, but I thought we  
 9 had no time to fight, we couldn't wait.  
 10 **Q.** The second question: do you assess that if the  
 11 government had acted sooner, had awoken to the true  
 12 nature of the crisis and the seriousness of our  
 13 position, and had imposed the measures of 12, 16 and  
 14 20 March earlier when the degree of viral transmission  
 15 in the country was lower, that is to say there was  
 16 a lower prevalence, then the need for a mandatory  
 17 stay-at-home order -- which, of course, was on the cusp  
 18 of the decision-making on the Monday, 23 March -- might  
 19 have been avoided?  
 20 **A.** Well, that I have to say that I doubt, but I don't know.  
 21 I think that the virus was/is extremely contagious.  
 22 I think that it was going to describe a pretty nasty  
 23 curve almost whatever we did. I'm not certain that we  
 24 would have been able to avoid the extreme action that we  
 25 eventually took by acting a few days earlier but,

143

1 it will be for government next time and the more public  
 2 buy-in there will be.  
 3 **Q.** Is that a --  
 4 **A.** Public buy-in was, I think, already very high, but  
 5 I think it would be a great thing.  
 6 **Q.** Is that a reference to objective analysis of life  
 7 quality and the outcomes, in terms of life and death and  
 8 quality of life, of particular measures?  
 9 **A.** I think that what we all need -- so I think that the --  
 10 you asked: did the lockdown work? Do I believe that it  
 11 worked? I do. But, as a layperson, I would like  
 12 that -- and I saw the Royal Society study on this, that  
 13 I think Chris had a hand in generating. It was very  
 14 interesting, but I think we need to understand with  
 15 a lot more granular clarity exactly what these NPIs  
 16 deliver.  
 17 **Q.** I think that was Sir Patrick Vallance's predecessor, but  
 18 it matters not.  
 19 **A.** Oh, forgive me.  
 20 **Q.** Is that the report into what the nature of interventions  
 21 are --  
 22 **A.** No, it was --  
 23 **Q.** -- lockdowns?  
 24 **A.** No, sorry, it came out after the pandemic. It was --  
 25 **Q.** Indeed, it came out just before this Inquiry.

142

1 you know, I would defer on that to scientists.  
 2 **Q.** And the third proposition: based upon in part the  
 3 evidence from some of the scientific witnesses who have  
 4 given evidence in this Inquiry, on the premise that the  
 5 lockdown was necessary on 23 March, was it nevertheless  
 6 imposed too late? Could it not have been imposed  
 7 earlier had the government been rather more alert in  
 8 middle to late February and in early March, had it not  
 9 been blindsided to some extent by the debates about  
 10 herd immunity and not going too early and behavioural  
 11 fatigue and so on, and understood properly the data in  
 12 its possession, thereby allowing it to impose the  
 13 lockdown in the weeks of 9 or 16 March?  
 14 **A.** I think that the -- all your conditionals I would  
 15 delete, except the one about the data. I think that  
 16 that was the key thing that the -- that SAGE lacked, and  
 17 it was -- it was the sudden appreciation that we were  
 18 much further along the curve than they'd thought, we  
 19 weren't four weeks behind France or Italy, we were  
 20 a couple of weeks, maybe less, and they were clearly  
 21 wrong in their initial estimation, we were clearly wrong  
 22 in our estimation of where the peak was going to be.  
 23 And so the -- that penny dropped, that -- we  
 24 realised that on the evening of the 13th into the 14th,  
 25 and then we acted. But I think once we decided to act,

144

1 I think it was pretty fast from flash to bang.  
 2 **LADY HALLETT:** Perfect timing, Mr Keith. We'll take  
 3 a 15-minute break.  
 4 **THE WITNESS:** Thank you.  
 5 **LADY HALLETT:** Back at 3.10.  
 6 **(2.56 pm)**  
 7 **(A short break)**  
 8 **(3.10 pm)**  
 9 **LADY HALLETT:** Mr Keith.  
 10 **MR KEITH:** Mr Johnson, as is well known, after the first  
 11 lockdown, your government published a roadmap out of  
 12 lockdown in May.  
 13 **A.** Yes.  
 14 **Q.** On 10 May, I think it was presented to Parliament, "*Our*  
 15 *plan to rebuild*". You make plain in your statement that  
 16 you were extremely keen to re-open schools. Was that  
 17 because you felt that keeping children out of school was  
 18 arguably one of the greatest harms of the lockdown?  
 19 **A.** Absolutely.  
 20 **Q.** You addressed the nation on 10 May and you included  
 21 an instruction that those who could not work from home  
 22 should be actively encouraged to go to work:  
 23 "So [to use your words] work from home if you can,  
 24 but you should go to work if you can't work from home."  
 25 The witness statement from Mr Sunak expresses how he  
 145

1 the effort to get the R down to be felt throughout the  
 2 country and for people to be able to do things again.  
 3 I think it's probably true that I wanted to see  
 4 people back in -- back at work and I think that  
 5 psychologically, emotionally, people -- a lot of people  
 6 were in a very different place, and they felt that  
 7 they'd seen a terrifying pandemic, they were still very  
 8 apprehensive, and they didn't want government lecturing  
 9 them about what to do.  
 10 So that's probably what I'm getting at.  
 11 **Q.** Was the speed of the release very hard to gauge?  
 12 **A.** Very.  
 13 **Q.** In Sir Patrick Vallance's diaries -- INQ000273901, at  
 14 page 66 -- he described you as being "very bullish" and  
 15 wanting everything to be "released sooner and more  
 16 extremely than we would". By "we" he means the  
 17 scientists. And then, page 92, in the context of  
 18 a meeting with the Prime Minister, actually having  
 19 a discussion about "letting it rip".  
 20 624 on 12 July:  
 21 "[Prime Minister] still wants to push opening too  
 22 fast."  
 23 And if you just pause there, then on INQ000094215,  
 24 which is a WhatsApp group extract between yourself and  
 25 Mr Hancock in the Top Team Group, on 15 July, you say:  
 147

1 was frustrated that there was, as he sees it,  
 2 overcompliance with the stay-at-home messaging, and he  
 3 believes that the possibility, or rather the likelihood,  
 4 that many people would ignore the active encouragement  
 5 to go to work and not go to work had an exacerbation of  
 6 the -- exacerbated the economic impact of the lockdown.  
 7 In your communications with your colleagues on this  
 8 subject, did you in July say this, in July 2021, looking  
 9 back to 2020 --  
 10 **A.** Yes.  
 11 **Q.** "I arguably cocked it up last time with finger wagging  
 12 to everyone to get on and do some work."  
 13 Do you recall saying that, expressing regret a year  
 14 later, that you had got the "work from home if you can  
 15 but go to work if you can't work from home" message  
 16 wrong?  
 17 **A.** I think that it was a very difficult time, as we came  
 18 out of -- I mean, the whole thing was unbelievably  
 19 difficult, but as we came out of lockdown in the summer  
 20 of -- early summer of 2020 for the first time, that, you  
 21 know, some areas remained under a lot of restrictive  
 22 measures, I felt strongly that people had made such  
 23 a sacrifice to get the R down that we must try to allow  
 24 people some freedom, and I wanted -- I wanted the,  
 25 you know, the benefits of the exertion, as it were, or  
 146

1 "I was calling because I'm very worried about  
 2 winter.  
 3 "We've gone fast on releasing lockdown ... I'm  
 4 getting no traction on doing what's needed to protect  
 5 the NHS ..."  
 6 Cases in track and trace are "starting to rise".  
 7 Of course, that's dated 15 July, by which time the  
 8 NHS track and trace system was up and running.  
 9 So may we presume from these messages that it was  
 10 very difficult to decide whether you were going too  
 11 fast, whether you were wanting to re-open, "let it rip"  
 12 to use your words, or whether or not in fact you were  
 13 going too fast and then becoming overly concerned or  
 14 concerned about the winter and the rise in cases?  
 15 **A.** Yes. Well, so, first of all, on the WhatsApps with Matt  
 16 here, I think you've got to remember that this is  
 17 a Cabinet Minister also thinking about his budget. If  
 18 you read that carefully, you can see that what he's  
 19 really saying is he needs more money, which is what all  
 20 secretaries of state rightly do in their messages. So  
 21 that's part of the conversation.  
 22 But clearly the issue was that I think I always  
 23 realised, and certainly nobody disagreed with me, that  
 24 when we came out of lockdown -- when we went into  
 25 lockdown, as Patrick said in that first important press  
 148

1 conference on March 12th, you can push it down, but in  
 2 an unimmunised population it will bounce back. And so  
 3 I always knew that throughout the summer we were  
 4 basically in remission, as it were, and that the thing  
 5 would come back, and it was a very -- it was a very,  
 6 very difficult judgement to make.

7 **Q.** You said that the last WhatsApp in the Top Team Group  
 8 there, on the page on the screen, may be reflective of  
 9 a Secretary of State being concerned with money.

10 **A.** Part.

11 **Q.** Isn't that your wording, or have we misread this? This  
 12 is you saying "I'm very worried about winter" and him  
 13 saying "What's the evidence on rising new cases?" Or is  
 14 it the other way around? We can't tell from the --

15 **A.** You -- I may be totally wrong about this, but I read  
 16 that as being Matt, Matt in the green, to me --

17 **Q.** All right.

18 **A.** -- saying:

19 "We can ... take a risk on releasing lockdown, OR we  
 20 can take a risk on not building up the NHS this winter."

21 And what he is really saying, like all good  
 22 secretaries of state for Health, is "Give us the money",  
 23 and -- and -- that's what I understood partly. But also  
 24 what he's saying is the cases are rising, and that's --  
 25 you know, and that was no particular surprise to me.

149

1 **A.** You've got it.

2 **Q.** -- as it happened. All right.

3 Now, to divert to a completely different subject,  
 4 the devolved administrations, please. In your  
 5 statement, you say that the interests of the devolved  
 6 administrations did not always align with England's or  
 7 the United Kingdom's interests. That's an inevitable  
 8 part of a devolved system.

9 **A.** Yes.

10 **Q.** Was that a nod to the fact that the United Kingdom  
 11 powers were constrained by public health legislation,  
 12 the Coronavirus Act, Public Health Act, Control of  
 13 Diseases Act, but on the ground this public health  
 14 crisis was a devolved issue because it was for each  
 15 devolved nation to determine its own course in terms of  
 16 the public health measures it took?

17 Did it matter ultimately? There has been a great  
 18 deal of evidence given about differences of approach in  
 19 terms of presentation, debates about whether or not  
 20 politically one or more devolved administrations took  
 21 a different route or took a different route for  
 22 political reasons. Also, whether or not, when they  
 23 attended meetings, they were simply informed of what the  
 24 position would be rather than being encouraged to  
 25 generally debate the decision.

151

1 The question in the summer/autumn is: what's the  
 2 tactics? The objective is still protect the NHS, save  
 3 lives, what's -- do we have any new tactics now?

4 **Q.** And it was apparent to the government, and to you  
 5 personally of course, that cases started going up at  
 6 a relatively early stage. They plateaued, of course.  
 7 They came right down after the lockdown, then they  
 8 plateaued for a while but they started to go up in July,  
 9 so well in advance, in fact, of the Eat Out to Help Out  
 10 scheme, well in advance of September/October.

11 **A.** That's exactly right. And contrary to, you know, our  
 12 hopes in the early phases, certainly by the end of May,  
 13 beginning of June, there is a very small percentage of  
 14 the population has antibodies. So you're looking at  
 15 a huge number of people who are still potential Covid  
 16 victims, and that's very, very difficult.

17 **Q.** And, in fact, the percentage of the population that had  
 18 been immunised by virtue of infection was very, very  
 19 low; it was around about 6% or 7%?

20 **A.** That's exactly right.

21 **Q.** All right. And that, of course, was therefore  
 22 dispositive of the arguments about herd immunity?

23 **A.** Correct, you've got it.

24 **Q.** Because in fact very few people were immunised by virtue  
 25 of infection --

150

1 Overall, did the constituent parts of the  
 2 United Kingdom generally work well in the face of this  
 3 crisis?

4 **A.** Yes, I hope what many of your respondents will also have  
 5 said is that overwhelmingly the collaboration was  
 6 excellent and the governments of the DAs, you know --  
 7 there was far, far more that united us than divided us.  
 8 I know that sounds trite, but it's got to be said, and  
 9 it was really a big UK effort and the country really  
 10 pulled together.

11 I was making a much more limited point and,  
 12 you know, it is no disrespect to the First Minister of  
 13 Scotland or anybody else, chief ministers in  
 14 Northern Ireland and Wales. They understandably were  
 15 looking to talk directly to their own electorates.  
 16 There were going to be times when they differed from the  
 17 main UK Government message, and I thought that was  
 18 sometimes at risk of being confusing at a time when we  
 19 really needed to land messages simply, and I could  
 20 see -- and people were endlessly playing back, oh, but,  
 21 you know, Scotland says this, England says this, you  
 22 know, Wales is doing a firebreaker -- a circuit-breaker,  
 23 and so on.

24 **Q.** You didn't, I think, perhaps help yourself, though,  
 25 Mr Johnson, in this debate because emails between

152

1 Mr Cummings and Helen MacNamara show that Mr Cummings  
2 said:

3 "The PM view (and mine) on ... COBRAS [this was in  
4 the context of the debate about who should attend COBR]  
5 is they're hopeless as decision making entities and  
6 actively cause trouble for comms ..."

7 Because some attendees at COBR (and Mr Cummings had  
8 in mind the devolved administrations) leak immediately  
9 afterwards.

10 Was that your view?

11 **A.** I think that sometimes that was the case, and that was  
12 a -- that was, in my view, a problem. Perhaps we could  
13 have found a better way to manage it, but it -- that was  
14 certainly one of the problems.

15 **Q.** The system was understood not to be working particularly  
16 well in terms of the government structures, the systemic  
17 structures at the top and in relation to the  
18 relationship with the DAs, because there was the series  
19 of the four ministerial implementation groups between  
20 March and May and they were then done away with and  
21 replaced by Covid-S and Covid-O.

22 You directed, following advice from your  
23 Cabinet Secretary, that there should be a new rhythm of  
24 meetings, the 9 am meetings to which the DAs were not  
25 invited, and you directed that consideration should be

153

1 with the heads of the devolved governments on a regular  
2 basis, but that came later.

3 **A.** Yeah.

4 **Q.** During the crisis, you ordered that Michael Gove, the  
5 Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, should chair  
6 regular meetings with the devolved administrations, but  
7 there were difficulties, were there not, in setting up  
8 that structure? It took time for those meetings to be  
9 arranged; do you recall that?

10 **A.** I don't recall the delay, but I do remember asking  
11 Michael to do it. I think he was ideally placed to do  
12 it. I think he did a very, very good job of working  
13 with the DAs. That didn't stop some of the raggedness  
14 that I've talked about.

15 If I had my time again, with hindsight, I think it's  
16 an area where I would have tried -- even though I was  
17 very pushed for time, I would have tried to spend more  
18 time with the DAs and really tried to bring them with  
19 me. But, you know, I'm afraid it may just be that I'm  
20 overestimating my ability to get a consensus. I think  
21 there was always the risk of divergence.

22 **Q.** Well, you may, with respect, be misrepresenting your  
23 true views, because in your statement you said:

24 "It is optically wrong, in the first place, for the  
25 [United Kingdom] Prime Minister to hold regular meetings

155

1 given to using something called the Joint Ministerial  
2 Committee. But the Joint Ministerial Committee was  
3 never used, was it, for the purpose of meeting with the  
4 DAs?

5 **A.** I think that the -- so, first of all, I think the COBRs  
6 had the problems that we've identified. There was  
7 a problem with messaging, and I think that was a serious  
8 problem. I think that in future there has to be some  
9 way of having a joined-up, a UK pandemic response, and  
10 how you get to that, I've got an open mind. I see a lot  
11 of my colleagues are against the Civil Contingencies  
12 Act. I'm happy to defer to them on that point.  
13 I wonder whether you could amend the 1984 Public Health  
14 Act so as to have an exemption for pandemics.

15 It just seems to me that something needs to be done  
16 to fix this, whilst taking account of the legitimate  
17 concerns of the DAs, their legitimate desire to be  
18 involved and to contribute. But we need to find  
19 a better way to get a single message.

20 **Q.** There was a body called the Review of Intergovernmental  
21 Relations. I think it reported in January 2022, so just  
22 at the end of the pandemic --

23 **A.** Yes.

24 **Q.** -- just at the end of the crisis which recommended that  
25 the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom should meet

154

1 with the other DA First Ministers ..."

2 **A.** Well, I think that's -- I happen to think that's also  
3 true.

4 **Q.** Well, they can't both be right, Mr Johnson.

5 **A.** Well, I think that -- well, sometimes you can do things  
6 that you think are, you know, constitutionally a bit  
7 weird if it will help the general cause of fighting the  
8 pandemic.

9 You know, let me summarise. I think that there's  
10 an issue. It's not a huge, huge issue, nothing like as  
11 big as many of the other issues that the Inquiry needs  
12 to look at, but we do need to sort it out. We need  
13 a better way to get at a unified message for the UK.

14 **Q.** Mr Johnson, you didn't try very hard, to use your words,  
15 to bring the DAs with you, because you took the view  
16 that optically it was wrong to be seen to be meeting  
17 with their First Ministers because it might look like  
18 a kind of, to use your words, "mini EU". You asked the  
19 Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster --

20 **A.** I did.

21 **Q.** -- Michael Gove, to chair the meetings instead, and you  
22 made it quite plain to the First Ministers of the  
23 devolved administrations that you had taken the view  
24 that they were prone to leaking from the COBR meetings,  
25 and also prone to taking decisions in this public health

156

1 crisis for nakedly political reasons.

2 **A.** Well, I'm not certain that I said that to them in so  
3 many words, but maybe -- maybe you've got some evidence  
4 that I did.

5 I certainly thought that that was a risk, and from  
6 time to time I ... I felt that the coherence of the UK  
7 message was being undermined, and there's got to be  
8 a way to fix it. I thought Michael did an excellent  
9 job. I sometimes wonder whether I could have done more  
10 in that respect myself, but frankly I doubt it.

11 **Q.** There were obviously divergences of approach, both in  
12 relation to the substantive responses to the crisis --  
13 tiers, firebreakers, circuit-breakers, and what was done  
14 in relation to schools and so on -- and there were also  
15 differences, were there not, in relation to public  
16 communications? So the messages, messaging across the  
17 United Kingdom wasn't always pointing in the same  
18 direction.

19 Ultimately, did it matter that there were those  
20 differences of approach, epidemiologically, or that in  
21 terms of communication you were not all singing from the  
22 same hymn sheet?

23 **A.** I think it did matter. I think that clarity and unity  
24 of message was very important.

25 **Q.** Data. Plainly, the United Kingdom Government was, where

157

1 **A.** I think that the issue of financial support was  
2 obviously allied with the issue of divergence of  
3 approach, because clearly if it was open to a DA to  
4 take, for instance, a much more precautionary approach  
5 or to say that they wanted to do X, Y, Z policy that  
6 would be more expensive, then that was something that we  
7 were going to -- the whole of the UK Exchequer was going  
8 to have to cover.

9 Now, that -- it wasn't that I wanted unity of  
10 message for that reason, but that was a -- that was  
11 certainly an extra complication.

12 **Q.** In his statement, Michael Gove says:  
13 "In the early stages of the response there were  
14 occasions where insufficient notice was given to the  
15 devolved administrations of decisions that were likely  
16 to be taken."  
17 In her witness statement, Ms Sturgeon says:  
18 "I believe both that communication should have been  
19 better, and more importantly, that the devolved  
20 administrations should have been integral to that  
21 decision-making."  
22 Would you accept, perhaps with hindsight, that the  
23 decision-making process, insofar as it involved the DAs,  
24 was not as good as it might have been?

25 **A.** I think some form of integrated decision-making that

159

1 it could, taking decisions in relation to what should be  
2 happening in each of the four nations of the  
3 United Kingdom, as I say, not directly in public health  
4 terms, but obviously it was trying to apply an allied or  
5 a unanimous approach.

6 Did you feel that you, as the Prime Minister of the  
7 United Kingdom Government, had sufficient data,  
8 sufficient scientific advice as to what the position was  
9 on the ground in each of the other nations  
10 epidemiologically?

11 **A.** Well, I think that when the pandemic broke out, we were  
12 short of data about many things. We didn't even know  
13 the number -- as I think I say in my statement -- of  
14 beds in the NHS, and it took a long time to extract  
15 relevant data.

16 **Q.** There was a general continuing concern raised with you,  
17 because Ms Sturgeon wrote to you in September 2020,  
18 about whether or not the devolved administrations were  
19 receiving enough financial support in order to be able  
20 to enable them to put into place the public health  
21 measures that they had ordained; in essence, because  
22 they are devolved nations, they don't have access to the  
23 same levers of fiscal power as the United Kingdom  
24 Government. How was that issue resolved or did it  
25 continue throughout the crisis?

158

1 doesn't leak is what you're after.

2 **Q.** Local government.  
3 It would seem that in March 2020 there was  
4 a deliberate decision within Downing Street not to  
5 invite the Mayor of London to meetings until 16 March.  
6 He says that he made repeated requests to attend. He  
7 requested to attend COBR on 2, 9 and 12 March, but was  
8 not permitted to do so. Did you know that? Do you  
9 agree with that?

10 **A.** Certainly London was very, very much in the forefront in  
11 the early stages of the pandemic, and I know that the  
12 Mayor of London was repeatedly consulted by my advisers  
13 in Number 10. I'm sure that there was a lot of traffic  
14 between them and Sadiq Khan. I think that he was  
15 invited to a meeting on the -- from memory, on the 16th,  
16 I may have that wrong, but I certainly spoke to him  
17 pretty early on. But as you said right at the end of  
18 the last session, you know, we began by thinking we  
19 might do London first but then we dropped that idea.

20 **Q.** The Mayor of London was not invited to the government's  
21 formal crisis machinery, COBR, until after the first  
22 national measures had been imposed by the United Kingdom  
23 Government; is that correct?

24 **A.** And that is because we didn't, in the end, do  
25 London-first measures, and there was some sensitivity

160



1 about other Metro Mayors.  
 2 **Q.** I think in relation to the Metro Mayors, save on one  
 3 occasion, 12 October, when the Mayor Of Liverpool,  
 4 Andrew Rotherham attended, no metro mayor was invited to  
 5 attend COBR at any time.  
 6 **A.** Right. Right.  
 7 **Q.** The evidence from Sadiq Khan, from Mr Burnham and  
 8 Mr Rotherham is to the effect that there was generally  
 9 insufficient information given to local leaders, and in  
 10 the context, Mr Johnson, of the local restrictions in  
 11 the summer of 2020, and of course the tier system in  
 12 October and December --  
 13 **A.** Yeah.  
 14 **Q.** -- of 2020, that was a very significant failing, was it  
 15 not?  
 16 **A.** Well, first of all, I'm grateful to Mr Rotherham, to  
 17 Andy Burnham, to Mr Khan, all the mayors, for the work  
 18 that they did and the leadership they gave to their own  
 19 communities. And, you know, you talk about  
 20 Andy Burnham, you know, there were several -- there were  
 21 parts of the country that barely came out of measures  
 22 for the whole of the year and --  
 23 **Q.** Manchester.  
 24 **A.** Exactly -- and they had a very, very tough time, and we  
 25 did our best to offer support and to engage with them,

161

1 Mr Johnson, that on account of your position as  
 2 Prime Minister, many of these issues would only perhaps  
 3 fleetingly have come to your attention, and of course  
 4 only at the highest possible level, and therefore there  
 5 is a distinct restriction on the detail into which we  
 6 can go in debating them.  
 7 Helen MacNamara in her statement makes this general  
 8 point: that across the advice and discussions in the  
 9 Cabinet Office and in the heart of government, there was  
 10 a striking absence of humanity or perspective about how  
 11 people or families actually lived, and her sense was  
 12 that the group of people in your inner coterie and in  
 13 the Cabinet were a most homogeneous group of people --  
 14 **A.** Yeah.  
 15 **Q.** -- and were taking decisions that probably called for  
 16 a much broader representation across society. Would you  
 17 agree with that general proposition?  
 18 **A.** I think that there is some force in that and, I mean --  
 19 but -- so some force in the description of the people in  
 20 and around those meetings at some of those key times.  
 21 I don't accept what Helen says about the measures  
 22 that we took, but it is -- and she said some things,  
 23 I think -- and, you know, I pay tribute to Helen, she  
 24 did an amazing job -- but I think that it is not right  
 25 or fair to say that policy was conceived and driven

163

1 and to help, but some of the negotiations, as I'm sure  
 2 we'll come to, were extremely difficult.  
 3 **Q.** One of Sir Patrick Vallance's entries appears to suggest  
 4 that in relation to Manchester and Mr Burnham, a Covid-S  
 5 meeting at which you were present, openly drew  
 6 a distinction between the support and measures that  
 7 would be given to Manchester as opposed to Liverpool for  
 8 nakedly political reasons. Would you agree? Did that  
 9 happen?  
 10 **A.** Are you saying that -- I'm not certain there was  
 11 a Conservative Mayor of Liverpool.  
 12 **Q.** No, it's that a view was taken upon the nature of the  
 13 local leadership in Manchester and a view was taken  
 14 about how co-operative it was being --  
 15 **A.** Oh, I see.  
 16 **Q.** -- and therefore Manchester would be treated differently  
 17 to Liverpool.  
 18 **A.** Right. I don't remember that at all. I think that  
 19 Liverpool certainly was -- the people of Liverpool were  
 20 heroic in trying to get mass testing going, and again  
 21 there was terrific hardship because of the lockdowns,  
 22 but they made a -- they were vital to the campaign to  
 23 get mass testing going.  
 24 **Q.** Another separate issue, please: the consideration of  
 25 vulnerable and at-risk groups. And you'll appreciate,

162

1 forward without regard to the particular needs of women,  
 2 for instance, the -- a huge amount of thought went into  
 3 the question of hidden harms, of domestic violence,  
 4 there was the access to abortion, to drugs necessary,  
 5 the -- we put money into -- we had a domestic violence  
 6 Bill, as you may remember, in, I think, March 2020,  
 7 which goes through the Commons very fast. We put money  
 8 into ISFAs and IDFAs, we set up a helpline, we have  
 9 systems whereby victims of domestic violence can  
 10 identify themselves without risk of exposure by going to  
 11 certain premises.  
 12 We were very, very alive, and I was personally very  
 13 alive. To this issue. So I was -- you know, I was  
 14 surprised when she said that, because I know how much  
 15 she cared about it, and I believe that we did a lot on  
 16 that.  
 17 On the broader question about -- you know, leaving  
 18 aside the issue of gender, I think there was a -- and  
 19 this needs flipping the other way round now. I think  
 20 sometimes we didn't think hard enough about the impact  
 21 on -- of lockdown on different groups, and sometimes,  
 22 frankly, it was easy or much easier for, you know,  
 23 people with professional jobs to sit out the lockdown  
 24 than it was for others, whether they're in the  
 25 hospitality sector or whatever. And they -- and a lot

164

1 of people who, you know, were on lower incomes really  
 2 had a pretty -- a pretty tough time of it. And I think  
 3 that it was vital to focus on those people, and to do  
 4 everything we could to help them through lockdown, but  
 5 also to realise that lockdown was hitting those groups  
 6 particularly hard. And for me that was a reason why you  
 7 had to be so careful about going back into a national  
 8 lockdown in October/November.

9 **Q.** It's necessary to distinguish between --

10 **A.** Or September.

11 **Q.** -- the first lockdown and the second one, of course.

12 **A.** Yeah.

13 **Q.** My Lady asked you earlier to what extent did you  
 14 consider the economic arguments against lockdown and you  
 15 said you had to give them short shrift. May we take it  
 16 that, on account of the speed with which the government  
 17 had to act in that week of 16 and 23 March, relatively  
 18 little consideration was given by the government to the  
 19 impact of lockdown similarly?

20 **A.** I think a huge amount of consideration -- I think a huge  
 21 amount of consideration was given by the government to  
 22 the impact of both lockdowns, and we thought about it  
 23 extensively, I think the --

24 **Q.** No, not the general impact, Mr Johnson, but --

25 **A.** Forgive me.

165

1 isn't it? Where in the notes and the minutes that you  
 2 have been shown to is there open debate about the likely  
 3 impact on the vulnerable and at risk of the national  
 4 lockdown that was imposed on 23 March?

5 **A.** I think that you can find -- well, I couldn't point you  
 6 to, off the top of my head, any particular text, but  
 7 what I can tell you is that the whole time we were  
 8 thinking: look, who gets hit when you close  
 9 non-essential retail and you close hospitality and you  
 10 stop people moving around? The relatively affluent  
 11 professional classes are probably going to be better  
 12 placed to cope with this than others. And you will find  
 13 that there are large numbers of black, minority ethnic  
 14 community members represented in those sectors who were  
 15 particularly disadvantaged by the lockdowns.

16 **Q.** Yes.

17 **A.** And so, you know, whether or not you can find any  
 18 mention of this in the material you've looked at, I know  
 19 that this was one thing that we were thinking about as  
 20 a particular reason for being anxious about the effect  
 21 of lockdowns.

22 **Q.** There was a general consideration at a generic level of  
 23 the impact of lockdown, there was a clinical and  
 24 financial consideration of those who needed to shield,  
 25 there was a broad understanding that if the R rate could

167

1 **Q.** -- by reference to your earlier answer, the needs of  
 2 individual sectorial groups, for example but by no means  
 3 limited to black people or BAME --

4 **A.** Yes.

5 **Q.** -- sectors. It's --

6 **A.** So --

7 **Q.** It wasn't something that was at the forefront of the  
 8 government's consideration in that week?

9 **A.** So both lockdowns were at the forefront of our  
 10 consideration, in their diverse impact, but also Covid  
 11 was the subject of consideration, because of what  
 12 appeared to be its diverse impact. And as I'm sure you  
 13 know, we commissioned a lot of work into the way Covid  
 14 seemed at first to be striking particular communities  
 15 harder.

16 **Q.** But that wasn't apparent until April. At the 16 and  
 17 23 March, there was great consideration given,  
 18 of course, to shielding and to --

19 **A.** Yes.

20 **Q.** -- clinical impact?

21 **A.** Yes.

22 **Q.** But there was relatively little, if any, consideration  
 23 given to social impact, upon the disproportionate way in  
 24 which a national lockdown might impose itself and might  
 25 impact upon various sectors in society; that's correct,

166

1 be brought below 1 and prevalence reduced, that would be  
 2 for the greater benefit of all, but it wasn't until  
 3 April, and the first few weeks of May, that the  
 4 information started to come to light that members of the  
 5 black and minority ethnic communities were suffering  
 6 more, that the lockdown was having a greater and  
 7 disproportionate impact upon them. That's correct,  
 8 isn't it?

9 **A.** I don't remember exactly when it came to light, but it  
 10 was intuitively obvious that it was going to happen and  
 11 it was one of the reasons that we were -- I was very  
 12 cautious about going back into a national lockdown.

13 **Q.** That's later, of course. And to be fair, you --

14 **A.** It's one of the reasons -- sorry, putting it the other  
 15 way around, it was one of the reasons I was keen to see  
 16 if we could get moving again.

17 **Q.** All right. And you instituted a review. We've heard  
 18 evidence that Kemi Badenoch --

19 **A.** Yeah.

20 **Q.** -- MP carried out a very extensive review. Over  
 21 a number of years, I think over two years, there were --  
 22 perhaps, or maybe a year, there were four quarterly  
 23 reports.

24 **A.** That's right.

25 **Q.** You were, I think, less sympathetic to the needs of

168

1 those persons suffering from long-term sequelae, that is  
2 to say suffering from the condition known as Long Covid.  
3 You questioned for quite some time whether or not that  
4 condition truly existed, and you equated it to Gulf War  
5 syndrome repeatedly. Is that fair?

6 **A.** Not really, no, but can I -- so can I just come back on  
7 that and say, first of all, the words that I described  
8 in the margins of submissions about Long Covid have  
9 obviously been now publicised and I'm sure that they  
10 have caused hurt and offence to huge numbers of people  
11 who do indeed suffer from that syndrome, and I regret  
12 very much using that language and should have thought  
13 about the possibility of future publication, and  
14 I regret it very, very much. What I was trying to do  
15 was to get to the heart of the matter, get to the truth  
16 of the matter, and to try to get my officials to explain  
17 to me exactly what the syndrome was, and it actually  
18 took quite a long time before I got a proper paper on  
19 it. I think it wasn't until ... I'll get this wrong  
20 now, but I think it wasn't until 2021, the summer of  
21 2021, before I actually got a paper on Long Covid. But  
22 I did, as you say, ask repeatedly to get some  
23 information. And that was so I could explain to people  
24 what we were doing and what the issue was.

25 **Q.** Mr Johnson, the point is that in October of 2020 you'd  
169

1 many people who have terrible symptoms for a very long  
2 time. There are also people who think they may be  
3 suffering, I think this is the -- now accepted, from  
4 something associated with the Gulf War, but who are not  
5 in fact suffering from something associated with the  
6 Gulf War. So what I was trying to say was: where is  
7 the -- where is the line? And please can someone  
8 explain to me what this is?

9 Because I was getting, you know, anecdotal accounts  
10 of people who were suffering from it, and I wanted to be  
11 able to say what we understood it to be and what we were  
12 doing about it. And what we were doing about it is  
13 fighting Covid, because the way to stop Long Covid is to  
14 stop Covid.

15 **Q.** One final topic in relation to the broad overarching  
16 issue of disparity. You indeed commissioned, as you've  
17 said, Mr Johnson, the report by Kemi Badenoch, who led  
18 a significant cross-government exercise on the  
19 disproportionate impact of Covid on ethnic minorities,  
20 I think following a report from Public Health England in  
21 June 2020.

22 Do you happen to know why it was that that report --  
23 that work done by Kemi Badenoch didn't cover disabled  
24 persons? It's a technical question --

25 **A.** It's a very good --

171

1 scribbled these remarks on a report to you about the  
2 funding from the NIHR into a Long Covid survey. You  
3 continued to make disparaging references to whether or  
4 not this was Gulf War syndrome stuff in February 2021,  
5 in the context of an update given to you on 21 February.  
6 And then still later, in June 2021, so nine months or so  
7 later, you were still questioning whether or not  
8 Long Covid was to be equated with Gulf War syndrome.

9 So it's not that -- it's not that the challenge  
10 against you is you took a position on Long Covid in the  
11 absence of a proper clinical understanding or advice  
12 from your advisers; it is that notwithstanding the  
13 repeated placing of reports before you, you carried on  
14 questioning Long Covid until many months later.

15 **A.** Well, I'm not certain that's correct, because I don't  
16 think I got a full explanation of -- or a full paper on  
17 it until the summer of 2021.

18 **Q.** The full paper was on 1 June 2021, that's correct, and  
19 you responded by saying:

20 "Thanks -- so it's not exactly gulf war syndrome."

21 And that was your take on the Long Covid condition.

22 **A.** Yes. Sorry, it's no disrespect to Long Covid patients,  
23 and I saw in the victim impact videos some of the  
24 victims of Long Covid, and I can imagine what a dreadful  
25 thing it is. But there are also with Gulf War syndrome

170

1 **Q.** It's not clear why --

2 **A.** It's a very good question, Mr Keith, I will make sure  
3 that the Inquiry gets an answer, but I can't -- I can't  
4 give it to you off the top of my head.

5 **Q.** May we then now turn back to --

6 **A.** And it doesn't mean that the interests of the disabled  
7 were not looked at in some other --

8 **Q.** Indeed.

9 **A.** -- format, because I'm sure they were.

10 **Q.** Now, returning to the chronology and having just for the  
11 moment put to one side those overarching but general  
12 issues, Mark Sedwill. You said earlier that Mark, now  
13 Lord Sedwill, suggested he should move on and you  
14 agreed.

15 Could we have -- well, no, I don't think we need to  
16 put it up. In his witness statement, Martin Reynolds,  
17 your private secretary, talks about the meeting that he  
18 had arranged for you to meet with Mark Sedwill --

19 **A.** Yes.

20 **Q.** -- on 14 May, and your diary shows a meeting with him on  
21 14 May:

22 "I identified a slot on 14 May ... for me to run the  
23 [Prime Minister] through the findings of the review."

24 You'll recall that Helen MacNamara had produced  
25 a report and Mark Sedwill had himself produced a report.

172

1 "The [Prime Minister] decided instead to use this  
2 slot for a one-to-one conversation with Mark Sedwill,  
3 where he told him that he had lost confidence in  
4 him ..."

5 So which is it? Is it that you lost confidence in  
6 him, which is a question I asked you earlier, or is it  
7 that Mark Sedwill told you he wanted to move on and you  
8 agreed?

9 **A.** Well, Mark Sedwill did an outstanding job for this  
10 country for a long time and he was a very distinguished  
11 permanent secretary, I think, at the Home Office, he was  
12 a National Security Adviser, he's done everything, and  
13 I was and remain hugely grateful to his service. He  
14 wanted to move on.

15 **Q.** The evidence from Mr Cummings and Martin Reynolds and  
16 Helen MacNamara is that, regardless of the genesis of  
17 why he moved or was effectively sacked, whichever way  
18 my Lady concludes, that regardless, as I say, of that  
19 genesis, his departure or his impending departure "led  
20 to general bad blood", "sowed chaos", says Mr Cummings,  
21 Mr Reynolds says damaged stability in the civil service.  
22 And Helen MacNamara, led to:

23 "... a real and damaging impact. It made those in  
24 the Civil Service in the centre less confident about  
25 challenging: no one was safe if the Cabinet Secretary

173

1 the challenging approach of some of the special advisers  
2 and I had to make a judgement about that particular  
3 issue, and I decided on balance that, at a very  
4 difficult time for the country, I'd rather have  
5 a Number 10 where people challenged ideas and where  
6 people brought new ideas and where people felt free to  
7 say things than a Number 10 where everybody tried to  
8 pretend that all was continuously well, because all was  
9 patently not well with the country and we needed to --  
10 we needed to fix it.

11 **Q.** So may we be clear about this, Mr Johnson. If your  
12 concern was that there had been a civil service unease  
13 about the challenging approach of some of your special  
14 advisers, and you plainly mean Mr Cummings there, your  
15 response was not to support the civil service and deal  
16 with Mr Cummings, you sidelined your Cabinet Secretary  
17 and kept Mr Cummings?

18 **A.** Well, that's your way of describing things.

19 **Q.** Well, is that what you did?

20 **A.** I certainly -- look, let me get back to Sir Mark. He  
21 decided he wanted to move on, that's what he told me.  
22 On the issue of my -- the rest of my team and the  
23 culture in Number 10, yes, it was occasionally  
24 argumentative, but I think that was no bad thing, and  
25 we -- we needed, frankly, to have an atmosphere in which

175

1 was not, and dealing with the unravelling preoccupied  
2 a number of us for critical weeks."

3 Would you agree that the consequences of his  
4 contingent departure did have wider ramifications, quite  
5 damaging impact, in fact, on the civil service, in  
6 Number 10 and Cabinet Office?

7 **A.** No, I don't think that's the case. I think that there  
8 was a fantastic array of talent in the civil service,  
9 and that they did a very good job. I think that what  
10 did matter in that period, and the thing that was  
11 getting us all down was the knowledge, creeping or  
12 otherwise, that this thing was coming back, and we  
13 needed to deal with it, and it was going to be very hard  
14 and we needed to get organised to do it. And that was,  
15 I think, the thing that made people scratchy.

16 **Q.** Helen MacNamara prepared, as you know, a report on the  
17 workings of Number 10 and the Cabinet Office, and  
18 without going through it in detail, because it's been  
19 placed before the Inquiry repeatedly, it identified very  
20 significant concerns in the working operations of  
21 Number 10 and the Cabinet Office, did it not?

22 **A.** I saw the -- I've seen two versions of this document --

23 **Q.** Yes, there was draft and then a final version.

24 **A.** So I saw the final version. I think what this document  
25 reflected was a -- yeah, a civil service unease about

174

1 people felt able to say things that were going to be  
2 controversial at the time.

3 **Q.** Mr Johnson, without labouring the point, a great deal of  
4 evidence has been given to the effect that there were  
5 systemic problems in Number 10 and the Cabinet Office,  
6 wrong people in the room, wrong people in the wrong  
7 jobs, people talking over each other, God complex,  
8 leadership issues, toxicity, misogyny, perpetual  
9 internecine warfare. Either you were aware of all that,  
10 in which case why did you not act, or if you were not,  
11 why were you not aware?

12 **A.** So none of those things was put to me in the terms that  
13 you have just done, first of all. Nobody came to me and  
14 said this is -- you know, this is -- people have got God  
15 complexes and internecine warfare going on here. What  
16 I saw was a country that needed continuous urgent action  
17 and it needed solutions to be found, and what I wanted  
18 were meetings in which people could speak their minds  
19 without fear of being embarrassed or being seen to say  
20 something foolish. And that's one of the reasons, by  
21 the way, why I sometimes spoke bluntly and freely in  
22 meetings: I wanted to give everybody cover to do the  
23 same, I wanted people to feel that they could -- if they  
24 had an idea, then I wanted to hear it.

25 **LADY HALLETT:** Sorry, can I just interrupt? I'm sorry,

176

1 Mr Keith, I appreciate, can you hold that train of  
2 thought, whatever it was.

3 Mr Johnson, one of the reasons I have been  
4 interested in the culture in Number 10 is whether or  
5 not, if there had been different structures in place,  
6 then this kind of culture may not have arisen and that  
7 might have provided you with a better framework for  
8 decision-making and seeking advice.

9 So, I was looking -- for example, we were looking at  
10 how initially the ministerial implementation groups,  
11 they didn't really work, and so -- until eventually you  
12 got the Covid-S and Covid-O and they did work. And  
13 I was just wondering if you had a kind of structure  
14 whereby something like Covid-O, Covid-S, whatever, swept  
15 into operation the minute the Prime Minister said,  
16 "Right, this is a dire emergency, a pandemic", might  
17 that help?

18 **A.** My Lady, look, I think that you've put your finger on  
19 it, and that -- the problem, frankly, was that the  
20 system, the Cabinet Office, the ministerial -- the MIGs,  
21 it was all too diffuse, and things, in my view, only  
22 really started to come together when we had a rhythm of  
23 morning meetings where everybody could say their piece  
24 and that would set the agenda for the day. That wasn't  
25 necessarily a decision-taking meeting, but what I would

177

1 was a Covid-O or Covid-S. I was just sitting in meeting  
2 after meeting trying to deal with the problem.

3 Now, that was the most effective way to do it. You  
4 needed to be -- you needed to be sitting permanently on  
5 the bridge trying to deal with it all. And, you know,  
6 back to the culture, I had to make a decision about --  
7 and, you know, I knew that some people were difficult,  
8 I didn't know how difficult they were, clearly, but  
9 I thought it was better on the whole for the country to  
10 have a disputatious culture in Number 10 than one that  
11 was quietly acquiescent to whatever I or the scientists  
12 said.

13 **MR KEITH:** Mr Johnson, in a WhatsApp to Mr Cummings you  
14 described him and you and your administration as having  
15 indulged in an "orgy of narcissism". That's not  
16 disputatious culture, is it?

17 **A.** I think, with -- I think, with respect, that WhatsApp  
18 was sent --

19 **Q.** At the end.

20 **A.** -- of the year, when I think things were becoming --  
21 you know, some of the things that were not obvious to me  
22 had become more obvious.

23 **Q.** INQ000048313, page 17, is a WhatsApp in May, in fact, so  
24 earlier in the summer, a WhatsApp from Mr Cummings to  
25 you. I think it's a screenshot from Mr Cummings'

179

1 submit is that for future pandemics there needs to be  
2 a -- more clarity about which are the debating -- the  
3 discussion meetings and which are the decision-making  
4 meetings.

5 Because what would often -- what would happen is  
6 that I would be presented with a problem, and then  
7 within the space of half an hour we would have got to  
8 the solution, and then we'd have to do it all again in  
9 the -- in a separate format or with -- or through the  
10 Cabinet or whatever.

11 And I think that some work -- and, I mean, it's  
12 a microscopic issue by comparison with much of what we  
13 have been talking about, but some work needs to be done  
14 on those procedures, so that the Prime Minister has a --  
15 when he goes into some meetings knowing that these are  
16 decision-taking meetings and is given all the evidence  
17 on both sides of the argument. Because that was not  
18 happening. What was happening was we were having  
19 a meeting, we would say: here's the problem -- the R is  
20 taking off, the tiers aren't working -- what do we do  
21 now? And I would try to come to an answer, but it --  
22 I felt that the structures were -- you know, we had the  
23 difference between Covid-O and Covid-S, but to be  
24 absolutely frank, I don't think if I was sitting in  
25 a Covid-O or a Covid-S I could have told you whether it

178

1 witness statement. If we could scroll into the top of  
2 the page:

3 "if hancock texts really coming to meetings in no10  
4 [please] just ignore. We urgently need to have meetings  
5 without him ..."

6 That's Mr Cummings. And then this:  
7 "All too recognizable.  
8 "We need to rebuild the [government] from top to  
9 bottom.  
10 "We need to take over the cabinet and run the whole  
11 thing."

12 **A.** Yeah, this is me on the left, is it?

13 **Q.** Well, that was my question. The top right is obviously  
14 Mr Cummings --

15 **A.** Yes.

16 **Q.** -- because he's asking you to ignore Mr Hancock's texts,  
17 which says, perhaps, something about the system --

18 **A.** Yes, so this is --

19 **Q.** No, no, just wait one moment.

20 Is it Mr Cummings or you who says "We need to  
21 rebuild the [government] from top to bottom ... take  
22 over the cabinet office and run the whole thing"?

23 **A.** So what I'm getting at here and what this is  
24 a reference -- is this in May?

25 **Q.** It is, 13 May.

180

- 1 **A.** Yeah. So this is a reference to a plan that we hatched  
2 to try to do -- have a massive data-driven revolution in  
3 government and to use Covid and this moment, when we  
4 were finding out so much about people's propensities to  
5 illness of all kinds, to run a much more effective  
6 government, and we opened a big office in 70 Whitehall,  
7 a big open plan -- a bit like this, actually, where the  
8 idea was that we would assemble data and we would -- we  
9 would try and do things in a different way. I have to  
10 tell you it was not a success and --
- 11 **Q.** Mr Johnson, it is well known that a new data system was  
12 set up, the 10DS system?
- 13 **A.** Yes.
- 14 **Q.** It's called 10 data system or 10 Downing Street,  
15 whatever your preference, and there was a greater  
16 provision of data throughout summer 2020, particularly  
17 from April/May onwards. But this message doesn't refer  
18 to data, does it? It doesn't refer to setting up a new  
19 data stream, it talks about rebuilding the government  
20 from top to bottom and taking over the Cabinet Office --
- 21 **A.** Yes.
- 22 **Q.** -- which wasn't, of course, itself responsible for data,  
23 it had multifarious functions, not one of which was  
24 provision of data to central government?
- 25 **A.** No, but, sorry, what I meant -- the office that we

181

- 1 18/05/2020, 08.29, so that passage:  
2 "I will not support any version of No 10 that  
3 undermines any Cabinet Secretary, let alone you. I will  
4 ... do my utmost to support a [Prime Minister] but I am  
5 [very, very] cautious about walking back into this."  
6 There is then a reference to the conversation with  
7 you about behaviours, at 18/05/2020, 08.59.  
8 15.47:  
9 "... I don't want to go near these people ...  
10 [unless] there are ... guarantees about behaviour."  
11 18/05/2020, 22.25.32:  
12 "I hear from everyone that you have made the  
13 [Prime Minister] see sense and the only thing that is  
14 happening is creation of a Covid job? ... I am almost  
15 more appalled that the Prime Minister has done all of  
16 this ..."  
17 And that's completely put me off my stride.  
18 There:  
19 "... has done all of this ... damage, when all he  
20 really wanted was a point person for COVID."  
21 18/05/2020, 22.29.46:  
22 "... I ... hammered the game playing. Covid now ...  
23 Lead the work ... Fine. If it sticks. I'm not sure he  
24 [that's you] saw sense. He just gave in when I made  
25 clear how angry I was at the behaviour."

183

- 1 were -- that we created was in the Cabinet Office, it  
2 was in 70 -- what is -- it was in 70 Whitehall, and so  
3 that was what I was talking about. I want -- I agreed  
4 that things needed to change, and I wanted a data-driven  
5 reform of government.
- 6 **Q.** Two further points on this topic, please.
- 7 Firstly, Mr Case's WhatsApp messages with his  
8 predecessor, Mark Sedwill, INQ000303245, page 1.  
9 I don't want to go through this line by line,  
10 Mr Johnson, but if you just scroll your eyes down the  
11 page, you will see multiple references to the behaviour  
12 in Downing Street and, in essence, Mark Sedwill saying,  
13 "I agreed to stay on for now subject to various  
14 conditions about behaviour and systems".  
15 The fact that he says -- well, "[I've] agreed to  
16 stay on" may say something about his departure. But  
17 there are references on this page to:  
18 "... not willing to agree to do any job back in this  
19 version of the centre without guarantees/honest  
20 conversations with the [Prime Minister] about  
21 behaviours. I will work ..."
- 22 **A.** Sorry, where is this?
- 23 **Q.** You will see that in the middle of the page.
- 24 **A.** Oh, yes.
- 25 **Q.** There we go.

182

- 1 And so on and so forth.  
2 They made it absolutely plain to you that there were  
3 very real problems in the operation of Number 10, in  
4 part because of the behaviour of Mr Cummings, in part  
5 because of your own approach to leadership and the  
6 decision-making, and in part because you had effectively  
7 sacked Mark Sedwill.
- 8 **A.** Well, several things. I don't remember any  
9 conversations about behaviour with either of these  
10 people. I don't remember any particular complaints  
11 being raised by Simon Case about anybody's behaviour.  
12 I think that, you know, you should take these points up  
13 with the current Cabinet Secretary. I understand,  
14 you know, he can't --
- 15 **Q.** They have been taken up with Mark Sedwill, who has been  
16 a witness in this Inquiry, Mr Johnson.
- 17 **A.** Well ...
- 18 **Q.** All right.
- 19 **A.** That's good.
- 20 **Q.** Finally --
- 21 **A.** What I would say is that I don't think it was a bad  
22 thing to have people who were willing to challenge the  
23 consensus and get things done and, you know, whatever  
24 you may say about the government, it did get an awful  
25 lot of things done, and I think that's what the country

184

1 needed at the time.

2 **Q.** And a lot of things were not done as well as they might  
3 otherwise have been done; is that not equally possible,  
4 Mr Johnson?

5 **A.** I think it's -- I think what is certainly -- that's  
6 always true, but I don't happen to think that when it  
7 came to the management of the pandemic, and this is  
8 I think the crucial thing, when it came to the  
9 management of the pandemic, the -- any kind of  
10 differences, feuding or whatever between officials,  
11 which I'm sad to say are just what happens in places  
12 like Number 10, I don't think any of that made the  
13 slightest difference to our processes and our  
14 decision-making.

15 **Q.** But you could have stopped it. If we look at --

16 **LADY HALLETT:** I think we probably need to move on from  
17 this.

18 **MR KEITH:** There is one final point, which is a matter  
19 which --

20 **LADY HALLETT:** All right.

21 **MR KEITH:** -- my Lady intervened to ask a question about  
22 when the evidence was given.

23 **LADY HALLETT:** I was stopping you asking a question  
24 I wanted. Right, okay.

25 **MR KEITH:** The Inquiry was shown a WhatsApp from Mr Cummings  
185

1 system response.

2 There is considerable material in  
3 Sir Patrick Vallance's diaries and in the witness  
4 statement of Mr Cummings to the effect that there was  
5 a high degree of chaos in the DHSC, that there was  
6 operational inefficiency -- Sir Patrick Vallance talks  
7 about this -- all the way through to May 2021.

8 Were you aware that competent, very senior advisers  
9 in your administration held the view that the DHSC had  
10 been overwhelmed and was operationally inefficient?

11 **A.** I was certainly aware that the DH -- the Department of  
12 Health and Matt Hancock were coming under fire, and --  
13 but I want to go back to the high level point I made  
14 earlier about what all this signifies, and the ways in  
15 which it should be read and understood.

16 First of all, it's the kind of stuff that would  
17 never have previously come out from any administration  
18 because it's now on instant social messaging of a kind  
19 that previous governments didn't have. This is instant  
20 chitchat between people who would normally have said  
21 this to each other's face, wherever, in the corridors or  
22 wherever --

23 **Q.** I'm so sorry, Mr Johnson, will you allow me -- I'm so  
24 sorry to interrupt. You may have misunderstood my  
25 question.

187

1 which was particularly offensive about Helen MacNamara.

2 **A.** I saw, yes.

3 **Q.** It was sent to you and others in your WhatsApp group,  
4 but you maintained a silence and you never spoke up to  
5 say "That is unacceptable and it cannot be allowed to go  
6 on on my watch".

7 **A.** I did see that, and I -- I don't remember it now, but  
8 I don't remember seeing it at the time, but I must have  
9 seen it because I was on the group.

10 **Q.** You were.

11 **A.** I've rung Helen MacNamara to apologise to her for not  
12 having called it out and ... you know ...

13 **Q.** If you've done that --

14 **A.** I've apologised to her.

15 **Q.** Finally this afternoon, the DHSC and Mr Hancock.  
16 A considerable amount of evidence has been given to  
17 the Inquiry that the lead government department model  
18 may not have been appropriate for a whole system crisis  
19 like Covid. You understand what the lead government  
20 department model is.

21 **A.** Yeah.

22 **Q.** It will plainly function well at the beginning, it may  
23 function less well when the whole of government is  
24 engaged, and perhaps too much pressure is placed on the  
25 LGD. It can't accommodate the weight of the whole  
186

1 **A.** Forgive me.

2 **Q.** The material consists not just of WhatsApps and evening  
3 notes but also witness statements --

4 **A.** Sure.

5 **Q.** -- which talk about a high level of operational  
6 inefficiency or chaos, however you --

7 **A.** Yes, so --

8 **Q.** -- in the DHSC. I'm not talking about the more personal  
9 or intimate --

10 **A.** Oh, I've got you. No, no, I've got you. I've got you.

11 **Q.** -- remarks in the WhatsApps.

12 **A.** I've got you. No, I totally understand.

13 **Q.** Were you aware that that view was taken generally of the  
14 DHSC?

15 **A.** I was aware, yes, certainly. I was certainly aware that  
16 the DHSC was under fire from loads of people, but that  
17 was hardly surprising, because the country was going  
18 through a horrific pandemic, and I just want to -- what  
19 I should have -- got quickly to the point. The point is  
20 you've got a lot of very talented, sometimes  
21 superconfident, sometimes egotistical people who are  
22 crushed with anxiety about what is happening to their  
23 country, who are wracked secretly with self-doubt and  
24 self-criticism, and who externalise that by criticising  
25 others, and it's human nature.

188

1 And when you're the leader in those circumstances,  
2 your job is to work out what is justified and what is  
3 people sounding off and what is political nonsense. And  
4 my judgement was that Matt was, on the whole, doing  
5 a good job in very difficult circumstances and there was  
6 no advantage in moving him, as I was being urged to do.  
7 That was my judgement.

8 On the lead department point, I think that, yes, it  
9 was a huge burden on Department of Health to be the lead  
10 department for a while but that, you know, rapidly  
11 morphed into the centre running everything, and that was  
12 inevitable.

13 **Q.** Why were -- you suggest in response to my question that  
14 these criticisms were made because people were crushed  
15 with anxiety and wracked secretly with self-doubt and  
16 self-criticism. Whatever the psychological mood of  
17 Sir Patrick Vallance, Mr Cummings --

18 **A.** I'm not -- sorry, I don't wish to --

19 **Q.** No, no, forgive me --

20 **A.** -- give that, those psychological states to any  
21 individual but --

22 **Q.** No, no. Wait for the question, please.

23 Whatever states they were in, and even if they were  
24 in a state of being crushed by self-criticism and  
25 self-doubt, that hardly explains why a significant

189

1 senior advisers in your administration, were telling you  
2 that the DHSC was not operating well, it was chaotic and  
3 dysfunctional, and there were very real concerns being  
4 expressed about its Secretary of State.

5 Why did you not take a grip on that issue?

6 **A.** Because, first of all, I thought that the  
7 permanent secretary at the Department of Health,  
8 Chris Wormald, was outstanding and, secondly, for the  
9 reason -- I repeat what I have said. I thought in the  
10 circumstances that Matt Hancock was doing a good job.  
11 He's extremely -- well, he's intellectually able, he was  
12 on top of the subject, and whatever his failings may or  
13 may not have been, I didn't see any advantage to the  
14 country, at a critical time, to the country, in moving  
15 him in exchange for someone else, when I couldn't be  
16 sure that we were necessarily going to be trading up.

17 And I thought it was -- I thought that -- I did  
18 think about it -- of course I thought about it -- but  
19 I thought that was the best thing to do. But what we  
20 also did was we took control and the management of the  
21 pandemic was basically centralised in Number 10.

22 **Q.** So is this the nub of it: throughout April, May, June,  
23 July you were aware that a number of senior advisers and  
24 civil servants were highly critical of Mr Hancock; you  
25 were told by Mark Sedwill around 2 July that you should

191

1 number of witnesses describe objectively chaos inside  
2 the DHSC.

3 **A.** Well, I think it goes -- I think the reason is that  
4 you've got a once-in-a-century pandemic for which,  
5 sadly, there was no proper preparation in the country  
6 because we didn't know how to deal with a highly  
7 contagious coronavirus pandemic, and all the pressure  
8 initially was on good, hard working Department of Health  
9 officials who of course felt under huge, huge personal  
10 and professional obligation to get things right, and who  
11 naturally were in a state of great anxiety.

12 And, you know, I just get back to my point, that my  
13 job was to decide whether the -- that problem, which  
14 I think was inevitable, could be solved by moving people  
15 or whether we had to forge on, and I thought it was  
16 better to forge on.

17 **Q.** Regardless of the state of the individuals in the DHSC,  
18 and acknowledging the remarkable and extraordinary  
19 efforts made by so many people individually within and  
20 without government to respond, it was part of your  
21 function as Prime Minister to ensure that the lead  
22 government department, the DHSC, was responding and  
23 dealing with the crisis as best it could. You were  
24 obliged to ensure that your government was operating  
25 properly, systemically. You knew that other advisers,

190

1 sack him; you were aware that he had a tendency to  
2 overpromise, because you debated long and hard with  
3 Mr Cummings the merits of what you had been told about  
4 testing; and there was a general lack of confidence that  
5 what he'd told you was accurate, but that you stuck by  
6 him for good or ill?

7 **A.** I didn't stick by him for, you know, any -- any reason  
8 other than that I thought, on the whole, in incredibly  
9 difficult circumstances, he was doing a good job, that  
10 it was not obvious to me that the trade -- that moving  
11 him would be worth the disruption, and I also thought --  
12 which is true -- that in any political environment at  
13 some stage somebody is always telling you to sack  
14 somebody, and that is just, I'm afraid, what happens in  
15 politics. And so I had to aim off --

16 **Q.** And the last question, please, on this: in his witness  
17 statement, Mr Cummings says:

18 "In summer 2020 [Mr Johnson] refused to replace  
19 [Mr] Hancock despite ... repeated requests from me, both  
20 Cabinet Secretaries and many others and ... being told  
21 repeatedly that leaving him there guaranteed further  
22 disasters and deaths in the autumn ... His Political  
23 Secretary ... told me that the [Prime Minister] wanted  
24 to keep [Mr] Hancock as 'the sacrifice for  
25 the inquiry'."

192



1 Now, that is of course, you may say, a piece of  
 2 double hearsay, but Mr Cummings has it in his witness  
 3 statement and therefore you need to answer it.  
 4 **A.** Well, sure. Well, I don't remember that at all, and ...  
 5 and it's nonsense.  
 6 My thinking was very straightforward. I had  
 7 a Health Secretary who was able, who was a good public  
 8 communicator, in my view. I felt that whatever his  
 9 defects I wasn't clear that we were going to trade up by  
 10 doing a swap. I thought it was a very, very difficult  
 11 time to do that. And I wasn't persuaded by the  
 12 arguments.  
 13 And I don't, by the way, remember -- he says "both  
 14 Cabinet Secretaries", I don't remember either of them  
 15 specifically saying this, but, you know, maybe --  
 16 I certainly remember -- I certainly remember there  
 17 was ... there was anti-Department of Health militating,  
 18 that's for sure.  
 19 **Q.** On 2 July Mark Sedwill WhatsApps Simon Case and says:  
 20 "I told the Prime Minister to sack Hancock (to save  
 21 lives and protect the NHS) ..."  
 22 **A.** Right.  
 23 **Q.** But you don't think he did tell --  
 24 **A.** Did you ask him about that?  
 25 **Q.** Indeed.

1 **A.** Right. I mean, I'm not -- I don't remember him saying  
 2 that in so many words.  
 3 **MR KEITH:** There we are.  
 4 My Lady, is that a convenient moment?  
 5 **LADY HALLETT:** It is, thank you very much.  
 6 A very long day for you, Mr Johnson.  
 7 **THE WITNESS:** Thank you very much.  
 8 **MR KEITH:** I'm afraid another long day tomorrow, but that  
 9 will be it. We'll finish tomorrow.  
 10 **THE WITNESS:** Thank you.  
 11 **LADY HALLETT:** So 10 o'clock tomorrow, please.  
 12 **MR KEITH:** Thank you, my Lady.  
 13 **(4.27 pm)**  
 14 **(The hearing adjourned until 10 am**  
 15 **on Thursday, 7 December 2023)**  
 16  
 17  
 18  
 19  
 20  
 21  
 22  
 23  
 24  
 25

1 **INDEX**

2 **PAGE**

3 MR BORIS JOHNSON (sworn) ..... 1

4

5 Questions from LEAD COUNSEL TO THE INQUIRY ... 1

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

	<b>10th [1]</b> 118/13 <b>11 [2]</b> 59/11 79/10 <b>11.07 am [1]</b> 44/19 <b>11.20 [1]</b> 44/17 <b>11.20 am [1]</b> 44/21 <b>12 [4]</b> 49/7 54/7 136/10 143/13 <b>12 July [1]</b> 147/20 <b>12 June [1]</b> 3/21 <b>12 March [11]</b> 47/17 95/3 95/19 104/13 105/6 109/16 110/22 110/22 114/8 114/16 160/7 <b>12 May 2021 [1]</b> 4/2 <b>12 October [1]</b> 161/3 <b>12.41 pm [1]</b> 98/23 <b>12th [5]</b> 113/17 114/3 118/4 120/21 149/1 <b>13 March [3]</b> 54/7 112/18 122/3 <b>13 May [1]</b> 180/25 <b>13/14 March [1]</b> 119/10 <b>13th [6]</b> 110/23 113/7 114/4 120/24 121/13 144/24 <b>14 [2]</b> 113/21 124/3 <b>14 days [1]</b> 113/22 <b>14 February [6]</b> 62/8 66/7 74/12 81/3 83/2 84/14 <b>14 March [5]</b> 108/11 108/15 109/10 111/6 121/16 <b>14 May [3]</b> 172/20 172/21 172/22 <b>14/15 March [1]</b> 119/25 <b>14th [2]</b> 134/1 144/24 <b>15 July [2]</b> 147/25 148/7 <b>15 March [4]</b> 111/25 112/8 112/9 124/3 <b>15.47 [1]</b> 183/8 <b>15th [1]</b> 112/6 <b>16 [6]</b> 35/8 131/16 143/5 143/13 165/17 166/16 <b>16 January [2]</b> 49/5 49/12 <b>16 March [3]</b> 27/9 144/13 160/5 <b>16th [4]</b> 15/17 113/21 132/2 160/15 <b>17 [4]</b> 78/6 78/12 139/22 179/23 <b>18 February [5]</b> 46/23 78/1 78/20 80/25 102/22 <b>18/05/2020 [4]</b> 183/1 183/7 183/11 183/21 <b>188 [1]</b> 38/18 <b>18th [1]</b> 81/17	<b>19 [7]</b> 86/24 87/19 116/17 123/17 131/7 139/9 139/10 <b>19 March [3]</b> 128/12 129/15 129/24 <b>19 September [1]</b> 38/19 <b>1984 [1]</b> 154/13 <b>19th [1]</b> 15/17	<b>2</b> <b>2 hours [1]</b> 126/21 <b>2 July [5]</b> 33/21 34/24 41/23 191/25 193/19 <b>2 March [3]</b> 83/21 96/5 107/6 <b>2.56 pm [1]</b> 145/6 <b>20 December 2021</b> <b>[1]</b> 6/10 <b>20 index [1]</b> 54/21 <b>20 March [4]</b> 131/16 136/15 143/5 143/14 <b>200 [1]</b> 135/18 <b>2011 [1]</b> 78/23 <b>2019 [1]</b> 2/6 <b>2020 [29]</b> 6/21 7/19 7/20 8/13 8/14 12/12 13/8 20/3 20/12 31/2 35/10 43/14 43/17 96/16 146/9 146/20 158/17 160/3 161/11 161/14 164/6 169/25 171/21 181/16 183/1 183/7 183/11 183/21 192/18 <b>2021 [14]</b> 4/2 6/10 7/3 7/4 27/12 27/13 146/8 169/20 169/21 170/4 170/6 170/17 170/18 187/7 <b>2022 [4]</b> 2/9 6/21 7/5 154/21 <b>2023 [3]</b> 1/1 3/18 194/15 <b>20th [3]</b> 131/23 131/25 133/8 <b>21 February [2]</b> 79/9 170/5 <b>21 January [1]</b> 46/6 <b>21/22 March [1]</b> 131/3 <b>22 January [2]</b> 45/3 45/5 <b>22 March [1]</b> 131/4 <b>22.25.32 [1]</b> 183/11 <b>22.29.46 [1]</b> 183/21 <b>229 [1]</b> 38/19 <b>22nd [1]</b> 131/7 <b>23 March [8]</b> 125/5 133/6 141/15 143/18 144/5 165/17 166/17 167/4 <b>23 March 2020 [1]</b>	20/3 <b>230,000 [1]</b> 4/13 <b>233 [1]</b> 2/4 <b>23rd [4]</b> 20/6 126/9 131/8 134/2 <b>24 February [2]</b> 48/21 82/1 <b>24 January [2]</b> 45/6 46/22 <b>24 July 2019 [1]</b> 2/6 <b>245 [1]</b> 39/2 <b>24th [1]</b> 80/24 <b>25 [1]</b> 40/13 <b>25 February [2]</b> 81/3 83/4 <b>26 February [5]</b> 46/24 81/1 85/5 86/2 88/8 <b>27 March [1]</b> 32/21 <b>28 February [5]</b> 83/23 84/12 84/15 86/22 91/21 <b>28 February/1 March</b> <b>[1]</b> 101/17 <b>28 January [2]</b> 64/24 65/7 <b>28,000 [1]</b> 73/7 <b>28th [3]</b> 82/19 82/20 90/15 <b>29 [1]</b> 91/19 <b>29 January [3]</b> 46/23 56/1 56/25 <b>29th [1]</b> 101/18 <b>2nd [1]</b> 93/14	<b>3</b> <b>3 March [7]</b> 91/14 99/4 99/12 100/10 100/14 101/4 102/7 <b>3.10 [1]</b> 145/5 <b>3.10 pm [1]</b> 145/8 <b>30 [1]</b> 58/20 <b>30 February [1]</b> 91/19 <b>30 January [2]</b> 7/19 55/11 <b>31 August [1]</b> 2/2 <b>31 January [2]</b> 58/12 58/21 <b>33 [1]</b> 15/17 <b>37 [1]</b> 70/8 <b>39 [1]</b> 109/3 <b>3rd [1]</b> 101/13	<b>4</b> <b>4 February [2]</b> 53/24 68/12 <b>4 March [4]</b> 94/12 103/9 104/9 106/10 <b>4 May [1]</b> 32/7 <b>4.27 pm [1]</b> 194/13 <b>48399 [2]</b> 108/17 111/7 <b>49 [1]</b> 122/7	<b>5</b> <b>5 February [3]</b> 46/23 66/7 126/2 <b>5 March [4]</b> 108/1 109/7 116/16 116/17 <b>5 o'clock [1]</b> 135/9 <b>5 pm [1]</b> 139/12 <b>5,000-odd [1]</b> 8/2 <b>50 [1]</b> 34/16 <b>50/50 [1]</b> 34/16 <b>500 [1]</b> 54/22 <b>500k [1]</b> 35/18 <b>520,000 [3]</b> 84/11 87/18 89/3 <b>55 [1]</b> 126/11	<b>6</b> <b>6 December 2023 [1]</b> 1/1 <b>6 February [3]</b> 70/10 72/23 73/14 <b>6 September 2022 [1]</b> 2/9 <b>6.49 [1]</b> 109/1 <b>600 contacts [1]</b> 54/22 <b>624 [1]</b> 147/20 <b>66 [1]</b> 147/14 <b>68 [1]</b> 5/25	<b>7</b> <b>7 December 2023 [1]</b> 194/15 <b>7 January [2]</b> 45/2 45/16 <b>7 July [1]</b> 2/10 <b>7 May [1]</b> 35/13 <b>7.17 am [1]</b> 108/15 <b>7.39.42 [1]</b> 111/10 <b>7.39.42 am [1]</b> 111/6 <b>70 [4]</b> 114/1 181/6 182/2 182/2 <b>75 [1]</b> 131/17	<b>8</b> <b>8 weeks [1]</b> 36/2 <b>800,000 [1]</b> 58/2	<b>9</b> <b>9 am [1]</b> 153/24 <b>9 June 2023 [1]</b> 3/18 <b>9 March [3]</b> 94/12 94/13 110/21 <b>9.15 [1]</b> 139/11 <b>92 [2]</b> 128/10 147/17 <b>9th [2]</b> 104/25 118/2	<b>A</b> <b>A: [1]</b> 114/18 <b>A: no [1]</b> 114/18 <b>ability [4]</b> 1/15 38/16 128/6 155/20 <b>able [20]</b> 7/8 7/14 8/10 24/16 60/14 93/6
<b>LADY HALLETT:</b> <b>[27]</b> 1/3 1/18 2/15 3/15 18/4 22/16 44/17 44/22 65/11 65/16 83/14 98/16 98/18 98/22 99/1 138/10 138/12 139/7 145/2 145/5 145/9 176/25 185/16 185/20 185/23 194/5 194/11 <b>MR KEITH: [23]</b> 1/17 1/19 1/22 3/16 18/15 22/18 44/15 44/18 44/23 65/21 83/16 98/17 99/2 138/11 139/8 145/10 179/13 185/18 185/21 185/25 194/3 194/8 194/12 <b>THE WITNESS: [4]</b> 98/21 145/4 194/7 194/10	<b>'business [1]</b> 108/2 <b>'the [1]</b> 192/24 <b>'they [1]</b> 39/4 <b>'we're [1]</b> 128/14 <b>'why [1]</b> 122/12	<b>0</b> <b>08.29 [1]</b> 183/1 <b>08.59 [1]</b> 183/7	<b>1</b> <b>1 June 2021 [1]</b> 170/18 <b>1 March [2]</b> 91/21 102/3 <b>1.40 [1]</b> 98/22 <b>1.40 pm [1]</b> 98/25 <b>10 [35]</b> 6/2 9/14 10/13 11/1 19/13 19/17 22/19 30/6 31/5 31/8 33/19 34/24 54/21 58/14 59/11 70/10 113/4 120/1 121/12 160/13 174/6 174/17 174/21 175/5 175/7 175/23 176/5 177/4 179/10 181/14 181/14 183/2 184/3 185/12 191/21 <b>10 am [1]</b> 194/14 <b>10 May [2]</b> 145/14 145/20 <b>10 o'clock [1]</b> 194/11 <b>10.00 am [1]</b> 1/2 <b>10.49.15 [2]</b> 111/24 112/7 <b>100,000 [2]</b> 16/18 129/20 <b>10DS [1]</b> 181/12									

<b>A</b>	<b>acknowledging [1]</b> 190/18	<b>advance [4]</b> 86/3 107/14 150/9 150/10	45/3 81/1 85/7 110/5 114/15 114/25 123/23 147/2 155/15 162/20 168/16 178/8	141/21 142/9 143/2 144/14 148/15 148/19 149/17 149/21 150/21 151/2 154/5 157/21 161/16 161/17 162/18 168/2 168/17 169/7 174/11 175/8 175/8 176/9 176/13 177/21 178/8 178/16 179/5 180/7 181/5 183/15 183/19 183/19 184/18 185/20 187/7 187/14 187/16 190/7 191/6 193/4
<b>able... [14]</b> 96/23 102/23 119/8 119/9 129/10 129/11 133/1 143/24 147/2 158/19 171/11 176/1 191/11 193/7	<b>acquiescent [1]</b> 179/11	<b>advantage [2]</b> 189/6 191/13	<b>against [11]</b> 4/22 17/5 17/8 36/20 61/5 97/20 102/8 138/18 154/11 165/14 170/10	187/16 190/7 191/6 193/4
<b>abortion [1]</b> 164/4	<b>act [16]</b> 21/3 64/4 84/22 120/16 124/25 128/24 137/16 137/24 144/25 151/12 151/12 151/13 154/12 154/14 165/17 176/10	<b>adversarial [1]</b> 68/10	<b>ago [2]</b> 14/21 126/2	<b>all right [20]</b> 8/23 9/5 25/8 41/9 65/12 68/11 73/22 77/17 85/3 103/8 112/13 123/11 131/2 143/2 149/17 150/21 151/2 168/17 184/18 185/20
<b>about [215]</b>	<b>acted [3]</b> 63/10 143/11 144/25	<b>advice [44]</b> 21/18 21/20 22/19 22/23 23/2 23/17 23/20 23/24 24/17 27/15 27/17 27/18 42/13 42/16 42/21 42/22 43/6 43/9 43/10 61/17 65/22 66/5 66/9 66/11 67/17 87/23 97/5 98/6 102/7 103/23 113/23 113/24 116/6 116/18 116/21 116/25 128/21 132/16 136/8 153/22 158/8 163/8 170/11 177/8	<b>agony [1]</b> 44/12	<b>allied [2]</b> 158/4 159/2
<b>above [1]</b> 73/22	<b>acting [1]</b> 143/25	<b>advise [1]</b> 23/18	<b>agree [10]</b> 4/19 31/10 85/24 118/23 140/3 160/9 162/8 163/17 174/3 182/18	<b>allow [6]</b> 1/12 81/18 110/8 121/9 146/23 187/23
<b>abroad [1]</b> 59/19	<b>action [9]</b> 16/6 17/8 70/10 71/23 91/13 101/7 101/14 143/24 176/16	<b>advised [2]</b> 34/7 102/5	<b>ah [3]</b> 108/18 108/19 113/2	<b>allowed [3]</b> 36/15 133/11 186/5
<b>absence [7]</b> 26/17 60/12 95/23 128/19 140/20 163/10 170/11	<b>actions [7]</b> 4/8 4/17 5/15 16/11 89/25 127/17 141/7	<b>adviser [16]</b> 22/21 23/4 23/10 23/23 32/7 36/6 36/23 39/15 39/15 43/19 65/24 79/7 100/18 113/3 137/18 173/12	<b>agricultural [1]</b> 69/12	<b>allowing [2]</b> 27/2 144/12
<b>absent [1]</b> 93/3	<b>activated [1]</b> 7/17	<b>advisers [23]</b> 21/18 22/11 22/19 23/13 23/18 34/1 38/14 39/10 42/14 43/23 48/14 52/1 109/8 112/11 121/8 160/12 170/12 175/1 175/14 187/8 190/25 191/1 191/23	<b>ah [3]</b> 108/18 108/19 113/2	<b>allows [1]</b> 8/20
<b>absolutely [20]</b> 4/25 5/11 6/22 9/6 22/9 29/7 29/8 32/16 34/18 97/23 106/9 115/11 124/24 126/6 127/7 130/13 141/15 145/19 178/24 184/2	<b>active [1]</b> 146/4	<b>advising [1]</b> 102/8	<b>alarm [6]</b> 45/15 53/17 58/8 61/1 74/21 74/24	<b>alluding [1]</b> 123/3
<b>absorb [1]</b> 126/19	<b>actively [3]</b> 111/12 145/22 153/6	<b>advisory [7]</b> 12/15 23/6 24/4 25/17 26/9 26/14 26/17	<b>alarmed [1]</b> 70/6	<b>almost [6]</b> 15/10 59/18 72/21 77/18 143/23 183/14
<b>abstract [1]</b> 80/1	<b>activity [4]</b> 46/18 78/8 91/4 91/9	<b>affair [1]</b> 79/15	<b>alerting [1]</b> 88/25	<b>alone [1]</b> 183/3
<b>abuse [1]</b> 30/14	<b>actual [3]</b> 88/1 100/2 137/20	<b>affairs [1]</b> 42/6	<b>alert [3]</b> 45/11 71/11 144/7	<b>along [2]</b> 57/23 144/18
<b>abusive [1]</b> 29/11	<b>actually [23]</b> 20/17 21/15 24/9 25/16 31/11 32/1 49/17 53/7 53/20 60/15 81/11 92/4 92/19 99/16 104/16 104/23 114/2 140/9 147/18 163/11 169/17 169/21 181/7	<b>affirmed [1]</b> 18/24	<b>alertness [1]</b> 85/13	<b>already [12]</b> 27/4 49/10 52/9 55/7 57/5 57/25 59/21 100/4 118/2 134/18 140/12 142/4
<b>accelerate [3]</b> 63/10 121/4 121/20	<b>acute [1]</b> 129/20	<b>affluent [1]</b> 167/10	<b>Alexander [1]</b> 1/24	<b>also [38]</b> 5/5 5/14 13/15 19/5 27/13 28/15 33/15 43/22 55/24 59/17 67/14 79/15 82/11 84/6 84/9 84/11 90/1 94/12 99/12 110/1 119/20 130/15 137/16 141/19 148/17 149/23 151/22 152/4 156/2 156/25 157/14 165/5 166/10 170/25 171/2 188/3 191/20 192/11
<b>acceleration [1]</b> 119/13	<b>additional [5]</b> 133/5 135/7 137/23 138/1 140/7	<b>after [17]</b> 6/11 20/10 32/21 44/4 44/10 83/1 83/4 96/18 100/10 100/12 135/5 142/24 145/10 150/7 160/1 160/21 179/2	<b>align [1]</b> 151/6	<b>alternative [4]</b> 95/25 123/16 123/24 124/20
<b>accept [20]</b> 5/8 10/3 12/1 14/14 16/11 31/21 32/1 33/6 33/14 39/14 42/5 69/21 70/2 84/16 91/25 99/10 133/19 143/3 159/22 163/21	<b>addition [1]</b> 21/20	<b>afternoon [2]</b> 58/16 186/15	<b>alive [2]</b> 164/12 164/13	<b>although [12]</b> 41/11 45/10 71/25 75/24 85/6 86/25 93/10 94/17 102/15 102/16 115/12 139/25
<b>acceptance [1]</b> 13/18	<b>addresses [1]</b> 31/22	<b>afterwards [2]</b> 42/9 153/9	<b>aim [2]</b> 94/4 192/15	<b>always [8]</b> 5/23 148/22 149/3 151/6
<b>accepted [3]</b> 13/17 42/17 171/3	<b>adhered [2]</b> 136/12 136/15	<b>again [18]</b> 8/6 11/3 27/12 28/5 31/11 41/4	<b>alarm [6]</b> 45/15 53/17 58/8 61/1 74/21 74/24	
<b>accepting [1]</b> 12/3	<b>adjourned [1]</b> 194/14		<b>alarmed [1]</b> 70/6	
<b>access [7]</b> 7/10 7/12 7/14 43/5 43/8 158/22 164/4	<b>adjournment [1]</b> 98/24		<b>alert [3]</b> 45/11 71/11 144/7	
<b>accommodate [2]</b> 125/16 186/25	<b>administration [13]</b> 2/7 4/23 12/4 29/6 31/3 31/19 31/25 34/2 43/21 179/14 187/9 187/17 191/1		<b>Alexander [1]</b> 1/24	
<b>accordance [1]</b> 118/24	<b>administrations [11]</b> 10/11 10/22 151/4 151/6 151/20 153/8 155/6 156/23 158/18 159/15 159/20		<b>align [1]</b> 151/6	
<b>according [2]</b> 31/2 68/24	<b>admit [1]</b> 115/15		<b>aligned [1]</b> 1/24	
<b>account [5]</b> 19/16 120/13 154/16 163/1 165/16			<b>align [1]</b> 151/6	
<b>accounts [1]</b> 171/9			<b>align [2]</b> 164/12 164/13	
<b>accuracy [1]</b> 99/13			<b>all [121]</b> 1/11 3/2 5/17 6/17 6/19 8/7 8/23 9/5 11/19 12/5 14/25 15/10 20/7 21/5 25/8 27/1 28/1 28/2 28/2 29/15 29/22 30/11 31/12 31/15 34/4 36/16 39/4 39/7 39/17 41/5 41/9 42/18 45/21 47/6 48/1 48/7 49/11 52/6 52/8 52/12 53/1 55/9 61/3 63/12 65/12 67/17 68/11 69/13 73/22 75/5 77/17 80/17 84/10 85/3 88/11 90/14 93/3 98/17 103/8 106/19 106/23 107/1 108/23 110/7 111/21 112/10 112/13 115/14 119/4 119/20 121/11 123/11 124/10 126/1 127/3 129/4 130/4 131/2 133/20 136/5 138/14	
<b>accurate [1]</b> 192/5			<b>aim [2]</b> 94/4 192/15	
<b>achieve [1]</b> 66/4			<b>alarm [6]</b> 45/15 53/17 58/8 61/1 74/21 74/24	
<b>achievements [1]</b> 33/9			<b>alarmed [1]</b> 70/6	
<b>acknowledged [1]</b> 78/19			<b>alert [3]</b> 45/11 71/11 144/7	

<b>A</b>	<b>any</b> [47] 4/13 5/21 8/22 9/7 14/11 14/11 17/19 27/20 30/5 30/19 31/19 34/5 48/13 68/5 71/6 73/20 99/11 113/19 116/22 119/15 121/15 124/8 127/15 127/16 137/3 137/21 139/13 140/20 141/24 150/3 161/5 166/22 167/6 167/17 182/18 183/2 183/3 184/8 184/10 185/9 185/12 187/17 189/20 191/13 192/7 192/7 192/12	140/17 151/18 157/11 157/20 158/5 159/3 159/4 175/1 175/13 184/5	100/16 102/6 103/6 104/9 108/1 116/16 125/10 127/2 149/14 150/19 163/20 167/10 168/15 191/25	63/19 64/8 64/14 64/25 65/6 65/9 65/9 65/18
<b>always...</b> [4] 155/21 157/17 185/6 192/13	<b>anybody</b> [4] 30/13 87/25 88/2 152/13	<b>approached</b> [1] 18/18	<b>arranged</b> [2] 155/9 172/18	<b>asymptotically</b> [6] 61/24 62/5 63/22 64/1 64/3 140/12
<b>am</b> [16] 1/2 2/12 2/13 2/23 3/1 3/13 44/19 44/21 84/11 90/24 108/15 111/6 153/24 183/4 183/14 194/14	<b>anybody's</b> [1] 184/11	<b>appropriate</b> [3] 18/11 78/9 186/18	<b>arrangements</b> [1] 125/15	<b>at</b> [233]
<b>amazing</b> [2] 139/2 163/24	<b>anymore</b> [1] 55/3	<b>approved</b> [1] 17/24	<b>array</b> [1] 174/8	<b>at present</b> [1] 136/12
<b>amend</b> [1] 154/13	<b>anything</b> [5] 68/6 76/1 99/6 100/9 100/14	<b>April</b> [5] 107/20 166/16 168/3 181/17 191/22	<b>arresting</b> [1] 89/1	<b>at-risk</b> [1] 162/25
<b>America</b> [1] 82/12	<b>anyway</b> [5] 72/7 101/21 110/7 128/16 141/20	<b>April/May</b> [1] 181/17	<b>arrived</b> [1] 74/5	<b>Atlético</b> [1] 118/13
<b>Amid</b> [1] 4/7	<b>apart</b> [1] 82/24	<b>are</b> [86] 3/7 5/4 5/10 5/10 9/13 9/20 10/16 10/25 11/3 16/8 16/20 16/25 18/5 22/5 25/24 31/13 31/14 35/9 36/17 37/13 39/21 41/7 41/12 43/6 44/7 46/16 50/16 54/4 61/24 62/14 63/22 66/1 67/8 73/14 74/24 75/25 87/5 87/24 88/6 88/16 89/10 89/12 90/9 91/7 95/17 97/18 99/9 101/10 109/19 110/8 112/7 113/18 115/11 115/18 115/23 116/3 118/12 121/25 128/2 128/3 128/15 129/4 140/6 140/8 142/21 148/6 149/24 150/15 154/11 156/6 158/22 162/10 167/11 167/13 170/25 171/2 171/4 178/2 178/3 178/15 182/17 183/10 185/11 188/21 188/23 194/3	<b>article</b> [1] 139/23	<b>atmosphere</b> [5] 33/17 34/2 36/15 42/20 175/25
<b>amiss</b> [1] 116/15	<b>apologise</b> [4] 9/16 11/3 83/17 186/11	<b>ask</b> [26] 2/18 2/19 5/18 8/15 9/9 13/15 18/6 32/12 35/18 37/14 43/10 74/1 78/9 81/13 87/2 88/3 100/9 101/6 115/20 116/3 125/1 139/24 141/10 169/22 185/21 193/24	<b>articulated</b> [1] 95/1	<b>atmospherics</b> [2] 31/9 37/20
<b>amount</b> [8] 53/21 115/17 125/20 139/18 164/2 165/20 165/21 186/16	<b>apologised</b> [2] 30/14 186/14	<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>as</b> [214]	<b>attended</b> [1] 60/22
<b>ample</b> [2] 92/6 92/21	<b>apologising</b> [1] 11/3	<b>asks</b> [1] 126/13	<b>as I say</b> [2] 24/24 158/3	<b>attacked</b> [1] 141/6
<b>analogous</b> [1] 26/15	<b>app</b> [1] 8/5	<b>asking</b> [12] 3/7 53/12 54/9 54/11 67/13 89/9 95/10 95/15 100/23 155/10 180/16 185/23	<b>Asia</b> [1] 51/5	<b>attempt</b> [1] 8/14
<b>analogous</b> [1] 26/15	<b>appalled</b> [1] 183/15	<b>areas</b> [3] 135/15 135/24 146/21	<b>Asiatic</b> [3] 71/16 72/11 72/11	<b>attempts</b> [1] 45/14
<b>analogy</b> [1] 69/23	<b>appalling</b> [5] 11/9 29/22 40/21 80/14 128/24	<b>aren't</b> [6] 32/18 67/8 75/21 122/12 122/25 178/20	<b>aside</b> [6] 43/15 43/18 43/22 43/25 71/1 164/18	<b>attend</b> [6] 73/18 73/21 153/4 160/6 160/7 161/5
<b>analysis</b> [3] 27/21 27/24 142/6	<b>apparent</b> [7] 23/6 78/25 79/17 117/9 130/22 150/4 166/16	<b>arguably</b> [3] 14/10 145/18 146/11	<b>ask</b> [26] 2/18 2/19 5/18 8/15 9/9 13/15 18/6 32/12 35/18 37/14 43/10 74/1 78/9 81/13 87/2 88/3 100/9 101/6 115/20 116/3 125/1 139/24 141/10 169/22 185/21 193/24	<b>attendance</b> [1] 135/17
<b>Andrew</b> [1] 161/4	<b>appear</b> [4] 31/7 73/9 92/16 134/1	<b>argue</b> [1] 39/3	<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attended</b> [3] 83/24 151/23 161/14
<b>Andy</b> [2] 161/17 161/20	<b>appeared</b> [3] 10/19 130/1 166/12	<b>argument</b> [8] 16/20 27/3 90/21 109/4 138/18 139/14 140/23 178/17	<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>Andy Burnham</b> [2] 161/17 161/20	<b>appears</b> [14] 1/7 25/18 27/4 57/1 69/25 70/12 74/22 96/4 109/7 109/11 111/8 120/6 136/13 162/3	<b>arguments</b> [10] 16/24 17/5 17/7 17/8 127/21 128/9 138/15 150/22 165/14 193/12	<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>anecdotal</b> [1] 171/9	<b>applied</b> [2] 71/2 103/15	<b>arisen</b> [1] 177/6	<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>angles</b> [1] 21/1	<b>apply</b> [2] 103/20 158/4	<b>arose</b> [1] 109/6	<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>angry</b> [1] 183/25	<b>appointed</b> [2] 3/21 6/11	<b>around</b> [23] 26/9 45/2 59/18 63/5 64/10 73/7 73/10 80/3 90/18	<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>announce</b> [1] 3/18	<b>appreciate</b> [4] 69/20 125/2 162/25 177/1		<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>announced</b> [2] 2/9 3/25	<b>appreciated</b> [1] 55/5		<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>announcement</b> [3] 4/6 5/14 20/7	<b>appreciation</b> [2] 54/7 144/17		<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>anonymous</b> [1] 22/6	<b>apprehensive</b> [1] 147/8		<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>another</b> [10] 34/12 74/13 74/13 76/4 117/20 122/21 124/20 125/17 162/24 194/8	<b>approach</b> [14] 5/19 10/11 91/12 131/5		<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>answer</b> [19] 14/3 14/19 16/4 16/19 50/23 51/7 63/7 74/8 84/13 87/8 88/10 92/18 96/1 97/21 98/14 166/1 172/3 178/21 193/3			<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>answers</b> [2] 3/5 105/2			<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>anti</b> [1] 193/17			<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>anti-Department</b> [1] 193/17			<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>antibodies</b> [1] 150/14			<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>anticipate</b> [2] 11/11 89/5			<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>antivirals</b> [1] 10/1			<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>anxiety</b> [11] 31/13 31/16 41/2 41/5 95/22 96/2 134/3 141/20 188/22 189/15 190/11			<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21
<b>anxious</b> [2] 48/10 167/20			<b>asked</b> [16] 10/23 31/1 38/23 43/15 43/18 48/1 67/6 86/10 89/5 99/24 109/21 122/9 142/10 156/18 165/13 173/6	<b>attende</b> [1] 112/21

<b>B</b>	97/13 100/20 100/21 101/13 103/13 107/22 110/5 110/13 111/1 111/10 114/4 115/17 116/6 116/13 117/1 133/2 137/10 137/16 138/21 140/20 143/4 145/17 148/1 150/24 151/14 152/25 153/7 153/18 155/23 156/15 156/17 158/17 158/21 159/3 160/24 162/21 164/14 166/11 170/15 171/9 171/13 172/9 174/18 175/8 178/5 178/17 180/16 184/4 184/5 184/6 186/9 187/18 188/17 189/14 190/6 191/6 192/2 <b>become [10]</b> 6/7 6/14 54/13 57/17 79/17 86/24 87/17 95/12 132/16 179/22 <b>becoming [7]</b> 48/20 85/11 85/20 86/20 88/9 148/13 179/20 <b>bed [2]</b> 128/18 129/14 <b>bed blockers [2]</b> 128/18 129/14 <b>beds [4]</b> 115/1 115/2 129/20 158/14 <b>been [108]</b> 5/19 5/23 7/8 7/21 8/12 9/9 14/18 17/24 25/1 29/5 30/5 30/7 31/18 32/17 32/20 34/13 38/5 38/25 40/18 41/16 43/3 46/11 47/9 47/18 49/3 49/5 51/19 56/22 58/2 58/18 58/20 63/15 63/15 64/17 65/5 69/5 70/1 70/6 73/9 75/14 80/1 80/24 81/9 82/14 83/15 85/15 86/17 87/9 90/11 92/1 92/9 93/19 96/4 96/10 96/22 97/4 97/8 97/12 101/8 101/14 102/5 102/12 102/15 102/16 102/20 113/5 117/9 119/10 121/11 122/6 123/8 125/23 127/11 130/14 131/16 131/23 132/5 133/1 133/22 135/14 137/11 143/19 143/24 144/6 144/7 144/9 150/18 151/17 159/18 159/20 159/24 160/22 167/2 169/9 174/18 175/12 176/4 177/3 177/5 178/13 184/15 184/15 185/3 186/16	186/18 187/10 191/13 192/3 <b>before [35]</b> 1/3 11/19 15/8 27/11 27/12 28/15 46/14 48/23 52/15 56/1 64/22 71/17 79/10 80/25 86/12 101/7 102/8 104/16 109/20 112/17 116/10 118/3 119/24 120/10 123/13 123/20 130/21 131/11 132/2 132/14 142/25 169/18 169/21 170/13 174/19 <b>beforehand [1]</b> 48/23 <b>began [1]</b> 160/18 <b>begin [3]</b> 40/12 63/14 63/14 <b>beginning [15]</b> 47/24 47/24 52/21 53/1 60/17 76/16 92/15 107/20 109/7 116/17 117/23 133/21 139/3 150/13 186/22 <b>begins [1]</b> 39/3 <b>behalf [2]</b> 12/4 127/21 <b>behaviour [10]</b> 18/10 26/7 118/11 182/11 182/14 183/10 183/25 184/4 184/9 184/11 <b>behavioural [18]</b> 17/9 25/11 25/20 40/20 90/21 94/17 95/2 103/10 103/14 104/11 105/5 105/17 105/18 112/15 113/6 113/11 140/24 144/10 <b>behaviours [4]</b> 66/12 112/25 182/21 183/7 <b>behind [2]</b> 125/12 144/19 <b>being [75]</b> 7/23 9/5 14/17 19/18 24/18 25/16 27/19 28/6 28/18 29/16 31/6 32/8 36/13 36/18 40/25 46/19 49/10 52/18 53/7 53/8 57/3 57/25 60/1 60/20 63/5 64/10 69/21 71/22 73/2 81/5 83/11 84/11 89/4 100/16 103/4 103/4 103/12 109/24 112/16 113/11 115/13 116/7 117/7 118/22 119/23 119/25 120/18 122/15 125/11 127/18 128/3 131/22 132/18 133/1 133/9 135/12 136/12 136/15 140/14 141/6 147/14 149/9 149/16 151/24 152/18 157/7 162/14 167/20 176/19	176/19 184/11 189/6 189/24 191/3 192/20 <b>beings [2]</b> 30/9 31/15 <b>believe [9]</b> 4/4 67/2 84/4 102/20 141/16 141/16 142/10 159/18 164/15 <b>believed [6]</b> 60/20 103/3 132/13 137/5 137/9 140/20 <b>believes [1]</b> 146/3 <b>believing [2]</b> 75/25 76/1 <b>bells [1]</b> 53/17 <b>below [8]</b> 55/14 110/17 115/23 116/1 131/18 132/6 132/12 168/1 <b>belt [1]</b> 102/17 <b>Ben [3]</b> 113/3 119/19 124/12 <b>Ben Warner [2]</b> 113/3 124/12 <b>benefit [1]</b> 168/2 <b>benefits [2]</b> 129/12 146/25 <b>benign [1]</b> 51/6 <b>bereaved [3]</b> 5/9 15/6 50/10 <b>best [22]</b> 5/21 8/10 11/14 11/16 14/7 14/24 31/15 32/8 32/14 33/12 35/6 37/3 41/6 42/20 44/6 58/10 130/2 138/8 139/5 161/25 190/23 191/19 <b>better [18]</b> 3/8 3/9 13/19 13/25 25/25 32/6 34/13 34/22 79/3 85/18 153/13 154/19 156/13 159/19 167/11 177/7 179/9 190/16 <b>between [32]</b> 1/9 1/13 2/6 6/1 7/4 7/19 8/7 8/25 11/24 28/5 30/16 35/9 74/20 79/5 81/2 83/2 83/10 84/14 88/14 105/3 105/3 108/23 117/17 147/24 152/25 153/19 160/14 162/6 165/9 178/23 185/10 187/20 <b>bewildered [1]</b> 115/9 <b>beyond [5]</b> 52/23 54/15 54/21 76/15 102/24 <b>big [9]</b> 17/12 59/16 89/12 99/5 137/13 152/9 156/11 181/6 181/7 <b>bigger [1]</b> 46/1 <b>biggest [2]</b> 89/16 89/21 <b>bilateral [3]</b> 27/8 27/9	28/14 <b>Bill [3]</b> 126/2 126/3 164/6 <b>binary [1]</b> 136/14 <b>binning [1]</b> 36/3 <b>bit [9]</b> 10/12 22/17 81/19 102/18 108/12 120/18 120/22 156/6 181/7 <b>black [7]</b> 106/5 107/19 115/1 115/23 166/3 167/13 168/5 <b>Blair [1]</b> 30/20 <b>blame [2]</b> 52/12 61/2 <b>blindsided [1]</b> 144/9 <b>blockers [2]</b> 128/18 129/14 <b>blood [1]</b> 173/20 <b>blue [3]</b> 106/7 115/21 116/1 <b>bluntly [2]</b> 74/2 176/21 <b>boat [1]</b> 79/19 <b>bodies [1]</b> 20/5 <b>body [5]</b> 26/15 26/22 31/21 88/5 154/20 <b>bolts [1]</b> 75/2 <b>bond [2]</b> 126/16 128/5 <b>bone [1]</b> 109/11 <b>border [5]</b> 66/19 67/3 67/17 67/23 92/25 <b>borders [14]</b> 65/21 65/24 66/16 67/9 68/1 68/9 75/11 75/12 75/15 76/16 92/4 92/20 100/21 117/19 <b>Boris [4]</b> 1/19 1/20 1/24 195/3 <b>Boris de [1]</b> 1/24 <b>Boris Johnson [1]</b> 1/19 <b>both [19]</b> 17/23 19/3 22/13 25/24 42/8 43/24 43/25 89/23 93/25 105/16 114/25 156/4 157/11 159/18 165/22 166/9 178/17 192/19 193/13 <b>bottom [10]</b> 35/11 35/23 37/12 70/13 114/20 123/22 123/24 180/9 180/21 181/20 <b>bought [1]</b> 66/19 <b>bounce [2]</b> 105/19 149/2 <b>bounce-back [1]</b> 105/19 <b>bounceback [3]</b> 17/10 40/20 105/17 <b>bounced [1]</b> 96/18 <b>bounces [1]</b> 95/7 <b>bouncing [1]</b> 111/2 <b>bovine [1]</b> 69/6
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<p><b>B</b></p> <p><b>box [6]</b> 55/11 55/14 57/1 81/23 82/2 82/2</p> <p><b>box notes [1]</b> 82/2</p> <p><b>braces [1]</b> 102/17</p> <p><b>breach [1]</b> 7/7</p> <p><b>break [9]</b> 44/20 81/7 81/21 82/1 83/2 98/18 104/16 145/3 145/7</p> <p><b>breaker [2]</b> 13/9 152/22</p> <p><b>breakers [1]</b> 157/13</p> <p><b>bridge [1]</b> 179/5</p> <p><b>brief [2]</b> 76/22 130/5</p> <p><b>briefed [1]</b> 53/23</p> <p><b>briefing [3]</b> 70/14 123/13 123/17</p> <p><b>brilliant [2]</b> 22/8 22/10</p> <p><b>brilliantly [2]</b> 32/18 34/6</p> <p><b>bring [7]</b> 96/19 115/21 116/1 132/6 132/11 155/18 156/15</p> <p><b>British [2]</b> 55/18 59/17</p> <p><b>broad [4]</b> 9/18 78/3 167/25 171/15</p> <p><b>broadcast [1]</b> 129/7</p> <p><b>broader [2]</b> 163/16 164/17</p> <p><b>broadly [1]</b> 18/16</p> <p><b>broke [1]</b> 158/11</p> <p><b>broken [1]</b> 47/18</p> <p><b>brought [8]</b> 19/9 46/9 57/8 57/12 57/13 131/18 168/1 175/6</p> <p><b>brutal [1]</b> 31/3</p> <p><b>BSE [8]</b> 61/7 69/6 69/11 69/23 72/8 72/12 72/14 77/22</p> <p><b>budget [1]</b> 148/17</p> <p><b>build [1]</b> 78/21</p> <p><b>building [1]</b> 149/20</p> <p><b>built [1]</b> 125/8</p> <p><b>bullish [1]</b> 147/14</p> <p><b>bullshit [1]</b> 35/16</p> <p><b>bunch [1]</b> 37/18</p> <p><b>burden [1]</b> 189/9</p> <p><b>Burnham [4]</b> 161/7 161/17 161/20 162/4</p> <p><b>business [1]</b> 108/7 but [277]</p> <p><b>But Cheltenham [1]</b> 118/7</p> <p><b>buy [2]</b> 142/2 142/4</p> <p><b>buy-in [2]</b> 142/2 142/4</p> <p><b>byproduct [1]</b> 110/19</p>	<p>19/7 19/9 19/11 19/15 19/20 19/21 19/24 20/1 20/8 20/10 20/14 20/18 21/19 22/23 23/8 23/11 30/25 33/16 33/20 36/10 37/6 37/16 37/16 39/16 39/16 41/20 43/13 43/16 46/5 46/17 58/12 59/11 60/4 62/25 64/10 66/7 72/23 73/1 73/3 73/5 73/13 74/1 74/13 81/2 83/2 125/10 148/17 153/23 163/9 163/13 173/25 174/6 174/17 174/21 175/16 176/5 177/20 178/10 180/10 180/22 181/20 182/1 183/3 184/13 192/20 193/14</p> <p><b>Cabinet Office [10]</b> 8/25 33/20 125/10 163/9 174/17 174/21 176/5 177/20 181/20 182/1</p> <p><b>Cabinet Secretaries [4]</b> 33/16 39/16 192/20 193/14</p> <p><b>Cabinet Secretary [22]</b> 6/3 6/5 6/17 21/19 22/23 23/8 23/11 30/25 36/10 37/6 37/16 37/16 39/16 41/20 43/13 43/16 46/5 153/23 173/25 175/16 183/3 184/13</p> <p><b>CABOFF [1]</b> 125/11</p> <p><b>Cain [2]</b> 99/3 126/13</p> <p><b>calculated [1]</b> 4/11</p> <p><b>call [3]</b> 20/18 25/20 122/5</p> <p><b>called [16]</b> 1/7 17/10 26/22 45/8 70/9 91/3 114/5 122/3 124/19 129/14 131/4 154/1 154/20 163/15 181/14 186/12</p> <p><b>calling [3]</b> 24/21 40/16 148/1</p> <p><b>came [21]</b> 17/6 17/25 18/1 23/14 26/20 54/25 56/21 66/16 102/7 142/24 142/25 146/17 146/19 148/24 150/7 155/2 161/21 168/9 176/13 185/7 185/8</p> <p><b>campaign [2]</b> 110/19 162/22</p> <p><b>can [86]</b> 2/12 3/7 9/6 11/24 21/14 22/6 29/24 30/8 32/12</p>	<p>35/12 35/20 42/9 42/23 44/2 47/4 52/4 52/6 53/6 54/5 57/14 57/14 58/14 62/4 63/16 64/16 64/18 67/3 67/25 68/5 68/6 72/25 75/24 78/3 82/4 87/2 93/10 93/16 95/4 97/3 99/6 100/9 100/13 100/14 103/14 105/24 106/17 107/15 108/16 109/13 109/13 111/25 112/5 113/18 113/20 114/2 114/18 115/20 120/21 123/22 123/23 124/5 125/9 126/11 127/5 130/4 136/1 138/10 141/23 145/23 146/14 148/18 149/1 149/19 149/20 156/5 163/6 164/9 167/5 167/7 167/17 169/6 169/6 170/24 171/7 176/25 177/1</p> <p><b>can't [33]</b> 8/9 14/19 17/21 20/15 35/12 54/24 57/11 64/7 74/9 80/2 80/14 82/4 82/4 88/10 97/3 100/17 101/19 103/7 104/4 111/17 119/5 130/4 130/13 139/25 141/21 145/24 146/15 149/14 156/4 172/3 172/3 184/14 186/25</p> <p><b>candidly [2]</b> 4/8 97/23</p> <p><b>cannot [6]</b> 36/5 36/9 36/12 41/6 80/15 186/5</p> <p><b>capability [1]</b> 8/19</p> <p><b>capable [2]</b> 7/23 103/6</p> <p><b>care [7]</b> 3/14 12/24 13/1 21/2 28/16 58/17 77/4</p> <p><b>care sector [1]</b> 12/24</p> <p><b>cared [1]</b> 164/15</p> <p><b>career [1]</b> 3/17</p> <p><b>careful [2]</b> 97/12 165/7</p> <p><b>carefully [1]</b> 148/18</p> <p><b>carried [3]</b> 81/16 168/20 170/13</p> <p><b>case [29]</b> 6/4 14/18 14/24 23/1 25/12 25/18 33/21 34/23 37/8 47/15 56/12 57/24 58/1 63/9 70/1 72/2 72/19 85/11 85/17 85/21 86/18 87/16 88/8 115/11 153/11 174/7 176/10 184/11 193/19</p>	<p><b>Case's [1]</b> 182/7</p> <p><b>cases [21]</b> 54/16 54/20 54/22 56/9 58/18 58/23 59/8 59/22 73/7 75/17 85/12 87/5 88/15 93/19 93/24 102/24 148/6 148/14 149/13 149/24 150/5</p> <p><b>casts [1]</b> 100/15</p> <p><b>catch [1]</b> 83/10</p> <p><b>category [1]</b> 61/10</p> <p><b>causally [1]</b> 14/11</p> <p><b>cause [3]</b> 140/9 153/6 156/7</p> <p><b>caused [4]</b> 74/24 111/9 137/24 169/10</p> <p><b>causing [1]</b> 74/21</p> <p><b>cautious [2]</b> 168/12 183/5</p> <p><b>caveats [1]</b> 107/2</p> <p><b>CCS [4]</b> 84/1 86/12 86/22 89/21</p> <p><b>central [3]</b> 73/23 78/23 181/24</p> <p><b>centralise [1]</b> 19/13</p> <p><b>centralised [1]</b> 191/21</p> <p><b>centre [3]</b> 173/24 182/19 189/11</p> <p><b>century [4]</b> 50/1 50/25 97/6 190/4</p> <p><b>certain [14]</b> 20/18 75/5 76/21 86/25 87/3 87/7 87/13 115/17 130/13 143/23 157/2 162/10 164/11 170/15</p> <p><b>certainly [41]</b> 4/18 4/24 17/11 22/6 24/10 27/23 30/2 35/25 45/16 46/3 46/16 47/19 51/4 51/24 67/21 68/9 69/10 70/2 70/2 77/16 77/19 82/5 101/21 117/13 123/2 141/1 148/23 150/12 153/14 157/5 159/11 160/10 160/16 162/19 175/20 185/5 187/11 188/15 188/15 193/16 193/16</p> <p><b>certainty [2]</b> 117/18 131/18</p> <p><b>certificate [1]</b> 4/12</p> <p><b>cetera [1]</b> 101/11</p> <p><b>chain [1]</b> 79/5</p> <p><b>chair [11]</b> 6/11 19/17 48/16 50/5 56/3 56/5 78/13 85/10 136/4 155/5 156/21</p> <p><b>chaired [12]</b> 46/21 46/22 47/2 47/4 58/15 72/24 78/6 86/17 93/14 99/15 103/9</p>	<p>114/8</p> <p><b>chairing [3]</b> 48/2 48/14 48/25</p> <p><b>challenge [6]</b> 32/5 42/20 52/2 67/16 170/9 184/22</p> <p><b>challenged [2]</b> 38/8 175/5</p> <p><b>challenges [1]</b> 31/20</p> <p><b>challenging [7]</b> 30/21 33/10 44/1 77/2 173/25 175/1 175/13</p> <p><b>chance [1]</b> 139/5</p> <p><b>Chancellor [10]</b> 21/4 27/5 27/7 27/15 28/11 127/9 128/4 139/18 155/5 156/19</p> <p><b>chances [1]</b> 119/3</p> <p><b>change [9]</b> 61/18 108/13 108/22 119/11 119/14 119/15 119/18 120/24 182/4</p> <p><b>changed [4]</b> 44/11 54/8 66/13 135/1</p> <p><b>changes [1]</b> 120/5</p> <p><b>changing [1]</b> 40/5</p> <p><b>chaos [4]</b> 173/20 187/5 188/6 190/1</p> <p><b>chaotic [1]</b> 191/2</p> <p><b>character [1]</b> 43/2</p> <p><b>characterisation [1]</b> 28/20</p> <p><b>characters [3]</b> 30/22 33/11 42/21</p> <p><b>chart [1]</b> 115/23</p> <p><b>Cheltenham [2]</b> 118/7 118/12</p> <p><b>Chequers [1]</b> 81/22</p> <p><b>Chevening [2]</b> 81/21 82/22</p> <p><b>chief [27]</b> 22/21 23/4 23/10 23/20 23/23 32/7 36/6 39/15 39/15 43/19 64/22 65/23 68/15 70/15 71/3 76/7 76/12 79/6 94/13 104/9 105/4 107/5 110/23 136/19 137/17 137/18 152/13</p> <p><b>Chief scientist [2]</b> 70/15 71/3</p> <p><b>children [1]</b> 145/17</p> <p><b>Chiltern [1]</b> 3/22</p> <p><b>China [22]</b> 46/13 49/20 52/23 55/6 55/25 56/7 56/14 56/15 57/4 58/22 59/22 60/1 60/6 60/10 62/3 68/8 70/20 75/4 82/7 82/9 87/3 87/4</p> <p><b>Chinese [2]</b> 55/17 60/5</p> <p><b>chitchat [1]</b> 187/20</p> <p><b>choice [1]</b> 128/24</p>
<p><b>C</b></p> <p><b>cabinet [72]</b> 6/3 6/5 6/17 8/25 18/24 19/1</p>				

<p><b>C</b></p> <p><b>choices [1]</b> 117/24  <b>choose [1]</b> 103/20  <b>Chris [15]</b> 55/1 65/14  68/25 76/22 79/7  85/19 90/16 103/4  121/7 124/19 131/3  137/15 138/5 142/13  191/8  <b>Chris Wormald [1]</b>  191/8  <b>chronological [3]</b>  45/4 45/4 79/9  <b>chronology [1]</b>  172/10  <b>circuit [3]</b> 13/9  152/22 157/13  <b>circuit-breakers [1]</b>  157/13  <b>circumnavigate [1]</b>  125/7  <b>circumstances [7]</b>  14/8 37/4 44/9 189/1  189/5 191/10 192/9  <b>cite [1]</b> 10/23  <b>cited [1]</b> 23/5  <b>citizens [1]</b> 4/21  <b>City [1]</b> 34/20  <b>City Hall [1]</b> 34/20  <b>civil [24]</b> 21/19 22/5  22/12 26/14 33/17  33/25 37/17 50/15  78/4 78/13 86/4 88/4  100/11 111/15 111/17  154/11 173/21 173/24  174/5 174/8 174/25  175/12 175/15 191/24  <b>CJRS [1]</b> 28/1  <b>claims [1]</b> 41/14  <b>clarity [3]</b> 142/15  157/23 178/2  <b>classes [1]</b> 167/11  <b>claxon [1]</b> 61/1  <b>clear [26]</b> 6/22 7/1  9/7 25/3 46/4 49/8  53/9 59/8 61/20 62/1  62/11 70/20 78/7  98/15 107/10 110/12  111/20 115/18 118/12  124/24 127/2 128/20  172/1 175/11 183/25  193/9  <b>cleared [1]</b> 115/19  <b>clearly [18]</b> 6/8 17/2  38/3 48/9 48/20 52/4  54/5 63/9 64/14 79/2  84/24 121/14 133/23  144/20 144/21 148/22  159/3 179/8  <b>clinical [3]</b> 166/20  167/23 170/11  <b>clip [1]</b> 103/1  <b>clocked [1]</b> 115/12</p>	<p><b>close [8]</b> 21/18 85/11  85/20 85/23 86/20  88/9 167/8 167/9  <b>closed [4]</b> 65/25  134/13 134/14 134/16  <b>closing [2]</b> 65/24  67/9  <b>closure [4]</b> 106/14  117/11 117/25 131/24  <b>cloud [1]</b> 46/1  <b>CMO [22]</b> 23/2 23/7  24/6 24/11 25/4 25/23  26/2 26/5 43/10 53/23  56/6 56/11 56/19  65/23 68/17 94/8 95/1  97/12 103/4 104/16  105/16 121/2  <b>CMO's [1]</b> 65/4  <b>co [1]</b> 162/14  <b>co-operative [1]</b>  162/14  <b>COBR [51]</b> 20/5 20/6  45/5 46/21 46/22 47/1  47/9 47/13 48/25 56/1  56/2 56/3 56/19 56/25  57/12 57/13 66/6 66/6  70/18 78/1 80/24  80/25 85/5 85/7 85/8  86/2 86/16 88/7 91/10  93/14 94/12 99/15  100/12 103/9 107/6  110/21 110/22 114/8  124/10 131/9 135/4  135/4 135/4 135/6  139/11 153/4 153/7  156/24 160/7 160/21  161/5  <b>COBRAS [1]</b> 153/3  <b>COBRs [7]</b> 47/5 47/6  48/2 48/15 48/16 50/6  154/5  <b>cock [1]</b> 35/25  <b>cocked [1]</b> 146/11  <b>cockups [1]</b> 36/2  <b>coherence [1]</b> 157/6  <b>coherent [1]</b> 116/12  <b>Colindale [2]</b> 102/15  102/25  <b>collaboration [1]</b>  152/5  <b>collapse [1]</b> 138/1  <b>colleague [1]</b> 34/20  <b>colleagues [4]</b> 68/22  119/19 146/7 154/11  <b>collective [2]</b> 40/5  60/12  <b>collectively [4]</b> 52/8  60/18 60/25 80/19  <b>colours [1]</b> 105/25  <b>come [32]</b> 10/17  17/17 19/6 20/24 27/8  31/1 33/22 35/1 36/14  40/3 41/1 41/24 48/12  62/17 64/13 64/16</p>	<p>64/18 72/6 88/1 90/2  95/20 96/1 107/12  114/5 149/5 162/2  163/3 168/4 169/6  177/22 178/21 187/17  <b>comes [2]</b> 100/10  100/12  <b>comfort [1]</b> 15/5  <b>coming [11]</b> 8/6  28/23 44/4 66/25  75/20 85/22 93/5  107/22 174/12 180/3  187/12  <b>commence [1]</b> 1/22  <b>comment [5]</b> 19/21  20/2 29/24 38/21 64/7  <b>commenting [1]</b>  39/17  <b>comments [1]</b> 41/5  <b>commissioned [2]</b>  166/13 171/16  <b>committee [4]</b> 20/13  25/17 154/2 154/2  <b>committees [1]</b>  12/15  <b>Commons [1]</b> 164/7  <b>Commonwealth [1]</b>  68/21  <b>comms [5]</b> 70/17  70/22 70/25 71/6  153/6  <b>communicate [1]</b>  37/6  <b>communicated [1]</b>  92/1  <b>communication [3]</b>  108/11 157/21 159/18  <b>communications [11]</b>  10/22 29/11 30/6  35/9 71/13 74/23 77/5  117/21 128/12 146/7  157/16  <b>communicator [2]</b>  37/4 193/8  <b>communities [3]</b>  161/19 166/14 168/5  <b>community [5]</b> 52/1  71/20 87/22 94/1  167/14  <b>comorbidities [1]</b>  16/8  <b>compare [1]</b> 82/9  <b>comparison [1]</b>  178/12  <b>comparisons [1]</b>  100/6  <b>competence [8]</b> 29/6  29/13 38/16 39/13  39/19 42/3 42/16  51/17  <b>competent [1]</b> 187/8  <b>competing [3]</b> 21/10  26/24 30/21  <b>complaints [1]</b></p>	<p>184/10  <b>complete [1]</b> 39/7  <b>completely [10]</b>  30/12 44/16 49/24  65/8 65/17 127/6  131/20 134/2 151/3  183/17  <b>complex [3]</b> 125/6  125/6 176/7  <b>complexes [1]</b>  176/15  <b>compliance [6]</b> 94/15  131/13 134/21 135/12  135/23 136/3  <b>complication [1]</b>  159/11  <b>complications [1]</b>  125/24  <b>comprehend [1]</b>  60/14  <b>computed [1]</b> 50/2  <b>conceivable [1]</b> 5/21  <b>conceived [1]</b> 163/25  <b>concept [3]</b> 57/15  92/10 95/1  <b>conceptualise [2]</b>  92/7 92/23  <b>concern [9]</b> 1/4  46/20 48/20 50/4  55/23 99/17 111/10  158/16 175/12  <b>concerned [12]</b> 9/21  26/2 26/3 35/10 55/20  57/2 100/3 102/18  111/11 148/13 148/14  149/9  <b>concerning [1]</b> 79/8  <b>concerns [7]</b> 36/9  36/13 45/2 45/9  154/17 174/20 191/3  <b>concludes [1]</b> 173/18  <b>Concluding [1]</b> 76/7  <b>conclusions [2]</b>  49/22 53/14  <b>condition [3]</b> 169/2  169/4 170/21  <b>conditionals [1]</b>  144/14  <b>conditions [1]</b>  182/14  <b>condolences [1]</b> 82/8  <b>conference [5]</b> 95/3  101/4 109/17 109/21  149/1  <b>confidence [8]</b> 43/13  43/16 43/19 43/23  68/19 173/3 173/5  192/4  <b>confident [3]</b> 74/9  103/5 173/24  <b>confidential [1]</b> 1/9  <b>confidentiality [2]</b>  1/12 1/15  <b>confined [1]</b> 56/14</p>	<p><b>confirm [2]</b> 5/18  90/16  <b>confirmed [5]</b> 56/9  58/18 58/20 59/8  59/22  <b>conflicting [1]</b> 99/20  <b>confluence [1]</b> 121/5  <b>confusing [1]</b> 152/18  <b>conjecturing [1]</b>  123/7  <b>connected [1]</b> 95/18  <b>cons [1]</b> 90/20  <b>conscious [1]</b> 140/23  <b>consciousness [1]</b>  47/19  <b>consensus [6]</b> 24/14  24/25 25/5 66/17  155/20 184/23  <b>consequence [2]</b>  54/18 105/18  <b>consequences [8]</b>  21/3 66/2 71/15  103/24 124/16 127/3  127/22 174/3  <b>Conservative [2]</b> 2/8  162/11  <b>consider [6]</b> 97/14  104/1 124/10 138/15  138/18 165/14  <b>considerable [5]</b>  27/6 31/21 111/10  186/16 187/2  <b>consideration [12]</b>  153/25 162/24 165/18  165/20 165/21 166/8  166/10 166/11 166/17  166/22 167/22 167/24  <b>considerations [4]</b>  21/5 21/10 26/19  103/17  <b>considered [3]</b> 17/3  56/13 135/6  <b>considering [1]</b>  104/10  <b>consistent [2]</b> 66/8  128/19  <b>consistently [2]</b>  65/23 66/6  <b>consists [1]</b> 188/2  <b>constant [2]</b> 32/4  35/15  <b>constantly [4]</b> 32/5  32/6 36/18 36/20  <b>constituent [2]</b> 51/20  152/1  <b>constitutionally [1]</b>  156/6  <b>constrained [1]</b>  151/11  <b>consulted [1]</b> 160/12  <b>contact [5]</b> 93/2  93/18 105/1 118/4  138/7  <b>contacts [1]</b> 54/22</p>
--	--	---	--	---

<p><b>C</b></p> <p><b>contagious [2]</b> 143/21 190/7</p> <p><b>contagiousness [1]</b> 54/4</p> <p><b>contain [5]</b> 10/6 77/20 91/15 94/4 101/8</p> <p><b>contained [1]</b> 73/9</p> <p><b>containing [1]</b> 68/2</p> <p><b>contains [1]</b> 2/3</p> <p><b>contemplate [1]</b> 21/8</p> <p><b>contemplated [1]</b> 94/21</p> <p><b>content [1]</b> 25/3</p> <p><b>contention [1]</b> 109/11</p> <p><b>contents [6]</b> 1/5 2/4 7/14 8/14 8/20 102/6</p> <p><b>context [15]</b> 10/21 17/20 28/12 28/24 45/17 51/16 61/21 68/13 108/21 111/18 133/2 147/17 153/4 161/10 170/5</p> <p><b>contextual [1]</b> 64/20</p> <p><b>contingencies [6]</b> 78/5 78/14 86/4 88/4 100/11 154/11</p> <p><b>contingent [1]</b> 174/4</p> <p><b>continue [2]</b> 68/18 158/25</p> <p><b>continued [3]</b> 81/4 118/12 170/3</p> <p><b>continuing [1]</b> 158/16</p> <p><b>continuous [1]</b> 176/16</p> <p><b>continuously [1]</b> 175/8</p> <p><b>contradict [1]</b> 15/15</p> <p><b>contrary [2]</b> 128/2 150/11</p> <p><b>contrast [2]</b> 26/10 113/5</p> <p><b>contribute [1]</b> 154/18</p> <p><b>contributed [3]</b> 16/12 16/22 33/16</p> <p><b>control [11]</b> 52/22 56/22 70/16 71/4 71/7 71/11 75/1 92/25 137/4 151/12 191/20</p> <p><b>controls [3]</b> 66/19 67/4 67/23</p> <p><b>controversial [1]</b> 176/2</p> <p><b>convene [1]</b> 81/4</p> <p><b>convened [2]</b> 46/21 124/11</p> <p><b>convenient [3]</b> 44/15 98/16 194/4</p> <p><b>conversation [13]</b> 6/16 25/1 38/2 45/16</p>	<p>83/9 90/17 105/9 127/8 127/12 139/17 148/21 173/2 183/6</p> <p><b>conversations [9]</b> 28/4 29/2 45/22 46/11 68/9 82/6 108/23 182/20 184/9</p> <p><b>conveyed [1]</b> 121/1</p> <p><b>conveying [1]</b> 24/13</p> <p><b>conviction [1]</b> 117/17</p> <p><b>convince [1]</b> 77/2</p> <p><b>cope [1]</b> 167/12</p> <p><b>core [3]</b> 1/10 4/18 9/21</p> <p><b>core participants [1]</b> 1/10</p> <p><b>corner [1]</b> 114/20</p> <p><b>corona [1]</b> 70/14</p> <p><b>coronavirus [16]</b> 46/8 47/16 70/25 73/4 73/6 74/16 74/18 79/8 81/7 81/24 82/3 84/14 126/3 131/5 151/12 190/7</p> <p><b>Coronavirus Bill [1]</b> 126/3</p> <p><b>correct [24]</b> 2/10 14/23 17/18 41/19 43/5 43/9 59/9 72/16 72/22 98/4 99/23 107/21 108/17 111/3 117/8 124/1 134/10 134/23 150/23 160/23 166/25 168/7 170/15 170/18</p> <p><b>correctly [2]</b> 3/25 39/11</p> <p><b>corridors [1]</b> 187/21</p> <p><b>cost [4]</b> 27/24 27/25 32/23 77/24</p> <p><b>costly [2]</b> 29/1 77/20</p> <p><b>costs [6]</b> 90/1 104/20 119/1 119/9 127/10 129/12</p> <p><b>coterie [1]</b> 163/12</p> <p><b>couched [1]</b> 107/1</p> <p><b>could [86]</b> 1/22 2/19 2/22 5/18 5/25 10/16 13/19 13/24 14/4 14/5 17/13 21/23 24/22 32/10 34/9 35/8 37/5 38/18 40/10 42/19 42/25 47/9 48/9 49/18 50/11 53/14 53/24 54/15 55/14 57/9 59/16 60/6 62/13 62/17 71/25 78/2 84/24 87/18 87/20 91/5 92/3 93/11 99/20 103/23 103/25 104/21 106/25 107/8 108/15 110/17 110/18 111/5 114/25 124/17 125/16 126/13 131/18 132/23</p>	<p>133/2 133/5 134/11 134/12 138/7 139/5 140/1 140/1 144/6 145/21 152/19 153/12 154/13 157/9 158/1 165/4 167/25 168/16 169/23 172/15 176/18 176/23 177/23 178/25 180/1 185/15 190/14 190/23</p> <p><b>couldn't [22]</b> 25/25 48/6 54/21 55/4 55/10 55/10 58/2 68/10 75/16 84/4 86/8 89/4 99/19 100/24 100/24 127/25 134/10 138/2 140/22 143/9 167/5 191/15</p> <p><b>COUNSEL [2]</b> 1/21 195/5</p> <p><b>countervailing [1]</b> 139/14</p> <p><b>countries [6]</b> 15/1 15/10 16/16 59/14 59/16 68/1</p> <p><b>country [38]</b> 3/3 15/22 15/25 16/9 16/10 33/8 33/13 37/19 39/21 44/12 59/25 66/23 69/13 74/18 75/11 97/8 101/5 117/23 125/23 128/7 130/9 130/21 130/24 143/15 147/2 152/9 161/21 173/10 175/4 175/9 176/16 179/9 184/25 188/17 188/23 190/5 191/14 191/14</p> <p><b>couple [5]</b> 30/10 82/11 113/22 129/17 144/20</p> <p><b>course [72]</b> 2/5 3/23 5/1 5/7 5/13 6/22 8/24 9/1 9/19 10/18 11/7 12/13 12/17 12/20 12/22 12/25 15/5 21/21 23/17 26/2 28/3 29/4 29/10 31/1 36/8 40/4 40/5 41/16 44/11 55/5 55/7 56/2 58/15 58/20 64/19 66/1 72/24 73/3 74/1 84/12 100/10 101/5 102/3 104/12 108/24 112/9 112/20 117/6 119/24 122/8 125/5 131/8 132/5 132/11 132/24 139/24 143/3 143/17 148/7 150/5 150/6 150/21 151/15 161/11 163/3 165/11 166/18 168/13 181/22 190/9 191/18 193/1</p>	<p><b>cover [5]</b> 103/16 140/4 159/8 171/23 176/22</p> <p><b>Covid [67]</b> 4/12 5/20 6/7 6/20 15/1 16/8 20/13 40/7 44/4 45/25 57/16 61/23 62/1 62/23 67/15 68/2 72/14 82/6 82/9 86/24 87/19 116/17 123/13 123/17 130/11 130/11 131/7 139/9 139/10 140/6 140/8 141/20 150/15 153/21 153/21 162/4 166/10 166/13 169/2 169/8 169/21 170/2 170/8 170/10 170/14 170/21 170/22 170/24 171/13 171/13 171/14 171/19 177/12 177/12 177/14 177/14 178/23 178/23 178/25 178/25 179/1 179/1 181/3 183/14 183/20 183/22 186/19</p> <p><b>Covid Inquiry [1]</b> 6/7</p> <p><b>Covid-19 [6]</b> 86/24 87/19 123/17 131/7 139/9 139/10</p> <p><b>Covid-O [4]</b> 153/21 177/12 177/14 178/23</p> <p><b>Covid-related [3]</b> 6/20 16/8 130/11</p> <p><b>Covid-S [5]</b> 153/21 177/12 177/14 178/23 179/1</p> <p><b>cracked [2]</b> 92/5 92/20</p> <p><b>create [1]</b> 78/7</p> <p><b>created [1]</b> 182/1</p> <p><b>creation [1]</b> 183/14</p> <p><b>creatively [1]</b> 38/12</p> <p><b>credence [2]</b> 60/23 61/12</p> <p><b>credible [2]</b> 64/24 65/5</p> <p><b>creeping [1]</b> 174/11</p> <p><b>crescendo [3]</b> 20/17 46/18 127/17</p> <p><b>criminally [1]</b> 32/9</p> <p><b>crisis [23]</b> 33/9 46/12 51/22 57/10 62/16 83/7 84/18 88/5 89/18 90/5 129/19 130/3 143/12 151/14 152/3 154/24 155/4 157/1 157/12 158/25 160/21 186/18 190/23</p> <p><b>crisply [1]</b> 129/8</p> <p><b>critical [9]</b> 31/17 41/7 41/8 44/7 44/8 121/22 174/2 191/14 191/24</p> <p><b>critical weeks [1]</b> 174/2</p>	<p><b>criticised [2]</b> 102/4 133/23</p> <p><b>criticising [1]</b> 188/24</p> <p><b>criticism [5]</b> 34/12 34/12 188/24 189/16 189/24</p> <p><b>criticisms [2]</b> 32/19 189/14</p> <p><b>cross [1]</b> 171/18</p> <p><b>cross-government [1]</b> 171/18</p> <p><b>crucial [5]</b> 54/6 85/6 85/25 94/15 185/8</p> <p><b>cruelty [1]</b> 128/23</p> <p><b>cruise [1]</b> 79/17</p> <p><b>crushed [3]</b> 188/22 189/14 189/24</p> <p><b>CSA [10]</b> 24/11 25/4 25/24 26/2 39/23 43/11 95/4 95/18 105/16 121/2</p> <p><b>culture [6]</b> 175/23 177/4 177/6 179/6 179/10 179/16</p> <p><b>Cummings [49]</b> 19/12 19/14 22/21 23/10 32/7 32/21 33/16 35/9 35/24 37/9 42/8 43/2 67/6 70/9 70/14 71/3 83/14 99/3 99/4 100/14 107/25 119/19 121/16 122/7 122/18 122/20 122/24 126/13 129/25 153/1 153/1 153/7 173/15 173/20 175/14 175/16 175/17 179/13 179/24 180/6 180/14 180/20 184/4 185/25 187/4 189/17 192/3 192/17 193/2</p> <p><b>Cummings' [4]</b> 29/9 119/21 125/11 179/25</p> <p><b>cumulative [1]</b> 141/17</p> <p><b>cumulatively [1]</b> 16/21</p> <p><b>current [5]</b> 123/16 123/22 123/24 135/10 184/13</p> <p><b>currently [2]</b> 49/1 50/20</p> <p><b>curve [10]</b> 107/1 109/23 110/3 110/16 113/14 133/3 134/4 137/14 143/23 144/18</p> <p><b>curves [2]</b> 132/20 133/13</p> <p><b>cusps [2]</b> 81/1 143/17</p> <p><b>D</b></p> <p><b>DA [2]</b> 156/1 159/3</p> <p><b>daily [2]</b> 81/24 103/2</p> <p><b>damage [8]</b> 5/4 18/2</p>
--	--	--	--	--



<b>D</b>	<b>deals [1]</b> 59/11	<b>decision-making [16]</b> 186/20 187/11 189/8	120/3 121/19 186/15
<b>damage...</b> [6] 21/11	<b>dealt [4]</b> 26/10 54/20	9/22 14/15 14/16	187/5 187/9 188/8
26/11 89/16 89/21	54/20 73/3	23/15 27/7 30/17	188/14 188/16 190/2
99/25 183/19	<b>death [9]</b> 4/11 5/1	94/22 127/23 143/18	190/17 190/22 191/2
<b>damaged [2]</b> 50/11	14/11 15/9 15/11	159/21 159/23 159/25	<b>diagnostics [2]</b> 53/5
173/21	59/25 97/17 140/10	177/8 178/3 184/6	63/12
<b>damaging [4]</b> 33/20	142/7	185/14	<b>Diamond [2]</b> 62/10
129/4 173/23 174/5	<b>deaths [16]</b> 4/10 4/13	<b>decision-taking [1]</b>	79/15
<b>danger [1]</b> 99/8	14/17 14/22 15/22	178/16	<b>Diamond Princess</b>
<b>dangers [1]</b> 90/6	16/18 16/22 58/1	<b>decisions [34]</b> 9/22	[2] 62/10 79/15
<b>DAs [9]</b> 152/6 153/18	59/25 61/8 69/9 133/5	12/5 12/8 12/18 13/20	<b>diaries [2]</b> 147/13
153/24 154/4 154/17	137/23 138/1 140/6	13/22 13/23 16/21	187/3
155/13 155/18 156/15	192/22	17/1 17/16 17/19	<b>diary [3]</b> 28/9 130/1
159/23	<b>debate [42]</b> 6/12	18/16 18/19 18/19	172/20
<b>data [30]</b> 7/12 15/16	21/12 21/25 22/14	18/21 18/25 19/3 19/5	<b>did [136]</b> 3/18 4/3 4/4
49/18 50/2 50/19	25/12 25/20 48/13	19/9 21/7 26/13 26/20	8/25 10/8 11/16 13/12
53/13 113/13 119/25	58/15 58/24 59/11	28/12 29/16 79/24	13/14 15/2 15/22
121/24 125/8 132/24	59/18 64/21 68/14	89/12 90/9 94/19	16/10 24/5 24/8 24/11
133/1 137/21 140/20	74/25 91/23 92/14	107/23 133/20 156/25	24/20 24/24 25/15
144/11 144/15 157/25	92/24 93/3 93/7 96/12	158/1 159/15 163/15	27/2 29/3 30/24 35/4
158/7 158/12 158/15	97/15 100/12 105/3	<b>declaration [1]</b> 2/3	40/5 43/8 43/14 43/16
181/2 181/8 181/11	108/1 108/3 108/8	<b>declare [1]</b> 55/22	43/19 43/23 44/11
181/14 181/16 181/18	108/10 108/25 109/6	<b>declared [4]</b> 47/17	47/22 48/13 48/23
181/19 181/22 181/24	109/10 111/8 111/9	49/3 49/5 87/10	50/19 51/1 51/2 51/2
182/4	123/1 126/12 130/15	<b>deep [1]</b> 41/5	51/21 54/13 57/15
<b>data-driven [1]</b> 181/2	130/21 136/18 139/13	<b>deeply [1]</b> 2/24	62/25 63/14 63/19
<b>date [14]</b> 6/10 8/7	151/25 152/25 153/4	<b>default [1]</b> 51/8	65/3 68/1 68/3 68/4
13/13 46/6 48/23 55/4	167/2	<b>defeating [1]</b> 37/13	69/12 71/9 72/8 72/8
73/13 78/20 80/7 86/1	<b>debated [5]</b> 20/3 20/6	<b>defects [2]</b> 37/2	73/18 73/20 73/21
90/18 100/10 103/7	20/10 92/13 192/2	193/9	74/1 76/13 76/17
114/15	<b>debates [4]</b> 25/10	<b>defer [2]</b> 144/1	76/22 77/18 81/6
<b>dated [6]</b> 2/2 70/10	112/10 144/9 151/19	154/12	81/17 82/3 83/19 86/8
99/4 99/12 131/4	<b>debating [5]</b> 109/8	<b>deference [1]</b> 38/15	87/2 87/25 88/2 88/20
148/7	109/9 117/11 163/6	<b>deferential [1]</b> 38/6	91/18 92/2 92/3 96/10
<b>dates [2]</b> 48/4 48/7	178/2	<b>deficient [1]</b> 93/1	96/17 97/1 97/13
<b>dawning [1]</b> 62/7	<b>debited [1]</b> 49/10	<b>definitely [1]</b> 70/7	97/19 100/13 102/9
<b>day [20]</b> 20/7 35/19	<b>debt [2]</b> 126/16 128/6	<b>degree [5]</b> 21/6 99/13	102/25 103/21 111/16
37/21 37/21 54/10	<b>December [5]</b> 1/1	131/17 143/14 187/5	111/20 115/8 116/19
56/1 56/25 57/1 90/15	6/10 27/13 161/12	<b>delay [13]</b> 66/20	118/10 121/21 124/18
99/14 102/14 114/23	194/15	91/15 94/4 94/5 94/8	125/1 132/3 134/2
115/19 116/10 122/22	<b>decide [5]</b> 23/18	97/2 101/8 105/3	137/5 137/16 138/9
124/15 128/12 177/24	124/17 138/14 148/10	110/24 113/1 113/8	138/14 138/15 138/18
194/6 194/8	190/13	113/11 155/10	138/18 138/20 139/1
<b>days [21]</b> 1/5 6/10	<b>decided [8]</b> 42/19	<b>delayed [1]</b> 129/21	141/19 142/10 143/4
52/4 66/20 79/1 79/9	124/18 124/20 129/17	<b>delete [2]</b> 7/12	143/23 146/8 151/6
80/7 82/11 96/3	144/25 173/1 175/3	144/15	151/17 152/1 155/12
104/23 113/13 113/19	175/21	<b>deliberate [1]</b> 160/4	156/20 157/4 157/8
113/22 118/3 119/24	<b>deciding [1]</b> 125/13	<b>deliver [2]</b> 127/5	157/19 157/23 158/6
123/8 129/17 130/25	<b>decision [39]</b> 9/22	142/16	158/24 160/8 161/18
132/2 139/21 143/25	11/10 13/8 14/12	<b>delivered [1]</b> 32/14	161/25 162/8 163/24
<b>de [1]</b> 1/24	14/15 14/16 17/22	<b>demand [1]</b> 97/17	164/15 165/13 169/22
<b>deadly [1]</b> 140/14	19/13 20/3 20/9 20/13	<b>demands [1]</b> 97/16	173/9 174/4 174/9
<b>deal [24]</b> 20/21 23/20	23/15 27/7 27/11	<b>demonstrate [1]</b>	174/10 174/21 175/19
26/18 26/21 29/4 48/3	28/15 30/17 94/22	94/13	176/10 177/12 184/24
63/3 71/10 73/24 75/8	119/17 125/3 125/17	<b>demonstrated [1]</b>	186/7 191/5 191/17
93/7 98/9 98/10 99/5	127/23 128/20 134/19	85/13	191/20 193/23 193/24
99/16 109/17 125/6	135/4 139/22 143/18	<b>demonstrates [1]</b>	<b>didn't [69]</b> 10/24 25/2
151/18 174/13 175/15	151/25 153/5 159/21	8/12	25/20 33/18 34/5
176/3 179/2 179/5	159/23 159/25 160/4	<b>denoted [1]</b> 58/1	38/14 40/22 40/23
190/6	177/8 177/25 178/3	<b>densely [2]</b> 16/8 16/9	40/24 40/24 46/2 46/4
<b>dealing [4]</b> 49/25	178/16 179/6 184/6	<b>density [1]</b> 16/13	47/7 47/10 53/14 56/3
81/24 174/1 190/23	185/14	<b>department [17]</b> 28/8	58/6 60/10 63/14
<b>dealings [1]</b> 42/8	<b>decision-makers [1]</b>	47/15 59/13 77/4 91/4	63/25 63/25 67/23
	19/13	120/3 120/6 186/17	68/2 71/6 72/3 72/3

<b>D</b>	104/22 157/18	<b>disputatious [2]</b> 179/10 179/16	148/20 150/3 155/9 155/10 155/11 155/11 156/5 156/12 159/5 160/8 160/8 160/19 160/24 165/3 169/11 169/14 171/22 174/14 176/22 178/8 178/20 178/20 179/3 181/2 181/9 182/18 183/4 189/6 191/19 193/11	96/22 97/3 97/6 97/12 97/20 97/21 97/22 97/23 98/13 100/14 100/17 101/19 104/15 108/4 108/7 108/7 113/7 122/6 123/2 123/9 123/10 123/10 124/13 143/20 155/10 158/22 162/18 163/21 168/9 170/15 172/15 174/7 178/24 182/9 183/9 184/8 184/10 184/21 185/6 185/12 186/7 186/8 189/18 193/4 193/13 193/14 193/23 194/1
<b>didn't... [43]</b> 73/9 73/19 73/21 75/12 77/9 77/12 81/23 85/2 92/14 98/11 98/11 102/10 107/10 115/20 116/2 116/3 117/14 120/16 120/17 127/15 127/16 130/22 132/10 133/10 137/3 137/3 137/6 137/24 138/20 147/8 152/24 155/13 156/14 158/12 160/24 164/20 171/23 177/11 179/8 187/19 190/6 191/13 192/7	<b>directions [2]</b> 124/22 135/5 <b>directly [13]</b> 19/4 33/21 36/12 41/12 41/15 41/21 41/22 41/23 45/8 57/4 74/8 152/15 158/3 <b>director [2]</b> 78/4 78/13 <b>disabled [2]</b> 171/23 172/6 <b>disadvantaged [1]</b> 167/15 <b>disagreed [1]</b> 148/23 <b>disarray [1]</b> 29/23 <b>disaster [2]</b> 47/21 57/16 <b>disasters [2]</b> 89/25 192/22 <b>disastrous [1]</b> 117/10 <b>discharge [3]</b> 64/13 129/18 129/21 <b>discharged [1]</b> 12/23 <b>discipline [1]</b> 37/11 <b>disclose [1]</b> 5/17 <b>disclosed [4]</b> 6/14 7/25 9/3 27/18 <b>disclosure [2]</b> 5/19 6/15 <b>discuss [3]</b> 20/19 82/9 82/12 <b>discussed [5]</b> 28/18 83/3 88/3 115/15 136/25 <b>discussing [1]</b> 133/25 <b>discussion [12]</b> 6/8 11/11 19/7 19/18 28/5 53/21 69/2 109/21 122/14 140/24 147/19 178/3 <b>discussions [4]</b> 19/20 46/17 74/4 163/8 <b>disease [7]</b> 54/5 55/3 59/15 59/15 100/2 107/11 140/12 <b>diseases [5]</b> 51/4 54/18 57/22 60/24 151/13 <b>dismay [2]</b> 123/4 123/4 <b>disparaging [1]</b> 170/3 <b>disparate [1]</b> 33/10 <b>disparity [1]</b> 171/16 <b>disposal [1]</b> 75/18 <b>dispose [1]</b> 43/24 <b>dispositive [1]</b> 150/22 <b>disproportionate [3]</b> 166/23 168/7 171/19	<b>disrespect [2]</b> 152/12 170/22 <b>disruption [1]</b> 192/11 <b>distancing [8]</b> 18/20 92/15 94/20 97/16 106/17 135/7 135/13 136/12 <b>distilling [1]</b> 24/12 <b>distinct [2]</b> 108/12 163/5 <b>distinction [4]</b> 11/24 30/16 98/6 162/6 <b>distinguish [1]</b> 165/9 <b>distinguished [2]</b> 22/1 173/10 <b>divergence [2]</b> 155/21 159/2 <b>divergences [1]</b> 157/11 <b>diverse [2]</b> 166/10 166/12 <b>divert [2]</b> 127/16 151/3 <b>diverted [1]</b> 128/3 <b>divided [1]</b> 152/7 <b>do [151]</b> 1/15 3/4 4/19 5/8 5/9 8/2 8/5 10/3 12/1 12/9 12/18 13/19 13/24 14/14 15/21 16/7 16/11 16/23 18/4 18/5 19/5 20/12 21/14 25/25 26/16 26/23 27/21 28/24 28/25 31/21 32/1 32/3 32/6 32/11 32/13 33/7 33/14 35/4 41/3 42/19 45/14 46/8 46/13 48/9 48/13 49/1 49/12 53/17 62/20 64/9 64/10 67/4 69/10 80/21 87/11 90/14 90/25 91/5 91/24 92/2 96/8 97/8 98/11 100/1 101/12 102/10 103/4 103/23 103/25 104/4 104/5 104/5 104/6 104/6 108/2 108/4 108/6 110/11 110/18 113/18 115/2 116/13 117/2 117/2 119/5 119/6 119/7 120/6 122/4 122/14 123/1 123/5 125/20 125/25 126/8 127/6 127/7 127/14 127/14 128/25 129/4 129/10 129/11 129/18 130/11 132/19 132/22 134/12 134/14 135/1 136/20 138/7 139/4 141/23 142/10 142/11 143/10 146/12 146/13 147/2 147/9	<b>document [4]</b> 104/3 104/4 104/4 104/5 <b>document [13]</b> 72/25 79/20 101/8 101/9 105/20 108/17 111/5 111/7 111/25 123/15 136/1 174/22 174/24 <b>documentation [1]</b> 24/10 <b>documents [1]</b> 57/24 <b>does [6]</b> 26/8 29/10 45/10 86/5 103/16 181/18 <b>doesn't [16]</b> 6/6 47/1 75/19 92/16 92/17 93/4 93/7 99/5 99/5 100/9 133/25 139/16 160/1 172/6 181/17 181/18 <b>dog [1]</b> 80/7 <b>doing [35]</b> 3/13 11/14 14/7 21/15 31/15 32/18 33/6 33/12 37/3 41/6 44/6 48/11 92/8 92/23 95/22 97/7 103/3 103/6 104/1 111/22 119/2 124/13 124/14 127/4 128/3 128/9 148/4 152/22 169/24 171/12 171/12 189/4 191/10 192/9 193/10 <b>doings [2]</b> 30/5 31/7 <b>Dom [1]</b> 70/22 <b>domestic [5]</b> 91/4 91/9 164/3 164/5 164/9 <b>dominated [1]</b> 34/18 <b>Dominic [3]</b> 19/12 70/14 99/4 <b>Dominic Cummings [3]</b> 19/12 70/14 99/4 <b>don't [88]</b> 2/18 6/16 8/4 8/22 11/11 15/15 16/19 16/19 16/24 19/19 22/1 22/1 22/2 28/19 35/3 35/5 35/21 41/21 44/6 45/21 49/21 50/1 50/16 52/12 53/19 60/6 60/14 60/22 61/1 64/7 69/10 74/8 75/8 75/8 86/21 86/21 87/8 90/13 92/10 93/12	<b>done [58]</b> 5/21 8/16 10/16 11/17 13/19 13/25 14/4 14/5 18/2 26/13 30/18 30/23 32/8 34/22 61/25 62/14 63/23 68/6 78/7 83/6 84/25 84/25 89/16 89/21 98/12 99/6 100/9 100/13 100/15 102/11 115/20 116/9 116/11 118/23 121/14 124/9 124/23 125/22 126/13 126/25 128/1 133/15 141/5 153/20 154/15 157/9 157/13 171/23 173/12 176/13 178/13 183/15 183/19 184/23 184/25 185/2 185/3 186/13 <b>double [2]</b> 106/22 193/2 <b>doubt [13]</b> 9/6 10/17 38/11 38/11 42/5 63/3 118/24 140/15 143/20 157/10 188/23 189/15 189/25 <b>doubted [3]</b> 38/9 38/15 38/16 <b>doubtful [1]</b> 134/8 <b>doubtless [1]</b> 130/6 <b>doubts [1]</b> 127/1 <b>down [33]</b> 2/16 2/16 2/18 3/19 8/5 8/8 15/4 15/4 16/2 16/3 55/24 66/14 79/12 96/17 100/8 109/1 111/24 112/7 126/15 128/8 129/3 130/23 130/24 132/12 138/14 138/15 141/18 146/23 147/1 149/1 150/7 174/11 182/10 <b>Downing [5]</b> 36/13 81/20 160/4 181/14 182/12 <b>Downing Street [5]</b> 36/13 81/20 160/4 181/14 182/12

<b>D</b>	100/12 105/12 105/13 105/14 107/6 116/5 144/8 144/10 146/20 150/6 150/12 159/13 160/11 160/17 <b>early weeks [1]</b> 61/22 <b>earn [1]</b> 119/6 <b>earnestness [1]</b> 118/21 <b>ears [1]</b> 110/8 <b>ease [1]</b> 20/25 <b>eased [1]</b> 13/4 <b>easier [5]</b> 11/20 44/9 81/19 141/25 164/22 <b>easing [1]</b> 28/13 <b>easy [6]</b> 14/3 17/19 17/22 41/7 133/22 164/22 <b>Eat [3]</b> 13/6 27/13 150/9 <b>economic [12]</b> 5/3 21/5 21/7 21/11 26/11 27/21 27/23 103/17 127/13 127/22 146/6 165/14 <b>economist [1]</b> 22/8 <b>economy [5]</b> 77/7 77/11 99/8 100/8 119/4 <b>Ed [1]</b> 70/18 <b>effect [14]</b> 17/12 67/17 102/21 110/1 113/9 114/13 116/18 118/8 118/10 137/17 161/8 167/20 176/4 187/4 <b>effective [9]</b> 18/7 18/8 30/19 52/21 52/24 92/25 93/1 179/3 181/5 <b>effectively [6]</b> 1/16 43/24 97/2 125/8 173/17 184/6 <b>effectiveness [6]</b> 94/10 95/14 96/7 96/11 117/18 132/18 <b>efficacy [3]</b> 40/9 51/17 134/9 <b>efficient [1]</b> 54/14 <b>effort [3]</b> 63/12 147/1 152/9 <b>efforts [1]</b> 190/19 <b>egotistical [1]</b> 188/21 <b>eight [1]</b> 24/23 <b>either [6]</b> 11/9 115/10 136/14 176/9 184/9 193/14 <b>elderly [5]</b> 16/6 16/7 80/12 80/13 113/25 <b>electorates [1]</b> 152/15 <b>eloquently [1]</b> 64/6 <b>else [8]</b> 14/7 30/13	36/1 36/19 131/25 139/6 152/13 191/15 <b>else but [1]</b> 36/1 <b>elsewhere [1]</b> 99/6 <b>email [3]</b> 55/12 79/5 101/1 <b>emails [4]</b> 5/20 7/4 80/3 152/25 <b>embarrass [1]</b> 22/1 <b>embarrassed [1]</b> 176/19 <b>emerged [1]</b> 92/11 <b>emergence [1]</b> 46/12 <b>Emergencies [1]</b> 24/5 <b>emergency [6]</b> 26/14 50/15 55/23 88/23 91/22 177/16 <b>emerging [4]</b> 47/7 48/3 49/15 57/9 <b>eminent [1]</b> 4/20 <b>emotionally [1]</b> 147/5 <b>emotions [1]</b> 18/5 <b>emphasise [2]</b> 33/23 91/24 <b>enable [1]</b> 158/20 <b>enact [1]</b> 27/25 <b>enacted [1]</b> 97/8 <b>enacting [1]</b> 97/7 <b>encephalitis [1]</b> 69/6 <b>enclosed [1]</b> 117/3 <b>encouraged [2]</b> 145/22 151/24 <b>encouragement [1]</b> 146/4 <b>encouraging [2]</b> 102/13 135/15 <b>end [21]</b> 7/5 8/13 26/22 45/25 45/25 47/23 47/24 48/9 48/10 48/16 52/16 58/7 66/8 75/7 107/19 150/12 154/22 154/24 160/17 160/24 179/19 <b>ended [1]</b> 16/17 <b>endedly [1]</b> 19/1 <b>endless [1]</b> 29/2 <b>endlessly [1]</b> 152/20 <b>endorsed [1]</b> 18/24 <b>enforcement [1]</b> 136/9 <b>engage [1]</b> 161/25 <b>engaged [3]</b> 25/10 25/19 186/24 <b>engaging [2]</b> 43/20 68/21 <b>England [4]</b> 56/6 102/22 152/21 171/20 <b>England's [1]</b> 151/6 <b>English [1]</b> 85/14 <b>enormous [1]</b> 125/24 <b>enough [7]</b> 51/23 60/23 61/1 92/2 98/19 158/19 164/20	<b>ensue [1]</b> 127/22 <b>ensure [7]</b> 18/7 24/17 94/10 96/6 96/11 190/21 190/24 <b>ensuring [1]</b> 74/23 <b>entering [1]</b> 66/21 <b>entire [1]</b> 51/25 <b>entirely [7]</b> 8/20 18/25 72/16 110/25 126/10 139/24 141/13 <b>entities [1]</b> 153/5 <b>entitled [2]</b> 5/11 114/13 <b>entries [2]</b> 28/9 162/3 <b>entry [2]</b> 52/25 108/10 <b>environment [1]</b> 192/12 <b>envisaged [2]</b> 5/5 57/25 <b>ephemeral [1]</b> 38/3 <b>epidemic [2]</b> 26/7 131/6 <b>epidemics [1]</b> 72/12 <b>epidemiological [2]</b> 116/21 133/3 <b>epidemiologically [2]</b> 157/20 158/10 <b>epidemiologists [1]</b> 121/24 <b>epidemiology [1]</b> 26/6 <b>equally [1]</b> 185/3 <b>equated [1]</b> 169/4 <b>equiparated [1]</b> 170/8 <b>equipped [1]</b> 37/19 <b>erasing [1]</b> 8/7 <b>error [1]</b> 27/22 <b>escalated [3]</b> 46/19 50/3 50/3 <b>escaped [1]</b> 87/3 <b>escapes [2]</b> 57/4 60/1 <b>especially [1]</b> 17/6 <b>essence [2]</b> 158/21 182/12 <b>essential [5]</b> 55/25 131/24 134/14 141/10 167/9 <b>establishing [1]</b> 110/10 <b>establishment [1]</b> 51/25 <b>estimate [1]</b> 73/7 <b>estimation [2]</b> 144/21 144/22 <b>et [1]</b> 101/11 <b>et cetera [1]</b> 101/11 <b>ethnic [3]</b> 167/13 168/5 171/19 <b>EU [1]</b> 156/18 <b>Europe [3]</b> 15/9 15/18 16/10	<b>European [4]</b> 15/4 15/10 16/2 68/22 <b>evacuate [1]</b> 55/18 <b>evacuation [1]</b> 59/17 <b>even [15]</b> 16/2 18/24 32/20 57/14 92/10 93/21 108/4 110/4 113/20 115/25 117/4 127/6 155/16 158/12 189/23 <b>evening [4]</b> 20/8 114/5 144/24 188/2 <b>event [4]</b> 20/10 50/1 97/6 124/8 <b>events [6]</b> 44/24 79/4 106/14 116/23 118/16 136/25 <b>eventuality [1]</b> 58/3 <b>eventually [3]</b> 138/3 143/25 177/11 <b>ever [4]</b> 24/5 24/21 103/23 133/1 <b>every [7]</b> 4/20 15/25 20/1 47/9 98/18 119/1 140/3 <b>everybody [10]</b> 14/7 38/6 49/17 110/4 110/4 117/2 141/25 175/7 176/22 177/23 <b>Everybody's [1]</b> 36/20 <b>everyone [2]</b> 146/12 183/12 <b>everything [15]</b> 5/21 6/25 9/8 33/6 35/25 110/18 128/16 131/25 134/12 136/23 138/7 147/15 165/4 173/12 189/11 <b>evidence [44]</b> 1/6 1/22 15/3 15/8 15/16 16/1 17/4 20/21 22/18 27/4 29/4 33/14 49/11 52/15 53/6 56/8 56/20 63/4 64/22 64/24 65/6 82/15 89/13 89/14 89/14 90/10 100/4 102/21 112/17 119/16 120/7 122/2 144/3 144/4 149/13 151/18 157/3 161/7 168/18 173/15 176/4 178/16 185/22 186/16 <b>evident [1]</b> 17/15 <b>exacerbated [1]</b> 146/6 <b>exacerbation [1]</b> 146/5 <b>exact [3]</b> 8/4 57/11 103/7 <b>exactly [16]</b> 54/24 82/12 92/7 92/23 100/17 111/17 130/4 131/1 133/5 142/15
----------	--	---	---	---

<b>E</b>	<b>explained [2]</b> 56/3 63/25	116/20 118/17 125/19 128/12 131/4 148/12 150/9 150/17 150/24 151/10 171/5 174/5 179/23 182/15	<b>fear [1]</b> 176/19 <b>feared [1]</b> 61/7 <b>fearful [1]</b> 7/11 <b>features [1]</b> 49/14 <b>Feb [1]</b> 70/5 <b>February [63]</b> 6/21 7/5 12/11 44/24 45/25 45/25 46/17 46/23 46/23 46/24 47/24 47/25 48/10 48/17 48/21 52/5 52/21 53/2 53/24 54/12 58/8 62/8 62/10 62/11 64/3 64/9 66/7 66/7 66/8 68/12 70/10 70/11 72/23 73/14 74/12 78/1 78/20 79/9 80/7 80/25 81/1 81/3 81/3 82/1 83/2 83/4 83/23 84/12 84/14 84/15 85/5 86/2 86/22 88/8 91/19 91/21 92/12 101/17 102/22 126/2 144/8 170/4 170/5 <b>February 2021 [1]</b> 170/4 <b>February 2022 [2]</b> 6/21 7/5 <b>fed [1]</b> 95/19 <b>feel [2]</b> 158/6 176/23 <b>feeling [3]</b> 30/9 52/13 102/19 <b>feelings [1]</b> 2/23 <b>feels [1]</b> 39/7 <b>feet [1]</b> 82/22 <b>felt [18]</b> 14/6 14/7 25/25 117/13 120/13 137/8 138/5 139/4 145/17 146/22 147/1 147/6 157/6 175/6 176/1 178/22 190/9 193/8 <b>fervently [1]</b> 132/12 <b>Festival [1]</b> 118/12 <b>fetches [1]</b> 101/2 <b>feuding [1]</b> 185/10 <b>few [12]</b> 1/5 3/16 14/21 54/15 93/23 102/24 104/23 123/8 132/2 143/25 150/24 168/3 <b>few weeks [1]</b> 168/3 <b>field [1]</b> 25/25 <b>fight [3]</b> 44/5 100/1 143/9 <b>fighting [4]</b> 126/5 126/10 156/7 171/13 <b>figure [7]</b> 4/14 58/6 58/7 59/20 84/4 99/19 103/2 <b>figures [7]</b> 69/4 69/5 79/18 88/6 130/17 135/12 135/13 <b>final [9]</b> 2/4 26/20	<b>28/15 107/22 131/3</b> 171/15 174/23 174/24 185/18 <b>Finally [2]</b> 184/20 186/15 <b>financial [3]</b> 158/19 159/1 167/24 <b>find [8]</b> 11/20 80/4 129/7 141/22 154/18 167/5 167/12 167/17 <b>finding [3]</b> 92/7 92/22 181/4 <b>findings [1]</b> 172/23 <b>fine [2]</b> 18/14 183/23 <b>finger [2]</b> 146/11 177/18 <b>finish [2]</b> 112/14 194/9 <b>fire [2]</b> 187/12 188/16 <b>firebreaker [1]</b> 152/22 <b>firebreakers [1]</b> 157/13 <b>first [69]</b> 7/15 10/20 17/6 20/9 20/16 20/16 23/5 27/11 30/11 34/4 36/16 37/5 45/4 45/5 46/5 46/7 46/9 52/10 53/23 54/13 54/15 56/13 62/1 62/9 75/5 86/22 87/1 89/19 91/20 93/14 96/20 100/8 102/24 103/21 104/12 104/15 104/24 105/3 105/6 106/4 107/1 107/1 109/14 114/6 130/19 132/2 135/11 143/3 145/10 146/20 148/15 148/25 152/12 154/5 155/24 156/1 156/17 156/22 160/19 160/21 160/25 161/16 165/11 166/14 168/3 169/7 176/13 187/16 191/6 <b>First Minister [1]</b> 152/12 <b>First Ministers [3]</b> 156/1 156/17 156/22 <b>firstly [4]</b> 22/24 115/20 141/12 182/7 <b>fiscal [1]</b> 158/23 <b>fit [2]</b> 30/22 43/1 <b>five [5]</b> 6/10 47/6 47/10 48/4 113/13 <b>five days [1]</b> 6/10 <b>five weeks [1]</b> 47/10 <b>fix [4]</b> 67/3 154/16 157/8 175/10 <b>flash [1]</b> 145/1 <b>flatten [1]</b> 109/23 <b>fleetingly [1]</b> 163/3 <b>flight [1]</b> 55/18 <b>flipping [1]</b> 164/19
<b>exactly... [6]</b> 150/11 150/20 161/24 168/9 169/17 170/20	<b>explains [1]</b> 189/25 <b>explanation [4]</b> 8/9 58/10 141/2 170/16 <b>explosion [1]</b> 13/1 <b>explosive [1]</b> 79/16 <b>exponential [3]</b> 133/3 137/19 137/25 <b>exposing [1]</b> 79/24 <b>exposure [1]</b> 164/10 <b>express [1]</b> 1/4 <b>expressed [8]</b> 36/10 36/13 38/7 42/4 43/3 69/3 69/8 191/4 <b>expresses [1]</b> 145/25 <b>expressing [2]</b> 69/22 146/13 <b>expressions [1]</b> 140/15 <b>expressly [2]</b> 40/18 81/25 <b>extended [2]</b> 54/15 76/14 <b>extensive [1]</b> 168/20 <b>extensively [2]</b> 137/1 165/23 <b>extent [12]</b> 11/25 13/17 23/14 42/15 94/19 94/22 96/8 106/6 109/10 125/1 144/9 165/13 <b>externalise [1]</b> 188/24 <b>extra [1]</b> 159/11 <b>extract [2]</b> 147/24 158/14 <b>extraordinary [3]</b> 39/14 140/13 190/18 <b>extreme [2]</b> 92/15 143/24 <b>extremely [15]</b> 16/6 16/20 43/3 49/14 50/8 54/14 89/19 101/5 125/6 139/24 143/21 145/16 147/16 162/2 191/11 <b>eye [2]</b> 45/18 84/21 <b>eyes [1]</b> 182/10	<b>factory [3]</b> 8/12 8/16 8/18 <b>fail [1]</b> 104/6 <b>failed [12]</b> 11/2 32/23 50/12 51/12 51/20 51/21 51/23 69/19 76/17 93/22 94/4 131/16 <b>failing [4]</b> 1/14 42/2 84/22 161/14 <b>failings [3]</b> 13/20 39/12 191/12 <b>failure [3]</b> 52/7 64/4 72/10 <b>failures [1]</b> 42/3 <b>fair [13]</b> 19/24 29/19 38/23 51/24 69/14 71/20 116/24 127/1 131/19 136/22 163/25 168/13 169/5 <b>fairly [3]</b> 1/16 20/18 80/1 <b>faith [1]</b> 132/6 <b>fall [1]</b> 27/25 <b>fallacious [1]</b> 72/18 <b>fallen [1]</b> 101/24 <b>false [1]</b> 69/23 <b>families [5]</b> 2/23 2/25 3/7 15/6 163/11 <b>fantastic [2]</b> 102/17 174/8 <b>far [9]</b> 34/8 36/1 40/2 66/17 74/19 101/2 138/16 152/7 152/7 <b>far-fetched [1]</b> 101/2 <b>fascinating [1]</b> 66/10 <b>fast [12]</b> 19/4 52/8 61/23 85/1 107/10 124/7 145/1 147/22 148/3 148/11 148/13 164/7 <b>faster [2]</b> 117/4 129/11 <b>fatal [2]</b> 49/1 77/23 <b>fatalities [5]</b> 49/20 56/7 58/23 84/3 140/8 <b>fatality [15]</b> 57/6 63/9 63/9 69/3 69/4 69/5 69/22 71/8 71/15 72/8 72/9 72/14 80/11 93/5 93/5 <b>fatigue [14]</b> 17/9 25/11 25/20 40/20 90/21 94/17 95/2 105/17 105/18 112/15 113/6 113/11 140/24 144/11 <b>fault [1]</b> 49/23 <b>FCO [1]</b> 55/24		
<b>examination [2]</b> 10/18 139/8 <b>examine [2]</b> 4/8 4/17 <b>examines [1]</b> 59/14 <b>example [7]</b> 18/19 62/8 117/19 117/20 127/25 166/2 177/9 <b>excellent [5]</b> 16/16 19/20 77/23 152/6 157/8 <b>except [2]</b> 92/8 144/15 <b>exceptional [1]</b> 84/10 <b>excess [8]</b> 4/12 14/17 14/22 15/9 15/11 15/22 16/18 16/22 <b>exchange [2]</b> 48/18 191/15 <b>exchanges [1]</b> 30/16 <b>Exchequer [4]</b> 27/5 28/11 128/4 159/7 <b>exclude [2]</b> 92/4 92/19 <b>excluded [1]</b> 28/17 <b>exclusively [2]</b> 59/18 81/25 <b>execution [1]</b> 19/16 <b>exemption [1]</b> 154/14 <b>exercise [7]</b> 14/13 21/25 70/17 73/11 73/15 73/18 171/18 <b>exercised [1]</b> 42/10 <b>exertion [1]</b> 146/25 <b>exhausted [1]</b> 126/19 <b>exhausted just [1]</b> 126/19 <b>exhaustive [1]</b> 19/7 <b>existed [1]</b> 169/4 <b>existential [1]</b> 90/5 <b>existing [2]</b> 87/15 119/14 <b>expand [1]</b> 35/12 <b>expanded [1]</b> 54/21 <b>expect [1]</b> 121/7 <b>expected [3]</b> 39/20 55/22 103/16 <b>expensive [1]</b> 159/6 <b>experience [6]</b> 50/9 50/24 51/11 60/24 61/3 61/16 <b>experts [2]</b> 25/24 43/11 <b>explain [13]</b> 11/21 32/12 63/16 66/5 67/1 68/18 109/15 111/22 136/22 141/23 169/16 169/23 171/8	<b>face [5]</b> 39/24 39/25 89/17 152/2 187/21 <b>faced [3]</b> 16/4 16/17 128/24 <b>facing [5]</b> 31/19 32/5 40/21 115/11 129/19 <b>fact [33]</b> 6/11 16/14 20/8 46/7 52/17 61/23 63/21 65/1 66/6 80/25 83/1 86/10 88/22 95/15 100/4 102/7 103/1 111/24 113/7			

<b>F</b>	164/1	<b>G</b>	110/5 125/8 125/19 128/3 147/10 148/4 171/9 174/11 180/23	104/25 105/12 105/13 105/14 105/14 107/2 107/3 107/9 107/12 109/19 110/17 110/18 115/18 116/16 118/3 118/6 120/16 123/5 125/20 129/4 130/24 133/23 134/25 135/1 139/18 143/22 144/10 144/22 148/10 148/13 150/5 152/16 159/7 159/7 162/20 162/23 164/10 165/7 167/11 168/10 168/12 174/13 174/18 176/1 176/15 188/17 191/16 193/9
<b>flu</b> [13] 51/3 67/15 69/7 72/8 72/12 72/14 78/24 84/7 84/8 87/16 89/3 99/7 100/7	<b>found</b> [6] 22/5 38/1 66/23 88/25 153/13 176/17	<b>gamble</b> [2] 138/2 140/22	<b>Ghebreyesus</b> [1] 87/11	<b>gone</b> [7] 65/17 97/1 97/4 121/19 127/12 135/17 148/3
<b>focus</b> [4] 71/5 74/22 99/6 165/3	<b>foundation</b> [1] 133/17	<b>game</b> [2] 94/2 183/22	<b>give</b> [16] 5/21 8/9 8/10 14/19 21/23 38/23 50/23 57/11 58/9 124/16 139/5 149/22 165/15 172/4 176/22 189/20	<b>good</b> [32] 13/11 17/19 19/2 25/22 30/8 32/3 32/10 33/7 37/4 39/4 53/8 60/8 74/7 79/22 88/12 92/5 92/20 109/25 132/5 149/21 155/12 159/24 171/25 172/2 174/9 184/19 189/5 190/8 191/10 192/6 192/9 193/7
<b>focused</b> [1] 82/3	<b>four</b> [8] 45/8 56/9 113/18 122/16 144/19 153/19 158/2 168/22	<b>gap</b> [2] 7/18 117/17	<b>given</b> [43] 9/8 11/14 11/15 16/16 23/17 24/18 25/6 27/15 27/19 29/5 32/4 47/12 69/6 75/23 83/11 83/16 90/24 92/9 93/9 100/4 102/7 112/2 116/7 116/18 117/1 118/4 133/1 135/5 144/4 151/18 154/1 159/14 161/9 162/7 165/18 165/21 166/17 166/23 170/5 176/4 178/16 185/22 186/16	<b>got</b> [50] 11/13 13/20 18/8 30/18 39/24 39/25 40/15 50/5 54/12 65/22 80/13 83/20 84/5 86/7 92/6 92/21 93/6 98/8 98/10 113/19 115/25 120/10 121/20 124/7 126/7 126/7 128/4 141/21 143/7 146/14 148/16 150/23 151/1 152/8 154/10 157/3 157/7 169/18 169/21 170/16 176/14 177/12 178/7 188/10 188/10 188/10 188/12 188/19 188/20 190/4
<b>focuses</b> [1] 59/18	<b>four nations</b> [1] 158/2	<b>gatherings</b> [5] 116/19 116/23 117/10 117/25 118/16	<b>gives</b> [2] 90/20 95/4	<b>Gove</b> [4] 19/8 155/4 156/21 159/12
<b>focusing</b> [2] 71/12 77/11	<b>four weeks</b> [1] 144/19	<b>gauge</b> [1] 147/11	<b>giving</b> [3] 1/23 42/21 116/25	<b>government</b> [102] 4/20 5/16 6/13 11/25 12/15 13/19 14/14 14/15 16/5 16/11 23/23 25/10 28/21 29/13 29/14 30/18 30/19 30/20 30/21 31/9 31/23 31/25 32/8 32/9 33/2 33/18 37/22 37/25 42/3 42/11 43/25 44/13 46/18 47/13 47/14 49/9 50/9 50/12 51/18 51/20 53/14 53/15 55/17 59/22 64/2 65/23
<b>folks</b> [1] 32/18	<b>fraction</b> [2] 25/6 49/9	<b>gave</b> [10] 68/15 102/21 103/1 103/2 110/23 124/21 136/8 138/21 161/18 183/24	<b>glad</b> [2] 2/12 30/3	
<b>follow</b> [4] 51/23 65/16 122/19 122/21	<b>framework</b> [1] 177/7	<b>GCSA</b> [2] 23/7 24/6	<b>global</b> [3] 86/25 87/10 88/17	
<b>follow-up</b> [1] 122/21	<b>France</b> [2] 93/25 144/19	<b>GDP</b> [1] 27/25	<b>globally</b> [1] 59/15	
<b>followed</b> [2] 81/8 124/21	<b>frank</b> [2] 45/21 178/24	<b>gender</b> [2] 34/13 164/18	<b>go</b> [41] 11/5 17/22 40/16 40/16 40/19 55/21 58/14 80/2 91/6 95/5 96/10 96/22 97/12 97/20 98/1 98/8 102/14 104/23 105/8 107/15 115/14 116/5 120/7 124/6 125/21 128/9 136/17 138/16 141/18 145/22 145/24 146/5 146/5 146/15 150/8 163/6 182/9 182/25 183/9 186/5 187/13	
<b>following</b> [13] 2/7 3/21 7/7 57/1 68/17 73/15 98/3 115/19 117/6 118/19 131/9 153/22 171/20	<b>frankly</b> [6] 32/20 141/19 157/10 164/22 175/25 177/19	<b>general</b> [25] 13/4 20/2 23/4 24/21 32/1 37/21 67/15 68/14 80/5 80/6 93/4 97/14 101/21 101/22 134/25 136/8 156/7 158/16 163/7 163/17 165/24 167/22 172/11 173/20 192/4	<b>gods</b> [3] 80/13 176/7 176/14	
<b>foolish</b> [1] 176/20	<b>frazzled</b> [1] 44/3	<b>generally</b> [10] 32/13 45/23 50/12 50/18 50/18 102/8 151/25 152/2 161/8 188/13	<b>goes</b> [5] 96/14 100/23 164/7 178/15 190/3	
<b>football</b> [1] 135/15	<b>free</b> [2] 102/1 175/6	<b>generating</b> [1] 142/13	<b>going</b> [90] 2/18 8/5 17/5 29/18 32/15 32/19 33/11 38/22 39/21 40/2 40/4 41/3 42/23 44/13 44/13 44/23 46/3 54/3 54/23 54/25 63/13 67/8 71/23 75/15 75/21 76/2 77/19 82/6 82/16 89/1 89/12 90/2 90/9 90/12 90/14 90/24 90/25 94/16 99/21 99/24 100/1 103/22	
<b>force</b> [2] 163/18 163/19	<b>Freeable</b> [1] 115/1	<b>generic</b> [1] 167/22		
<b>forced</b> [2] 40/25 97/2	<b>freedom</b> [1] 146/24	<b>genesis</b> [4] 94/18 108/9 173/16 173/19		
<b>forecast</b> [1] 61/9	<b>freely</b> [1] 176/21	<b>genuine</b> [1] 39/12		
<b>forecasts</b> [3] 60/19 60/23 69/15	<b>frequency</b> [1] 47/5	<b>geographical</b> [1] 16/14		
<b>forefront</b> [3] 160/10 166/7 166/9	<b>frequently</b> [1] 21/4	<b>Germany</b> [4] 56/9 64/25 65/6 93/25		
<b>Foreign</b> [2] 3/23 68/21	<b>friction</b> [1] 37/21	<b>gestating</b> [1] 101/3		
<b>Foreign Secretary</b> [1] 3/23	<b>Friday</b> [12] 81/2 83/23 112/20 114/5 119/21 122/3 129/24 130/15 131/25 134/13 134/16 136/20	<b>get</b> [49] 2/18 3/5 7/14 9/11 11/12 24/16 27/2 28/13 30/8 30/23 32/24 33/10 35/18 67/5 72/7 74/19 79/8 79/22 80/21 82/17 95/19 105/17 114/5 117/14 119/5 125/23 126/15 127/5 146/12 146/23 147/1 154/10 154/19 155/20 156/13 162/20 162/23 168/16 169/15 169/15 169/16 169/19 169/22 174/14 175/20 184/23 184/24 190/10 190/12		
<b>forge</b> [2] 190/15 190/16	<b>frightening</b> [1] 118/5	<b>gets</b> [3] 133/23 167/8 172/3		
<b>forget</b> [1] 97/6	<b>front</b> [1] 98/9	<b>getting</b> [22] 25/3 34/9 44/2 44/3 48/10 62/21 77/5 94/20 97/5 99/19 101/1 101/22 110/4		
<b>forgive</b> [19] 17/25 53/12 54/11 54/23 71/24 72/7 83/8 83/8 90/7 95/9 95/17 98/4 118/10 127/18 138/10 142/19 165/25 188/1 189/19	<b>fruity</b> [1] 38/2			
<b>forgotten</b> [1] 65/8	<b>frustrated</b> [2] 44/4 146/1			
<b>form</b> [3] 2/6 101/9 159/25	<b>fucking</b> [1] 32/25			
<b>formal</b> [2] 23/6 160/21	<b>full</b> [8] 1/23 4/2 5/11 95/4 109/9 170/16 170/16 170/18			
<b>formally</b> [3] 3/20 46/6 87/9	<b>fully</b> [1] 63/7			
<b>format</b> [2] 172/9 178/9	<b>function</b> [4] 127/25 186/22 186/23 190/21			
<b>former</b> [3] 6/1 33/15 34/20	<b>functions</b> [2] 42/15 181/23			
<b>forms</b> [3] 43/6 43/9 140/25	<b>fund</b> [1] 126/16			
<b>forth</b> [3] 36/4 62/10 184/1	<b>fundamental</b> [1] 96/14			
<b>forward</b> [6] 4/5 34/10 69/25 108/11 112/9	<b>fundamentally</b> [2] 76/3 137/8			

<b>G</b>	24/4 30/13 38/10 41/6 70/10 70/12 107/24 107/24 131/10 139/9 139/10 147/24 147/25 149/7 163/12 163/13 186/3 186/9	<b>hand [6]</b> 46/2 61/16 106/18 114/18 114/20 142/13 <b>handed [1]</b> 6/17 <b>handful [2]</b> 75/16 102/24 <b>handle [1]</b> 11/8 <b>handling [2]</b> 48/5 48/6 <b>hands [3]</b> 60/11 101/25 102/9 <b>Hang [1]</b> 116/12 <b>happen [16]</b> 53/24 72/4 74/21 76/2 93/11 93/13 95/24 99/21 118/6 139/2 156/2 162/9 168/10 171/22 178/5 185/6 <b>happened [16]</b> 11/21 23/19 40/7 49/16 49/23 50/24 60/9 83/9 96/15 106/24 109/16 112/2 120/14 122/1 130/5 151/2 <b>happening [14]</b> 31/14 49/19 54/1 80/4 82/8 82/10 123/4 130/7 139/16 158/2 178/18 178/18 183/14 188/22 <b>happens [5]</b> 33/7 36/19 95/5 185/11 192/14 <b>happy [2]</b> 22/6 154/12 <b>hard [26]</b> 17/3 31/4 37/2 37/14 40/16 40/19 42/7 44/5 66/23 92/7 92/22 95/5 95/25 105/14 125/23 132/24 133/1 138/4 140/20 147/11 156/14 164/20 165/6 174/13 190/8 192/2 <b>harder [2]</b> 120/4 166/15 <b>hardly [2]</b> 188/17 189/25 <b>hardship [1]</b> 162/21 <b>hare [1]</b> 111/19 <b>harm [2]</b> 21/7 21/11 <b>harmed [1]</b> 50/11 <b>harmonious [1]</b> 34/16 <b>harms [3]</b> 11/9 145/18 164/3 <b>has [43]</b> 4/7 4/16 5/19 5/23 6/19 9/9 19/8 19/10 19/14 29/4 29/7 30/3 30/19 30/21 38/25 41/16 56/19 57/6 64/12 64/20 73/1 78/19 78/20 82/14 87/3 87/21 94/17 95/6	97/7 103/18 119/10 129/25 137/15 150/14 151/17 154/8 176/4 178/14 183/15 183/19 184/15 186/16 193/2 <b>hasn't [1]</b> 19/6 <b>hat [1]</b> 97/9 <b>hatched [1]</b> 181/1 <b>have [238]</b> <b>haven't [4]</b> 9/7 54/12 86/10 93/6 <b>having [18]</b> 2/9 21/8 38/17 48/13 90/17 97/12 112/10 123/8 125/7 127/19 139/23 147/18 154/9 168/6 172/10 178/18 179/14 186/12 <b>he [84]</b> 6/6 6/7 26/6 26/8 30/25 32/11 36/11 36/25 37/2 37/3 37/4 37/17 43/4 43/15 43/18 43/22 45/3 45/7 45/7 45/10 45/10 45/11 45/12 46/22 48/6 60/4 61/14 67/14 79/25 90/18 90/19 90/20 90/21 91/16 99/5 99/5 99/7 99/7 100/8 102/21 104/20 107/24 109/25 110/1 113/4 122/3 126/19 130/8 145/25 146/1 146/2 147/14 147/16 148/19 149/21 155/11 155/12 160/6 160/6 160/6 160/14 172/13 172/17 173/3 173/3 173/7 173/10 173/11 173/13 173/17 175/20 175/21 175/21 178/15 182/15 183/19 183/23 183/24 184/14 191/11 192/1 192/9 193/13 193/23 <b>he'd [2]</b> 41/21 192/5 <b>he's [11]</b> 32/11 76/19 126/15 126/17 127/8 148/18 149/24 173/12 180/16 191/11 191/11 <b>head [4]</b> 37/17 125/24 167/6 172/4 <b>heads [1]</b> 155/1 <b>headwinds [1]</b> 16/5 <b>health [49]</b> 21/2 21/3 21/4 21/10 26/5 28/8 28/16 28/17 36/7 36/24 37/1 37/1 46/7 47/15 48/25 55/22 56/6 58/17 60/4 62/24 63/2 77/1 77/3 97/16 98/7 102/22 104/19 120/4 127/19 139/14 140/17 140/22 141/9	149/22 151/11 151/12 151/13 151/16 154/13 156/25 158/3 158/20 171/20 187/12 189/9 190/8 191/7 193/7 193/17 <b>Health Secretary [5]</b> 36/24 37/1 37/1 62/24 63/2 <b>healthcare [5]</b> 3/1 16/13 16/16 22/9 22/10 <b>healthy [1]</b> 32/3 <b>hear [3]</b> 25/1 176/24 183/12 <b>heard [6]</b> 20/21 22/11 22/13 56/20 71/17 168/17 <b>hearing [9]</b> 1/7 2/17 18/7 18/9 18/11 98/13 134/7 137/11 194/14 <b>hearings [1]</b> 1/13 <b>hears [1]</b> 56/6 <b>hearsay [1]</b> 193/2 <b>heart [9]</b> 24/16 33/18 42/3 43/21 88/5 104/17 104/17 163/9 169/15 <b>heavens [1]</b> 139/1 <b>heavily [1]</b> 94/15 <b>heavy [1]</b> 17/14 <b>heightened [1]</b> 85/13 <b>held [1]</b> 187/9 <b>Helen [13]</b> 33/14 33/19 119/20 153/1 163/7 163/21 163/23 172/24 173/16 173/22 174/16 186/1 186/11 <b>Helen MacNamara [11]</b> 33/14 33/19 119/20 153/1 163/7 172/24 173/16 173/22 174/16 186/1 186/11 <b>help [13]</b> 3/5 3/8 3/8 10/5 13/6 16/10 27/14 150/9 152/24 156/7 162/1 165/4 177/17 <b>helped [3]</b> 3/3 86/6 141/16 <b>helpful [1]</b> 51/1 <b>helpline [1]</b> 164/8 <b>hence [1]</b> 68/14 <b>her [8]</b> 27/5 27/16 78/16 159/17 163/7 163/11 186/11 186/14 <b>Her Majesty's [2]</b> 27/5 27/16 <b>herd [14]</b> 25/11 108/9 108/25 109/4 109/6 109/10 109/24 110/6 110/10 110/18 111/8 120/8 144/10 150/22 <b>herd immunity [13]</b> 25/11 108/9 109/4
<b>government... [56]</b> 69/19 71/2 72/13 73/23 74/17 75/18 78/23 79/6 80/3 84/17 84/20 84/21 85/15 88/5 90/1 90/4 91/3 103/20 120/3 133/22 134/1 136/5 138/23 142/1 143/4 143/11 144/7 145/11 147/8 150/4 152/17 153/16 157/25 158/7 158/24 160/2 160/23 163/9 165/16 165/18 165/21 171/18 180/8 180/21 181/3 181/6 181/19 181/24 182/5 184/24 186/17 186/19 186/23 190/20 190/22 190/24 <b>government's [10]</b> 12/11 25/17 39/13 39/14 76/4 76/7 118/21 137/18 160/20 166/8 <b>governmental [2]</b> 14/12 64/4 <b>governments [3]</b> 152/6 155/1 187/19 <b>granted [1]</b> 55/17 <b>granular [1]</b> 142/15 <b>graph [11]</b> 105/20 106/22 107/15 107/18 114/9 114/18 114/20 115/10 115/18 116/12 123/19 <b>graphs [3]</b> 115/1 116/8 125/18 <b>grasp [1]</b> 111/15 <b>grateful [7]</b> 2/25 3/13 55/14 77/1 77/3 161/16 173/13 <b>grave [1]</b> 36/12 <b>great [15]</b> 20/4 20/21 23/20 26/21 29/4 31/16 31/16 34/15 63/3 125/6 142/5 151/17 166/17 176/3 190/11 <b>greater [7]</b> 14/17 18/16 21/6 50/20 168/2 168/6 181/15 <b>greatest [1]</b> 145/18 <b>green [1]</b> 149/16 <b>greetings [1]</b> 102/8 <b>grim [1]</b> 109/20 <b>grip [4]</b> 60/5 60/6 60/10 191/5 <b>grossly [1]</b> 52/18 <b>ground [2]</b> 151/13 158/9 <b>grounds [1]</b> 127/19 <b>group [19]</b> 23/13	24/4 30/13 38/10 41/6 70/10 70/12 107/24 107/24 131/10 139/9 139/10 147/24 147/25 149/7 163/12 163/13 186/3 186/9 <b>groups [6]</b> 153/19 162/25 164/21 165/5 166/2 177/10 <b>growing [1]</b> 62/4 <b>growth [2]</b> 137/19 137/25 <b>guaranteed [1]</b> 192/21 <b>guarantees [2]</b> 182/19 183/10 <b>guarantees/honest [1]</b> 182/19 <b>guess [1]</b> 51/7 <b>guidance [1]</b> 120/20 <b>guided [3]</b> 73/25 97/4 118/22 <b>gulf [7]</b> 169/4 170/4 170/8 170/20 170/25 171/4 171/6 <b>gulf war [7]</b> 169/4 170/4 170/8 170/20 170/25 171/4 171/6 <b>gunfire [1]</b> 37/15 <b>guy [1]</b> 44/7	<b>H</b> <b>had [235]</b> <b>hadn't [9]</b> 47/18 49/3 49/5 50/25 102/4 102/5 120/17 126/24 134/17 <b>half [14]</b> 35/11 35/23 37/12 58/25 59/4 59/5 81/2 81/7 81/21 82/1 83/2 83/4 87/17 178/7 <b>half term [3]</b> 82/1 83/2 83/4 <b>half-term [3]</b> 81/2 81/7 81/21 <b>Hall [1]</b> 34/20 <b>hammered [1]</b> 183/22 <b>Hammond [7]</b> 78/17 79/7 83/20 86/23 87/2 88/3 93/11 <b>Hammond's [3]</b> 82/17 86/6 86/6 <b>hancock [31]</b> 32/23 35/14 36/3 45/1 46/11 46/21 48/2 56/6 58/18 64/23 65/5 65/11 78/5 78/19 85/10 85/14 102/21 107/23 122/2 122/12 122/25 137/16 147/25 180/3 186/15 187/12 191/10 191/24 192/19 192/24 193/20 <b>Hancock's [1]</b> 180/16		

<b>H</b>	<b>HM [2]</b> 26/23 127/13	137/25 139/18 150/15	<b>I clocked [1]</b> 115/12	<b>I found [1]</b> 88/25
<b>herd immunity... [10]</b>	<b>HM Treasury [2]</b>	156/10 156/10 164/2	<b>I come [1]</b> 114/5	<b>I gave [3]</b> 103/1
109/6 109/10 109/24	26/23 127/13	165/20 165/20 169/10	<b>I comment [1]</b> 29/24	103/2 138/21
110/6 110/10 110/18	<b>HMG [1]</b> 103/15	189/9 190/9 190/9	<b>I could [10]</b> 34/9 48/9	<b>I get [3]</b> 9/11 72/7
111/8 120/8 144/10	<b>hold [3]</b> 125/8 155/25	<b>hugely [1]</b> 173/13	92/3 104/21 107/8	114/5
150/22	177/1	<b>human [16]</b> 30/9	139/5 152/19 157/9	<b>I go [1]</b> 102/14
<b>here [13]</b> 55/20 60/11	<b>holiday [1]</b> 81/12	31/15 49/11 49/11	169/23 178/25	<b>I going [1]</b> 90/24
75/20 80/21 121/25	<b>home [14]</b> 106/14	51/13 52/20 52/20	<b>I couldn't [15]</b> 25/25	<b>I got [3]</b> 86/7 169/18
126/15 126/21 127/8	125/3 133/18 134/15	56/8 56/8 59/23 59/23	48/6 55/4 55/10 68/10	170/16
127/18 141/5 148/16	135/8 141/14 143/17	87/4 87/4 138/22	84/4 86/8 89/4 99/19	<b>I had [26]</b> 11/15 16/4
176/15 180/23	145/21 145/23 145/24	139/19 188/25	100/24 100/24 134/10	19/21 22/7 51/7 62/24
<b>here's [3]</b> 49/16	146/2 146/14 146/15	<b>humanity [1]</b> 163/10	140/22 167/5 191/15	74/4 102/18 104/17
109/4 178/19	173/11	<b>hump [1]</b> 106/22	<b>I decided [2]</b> 42/19	109/18 118/2 118/4
<b>heroic [1]</b> 162/20	<b>Home Office [1]</b>	<b>hunch [1]</b> 134/9	175/3	128/25 132/20 134/9
<b>hidden [1]</b> 164/3	173/11	<b>hundred [2]</b> 54/15	<b>I described [1]</b> 169/7	136/24 137/6 139/4
<b>hierarchy [1]</b> 11/19	<b>homogeneous [1]</b>	102/24	<b>I did [15]</b> 4/4 24/8	139/5 139/6 143/7
<b>high [11]</b> 18/5 54/16	163/13	<b>hundreds [5]</b> 3/1	24/24 43/8 63/19	155/15 175/2 179/6
54/18 59/15 63/17	<b>honest [4]</b> 34/18 84/5	3/22 24/2 25/5 139/3	77/18 86/8 92/3 138/9	192/15 193/6
69/5 106/8 142/4	115/9 182/19	<b>hurt [1]</b> 169/10	138/20 156/20 157/4	<b>I happen [1]</b> 156/2
187/5 187/13 188/5	<b>honestly [1]</b> 63/16	<b>hymn [1]</b> 157/22	169/22 186/7 191/17	<b>I happened [1]</b> 83/9
<b>high-consequence [1]</b> 54/18	<b>honesty [1]</b> 141/21	<b>hyperbolic [1]</b> 38/4	<b>I didn't [15]</b> 10/24	<b>I have [8]</b> 16/1 18/6
<b>higher [2]</b> 63/16	<b>hope [5]</b> 3/4 79/2		25/2 34/5 58/6 73/19	115/15 128/8 143/20
139/19	81/10 129/10 152/4	<b>I</b>	73/21 77/12 98/11	177/3 181/9 191/9
<b>highest [3]</b> 15/9	<b>hoped [2]</b> 110/19	<b>I accept [1]</b> 133/19	98/11 102/10 137/6	<b>I haven't [2]</b> 9/7
42/11 163/4	132/12	<b>I actually [3]</b> 99/16	138/20 179/8 191/13	86/10
<b>highlighted [1]</b>	<b>hopeless [2]</b> 32/25	104/23 169/21	192/7	<b>I hope [4]</b> 79/2 81/10
117/21	153/5	<b>I agree [2]</b> 118/23	<b>I do [15]</b> 3/4 18/4	129/10 152/4
<b>highly [4]</b> 31/12	<b>hopes [1]</b> 150/12	140/3	18/5 19/5 32/3 33/7	<b>I identified [1]</b> 172/22
31/13 190/6 191/24	<b>hoping [1]</b> 85/17	<b>I agreed [1]</b> 182/3	62/20 64/9 64/10	<b>I interrupt [1]</b> 138/10
<b>him [28]</b> 32/12 35/18	<b>horizon [1]</b> 46/1	<b>I also [3]</b> 82/11 84/11	69/10 102/10 103/4	<b>I just [16]</b> 2/12 5/18
45/18 48/8 80/1 90/17	<b>horrific [1]</b> 188/18	192/11	116/13 142/11 155/10	8/15 13/15 50/1 61/2
97/14 122/24 126/20	<b>horrifying [1]</b> 84/4	<b>I always [2]</b> 148/22	<b>I don't [69]</b> 6/16 8/4	62/17 89/4 98/13
126/21 130/9 149/12	<b>horror [1]</b> 80/17	149/3	8/22 11/11 15/15	100/9 108/10 134/5
160/16 172/20 173/3	<b>horse [1]</b> 25/15	<b>I am [5]</b> 2/12 2/13	16/19 16/19 16/24	169/6 176/25 188/18
173/4 173/6 179/14	<b>Hospital [1]</b> 102/1	2/23 3/1 3/13	19/19 22/1 22/1 22/2	190/12
180/5 189/6 191/15	<b>hospitalisation [5]</b>	<b>I apologise [2]</b> 11/3	28/19 35/3 35/5 35/21	<b>I knew [2]</b> 65/14
192/1 192/6 192/7	49/8 52/17 57/7 71/9	83/17	41/21 44/6 45/21	179/7
192/11 192/21 193/24	97/17	<b>I appreciate [1]</b>	49/21 52/12 53/19	<b>I know [7]</b> 14/6 14/12
194/1	<b>hospitality [2]</b> 164/25	177/1	60/14 60/22 61/1 64/7	114/22 152/8 160/11
<b>himself [2]</b> 33/16	167/9	<b>I arguably [1]</b> 146/11	69/10 74/8 75/8 75/8	164/14 167/18
172/25	<b>hospitals [1]</b> 12/24	<b>I ask [1]</b> 9/9	86/21 86/21 87/8	<b>I listened [1]</b> 138/4
<b>hindsight [13]</b> 13/18	<b>host [1]</b> 122/19	<b>I asked [1]</b> 173/6	90/13 92/10 97/3	<b>I look [1]</b> 80/16
13/24 14/3 26/16	<b>hour [2]</b> 98/18 178/7	<b>I assume [1]</b> 129/15	97/22 97/23 100/14	<b>I looked [1]</b> 24/9
27/22 42/18 42/23	<b>hours [1]</b> 126/21	<b>I believe [6]</b> 4/4	100/17 108/4 108/7	<b>I made [2]</b> 183/24
91/24 91/24 98/12	<b>household [3]</b>	141/16 141/16 142/10	122/6 123/2 123/10	187/13
118/20 155/15 159/22	106/15 113/21 114/24	159/18 164/15	124/13 143/20 155/10	<b>I may [6]</b> 41/19 57/18
<b>his [40]</b> 1/6 6/6 19/8	<b>how [41]</b> 2/12 2/13	<b>I believed [1]</b> 103/3	162/18 163/21 168/9	67/10 120/23 149/15
19/10 19/11 19/14	3/13 18/17 29/14	<b>I bring [1]</b> 96/19	170/15 172/15 174/7	160/16
29/11 32/12 37/3	32/10 37/8 47/8 50/11	<b>I can [10]</b> 22/6 57/14	178/24 182/9 183/9	<b>I mean [11]</b> 58/6
37/10 45/2 45/7 45/9	52/8 54/7 56/3 61/4	57/14 63/16 82/4 97/3	184/8 184/10 184/21	64/12 80/16 104/2
67/6 77/4 89/8 99/6	61/23 66/5 68/10	109/13 130/4 167/7	185/6 185/12 186/7	109/13 111/18 123/6
99/7 100/19 101/1	69/18 85/1 87/2 89/24	170/24	186/8 189/18 193/4	126/2 138/20 146/18
107/24 119/19 121/16	104/7 107/10 109/6	<b>I can't [20]</b> 8/9 14/19	193/13 193/14 194/1	163/18
122/2 122/7 128/11	109/22 125/25 127/10	17/21 20/15 35/12	<b>I doubt [2]</b> 143/20	<b>I meant [2]</b> 65/14
148/17 159/12 172/16	133/5 138/13 140/6	54/24 57/11 64/7 74/9	157/10	181/25
173/13 173/19 173/19	140/14 141/3 145/25	82/4 82/4 88/10 97/3	<b>I emphasise [2]</b>	<b>I mention [1]</b> 10/9
174/3 182/7 182/16	154/10 158/24 162/14	100/17 101/19 130/4	33/23 91/24	<b>I might [4]</b> 34/11
191/12 192/16 192/22	163/10 164/14 177/10	130/13 141/21 172/3	<b>I even [1]</b> 108/4	108/5 122/15 137/11
193/2 193/8	179/8 183/25 190/6	172/3	<b>I felt [9]</b> 14/6 117/13	<b>I must [8]</b> 97/24
<b>hit [1]</b> 167/8	<b>however [5]</b> 7/2 26/9	<b>I certainly [13]</b> 4/24	120/13 137/8 139/4	97/25 97/25 98/5 98/6
<b>hitherto [1]</b> 85/15	45/7 104/10 188/6	45/16 46/3 67/21 68/9	146/22 157/6 178/22	98/8 140/3 186/8
<b>hitting [1]</b> 165/5	<b>huge [20]</b> 19/3 23/12	69/10 70/2 70/2 157/5	193/8	<b>I necessarily [1]</b>
	32/22 53/21 59/24	160/16 175/20 193/16	<b>I find [1]</b> 141/22	100/18
	63/11 111/20 125/20	193/16	<b>I follow [1]</b> 65/16	<b>I need [2]</b> 90/12

<b>I</b>	<b>I take [2]</b> 12/2 12/5	86/19 95/15 113/10	46/15 50/5 50/22	167/25 168/16 173/25
<b>I need... [1]</b> 127/14	<b>I talked [1]</b> 121/6	193/9 193/11	57/22 65/8 65/10	175/11 176/10 176/23
<b>I needed [2]</b> 129/9	<b>I think [275]</b>	<b>I went [1]</b> 89/1	66/13 75/23 84/5 89/6	177/5 177/13 178/24
129/10	<b>I thought [37]</b> 36/25	<b>I will [2]</b> 172/2 182/21	90/13 93/9 98/8 98/9	180/1 180/3 182/10
<b>I no [1]</b> 134/4	37/1 37/3 37/4 61/13	<b>I wish [1]</b> 1/10	99/15 99/17 120/22	183/23 185/15 186/13
<b>I notice [2]</b> 14/20	61/14 67/21 74/6	<b>I wonder [1]</b> 154/13	126/18 126/21 128/2	189/23
81/9	77/15 80/10 80/12	<b>I would [23]</b> 1/3	128/4 133/22 141/21	<b>IFR [1]</b> 71/9
<b>I now [2]</b> 103/7	83/11 84/5 84/8 97/21	11/18 14/25 16/5	154/10 155/14 174/22	<b>ignore [6]</b> 97/25 98/5
139/25	115/12 132/21 132/22	16/25 30/10 30/16	182/15 186/11 186/14	98/6 146/4 180/4
<b>I or [1]</b> 179/11	133/14 134/10 134/11	30/18 33/5 48/8 51/8	188/10 188/10 188/10	180/16
<b>I paid [1]</b> 65/19	135/1 138/22 138/24	60/3 97/3 97/4 142/11	188/12	<b>ill [3]</b> 13/11 87/17
<b>I pause [1]</b> 95/9	143/8 152/17 157/8	144/1 144/14 155/16	<b>idea [10]</b> 80/22 95/10	192/6
<b>I pay [1]</b> 163/23	179/9 190/15 191/6	155/17 177/25 178/6	109/23 121/10 140/6	<b>illness [2]</b> 73/24
<b>I point [1]</b> 10/4	191/9 191/17 191/17	178/21 184/21	140/9 140/11 160/19	181/5
<b>I put [1]</b> 63/18	191/18 191/19 192/8	<b>I wouldn't [2]</b> 121/9	176/24 181/8	<b>illustrative [1]</b> 103/12
<b>I rang [1]</b> 82/7	193/10	121/9	<b>ideally [1]</b> 155/11	<b>images [1]</b> 99/18
<b>I read [2]</b> 87/12	<b>I told [1]</b> 193/20	<b>I'd [14]</b> 9/18 11/20	<b>ideas [2]</b> 175/5 175/6	<b>imagination [1]</b>
149/15	<b>I took [5]</b> 61/14 81/12	33/3 61/16 79/23 92/9	<b>identified [6]</b> 75/17	101/2
<b>I really [3]</b> 49/16	133/20 137/12 138/4	99/9 102/15 102/16	75/21 85/19 154/6	<b>imagine [1]</b> 170/24
101/19 141/3	<b>I totally [1]</b> 188/12	102/20 123/8 137/5	172/22 174/19	<b>immediate [4]</b> 71/23
<b>I regret [2]</b> 169/11	<b>I tried [2]</b> 34/19 34/20	137/9 175/4	<b>identify [1]</b> 164/10	83/7 119/22 122/4
169/14	<b>I understand [3]</b> 2/22	<b>I'll [1]</b> 169/19	<b>identity [2]</b> 21/24	<b>immediately [3]</b>
<b>I reject [1]</b> 28/19	65/13 184/13	<b>I'm [100]</b> 2/16 2/17	22/14	24/16 63/10 153/8
<b>I relied [1]</b> 43/10	<b>I understood [3]</b>	2/18 8/10 10/15 11/12	<b>IDFAs [1]</b> 164/8	<b>immense [2]</b> 3/14
<b>I remember [14]</b>	66/18 74/3 149/23	11/20 14/19 16/24	<b>if [146]</b> 2/17 3/11	69/11
45/17 48/18 65/17	<b>I valued [1]</b> 42/21	20/15 20/17 23/5 30/3	4/19 4/22 6/6 6/14	<b>immunised [2]</b>
69/11 80/10 82/5 89/1	<b>I want [5]</b> 23/14	34/18 36/19 36/22	7/11 8/15 10/4 15/18	150/18 150/24
90/16 90/17 114/12	84/13 101/6 136/22	38/22 41/1 42/1 44/15	16/4 18/24 19/21 31/5	<b>immunity [15]</b> 25/11
115/9 115/10 122/15	187/13	46/15 48/10 53/12	32/17 34/11 34/14	95/6 108/9 108/25
131/20	<b>I wanted [16]</b> 67/22	53/22 54/9 54/10	34/18 35/20 35/23	109/4 109/6 109/10
<b>I repeat [1]</b> 191/9	69/15 102/13 102/13	54/11 57/18 58/9 63/4	36/17 37/15 37/23	109/24 110/6 110/10
<b>I said [12]</b> 33/7 50/5	130/9 146/24 146/24	63/13 63/16 64/13	37/23 40/7 40/18	110/18 111/8 120/8
60/17 72/17 74/9	147/3 159/9 171/10	64/18 65/13 72/20	41/19 42/25 43/9 51/6	144/10 150/22
98/12 100/17 100/19	176/17 176/22 176/23	73/21 74/9 75/5 82/25	51/7 53/6 53/12 55/5	<b>impact [28]</b> 29/12
104/16 129/1 139/3	176/24 182/4 185/24	83/21 86/14 89/23	55/14 55/21 56/5	33/20 51/5 77/7 96/11
157/2	<b>I was [86]</b> 19/25	90/1 90/11 90/16	56/20 57/4 57/18	100/2 103/10 106/17
<b>I saw [14]</b> 15/16 34/5	23/17 25/2 25/3 25/22	90/23 90/23 94/16	58/14 59/4 59/25 60/3	108/25 120/2 141/22
41/22 58/6 83/20	28/6 34/4 34/15 40/12	95/20 96/15 96/19	60/5 60/6 60/10 60/17	146/6 164/20 165/19
116/11 123/21 129/8	40/21 46/4 48/5 48/6	106/23 108/17 109/13	60/18 61/22 63/6	165/22 165/24 166/10
142/12 170/23 174/22	53/7 61/13 61/13	109/18 116/6 118/9	63/21 65/8 65/14	166/12 166/20 166/23
174/24 176/16 186/2	61/17 62/21 65/8	121/25 122/6 123/7	65/25 66/2 66/24	166/25 167/3 167/23
<b>I say [12]</b> 2/22 3/11	68/10 69/15 71/21	126/4 126/5 126/19	70/21 71/7 76/8 76/13	168/7 170/23 171/19
15/24 16/24 37/23	78/25 83/9 83/12	127/9 127/10 128/4	77/21 78/2 81/18 84/9	173/23 174/5
71/19 76/21 90/8	83/13 83/18 86/7 89/4	130/13 133/19 138/11	84/25 84/25 90/16	<b>impacted [1]</b> 56/16
99/18 115/15 158/13	92/6 92/22 95/10 97/5	138/20 141/5 143/23	90/23 91/6 92/4 92/5	<b>impacts [3]</b> 5/4
173/18	99/18 99/19 100/2	147/10 148/1 148/3	92/19 92/21 93/16	103/16 129/12
<b>I see [2]</b> 154/10	100/2 100/23 101/2	149/12 154/12 155/19	94/4 95/2 95/5 95/9	<b>impending [1]</b>
162/15	101/3 101/21 101/22	155/19 157/2 160/13	95/20 95/24 98/7	173/19
<b>I sensed [2]</b> 132/17	102/18 105/16 111/11	161/16 162/1 162/10	99/23 99/23 100/13	<b>impertinent [1]</b> 3/11
133/15	111/17 113/12 115/9	166/12 169/9 170/15	104/5 104/6 104/6	<b>implement [2]</b> 96/6
<b>I shall [1]</b> 44/17	116/6 116/7 116/7	172/9 176/25 180/23	105/15 106/3 106/5	96/9
<b>I should [9]</b> 23/5	119/1 123/3 123/3	183/23 185/11 187/23	106/9 107/8 107/11	<b>implementation [8]</b>
79/15 80/19 98/12	125/18 127/4 127/14	187/23 188/8 189/18	107/15 108/15 111/5	94/14 96/24 112/16
102/12 102/12 116/9	128/9 129/1 129/7	192/14 194/1 194/8	113/17 113/19 114/25	113/1 113/8 113/12
116/11 188/19	132/18 134/7 137/8	<b>I'm afraid [14]</b> 11/20	117/1 120/20 123/23	153/19 177/10
<b>I shouldn't [1]</b> 102/10	137/11 140/22 148/1	20/15 36/19 36/22	126/10 126/13 126/23	<b>implemented [3]</b>
<b>I sometimes [2]</b>	152/11 155/16 164/12	72/20 106/23 109/18	129/1 130/23 133/6	94/9 107/6 114/21
157/9 176/21	164/13 164/13 168/11	116/6 121/25 122/6	135/10 135/25 136/1	<b>implication [2]</b> 45/10
<b>I still [2]</b> 99/25	169/14 171/6 171/9	138/20 155/19 192/14	136/16 137/24 138/24	127/24
136/23	173/13 177/9 177/13	194/8	139/13 139/25 140/1	<b>implications [6]</b>
<b>I stuck [1]</b> 36/25	178/24 179/1 182/3	<b>I've [46]</b> 5/21 6/17 9/8	141/6 143/10 145/23	49/18 49/19 50/2
<b>I suppose [3]</b> 17/21	186/9 187/11 188/15	10/17 15/3 15/12 22/5	145/24 146/14 146/15	60/15 60/19 72/1
77/14 143/7	188/15 189/6	26/21 30/13 37/18	147/23 148/17 155/15	<b>imply [1]</b> 57/15
	<b>I wasn't [6]</b> 48/1	39/25 41/11 45/19	156/7 159/3 166/22	<b>importance [3]</b> 75/9



<b>I</b>	75/6 192/8	144/21	18/11 21/23 29/7 30/2	81/10
<b>importance... [2]</b> 100/7 117/21	<b>indeed [19]</b> 6/19 30/12 46/21 47/4	<b>initially [2]</b> 177/10 190/8	30/5 39/1 42/25 46/16 64/22 77/9 78/20 79/3	<b>interrupt [6]</b> 18/13 64/18 66/18 138/10 176/25 187/24
<b>important [18]</b> 4/22 4/22 9/12 13/16 14/2 28/24 33/1 38/10 62/20 64/2 64/20 66/25 75/6 75/7 96/13 98/5 148/25 157/24	76/24 77/10 78/18 85/22 92/12 101/25 106/23 121/22 129/1 130/8 142/25 169/11 171/16 172/8 193/25	<b>injury [1]</b> 5/2 <b>inner [1]</b> 163/12 <b>innermost [1]</b> 23/13 <b>innings' [1]</b> 39/4 <b>INQ000048313 [3]</b> 35/8 99/3 179/23 <b>INQ000048399 [3]</b> 108/16 111/6 139/22	81/10 81/11 82/15 96/12 100/4 109/6 112/17 121/10 122/2 125/1 129/10 137/15 141/10 142/25 144/4 156/11 172/3 174/19 184/16 185/25 186/17 195/5	<b>intervened [1]</b> 185/21 <b>intervention [6]</b> 105/7 105/23 105/24 106/7 121/12 124/5 <b>interventions [23]</b> 9/23 92/13 94/8 94/23 97/15 103/11 103/14 103/19 103/19 103/24 104/11 104/18 105/5 106/13 107/7 112/17 114/14 114/19 116/5 117/12 128/22 132/3 142/20
<b>importantly [1]</b> 159/19	<b>index [3]</b> 54/20 54/21 194/16	<b>INQ000056125 [1]</b> 58/13 <b>INQ000056137 [1]</b> 72/23 <b>INQ000056138 [1]</b> 74/14 <b>INQ000056158 [1]</b> 103/11 <b>INQ000056209 [1]</b> 114/9 <b>INQ000056213 [1]</b> 135/3 <b>INQ000056216 [1]</b> 85/5 <b>INQ000056217 [1]</b> 93/15 <b>INQ000056226 [1]</b> 56/2 <b>INQ000056227 [1]</b> 78/2 <b>INQ000094215 [1]</b> 147/23 <b>INQ000136734 [1]</b> 55/11 <b>INQ000136750 [1]</b> 91/2 <b>INQ000146558 [1]</b> 68/13 <b>INQ000146563 [1]</b> 79/5 <b>INQ000146636 [2]</b> 89/7 128/10 <b>INQ000182331 [1]</b> 86/22 <b>INQ000183889 [1]</b> 123/15 <b>INQ000236371 [1]</b> 70/8 <b>INQ000255836 [1]</b> 2/2 <b>INQ000265619 [1]</b> 5/25 <b>INQ000273872 [1]</b> 126/11 <b>INQ000273901 [2]</b> 38/18 147/13 <b>INQ000303245 [2]</b> 37/5 182/8 <b>inquiry [53]</b> 1/6 1/8 1/10 1/11 1/14 1/21 2/13 3/5 3/13 4/1 4/3 5/5 6/7 6/12 6/19 7/6 8/25 13/16 17/13	<b>inquiry' [1]</b> 192/25 <b>Inquiry's [3]</b> 1/15 20/21 22/11 <b>insane [1]</b> 37/11 <b>inside [1]</b> 190/1 <b>insofar [2]</b> 65/19 159/23 <b>instance [5]</b> 48/1 81/17 101/24 159/4 164/2 <b>instant [2]</b> 187/18 187/19 <b>instead [4]</b> 90/4 90/6 156/21 173/1 <b>instinct [1]</b> 80/14 <b>instinctively [1]</b> 67/3 <b>instincts [2]</b> 45/19 118/25 <b>instituted [1]</b> 168/17 <b>institution [3]</b> 4/1 4/2 5/6 <b>institutional [1]</b> 72/10 <b>instruction [1]</b> 145/21 <b>instructions [1]</b> 48/8 <b>insufficient [3]</b> 61/12 159/14 161/9 <b>integral [1]</b> 159/20 <b>integrated [1]</b> 159/25 <b>intellectually [2]</b> 93/10 191/11 <b>intended [1]</b> 38/2 <b>intensely [1]</b> 66/2 <b>intention [1]</b> 3/18 <b>interest [3]</b> 21/10 29/8 29/10 <b>interested [1]</b> 177/4 <b>interesting [1]</b> 142/14 <b>interests [4]</b> 21/16 151/5 151/7 172/6 <b>Intergovernmental [1]</b> 154/20 <b>interlocutors [1]</b> 41/18 <b>International [2]</b> 55/23 59/13 <b>internecine [2]</b> 176/9 176/15 <b>interpretation [1]</b> 120/11 <b>interrogations [1]</b>	<b>interview [1]</b> 110/22 <b>intimate [2]</b> 50/9 188/9 <b>into [37]</b> 11/12 12/24 17/5 19/9 30/5 40/4 46/3 52/25 63/12 63/12 63/12 85/14 94/20 95/24 97/11 99/8 117/2 125/15 126/14 139/19 142/20 144/24 148/24 158/20 163/5 164/2 164/5 164/8 165/7 166/13 168/12 170/2 177/15 178/15 180/1 183/5 189/11 <b>intolerable [1]</b> 115/11 <b>introduce [3]</b> 13/8 13/10 120/5 <b>intuitively [2]</b> 66/24 168/10 <b>invite [1]</b> 160/5 <b>invited [6]</b> 2/6 78/13 153/25 160/15 160/20 161/4 <b>involve [1]</b> 80/23 <b>involved [4]</b> 1/11 1/14 154/18 159/23 <b>involvement [1]</b> 47/11 <b>Ireland [1]</b> 152/14 <b>irrationally [1]</b> 75/25 <b>irrelevant [2]</b> 19/15 73/2 <b>irrespective [1]</b> 16/5 <b>irrevocably [1]</b> 75/3 <b>is [384]</b> <b>ISFAs [1]</b> 164/8 <b>isn't [9]</b> 14/1 32/19 38/3 55/2 107/4 134/23 149/11 167/1 168/8 <b>isolate [4]</b> 52/22 53/5 74/5 93/2 <b>isolation [6]</b> 106/15

<b>I</b>	193/5 <b>Italy [12]</b> 14/22 15/13 79/8 79/10 80/9 80/11 81/6 85/12 90/14 99/19 112/2 144/19 <b>itemise [1]</b> 11/19 <b>its [24]</b> 1/16 2/3 4/8 4/17 4/20 5/1 5/6 7/12 8/20 27/1 39/15 39/15 39/16 45/3 51/19 52/25 84/21 87/6 94/18 108/21 144/12 151/15 166/12 191/4 <b>itself [8]</b> 25/2 47/8 79/20 88/1 91/16 130/22 166/24 181/22	101/19 103/13 103/22 105/25 108/21 117/22 119/13 124/1 126/23 130/12 131/11 136/13 138/13 139/8 140/15 141/12 145/10 152/25 156/4 156/14 161/10 163/1 165/24 169/25 171/17 175/11 176/3 177/3 179/13 181/11 182/10 184/16 185/4 187/23 192/18 194/6 195/3 <b>Johnson's [1]</b> 1/5 <b>joined [1]</b> 154/9 <b>Joint [2]</b> 154/1 154/2 <b>judgement [5]</b> 127/23 149/6 175/2 189/4 189/7 <b>July [14]</b> 2/6 2/10 33/21 34/24 41/23 146/8 146/8 147/20 147/25 148/7 150/8 191/23 191/25 193/19 <b>July 2021 [1]</b> 146/8 <b>jumped [1]</b> 112/8 <b>June [11]</b> 3/18 3/21 7/20 8/14 52/11 107/13 150/13 170/6 170/18 171/21 191/22 <b>June 2020 [3]</b> 7/20 8/14 171/21 <b>June 2021 [1]</b> 170/6 <b>just [97]</b> 2/12 3/16 5/1 5/18 6/10 8/15 11/5 13/15 13/24 16/12 18/8 20/16 28/7 28/14 31/22 35/22 36/19 36/22 37/11 38/14 38/22 39/24 49/2 50/1 52/13 54/4 60/10 61/2 62/17 66/3 66/5 66/24 67/20 72/19 73/4 73/22 75/21 78/2 80/16 81/1 84/4 87/20 88/7 89/4 93/21 95/1 98/13 98/18 99/10 99/14 99/15 100/9 108/10 108/15 108/21 109/5 110/9 111/5 112/14 117/14 118/21 121/10 125/21 126/14 126/19 126/21 127/15 130/24 133/9 134/4 134/5 135/25 136/1 137/13 138/12 139/14 142/25 147/23 154/15 154/21 154/24 155/19 169/6 172/10 176/13 176/25 177/13 179/1 180/4 180/19 182/10 183/24 185/11 188/2 188/18 190/12 192/14	<b>justified [1]</b> 189/2 <b>K</b> <b>Katharine [7]</b> 78/17 79/7 82/17 83/20 86/5 86/6 93/11 <b>Katharine Hammond [4]</b> 78/17 79/7 83/20 93/11 <b>Katharine Hammond's [2]</b> 82/17 86/6 <b>keen [2]</b> 145/16 168/15 <b>keep [9]</b> 33/11 33/12 45/18 48/8 95/20 95/22 110/16 117/10 192/24 <b>keeping [1]</b> 145/17 <b>Keith [23]</b> 1/3 2/11 3/12 4/4 15/15 17/25 22/17 26/24 41/19 44/22 46/16 51/8 54/23 83/8 83/17 98/16 99/1 99/14 125/25 145/2 145/9 172/2 177/1 <b>Kemi [3]</b> 168/18 171/17 171/23 <b>Kemi Badenoch [3]</b> 168/18 171/17 171/23 <b>kept [3]</b> 44/4 68/25 175/17 <b>key [6]</b> 6/19 70/23 114/4 127/15 144/16 163/20 <b>Khan [3]</b> 160/14 161/7 161/17 <b>kill [1]</b> 77/11 <b>killed [1]</b> 32/22 <b>killing [1]</b> 128/14 <b>kind [13]</b> 27/20 30/7 57/16 113/19 138/16 138/25 141/24 156/18 177/6 177/13 185/9 187/16 187/18 <b>kindly [1]</b> 8/11 <b>kinds [1]</b> 181/5 <b>Kingdom [26]</b> 4/10 14/18 15/8 15/14 16/15 49/7 52/22 52/25 58/19 61/7 75/3 76/9 76/10 87/5 93/19 93/22 151/10 152/2 154/25 155/25 157/17 157/25 158/3 158/7 158/23 160/22 <b>Kingdom's [1]</b> 151/7 <b>knew [12]</b> 11/15 53/13 62/2 64/2 65/14 71/24 117/1 120/15 120/15 149/3 179/7 190/25 <b>knocking [1]</b> 63/5	<b>know [157]</b> 2/2 8/2 8/4 10/10 10/15 11/18 14/6 14/12 14/12 16/19 16/19 16/24 18/17 18/17 22/2 23/14 28/25 29/4 38/17 44/6 45/18 46/2 47/20 47/23 48/19 51/9 52/11 53/9 53/22 54/5 55/2 58/8 58/9 60/9 60/11 61/15 62/21 63/3 63/25 63/25 64/7 65/3 66/13 69/13 69/14 69/16 70/11 80/11 80/15 80/16 80/16 81/9 81/11 83/19 87/8 89/2 90/12 97/10 98/13 100/20 100/23 100/24 101/2 101/19 101/23 102/3 102/9 102/17 102/25 103/4 104/3 104/15 105/16 107/8 107/9 108/6 110/2 111/20 113/13 113/17 114/7 114/7 114/22 118/22 119/3 123/4 123/6 124/13 125/21 125/25 126/6 126/6 130/7 132/21 133/5 133/19 133/22 133/24 134/10 134/11 134/13 137/4 137/6 139/3 140/23 141/4 141/5 141/6 143/6 143/8 143/20 144/1 146/21 146/25 149/25 150/11 152/6 152/8 152/12 152/21 152/22 155/19 156/6 156/9 158/12 160/8 160/11 160/18 161/19 161/20 163/23 164/13 164/14 164/17 164/22 165/1 166/13 167/17 167/18 171/9 171/22 174/16 176/14 178/22 179/5 179/7 179/8 179/21 184/12 184/14 184/23 186/12 189/10 190/6 190/12 192/7 193/15 <b>knowing [1]</b> 178/15 <b>knowledge [4]</b> 14/24 59/21 80/6 174/11 <b>known [10]</b> 53/1 53/2 63/7 63/20 72/13 84/25 94/16 145/10 169/2 181/11 <b>knows [1]</b> 26/6 <b>Korea [1]</b> 62/3
<b>J</b>	<b>Jan [1]</b> 70/5 <b>January [34]</b> 6/21 7/19 8/13 12/11 44/24 45/2 45/3 45/5 45/6 45/9 45/16 45/24 46/6 46/17 46/22 46/23 47/8 47/23 47/24 48/17 49/5 49/12 52/17 54/11 55/11 56/1 56/25 58/12 58/21 61/21 64/24 65/7 85/19 154/21 <b>January 2020 [2]</b> 6/21 8/13 <b>January 2022 [1]</b> 154/21 <b>Japan [2]</b> 49/6 62/3 <b>Javid [1]</b> 19/10 <b>Jaws [1]</b> 126/17 <b>job [23]</b> 1/16 21/13 24/11 33/5 33/9 33/13 35/14 111/20 127/3 136/21 138/22 155/12 157/9 163/24 173/9 174/9 182/18 183/14 189/2 189/5 190/13 191/10 192/9 <b>jobs [3]</b> 32/23 164/23 176/7 <b>John [1]</b> 140/5 <b>Johnson [89]</b> 1/19 1/20 1/24 1/25 2/5 2/15 3/16 4/14 5/23 9/9 9/15 9/21 10/25 12/7 20/12 20/22 22/15 22/18 28/10 33/4 35/22 38/15 42/7 43/24 44/23 54/11 55/12 56/3 61/4 62/7 65/12 67/14 68/13 68/25 70/13 72/25 74/12 74/22 76/25 78/3 79/10 80/2 81/18 82/21 83/16 85/7 88/20 91/25 92/18 95/9 96/19 99/2	<b>J</b>	<b>L</b>	
<b>isolation... [5]</b> 106/15 113/18 113/21 114/23 114/24 <b>issue [36]</b> 9/9 10/20 17/2 20/24 24/16 40/15 47/6 47/10 48/20 50/4 59/19 64/8 65/10 71/1 95/14 96/4 99/17 129/18 136/14 141/10 148/22 151/14 156/10 156/10 158/24 159/1 159/2 162/24 164/13 164/18 169/24 171/16 175/3 175/22 178/12 191/5 <b>issues [16]</b> 18/18 22/9 25/18 26/18 43/6 51/19 73/3 90/22 105/13 125/7 125/9 129/23 156/11 163/2 172/12 176/8 <b>it [545]</b> <b>It'd [1]</b> 79/22 <b>it'll [1]</b> 99/7 <b>it's [124]</b> 1/8 2/2 3/11 4/24 8/5 9/12 12/7 13/16 13/17 14/2 18/5 18/8 18/14 20/10 21/5 23/6 26/22 29/19 30/6 32/11 33/4 36/19 36/19 36/22 37/14 38/2 38/22 41/10 45/22 46/15 47/1 47/25 50/18 53/25 59/8 62/20 65/12 65/17 67/4 68/8 70/10 70/11 70/15 71/14 73/6 78/9 78/12 80/1 84/9 85/6 86/2 86/3 86/11 87/1 87/7 87/12 88/12 89/8 89/24 90/14 91/7 93/5 93/9 93/12 96/14 96/14 96/14 96/15 97/9 98/18 99/5 99/12 99/25 101/21 102/14 103/11 104/3 104/23 104/25 107/4 107/16 108/7 108/16 109/1 111/22 111/24 119/6 119/6 119/16 119/25 120/10 122/6 128/23 128/23 129/6 138/12 139/14 139/23 141/3 147/3 152/8 155/15 156/10 162/12 165/9 166/5 168/14 170/9 170/9 170/20 170/22 171/24 171/25 172/1 172/2 174/18 178/11 179/25 181/14 185/5 187/16 187/18 188/25	<b>labouring [1]</b> 176/3 <b>lack [4]</b> 38/14 39/5			

<b>L</b>	52/16 53/1 68/7 91/5 102/5 103/5 113/13 119/8 119/9	<b>lightbulb [2]</b> 57/8 69/19	<b>lockdown [57]</b> 9/22 12/18 16/21 20/3 20/9 20/11 20/16 20/24 26/13 27/11 40/3 92/10 92/11 92/14 92/16 95/25 106/11 106/20 122/4 125/2 125/14 125/16 127/22 130/18 131/8 133/24 133/25 134/19 136/17 138/18 141/14 142/10 144/5 144/13 145/11 145/12 145/18 146/6 146/19 148/3 148/24 148/25 149/19 150/7 164/21 164/23 165/4 165/5 165/8 165/11 165/14 165/19 166/24 167/4 167/23 168/6 168/12	53/6 55/2 56/5 60/3 60/11 70/2 80/16 86/5 90/13 93/16 95/2 95/3 106/9 108/15 111/19 117/1 120/20 123/12 126/11 135/10 156/12 156/17 167/8 175/20 177/18 185/15
<b>lack... [2]</b> 39/7 192/4	<b>leave [6]</b> 2/12 2/17 2/19 2/20 2/22 18/6	<b>like [32]</b> 1/3 9/18 21/1 31/15 35/25 38/21 39/7 46/1 49/25 50/25 51/3 56/16 57/21 67/10 67/15 70/3 76/2 79/23 84/6 90/13 99/7 99/10 104/2 129/1 142/11 149/21 156/10 156/17 177/14 181/7 185/12 186/19	<b>looked [6]</b> 24/9 85/11 121/24 139/12 167/18 172/7	
<b>lacked [1]</b> 144/16	<b>lecturing [1]</b> 147/8	<b>likelihood [3]</b> 77/14 97/16 146/3	<b>looking [25]</b> 9/19 25/15 31/11 34/14 39/22 60/15 61/20 85/20 85/23 86/20 90/11 109/14 114/12 115/10 116/8 116/14 123/3 125/18 132/20 133/13 146/8 150/14 152/15 177/9 177/9	
<b>Lady [25]</b> 1/17 1/19 2/12 6/11 12/10 12/21 15/8 22/2 29/5 37/25 43/1 44/15 52/15 56/19 65/13 86/11 119/17 138/11 139/24 165/13 173/18 177/18 185/21 194/4 194/12	<b>led [5]</b> 14/16 102/20 171/17 173/19 173/22	<b>likely [11]</b> 13/23 72/4 73/8 86/24 93/12 96/8 105/22 120/2 134/25 159/15 167/2	<b>looks [4]</b> 8/4 86/24 88/9 89/17	
<b>Lancaster [2]</b> 155/5 156/19	<b>lee [3]</b> 99/3 126/13 140/5	<b>limit [1]</b> 96/23	<b>Lord [1]</b> 172/13	
<b>land [5]</b> 18/17 91/11 128/8 135/21 152/19	<b>Lee Cain [2]</b> 99/3 126/13	<b>limited [6]</b> 49/11 56/15 76/15 93/21 152/11 166/3	<b>Lord Sedwill [1]</b> 172/13	
<b>language [3]</b> 30/11 30/17 169/12	<b>left [5]</b> 5/1 5/3 68/8 75/4 180/12	<b>line [9]</b> 39/6 40/17 100/8 115/1 115/1 115/23 171/7 182/9 182/9	<b>lose [5]</b> 43/16 43/19 43/23 95/19 109/19	
<b>large [11]</b> 10/8 19/5 58/23 59/9 73/1 77/7 106/14 109/19 128/15 137/7 167/13	<b>legal [2]</b> 125/24 136/8	<b>lines [3]</b> 73/22 105/25 116/1	<b>losing [1]</b> 70/20	
<b>largely [1]</b> 19/15	<b>legislation [2]</b> 91/22 151/11	<b>linguistic [1]</b> 29/9	<b>loss [5]</b> 2/14 2/24 4/15 4/25 94/6	
<b>last [15]</b> 1/5 8/8 28/13 35/24 39/6 93/19 93/24 111/12 114/2 136/25 137/1 146/11 149/7 160/18 192/16	<b>legitimate [2]</b> 154/16 154/17	<b>listened [1]</b> 138/4	<b>losses [1]</b> 15/1	
<b>lasting [1]</b> 99/24	<b>leisure [1]</b> 131/25	<b>listening [2]</b> 69/2 116/6	<b>lost [7]</b> 11/6 43/13 56/22 69/23 84/16 173/3 173/5	
<b>late [10]</b> 19/10 27/11 47/8 52/5 52/10 52/10 109/10 120/10 144/6 144/8	<b>length [1]</b> 20/4	<b>Lister [2]</b> 70/18 122/18	<b>lot [31]</b> 24/10 26/6 30/11 30/21 30/23 31/12 45/24 53/20 53/21 53/22 64/12 66/22 77/19 77/24 82/15 104/18 110/12 119/8 122/22 141/1 142/15 146/21 147/5 154/10 160/13 164/15 164/25 166/13 184/25 185/2 188/20	
<b>later [26]</b> 8/14 9/19 18/16 18/25 20/20 29/18 31/2 46/4 50/4 55/8 55/9 74/12 76/21 82/11 90/19 92/16 102/3 102/7 104/23 105/14 146/14 155/2 168/13 170/6 170/7 170/14	<b>less [10]</b> 5/11 13/23 37/18 106/2 106/24 126/5 144/20 168/25 173/24 186/23	<b>literally [2]</b> 126/18 139/6	<b>lots [6]</b> 16/7 28/25 33/21 34/25 34/25 41/24	
<b>latterly [3]</b> 6/2 13/8 23/1	<b>lesser [1]</b> 21/6	<b>litigation [3]</b> 6/23 8/24 9/2	<b>loud [1]</b> 61/1	
<b>layperson [1]</b> 142/11	<b>lessons [1]</b> 42/9	<b>little [9]</b> 19/10 66/4 66/19 83/6 102/18 130/23 139/13 165/18 166/22	<b>loved [1]</b> 109/19	
<b>lead [9]</b> 1/21 120/3 183/23 186/17 186/19 189/8 189/9 190/21 195/5	<b>let [9]</b> 39/9 60/16 63/18 81/13 109/14 148/11 156/9 175/20 183/3	<b>lived [2]</b> 51/10 163/11	<b>loved [1]</b> 109/19	
<b>leader [2]</b> 2/8 189/1	<b>Let's [1]</b> 123/12	<b>livelihoods [1]</b> 128/8	<b>low [2]</b> 36/24 150/19	
<b>leaders [1]</b> 161/9	<b>letting [2]</b> 39/4 147/19	<b>Liverpool [6]</b> 161/3 162/7 162/11 162/17 162/19 162/19	<b>lower [6]</b> 13/11 15/10 135/23 143/15 143/16 165/1	
<b>leadership [10]</b> 13/22 38/20 39/6 39/7 117/22 127/25 161/18 162/13 176/8 184/5	<b>level [18]</b> 11/16 15/11 33/12 41/6 42/11 44/6 63/15 63/17 80/6 91/25 109/18 131/13 135/16 138/16 163/4 167/22 187/13 188/5	<b>lives [6]</b> 11/7 28/22 61/3 111/23 150/3 193/21	<b>luxury [1]</b> 134/5	
<b>leading [3]</b> 24/12 47/15 126/9	<b>life [17]</b> 3/3 4/15 4/19 4/25 14/8 36/20 94/6 110/14 110/14 119/2 119/5 138/9 138/22 139/20 142/6 142/7 142/8	<b>living [3]</b> 49/24 50/24 119/6		
<b>leak [2]</b> 153/8 160/1	<b>lifetimes [2]</b> 51/15 97/8	<b>load [3]</b> 32/17 32/17 33/10		
<b>leaking [1]</b> 156/24	<b>light [9]</b> 5/17 29/13 53/17 66/3 100/15 130/16 134/20 168/4 168/9	<b>loads [1]</b> 188/16		
<b>leaks [1]</b> 19/16		<b>lobbied [1]</b> 36/18		
<b>leap [1]</b> 101/18		<b>lobbying [1]</b> 37/20		
<b>learned [1]</b> 42/9		<b>local [5]</b> 13/12 160/2 161/9 161/10 162/13		
<b>least [11]</b> 20/18 45/8		<b>location [1]</b> 16/14		
		<b>lock [3]</b> 96/17 138/13 138/14		
		<b>Long Covid [10]</b> 169/2 169/8 169/21 170/8 170/10 170/14 170/21 170/22 170/24 171/13		
		<b>long-term [1]</b> 169/1		
		<b>longer [1]</b> 134/5		
		<b>look [39]</b> 5/5 10/4 18/15 20/20 24/8 24/24 25/9 29/18 39/8 40/7 44/23 50/5 50/22		



<b>M</b>	146/2 154/7 157/16 187/18 <b>meeting...</b> [63] 72/23 73/1 74/1 74/9 74/13 76/25 78/1 78/6 83/23 84/12 86/5 86/8 86/13 87/25 87/25 88/1 88/2 89/6 89/8 91/2 91/10 92/12 100/11 112/18 112/23 113/3 114/8 116/18 121/23 122/16 122/17 122/18 122/19 122/21 122/21 124/15 124/20 129/24 130/1 130/5 130/5 130/11 131/7 131/9 131/10 135/3 135/4 135/9 136/18 139/9 139/11 139/12 147/18 154/3 156/16 160/15 162/5 172/17 172/20 177/25 178/19 179/1 179/2 <b>meetings</b> [33] 23/7 23/8 23/8 23/9 23/13 27/8 27/9 28/17 34/17 95/3 121/17 122/16 122/22 124/4 151/23 153/24 153/24 155/6 155/8 155/25 156/21 156/24 160/5 163/20 176/18 176/22 177/23 178/3 178/4 178/15 178/16 180/3 180/4 <b>melting</b> [1] 126/15 <b>member</b> [3] 3/19 20/1 55/12 <b>members</b> [2] 167/14 168/4 <b>memo</b> [1] 120/2 <b>memory</b> [6] 49/25 60/12 65/9 80/8 120/11 160/15 <b>mention</b> [3] 10/9 106/10 167/18 <b>mentioned</b> [2] 57/22 138/12 <b>menu</b> [1] 90/25 <b>merely</b> [1] 140/9 <b>merits</b> [1] 192/3 <b>MERS</b> [2] 51/3 61/6 <b>message</b> [19] 10/7 10/13 83/20 99/2 99/9 99/11 99/22 118/1 118/6 123/6 123/7 146/15 152/17 154/19 156/13 157/7 157/24 159/10 181/17 <b>messages</b> [8] 99/20 107/23 132/19 148/9 148/20 152/19 157/16 182/7 <b>messaging</b> [12] 10/5 10/21 74/19 74/23 75/6 75/6 75/7 75/9	21/13 21/14 36/17 39/3 39/25 43/5 47/2 47/11 49/13 50/7 55/16 57/3 68/18 74/17 79/24 86/16 89/11 90/4 91/12 122/9 137/7 147/18 147/21 148/17 152/12 154/25 155/25 158/6 163/2 172/23 173/1 177/15 178/14 182/20 183/4 183/13 183/15 190/21 192/23 193/20 <b>ministerial</b> [11] 20/13 28/4 73/11 131/9 139/9 139/10 153/19 154/1 154/2 177/10 177/20 <b>ministers</b> [10] 23/9 23/18 28/5 42/16 53/4 70/4 152/13 156/1 156/17 156/22 <b>minorities</b> [1] 171/19 <b>minority</b> [2] 167/13 168/5 <b>minute</b> [2] 145/3 177/15 <b>minutes</b> [11] 24/5 24/14 24/14 24/22 24/25 25/5 27/18 28/10 73/1 112/23 167/1 <b>misapprehension</b> [1] 81/14 <b>misery</b> [1] 5/2 <b>misogynistic</b> [1] 29/12 <b>misogyny</b> [1] 176/8 <b>misread</b> [1] 149/11 <b>misrepresenting</b> [1] 155/22 <b>missed</b> [1] 91/8 <b>missing</b> [1] 8/2 <b>mistake</b> [5] 10/20 10/23 10/24 72/3 111/19 <b>mistakes</b> [8] 9/15 9/20 10/3 10/25 11/10 11/23 13/16 13/18 <b>misunderstood</b> [1] 187/24 <b>mitigated</b> [1] 115/3 <b>mitigation</b> [3] 105/23 105/24 120/8 <b>mixing</b> [1] 131/22 <b>mode</b> [3] 69/2 126/5 126/17 <b>model</b> [2] 186/17 186/20 <b>moderate</b> [2] 105/24 106/6 <b>modest</b> [1] 115/24 <b>module</b> [1] 9/21 <b>moment</b> [19] 8/8	41/1 44/15 54/6 69/20 80/1 85/6 85/25 88/2 98/16 107/3 110/7 114/4 121/22 124/22 172/11 180/19 181/3 194/4 <b>momentous</b> [4] 12/8 17/16 18/19 139/22 <b>Monday</b> [17] 3/21 20/5 20/6 82/1 91/11 113/20 124/10 125/4 132/3 134/15 134/19 135/5 135/9 137/12 139/11 139/12 143/18 <b>money</b> [7] 63/12 77/25 148/19 149/9 149/22 164/5 164/7 <b>month</b> [5] 47/6 48/9 48/23 76/21 137/5 <b>months</b> [6] 14/21 40/11 56/18 70/22 170/6 170/14 <b>mood</b> [3] 6/8 126/10 189/16 <b>more</b> [50] 3/16 3/16 16/18 19/25 22/17 24/8 25/2 32/20 38/10 50/25 69/25 102/12 105/18 106/7 106/24 113/14 113/22 117/16 119/22 120/5 121/3 121/20 124/8 124/9 125/20 126/4 132/16 132/19 133/15 136/2 141/23 142/1 142/15 144/7 147/15 148/19 151/20 152/7 152/11 155/17 157/9 159/4 159/6 159/19 168/6 178/2 179/22 181/5 183/15 188/8 <b>morning</b> [5] 98/20 114/6 121/6 139/11 177/23 <b>morphed</b> [1] 189/11 <b>mortality</b> [4] 59/2 59/7 59/20 73/10 <b>most</b> [12] 1/13 4/22 12/7 16/9 17/16 18/6 18/18 21/24 66/10 75/7 163/13 179/3 <b>motivate</b> [1] 31/4 <b>motivated</b> [1] 31/13 <b>mount</b> [1] 82/16 <b>mouth</b> [1] 25/16 <b>move</b> [7] 31/1 124/7 172/13 173/7 173/14 175/21 185/16 <b>moved</b> [2] 66/14 173/17 <b>moves</b> [1] 58/24 <b>moving</b> [7] 12/14 167/10 168/16 189/6 190/14 191/14 192/10	<b>MP</b> [2] 2/8 168/20 <b>Mr</b> [196] <b>Mr Burnham</b> [2] 161/7 162/4 <b>Mr Case</b> [1] 37/8 <b>Mr Case's</b> [1] 182/7 <b>Mr Cummings</b> [45] 19/14 22/21 23/10 32/7 32/21 33/16 35/9 35/24 37/9 42/8 43/2 67/6 70/9 71/3 83/14 99/3 100/14 107/25 119/19 121/16 122/7 122/20 122/24 126/13 129/25 153/1 153/1 153/7 173/15 173/20 175/14 175/16 175/17 179/13 179/24 180/6 180/14 180/20 184/4 185/25 187/4 189/17 192/3 192/17 193/2 <b>Mr Cummings'</b> [4] 29/9 119/21 125/11 179/25 <b>Mr Hancock</b> [21] 32/23 45/1 46/11 46/21 48/2 56/6 58/18 64/23 65/5 65/11 78/5 78/19 85/10 85/14 102/21 107/23 122/2 137/16 147/25 186/15 191/24 <b>Mr Javid</b> [1] 19/10 <b>Mr Johnson</b> [81] 1/25 2/5 2/15 3/16 4/14 5/23 9/9 9/15 9/21 10/25 12/7 20/12 20/22 22/15 22/18 28/10 33/4 35/22 38/15 42/7 43/24 44/23 55/12 56/3 61/4 62/7 65/12 67/14 68/13 68/25 70/13 72/25 74/12 74/22 76/25 78/3 79/10 80/2 81/18 85/7 88/20 91/25 95/9 96/19 99/2 101/19 103/13 103/22 105/25 108/21 117/22 119/13 124/1 126/23 130/12 131/11 136/13 138/13 139/8 140/15 141/12 145/10 152/25 156/4 156/14 161/10 163/1 165/24 169/25 171/17 175/11 176/3 177/3 179/13 181/11 182/10 184/16 185/4 187/23 192/18 194/6 <b>Mr Johnson's</b> [1] 1/5 <b>Mr Keith</b> [22] 1/3 2/11 3/12 4/4 15/15 17/25 22/17 26/24 41/19 44/22 46/16
----------	--	--	--	---

<b>M</b>	100/17 100/19 101/2 102/16 105/2 115/16 119/17 120/11 120/11 120/23 120/23 121/8 121/15 121/22 124/12 126/4 127/3 128/2 134/3 134/7 134/25 138/11 138/22 139/17 139/24 153/12 154/11 155/15 155/20 158/13 160/12 165/13 167/6 169/16 172/4 173/18 175/22 175/22 177/18 177/21 180/13 183/4 183/17 185/21 186/6 187/24 189/4 189/7 189/13 190/12 190/12 193/6 193/8 194/4 194/12	<b>necessary</b> [10] 110/3 116/19 128/22 131/17 141/2 141/15 141/25 144/5 164/4 165/9 <b>need</b> [52] 9/8 10/14 18/1 21/3 22/16 30/1 36/3 40/2 40/13 47/9 63/13 68/18 70/14 70/25 71/10 71/19 83/3 85/13 88/14 88/23 90/12 90/14 91/9 91/21 110/24 111/12 111/15 111/21 113/6 116/22 119/6 127/14 141/1 141/2 141/3 141/4 141/6 141/7 141/8 142/9 142/14 143/16 154/18 156/12 156/12 172/15 180/4 180/8 180/10 180/20 185/16 193/3 <b>needed</b> [33] 10/6 21/18 32/4 32/5 40/12 40/12 74/18 110/2 121/14 122/4 124/22 125/14 126/1 127/21 129/9 129/10 129/22 133/15 136/11 148/4 152/19 167/24 174/13 174/14 175/9 175/10 175/25 176/16 176/17 179/4 179/4 182/4 185/1 <b>needn't</b> [1] 135/25 <b>needs</b> [12] 29/6 42/14 125/1 148/19 154/15 156/11 164/1 164/19 166/1 168/25 178/1 178/13 <b>negligent</b> [2] 127/11 127/11 <b>negotiations</b> [1] 162/1 <b>NERVTAG</b> [2] 62/8 81/3 <b>network</b> [1] 55/25 <b>never</b> [16] 30/4 36/16 37/18 38/7 38/8 38/8 75/15 75/22 97/7 103/22 103/25 138/16 143/6 154/3 186/4 187/17 <b>nevertheless</b> [3] 62/1 81/7 144/5 <b>new</b> [9] 15/25 48/3 113/13 149/13 150/3 153/23 175/6 181/11 181/18 <b>news</b> [3] 10/12 46/10 81/6 <b>newspaper</b> [2] 129/25 130/6 <b>next</b> [4] 36/2 105/2 124/11 142/1	<b>NHS</b> [26] 14/9 18/2 28/21 110/14 110/15 111/22 114/14 115/2 115/4 119/23 120/2 125/9 129/20 130/17 132/24 137/20 137/21 138/8 138/24 139/2 148/5 148/8 149/20 150/2 158/14 193/21 <b>night</b> [4] 119/21 124/18 125/2 135/6 <b>NIHR</b> [1] 170/2 <b>nine</b> [2] 24/23 170/6 <b>nine months</b> [1] 170/6 <b>no</b> [120] 5/11 9/11 10/17 14/12 15/5 17/21 17/25 18/14 22/14 26/9 26/14 27/18 27/19 29/8 33/4 34/4 34/9 35/6 39/18 39/20 42/5 46/1 49/22 52/21 52/24 54/2 58/4 62/7 65/4 65/13 67/18 75/17 78/12 78/21 78/23 79/18 81/2 86/19 87/6 90/7 90/7 90/7 90/7 91/7 92/9 92/25 93/1 93/4 94/17 95/6 95/25 97/21 98/2 103/1 105/11 105/23 106/4 106/10 106/12 106/20 106/21 107/18 112/2 112/8 112/22 114/12 114/18 114/19 115/22 116/22 118/24 121/18 125/12 128/2 128/23 128/23 132/24 134/4 134/11 136/16 136/18 138/12 139/6 139/6 140/6 140/8 140/11 140/21 141/8 141/8 141/8 142/22 142/24 143/9 148/4 149/25 152/12 161/4 162/12 165/24 166/2 169/6 170/22 172/15 173/25 174/7 175/24 180/19 180/19 181/25 183/2 188/10 188/10 188/12 189/6 189/19 189/19 189/22 189/22 190/5 <b>No 10</b> [1] 183/2 <b>no one</b> [2] 121/18 173/25 <b>no10</b> [1] 180/3 <b>nobody</b> [4] 59/23 82/22 148/23 176/13 <b>nod</b> [1] 151/10 <b>non</b> [9] 9/23 55/25 92/13 97/15 104/17 131/24 134/14 139/14 167/9	<b>non-essential</b> [4] 55/25 131/24 134/14 167/9 <b>non-pharmaceutical</b> [4] 9/23 92/13 97/15 104/17 <b>non-public</b> [1] 139/14 <b>none</b> [3] 71/9 133/21 176/12 <b>nonsense</b> [2] 189/3 193/5 <b>nor</b> [3] 100/18 108/4 133/4 <b>normally</b> [1] 187/20 <b>Northern</b> [1] 152/14 <b>Northern Ireland</b> [1] 152/14 <b>not</b> [269] <b>notable</b> [1] 33/9 <b>note</b> [7] 55/11 57/1 80/10 82/17 87/20 89/17 103/16 <b>notebook</b> [1] 128/11 <b>notebooks</b> [1] 41/4 <b>noted</b> [1] 69/5 <b>notes</b> [7] 5/20 68/25 81/23 82/2 82/10 167/1 188/3 <b>nothing</b> [4] 53/25 126/7 139/6 156/10 <b>notice</b> [3] 14/20 81/9 159/14 <b>notion</b> [2] 94/23 97/20 <b>notwithstanding</b> [2] 77/22 170/12 <b>novel</b> [2] 46/7 127/7 <b>November</b> [4] 20/12 41/2 95/21 165/8 <b>November 2020</b> [1] 20/12 <b>now</b> [59] 4/13 11/19 25/18 38/17 42/23 44/23 48/25 53/22 62/6 68/7 68/10 70/16 71/1 71/4 71/7 71/10 75/3 77/10 77/18 80/2 80/7 80/8 80/18 87/5 88/17 88/23 93/14 93/25 94/19 98/10 103/7 104/10 107/22 107/22 120/10 120/14 121/2 124/6 126/4 131/23 138/6 139/25 150/3 151/3 159/9 164/19 169/9 169/20 171/3 172/5 172/10 172/12 178/21 179/3 182/13 183/22 186/7 187/18 193/1 <b>NPI</b> [1] 141/24 <b>NPIs</b> [17] 9/22 11/12 17/7 19/25 40/25 52/6
<b>Mr Keith...</b> [11] 51/8 54/23 83/8 98/16 99/1 99/14 125/25 145/2 145/9 172/2 177/1 <b>Mr Khan</b> [1] 161/17 <b>Mr Reynolds</b> [1] 173/21 <b>Mr Rotherham</b> [2] 161/8 161/16 <b>Mr Slack</b> [1] 107/25 <b>Mr Sunak</b> [1] 145/25 <b>Ms</b> [5] 86/23 87/2 88/3 158/17 159/17 <b>Ms Hammond</b> [3] 86/23 87/2 88/3 <b>Ms Sturgeon</b> [2] 158/17 159/17 <b>much</b> [37] 10/5 19/6 25/22 38/10 46/1 46/4 47/25 50/4 55/8 63/15 79/3 80/19 100/18 107/1 108/20 110/17 119/22 120/19 121/3 131/22 132/16 136/2 144/18 152/11 159/4 160/10 163/16 164/14 164/22 169/12 169/14 178/12 181/4 181/5 186/24 194/5 194/7 <b>multifarious</b> [1] 181/23 <b>multiple</b> [2] 124/4 182/11 <b>municipalities</b> [2] 79/10 79/13 <b>must</b> [27] 1/11 4/23 6/21 15/20 35/18 42/7 51/22 94/9 96/5 97/24 97/24 97/25 97/25 98/5 98/6 98/8 103/23 104/10 107/6 115/13 117/9 120/9 130/13 136/6 140/3 146/23 186/8 <b>mustn't</b> [3] 95/11 96/10 116/5 <b>my</b> [110] 1/4 1/17 1/19 2/12 5/21 6/11 9/7 10/4 12/10 12/21 14/24 15/8 22/2 28/22 29/5 33/5 33/9 33/13 34/8 34/13 35/5 37/25 38/5 41/2 43/1 43/12 44/15 45/19 45/19 46/15 47/19 48/7 48/19 52/15 56/19 57/12 57/13 58/10 64/1 65/9 65/13 65/17 70/3 72/17 73/21 74/6 74/10 76/22 80/8 80/13 80/14 82/6 86/11 89/2 95/22	<b>my Lady</b> [24] 1/17 1/19 2/12 6/11 12/10 12/21 15/8 22/2 29/5 37/25 43/1 44/15 52/15 56/19 65/13 86/11 119/17 139/24 165/13 173/18 177/18 185/21 194/4 194/12 <b>myself</b> [3] 97/22 97/23 157/10 <b>N</b> <b>nakedly</b> [2] 157/1 162/8 <b>name</b> [2] 1/23 70/12 <b>naming</b> [1] 22/2 <b>narcissism</b> [2] 43/20 179/15 <b>nasty</b> [1] 143/22 <b>nation</b> [2] 145/20 151/15 <b>national</b> [10] 46/20 47/21 48/20 50/4 160/22 165/7 166/24 167/3 168/12 173/12 <b>nationals</b> [2] 55/18 59/17 <b>nations</b> [3] 158/2 158/9 158/22 <b>natural</b> [2] 10/10 51/13 <b>naturally</b> [3] 20/23 41/7 190/11 <b>nature</b> [16] 17/14 18/15 29/9 36/22 57/9 58/14 62/16 84/18 103/24 109/9 137/19 137/24 142/20 143/12 162/12 188/25 <b>near</b> [2] 90/5 183/9 <b>nearly</b> [3] 32/22 33/3 77/23 <b>necessarily</b> [7] 19/25 49/21 57/15 76/14 100/18 177/25 191/16			

<b>N</b>	<b>obsession [1]</b> 35/15	<b>offs [1]</b> 19/21	190/24 191/2	132/10 133/10 135/6
<b>NPIs... [11]</b> 66/13	<b>obvious [12]</b> 12/7	<b>often [5]</b> 28/13 67/4	<b>operation [9]</b> 29/5	136/15 136/19 137/22
76/22 80/22 80/23	20/10 21/5 24/1 41/10	117/16 117/16 178/5	31/9 33/24 35/2 36/11	138/18 140/9 144/13
90/19 92/8 97/5	54/24 119/25 141/13	<b>OGD [2]</b> 91/3 91/9	38/6 41/25 177/15	144/19 146/3 146/25
100/25 129/12 141/24	168/10 179/21 179/22	<b>oh [6]</b> 61/11 142/19	184/3	148/12 148/12 148/13
142/15	192/10	152/20 162/15 182/24	<b>operational [4]</b>	149/11 149/13 149/19
<b>nub [2]</b> 138/3 191/22	<b>obviously [17]</b> 16/2	188/10	103/17 125/6 187/6	150/19 151/6 151/19
<b>number [66]</b> 4/10	16/20 22/11 22/21	<b>okay [5]</b> 10/2 63/1	188/5	151/20 151/21 151/22
4/21 5/10 6/2 10/13	41/13 41/17 46/10	80/8 86/14 185/24	<b>operationally [1]</b>	152/13 157/20 158/4
14/17 16/22 19/3 19/5	50/7 76/17 119/16	<b>old [2]</b> 7/15 78/23	187/10	158/18 158/24 159/5
19/13 19/17 22/11	125/4 131/23 157/11	<b>Omicron [1]</b> 27/13	<b>operations [1]</b>	163/10 163/11 163/25
22/19 23/12 30/6 31/5	158/4 159/2 169/9	<b>on [375]</b>	174/20	164/22 164/25 165/10
31/8 33/19 34/24	180/13	<b>once [9]</b> 24/8 50/1	<b>operative [1]</b> 162/14	166/3 167/17 168/22
39/10 45/14 52/18	<b>occasion [2]</b> 50/17	52/23 56/22 70/21	<b>opinion [4]</b> 36/6	169/3 170/3 170/6
58/23 59/9 59/24 69/9	161/3	87/21 97/6 144/25	36/24 38/8 121/5	170/7 170/11 170/16
70/10 79/18 80/15	<b>occasionally [2]</b>	190/4	<b>opinions [1]</b> 42/4	173/6 173/17 173/19
81/22 84/2 93/23 99/9	28/17 175/23	<b>one [56]</b> 10/8 10/12	<b>opportunity [3]</b> 9/12	174/11 176/10 176/19
103/2 103/6 109/19	<b>occasions [3]</b> 45/8	10/13 14/2 15/9 15/18	69/24 84/16	177/4 178/9 178/9
113/4 114/23 119/18	45/23 159/14	17/2 28/7 28/8 30/14	<b>opposed [8]</b> 12/3	178/10 178/25 179/1
120/1 121/12 121/23	<b>occur [2]</b> 137/22	30/15 34/11 34/11	13/18 31/9 87/21	179/11 180/20 181/14
124/22 131/18 137/20	138/3	47/6 54/10 59/5 60/2	110/25 120/9 133/7	185/10 187/21 188/6
137/23 138/23 150/15	<b>occurrence [1]</b> 47/13	60/8 64/12 66/10	162/7	188/9 190/15 191/12
158/13 160/13 168/21	<b>October [11]</b> 13/9	72/19 72/20 79/2	<b>optically [2]</b> 155/24	192/6
174/2 174/6 174/17	27/11 39/23 40/22	94/11 104/12 114/3	156/16	<b>ordained [1]</b> 158/21
174/21 175/5 175/7	41/2 95/21 150/10	117/12 120/25 121/18	<b>option [2]</b> 136/16	<b>order [13]</b> 79/25
175/23 176/5 177/4	161/3 161/12 165/8	122/24 123/12 138/23	140/21	94/10 96/6 104/4
179/10 184/3 185/12	169/25	140/17 140/25 144/15	<b>options [1]</b> 90/25	125/3 128/25 129/2
190/1 191/21 191/23	<b>October/November</b>	145/18 151/20 153/14	<b>or [189]</b> 1/8 2/16 4/12	133/17 133/18 135/8
<b>Number 10 [24]</b> 6/2	<b>[3]</b> 41/2 95/21 165/8	161/2 162/3 165/11	6/13 6/14 8/17 8/19	141/14 143/17 158/19
10/13 19/13 19/17	<b>odd [2]</b> 8/2 57/18	167/19 168/11 168/14	10/14 13/9 13/9 13/11	<b>ordered [4]</b> 4/2 5/6
22/19 30/6 31/5 31/8	<b>off [15]</b> 7/16 15/18	168/15 171/15 172/11	13/20 13/22 13/24	131/8 155/4
33/19 34/24 113/4	15/19 84/21 112/14	173/2 173/2 173/25	14/4 15/17 17/10	<b>Organisation [1]</b>
120/1 121/12 160/13	114/2 121/19 121/25	176/20 177/3 179/10	17/19 18/24 18/25	46/7
174/6 174/17 174/21	127/20 167/6 172/4	180/19 181/23 185/18	19/15 20/12 20/14	<b>organised [1]</b> 174/14
175/23 176/5 177/4	178/20 183/17 189/3	<b>one's [1]</b> 125/24	21/6 24/5 24/8 24/8	<b>orgy [2]</b> 43/20 179/15
179/10 184/3 185/12	192/15	<b>ones [1]</b> 109/20	24/23 25/6 26/14	<b>originally [1]</b> 77/24
191/21	<b>offence [1]</b> 169/10	<b>online [1]</b> 18/9	26/14 27/20 29/8 29/9	<b>origins [1]</b> 82/9
<b>number one [1]</b>	<b>offensive [1]</b> 186/1	<b>only [26]</b> 9/21 14/22	29/11 29/14 30/12	<b>oscillated [1]</b> 126/24
138/23	<b>offer [4]</b> 75/13 82/8	17/16 21/13 24/23	30/20 34/12 37/17	<b>oscillation [1]</b> 127/2
<b>numbers [12]</b> 32/22	107/8 161/25	25/6 25/6 47/17 49/9	37/20 37/20 39/10	<b>other [55]</b> 3/2 3/8
49/20 69/3 69/4 69/22	<b>offered [1]</b> 28/6	73/10 75/16 75/20	39/11 39/12 40/22	10/16 14/25 15/1
71/9 75/25 87/23	<b>offering [1]</b> 113/16	92/8 93/23 103/23	42/12 42/16 42/25	15/10 16/16 26/18
137/7 137/25 167/13	<b>office [22]</b> 8/25 33/20	104/23 116/10 117/6	43/4 44/7 46/3 46/12	26/18 28/1 29/15
169/10	34/8 42/8 43/12 48/19	124/17 129/17 129/19	48/13 48/14 48/15	30/22 31/23 36/21
<b>numerous [1]</b> 121/17	55/12 55/13 68/21	134/19 163/2 163/4	48/15 50/25 51/16	38/12 41/18 44/8 51/4
<b>nuts [1]</b> 75/2	125/10 163/9 173/11	177/21 183/13	54/21 54/22 55/1	57/21 57/23 60/24
<b>O</b>	174/6 174/17 174/21	<b>ONS [1]</b> 15/16	57/12 57/21 59/7	61/16 66/13 73/3 73/3
<b>o'clock [2]</b> 135/9	176/5 177/20 180/22	<b>onwards [1]</b> 181/17	60/16 62/4 65/25 66/3	75/17 76/23 78/23
194/11	181/6 181/20 181/25	<b>open [10]</b> 19/1 89/23	66/6 66/20 67/4 67/20	80/3 91/3 95/2 100/22
<b>objective [6]</b> 28/22	182/1	100/22 117/11 145/16	71/1 71/3 72/12 72/12	104/7 112/14 121/8
110/13 110/15 139/19	<b>Officer [12]</b> 23/21	148/11 154/10 159/3	72/21 76/1 80/3 81/25	121/17 124/6 129/5
142/6 150/2	64/23 68/15 76/7	167/2 181/7	84/7 89/3 92/10 93/1	129/23 136/5 137/3
<b>objectively [1]</b> 190/1	76/12 94/14 104/9	<b>open-endedly [1]</b>	93/5 94/15 95/3 95/7	137/6 139/6 139/6
<b>obligation [3]</b> 4/7	105/4 107/5 110/23	19/1	95/15 97/25 99/10	149/14 156/1 156/11
4/17 190/10	136/20 137/17	<b>opened [1]</b> 181/6	99/12 102/5 103/3	158/9 161/1 164/19
<b>obliged [3]</b> 27/25	<b>offices [1]</b> 136/6	<b>opening [3]</b> 5/9 14/20	103/17 103/19 104/1	168/14 172/7 176/7
119/7 190/24	<b>official [3]</b> 22/2 47/4	147/21	104/25 105/22 105/23	190/25 192/8
<b>oblivious [2]</b> 53/19	73/7	<b>openly [2]</b> 27/16	105/24 106/2 106/2	<b>other's [1]</b> 187/21
80/17	<b>officially [2]</b> 46/9	162/5	106/24 107/13 107/24	<b>others [10]</b> 31/18
<b>observe [1]</b> 3/25	46/13	<b>operate [1]</b> 102/24	108/10 109/8 110/4	41/8 41/13 122/19
<b>observed [2]</b> 31/4	<b>officials [10]</b> 28/23	<b>operated [3]</b> 29/14	115/3 115/24 116/10	124/13 164/24 167/12
51/14	43/12 48/24 70/4	32/1 60/21	119/14 120/13 122/5	186/3 188/25 192/20
	73/21 82/6 89/2	<b>operating [6]</b> 51/10	125/15 125/19 126/4	<b>otherwise [3]</b> 14/18
	169/16 185/10 190/9	57/20 60/13 72/17	127/16 130/16 132/4	174/12 185/3

<b>O</b>	<b>overall [4]</b> 14/14 83/6 84/21 152/1	<b>page 1 [2]</b> 74/15 182/8	<b>paragraph [14]</b> 9/14 11/1 56/10 78/6 78/12 86/15 86/23 87/14 88/13 88/19 93/16 94/7 135/17 136/13	142/17 147/13 148/25 162/3 187/3 187/6 189/17	
<b>our [31]</b> 3/3 11/14 11/16 14/7 28/22 36/1 50/24 52/1 58/8 58/8 60/11 68/19 72/3 97/8 106/23 110/13 110/15 110/15 115/17 126/16 128/6 138/8 141/7 143/12 144/22 145/14 150/11 161/25 166/9 185/13 185/13	<b>overarching [3]</b> 49/12 171/15 172/11	<b>page 10 [1]</b> 58/14	<b>paragraph 10 [2]</b> 9/14 11/1	<b>pause [6]</b> 2/21 18/4 35/22 95/9 135/25 147/23	
<b>ourselves [3]</b> 3/8 3/9 32/6	<b>overcompliance [1]</b> 146/2	<b>page 16 [1]</b> 35/8	<b>paragraph 17 [2]</b> 78/6 78/12	<b>pausing [2]</b> 87/20 93/21	
<b>out [68]</b> 9/18 10/4 10/15 13/6 13/6 17/23 19/6 27/14 27/14 30/1 35/20 37/21 40/3 40/13 40/24 44/11 45/19 52/14 56/19 61/6 64/21 69/13 69/23 70/16 71/4 71/7 72/21 72/22 80/4 81/18 91/2 96/1 99/19 101/6 114/25 119/22 123/15 123/23 124/25 126/8 129/3 129/22 132/21 132/22 133/14 134/11 137/8 137/13 140/1 140/2 142/24 142/25 145/11 145/17 146/18 146/19 148/24 150/9 150/9 156/12 158/11 161/21 164/23 168/20 181/4 186/12 187/17 189/2	<b>overestimating [1]</b> 155/20	<b>page 17 [2]</b> 139/22 179/23	<b>paragraph 2 [2]</b> 87/14 93/16	<b>pay [1]</b> 163/23	
<b>outbreak [2]</b> 79/16 87/16	<b>overreacting [2]</b> 88/15 88/16	<b>page 188 [1]</b> 38/18	<b>paragraph 3 [3]</b> 56/10 94/7 135/17	<b>peak [9]</b> 52/10 52/10 70/22 94/5 94/5 107/12 107/18 110/25 144/22	
<b>outcome [3]</b> 16/12 85/18 109/25	<b>overreaction [6]</b> 61/5 74/25 88/21 89/16 89/22 90/6	<b>page 2 [3]</b> 88/13 105/20 107/15	<b>paragraph 9 [1]</b> 88/13	<b>pejorative [1]</b> 38/4	
<b>outcomes [2]</b> 98/7 142/7	<b>overpromise [1]</b> 192/2	<b>Page 229 [1]</b> 38/19	<b>paragraphs [1]</b> 135/11	<b>penny [1]</b> 144/23	
<b>outlets [1]</b> 131/25	<b>overreacting [2]</b> 88/15 88/16	<b>page 233 [1]</b> 2/4	<b>park [1]</b> 135/17	<b>people [122]</b> 3/2 7/16 11/6 11/6 16/25 18/6 18/8 18/9 31/5 31/13 32/15 32/22 33/22 34/6 34/9 34/25 34/25 35/7 36/14 37/13 37/14 37/18 38/10 41/6 41/18 41/24 44/1 44/5 44/7 50/1 51/10 51/13 57/19 58/2 58/10 58/25 59/6 59/7 59/9 61/2 61/10 64/8 66/15 66/22 67/8 67/12 67/13 74/5 77/2 77/24 79/18 87/18 93/10 95/19 102/13 109/19 110/7 116/24 118/2 119/4 119/8 121/6 121/7 124/4 124/6 124/7 128/7 128/8 128/15 128/16 129/9 129/11 135/21 137/7 139/4 146/4 146/22 146/24 147/2 147/4 147/5 147/5 150/15 150/24 152/20 162/19 163/11 163/12 163/13 163/19 164/23 165/1 165/3 166/3 167/10 169/10 169/23 171/1 171/2 171/10 174/15 175/5 175/6 175/6 176/1 176/6 176/6 176/7 176/14 176/18 176/23 179/7 183/9 184/10 184/22 187/20 188/16 188/21 189/3 189/14 190/14 190/19	<b>perennial [1]</b> 126/12
<b>outline [1]</b> 78/3	<b>overrule [1]</b> 97/24	<b>page 3 [2]</b> 108/16 111/7	<b>parks [2]</b> 131/22 135/21	<b>Perfect [1]</b> 145/2	
<b>outright [1]</b> 37/9	<b>overruling [1]</b> 98/2	<b>page 4 [1]</b> 135/3	<b>Parliament [2]</b> 3/19 145/14		
<b>outs [1]</b> 28/10	<b>overrun [1]</b> 60/1	<b>page 49 [1]</b> 122/7	<b>part [26]</b> 33/1 35/24 36/20 37/21 52/16 69/24 84/17 92/24 99/22 103/15 115/23 116/1 120/1 120/8 126/11 129/8 135/3 135/12 144/2 148/21 149/10 151/8 184/4 184/4 184/6 190/20		
<b>outset [1]</b> 98/13	<b>overwhelmed [7]</b> 115/6 119/23 130/18 132/25 137/22 138/24 187/10	<b>page 5 [3]</b> 56/5 93/16 106/9	<b>participants [1]</b> 1/10		
<b>outside [7]</b> 49/24 50/24 55/6 59/22 62/2 87/4 135/24	<b>overwhelming [4]</b> 28/20 66/17 70/4 77/14	<b>page 6 [8]</b> 72/24 73/5 74/15 85/6 85/9 111/25 114/9 136/3	<b>particular [21]</b> 14/11 16/4 18/15 20/5 30/14 36/23 40/15 41/1 47/14 48/7 77/5 94/14 113/10 142/8 149/25 164/1 166/14 167/6 167/20 175/2 184/10		
<b>outstanding [4]</b> 24/11 25/24 173/9 191/8	<b>overwhelmingly [2]</b> 43/8 152/5	<b>page 68 [1]</b> 5/25	<b>particularly [10]</b> 25/10 25/19 67/16 83/19 104/19 153/15 165/6 167/15 181/16 186/1		
<b>over [34]</b> 1/4 4/13 6/17 27/6 36/2 36/6 40/8 40/8 40/9 41/3 41/3 55/21 67/5 81/9 91/6 91/16 91/18 94/2 97/19 101/15 108/21 114/1 119/10 131/11 132/11 134/6 134/20 136/1 168/20 168/21 176/7 180/10 180/22 181/20	<b>owes [1]</b> 4/20	<b>page 7 [3]</b> 76/4 78/4 78/12	<b>partly [1]</b> 149/23		
	<b>own [24]</b> 5/19 9/5 10/11 12/8 19/14 30/25 31/17 32/7 36/21 39/13 63/20 82/25 117/6 118/24 126/12 126/25 127/23 127/23 128/1 128/10 151/15 152/15 161/18 184/5	<b>page 8 [1]</b> 76/25	<b>parts [9]</b> 12/14 51/20 64/2 73/1 78/22 84/20 99/9 152/1 161/21		
	<b>owns [1]</b> 130/8	<b>page 9 [1]</b> 37/7	<b>party [2]</b> 2/8 70/11		
	<b>P</b>	<b>page 92 [2]</b> 128/10 147/17	<b>pass [3]</b> 56/21 85/22 110/9		
	<b>pace [4]</b> 52/2 54/4 121/25 125/12	<b>page 10 [1]</b> 114/13	<b>passage [2]</b> 26/16 183/1		
	<b>package [1]</b> 103/19	<b>pages [2]</b> 24/23 59/11	<b>past [2]</b> 88/21 123/8		
	<b>page [62]</b> 2/4 2/4 5/25 35/8 35/11 35/24 37/7 37/8 37/12 38/18 38/19 39/2 55/21 56/5 58/14 70/8 72/24 73/5 73/5 73/12 74/15 74/15 76/4 76/6 76/25 78/4 78/12 85/6 85/9 88/13 91/6 91/7 93/16 105/20 106/9 107/15 108/16 109/1 111/7 111/24 111/25 112/8 114/9 114/13 122/7 123/22 123/25 126/11 128/10 135/3 136/3 139/22 147/14 147/17 149/8 179/23 180/2 182/8 182/11 182/17 182/23 195/2	<b>pages 10 [1]</b> 59/11	<b>patient [2]</b> 104/3 128/14		
		<b>paid [1]</b> 65/19	<b>patients [5]</b> 12/23 40/13 101/25 129/22 170/22		
		<b>pain [3]</b> 2/13 2/24 5/3	<b>Patrick [17]</b> 31/3 39/23 55/1 109/22 110/11 111/20 121/7 124/19 131/21 138/5		
		<b>pains [1]</b> 45/11			
		<b>paints [1]</b> 29/20			
		<b>pan [2]</b> 78/24 87/15			
		<b>pan flu [1]</b> 78/24			
		<b>panacea [1]</b> 75/13			
		<b>pandemic [40]</b> 3/4 11/8 14/15 15/25 26/14 31/14 34/17 47/16 49/1 49/3 49/5 50/11 56/16 56/22 57/5 57/15 57/21 66/11 71/16 84/7 86/25 87/10 88/17 89/3 117/16 128/25 142/24 147/7 154/9 154/22 156/8 158/11 160/11 177/16 185/7 185/9 188/18 190/4 190/7 191/21			
		<b>pandemics [3]</b> 84/8 154/14 178/1			
		<b>panic [2]</b> 63/15 63/17			
		<b>paper [18]</b> 84/6 84/15 86/4 86/7 86/12 86/22 88/3 88/4 88/25 102/6 102/7 103/10 120/21 131/4 169/18 169/21 170/16 170/18			
		<b>papers [1]</b> 123/12			



<b>P</b>	8/2 8/13 8/17 8/20 9/7	17/13 18/4 18/10	132/25 138/6 141/13	174/16
<b>perfectly [1]</b> 36/23	<b>phones [1]</b> 41/18	21/23 29/25 35/8	143/13 151/24 158/8	<b>preparedness [3]</b>
<b>performance [5]</b>	<b>phrase [4]</b> 78/10	35/23 38/18 58/14	163/1 170/10	91/4 91/10 125/10
31/17 31/24 32/10	94/16 94/18 108/5	62/19 70/25 84/13	<b>positive [3]</b> 131/12	<b>preparing [1]</b> 74/20
33/1 39/19	<b>pick [3]</b> 60/3 68/3	96/19 98/22 99/10	135/12 135/14	<b>presence [1]</b> 37/10
<b>performs [1]</b> 42/11	93/22	108/10 111/6 114/25	<b>possession [3]</b> 6/25	<b>present [7]</b> 78/2 85/7
<b>perhaps [23]</b> 17/15	<b>picked [1]</b> 93/24	140/1 140/2 151/4	59/21 144/12	86/2 113/3 136/12
59/7 66/20 75/25 86/7	<b>picking [3]</b> 20/16	162/4 171/7 180/4	<b>possibilities [1]</b>	140/9 162/5
89/20 98/11 102/19	67/22 68/4	182/6 189/22 192/16	89/23	<b>presentation [1]</b>
105/2 118/22 126/23	<b>picture [2]</b> 29/22	194/11	<b>possibility [3]</b> 47/16	151/19
129/6 130/2 137/5	81/18	<b>plenty [2]</b> 10/16 84/8	146/3 169/13	<b>presentationally [1]</b>
139/21 140/4 152/24	<b>pictures [1]</b> 135/19	<b>plethora [1]</b> 57/23	<b>possible [17]</b> 4/9	117/10
153/12 159/22 163/2	<b>piece [2]</b> 177/23	<b>plural [1]</b> 107/7	10/8 14/5 14/13 30/7	<b>presented [6]</b> 90/12
168/22 180/17 186/24	193/1	<b>pm [8]</b> 89/9 98/23	32/14 35/6 46/12 69/3	103/10 121/16 131/6
<b>perhaps weeks [1]</b>	<b>place [28]</b> 5/15 19/12	98/25 139/12 145/6	69/9 69/21 105/4	145/14 178/6
66/20	19/18 28/14 28/20	145/8 153/3 194/13	117/12 123/3 139/5	<b>presenting [1]</b> 116/4
<b>period [18]</b> 7/5 7/19	37/11 40/10 45/4 45/5	<b>PMQs [1]</b> 48/1	163/4 185/3	<b>President [2]</b> 82/7
33/11 39/21 39/23	53/8 56/25 65/20 76/5	<b>point [44]</b> 10/4 11/5	<b>possibly [3]</b> 54/3	82/12
40/8 44/1 45/24 47/23	76/11 93/4 93/6 93/7	50/18 55/1 60/8 61/5	80/15 113/14	<b>President Trump [1]</b>
70/5 81/9 81/12 82/7	100/18 101/11 117/15	62/17 67/1 67/4 67/22	<b>post [3]</b> 34/7 55/13	82/12
83/12 83/18 84/19	118/7 125/15 135/5	68/3 68/4 71/14 73/23	79/22	<b>President Xi [1]</b> 82/7
84/22 174/10	135/9 147/6 155/24	77/21 77/23 79/23	<b>posted [1]</b> 48/8	<b>press [10]</b> 1/4 9/10
<b>permanent [5]</b> 6/2	158/20 177/5	91/11 99/23 99/23	<b>postpone [1]</b> 113/20	95/3 101/4 109/16
34/23 68/24 173/11	<b>placed [4]</b> 155/11	104/19 108/24 108/24	<b>potential [10]</b> 47/20	109/20 110/23 135/19
191/7	167/12 174/19 186/24	108/25 115/16 117/4	47/21 77/6 77/10	139/23 148/25
<b>permanent secretary</b>	<b>places [2]</b> 137/20	121/18 125/22 130/23	79/24 84/3 88/17	<b>pressure [2]</b> 186/24
<b>[5]</b> 6/2 34/23 68/24	185/11	131/21 138/2 152/11	103/10 106/13 150/15	190/7
173/11 191/7	<b>placing [1]</b> 170/13	154/12 163/8 167/5	<b>power [3]</b> 19/13	<b>Presumably [1]</b>
<b>permanently [1]</b>	<b>plain [15]</b> 9/1 28/1	169/25 176/3 183/20	42/10 158/23	21/18
179/4	47/1 47/8 63/18 85/14	185/18 187/13 188/19	<b>powerful [2]</b> 30/19	<b>presume [2]</b> 5/8
<b>permissible [1]</b> 47/1	103/13 106/3 106/9	188/19 189/8 190/12	118/5	148/9
<b>permissibly [1]</b> 20/23	112/24 115/2 119/16	<b>pointing [1]</b> 157/17	<b>powerfully [1]</b> 17/11	<b>pretend [1]</b> 175/8
<b>permission [1]</b> 55/18	145/15 156/22 184/2	<b>points [6]</b> 30/10	<b>powers [3]</b> 42/15	<b>pretty [11]</b> 38/1 46/1
<b>permitted [1]</b> 160/8	<b>plainly [8]</b> 3/14 29/7	112/14 131/21 136/9	42/15 151/11	101/1 109/20 118/5
<b>perpetual [1]</b> 176/8	76/20 80/2 129/21	182/6 184/12	<b>PPE [4]</b> 63/12 92/6	138/21 143/22 145/1
<b>person [4]</b> 3/12	157/25 175/14 186/22	<b>policy [8]</b> 19/15	92/22 92/25	160/17 165/2 165/2
30/14 59/5 183/20	<b>plan [30]</b> 35/19 68/19	64/14 97/7 103/17	<b>practical [2]</b> 66/2	<b>prevailing [1]</b> 94/25
<b>personal [6]</b> 12/3	73/24 74/2 74/3 74/6	127/4 127/7 159/5	75/17	<b>prevalence [4]</b> 13/10
12/5 50/18 130/2	74/10 78/8 78/23	163/25	<b>practicalities [1]</b>	137/3 143/16 168/1
188/8 190/9	90/12 91/13 91/14	<b>political [9]</b> 42/13	75/1	<b>prevalent [2]</b> 89/19
<b>personally [5]</b> 11/25	91/16 91/18 91/20	47/19 47/25 151/22	<b>practice [3]</b> 18/21	96/3
31/24 81/13 150/5	92/9 100/24 101/7	157/1 162/8 189/3	24/21 54/14	<b>prevent [5]</b> 3/9 4/25
164/12	101/14 119/14 121/18	192/12 192/22	<b>pre [1]</b> 4/20	71/11 75/18 119/23
<b>persons [3]</b> 21/24	123/16 123/16 123/23	<b>politically [1]</b> 151/20	<b>pre-eminent [1]</b> 4/20	<b>preventing [1]</b> 87/6
169/1 171/24	123/24 123/24 124/20	<b>politician [1]</b> 50/8	<b>preamble [1]</b> 14/20	<b>previous [12]</b> 7/10
<b>perspective [3]</b> 28/6	145/15 181/1 181/7	<b>politics [2]</b> 36/16	<b>precautionary [6]</b>	30/5 72/18 81/10
28/7 163/10	<b>plan B [1]</b> 121/18	192/15	88/15 88/23 102/12	83/10 99/14 124/15
<b>perspectives [1]</b>	<b>planning [11]</b> 53/21	<b>poor [1]</b> 127/25	132/17 140/17 159/4	132/5 132/19 133/11
26/24	56/11 79/4 85/11	<b>popular [1]</b> 141/20	<b>predecessor [2]</b>	137/9 187/19
<b>persuaded [1]</b>	85/12 85/16 85/17	<b>populated [2]</b> 16/9	142/17 182/8	<b>previously [5]</b> 3/23
193/11	87/24 88/9 88/17	16/9	<b>prediction [2]</b> 87/24	82/14 129/17 131/16
<b>Pfeffel [1]</b> 1/24	99/16	<b>population [21]</b> 16/6	88/6	187/17
<b>Pfizer [1]</b> 17/23	<b>plans [7]</b> 76/5 76/5	16/7 16/14 59/6 71/12	<b>predictions [3]</b> 72/21	<b>preying [1]</b> 51/19
<b>pharmaceutical [4]</b>	76/11 76/17 83/3	79/12 80/12 80/13	72/22 107/12	<b>pricked [1]</b> 110/7
9/23 92/13 97/15	101/10 125/12	87/17 95/6 95/11	<b>preference [1]</b>	<b>primary [5]</b> 10/20
104/17	<b>plateaued [2]</b> 150/6	96/23 97/13 97/18	181/15	10/24 10/25 25/17
<b>phase [3]</b> 49/22 94/4	150/8	110/9 111/13 131/13	<b>premise [1]</b> 144/4	25/21
94/20	<b>plausible [1]</b> 56/17	138/17 149/2 150/14	<b>premises [1]</b> 164/11	<b>Prime [43]</b> 2/5 6/6
<b>phases [1]</b> 150/12	<b>play [1]</b> 34/3	150/17	<b>preoccupied [1]</b>	12/9 17/17 19/12
<b>PHE [1]</b> 102/15	<b>playing [2]</b> 152/20	<b>position [22]</b> 5/23	174/1	21/13 21/14 36/17
<b>phenomenal [1]</b> 30/3	183/22	10/19 15/13 34/8	<b>preparation [1]</b> 190/5	39/3 39/25 43/5 47/2
<b>phone [11]</b> 7/2 7/4	<b>please [38]</b> 1/22 2/15	38/20 39/11 43/4 47/8	<b>prepared [8]</b> 34/1	47/11 49/13 50/7
7/10 7/15 7/15 7/19	2/16 2/16 3/17 5/18	48/16 59/19 64/20	75/14 97/19 101/5	55/16 57/3 68/18
	5/25 9/18 11/24 13/15	69/20 72/11 128/20	101/10 101/13 101/23	74/17 79/24 86/16

<b>P</b>	190/13	103/23	putting [2] 71/1 168/14	91/9
<b>Prime...</b> [22] 89/11 90/4 91/12 122/9 137/7 147/18 147/21 154/25 155/25 158/6 163/2 172/23 173/1 177/15 178/14 182/20 183/4 183/13 183/15 190/21 192/23 193/20	<b>problems</b> [7] 16/17 32/24 40/19 153/14 154/6 176/5 184/3	<b>provided</b> [8] 8/12 27/17 27/21 41/17 103/18 120/1 136/2 177/7	<b>puzzlement</b> [1] 116/8	<b>rang</b> [3] 45/3 82/7 82/11
<b>Prime Minister</b> [41] 2/5 6/6 12/9 17/17 19/12 21/13 21/14 36/17 39/3 39/25 43/5 47/11 49/13 50/7 55/16 57/3 68/18 74/17 79/24 86/16 89/11 90/4 122/9 137/7 147/18 147/21 154/25 155/25 158/6 163/2 172/23 173/1 177/15 178/14 182/20 183/4 183/13 183/15 190/21 192/23 193/20	<b>procedures</b> [2] 50/16 178/14	<b>provision</b> [3] 2/1 181/16 181/24	<b>quality</b> [2] 142/7 142/8	<b>range</b> [1] 106/13 <b>rapidly</b> [2] 121/3 189/10
<b>Princess</b> [2] 62/10 79/15	<b>proceeded</b> [2] 96/9 140/16	<b>psyches</b> [1] 119/2	<b>quantify</b> [1] 141/22	<b>rate</b> [23] 15/21 49/8 52/17 57/6 57/7 58/24 59/2 59/7 59/20 63/9 63/9 71/9 71/15 72/8 72/9 72/14 73/10 80/11 93/5 93/6 116/22 121/15 167/25
<b>principal</b> [2] 6/3 23/11	<b>proceedings</b> [1] 6/24	<b>psychological</b> [3] 51/18 189/16 189/20	<b>quantities</b> [1] 63/11	<b>rattled</b> [4] 80/9 81/6 89/19 99/18
<b>print</b> [1] 30/23	<b>process</b> [10] 1/11 1/14 5/15 6/15 23/16 27/7 31/8 69/18 94/22 159/23	<b>psychologically</b> [1] 147/5	<b>quantity</b> [1] 30/4	<b>re</b> [2] 145/16 148/11 <b>re-open</b> [2] 145/16 148/11
<b>prior</b> [2] 1/13 72/11	<b>processes</b> [3] 30/17 50/15 185/13	<b>public</b> [56] 3/2 4/3 6/7 6/15 10/6 18/2 18/11 20/6 21/3 21/4 21/10 21/10 22/2 26/5 26/6 27/19 28/2 28/3 28/4 28/17 55/22 56/6 67/2 67/2 68/19 72/24 74/19 74/20 74/24 97/16 98/7 102/22 104/19 104/24 109/18 117/14 117/17 120/4 127/19 139/14 140/17 140/22 141/8 142/1 142/4 151/11 151/12 151/13 151/16 154/13 156/25 157/15 158/3 158/20 171/20 193/7	<b>quarter</b> [1] 98/19	<b>reaches</b> [2] 70/21 70/21
<b>priority</b> [2] 28/21 111/23	<b>produced</b> [7] 14/21 24/10 39/1 84/15 131/4 172/24 172/25	<b>public's</b> [1] 111/21	<b>quarterly</b> [1] 168/22	<b>react</b> [1] 84/17
<b>prism</b> [1] 51/16	<b>production</b> [1] 27/20	<b>publication</b> [1] 169/13	<b>quarters</b> [1] 133/23	<b>read</b> [13] 24/5 24/15 24/22 25/5 28/10 71/16 87/12 89/8 91/2 91/18 148/18 149/15 187/15
<b>private</b> [15] 6/3 22/7 22/10 23/11 31/22 34/8 43/12 48/19 55/13 69/1 79/5 79/20 89/6 128/10 172/17	<b>professional</b> [3] 164/23 167/11 190/10	<b>publicised</b> [3] 7/7 30/15 169/9	<b>question</b> [42] 13/15 14/1 14/19 19/2 22/16 25/22 34/14 39/9 51/7 53/6 57/2 63/8 63/18 64/14 67/11 74/8 82/1 82/21 84/13 86/15 88/10 88/12 96/1 98/2 103/21 105/2 125/13 130/6 143/10 150/1 164/3 164/17 171/24 172/2 173/6 180/13 185/21 185/23 187/25 189/13 189/22 192/16	<b>read-out</b> [1] 91/2
<b>private office</b> [4] 34/8 43/12 48/19 55/13	<b>professor</b> [2] 26/5 140/5	<b>publicly</b> [1] 129/7	<b>questioned</b> [1] 169/3	<b>read-outs</b> [1] 28/10
<b>privately</b> [1] 29/16	<b>professor John lee</b> [1] 140/5	<b>publish</b> [1] 91/13	<b>questioning</b> [3] 40/17 170/7 170/14	<b>readily</b> [1] 24/20
<b>probability</b> [2] 77/10 77/13	<b>profusion</b> [1] 23/9	<b>published</b> [3] 27/20 91/14 145/11	<b>questions</b> [9] 1/21 3/6 3/16 95/10 100/23 122/10 139/25 141/11 195/5	<b>reading</b> [3] 24/17 88/20 101/14
<b>probably</b> [22] 19/23 51/8 55/8 70/16 70/20 71/4 71/7 98/19 99/25 100/25 111/6 111/18 120/11 120/16 120/19 134/8 134/24 147/3 147/10 163/15 167/11 185/16	<b>programme</b> [1] 95/24	<b>publishes</b> [1] 1/8	<b>quietly</b> [1] 179/11	<b>ready</b> [1] 74/18
<b>probe</b> [1] 69/15	<b>prohibition</b> [1] 116/19	<b>pubs</b> [1] 117/3	<b>quite</b> [19] 22/5 33/10 33/10 45/23 47/1 53/9 53/22 55/1 68/10 85/1 85/22 95/17 103/5 106/21 110/12 156/22 169/3 169/18 174/4	<b>real</b> [12] 33/20 47/20 47/20 66/1 88/23 89/18 124/8 125/9 139/1 173/23 184/3 191/3
<b>problem</b> [34] 10/9 40/20 40/21 45/11 50/20 58/22 59/16 60/6 60/22 71/12 71/18 72/2 72/5 75/20 76/3 87/13 90/11 90/24 92/3 92/19 96/2 98/9 105/15 109/4 120/15 129/8 153/12 154/7 154/8 177/19 178/6 178/19 179/2	<b>promote</b> [2] 21/2 21/4	<b>pungent</b> [1] 32/20	<b>quoted</b> [1] 32/12	<b>realisation</b> [3] 62/7 92/24 93/4
	<b>prone</b> [2] 156/24 156/25	<b>purpose</b> [2] 14/13 154/3	<b>quoted</b> [1] 120/22	<b>realise</b> [3] 72/10 107/10 165/5
	<b>propensities</b> [1] 181/4	<b>purposes</b> [3] 64/21 116/22 119/12	<b>R</b>	<b>realised</b> [3] 85/18 144/24 148/23
	<b>proper</b> [11] 10/10 26/17 38/23 43/5 43/9 45/4 53/14 141/2 169/18 170/11 190/5	<b>push</b> [5] 68/5 97/19 117/2 147/21 149/1	<b>R number</b> [1] 131/18	<b>realistic</b> [1] 96/16
	<b>properly</b> [8] 61/22 62/15 63/21 100/6 127/21 132/12 144/11 190/25	<b>pushed</b> [2] 124/4 155/17	<b>R rate</b> [1] 167/25	<b>reality</b> [9] 15/7 39/24 39/25 85/4 85/18 85/21 86/20 88/9 93/13
	<b>proportion</b> [3] 82/3 111/12 140/11	<b>pushing</b> [2] 119/18 120/4	<b>radical</b> [1] 120/24	<b>really</b> [43] 10/8 19/20 45/24 46/19 47/18 49/16 50/3 50/24 54/21 58/9 66/19 67/2 68/2 75/13 80/9 82/16 101/19 102/19 104/20 105/6 106/22 107/9 107/13 111/20 114/4
	<b>proposal</b> [1] 68/23	<b>put</b> [32] 15/16 38/22 39/9 41/11 45/3 46/13 52/9 60/11 60/16 61/9 63/11 63/18 66/15 82/22 97/5 97/19 107/16 108/21 114/2 117/15 123/13 125/14 131/11 137/15 158/20 164/5 164/7 172/11 172/16 176/12 177/18 183/17	<b>radically</b> [2] 40/8 54/7	
	<b>proposed</b> [1] 123/16	<b>puts</b> [1] 93/11	<b>raggedness</b> [1] 155/13	
	<b>proposing</b> [1] 127/14		<b>raise</b> [4] 45/12 45/14 108/24 128/6	
	<b>proposition</b> [5] 32/2 137/15 143/3 144/2 163/17		<b>raised</b> [7] 46/5 58/9 67/12 96/4 105/13 158/16 184/11	
	<b>propriator</b> [2] 129/25 130/6		<b>ramifications</b> [2] 127/13 174/4	
	<b>pros</b> [1] 90/20		<b>ramp</b> [2] 91/3 91/9	
	<b>protect</b> [16] 3/3 3/7 3/8 14/8 14/8 18/1 18/2 28/21 33/12 110/14 111/22 137/7 138/22 148/4 150/2 193/21		<b>ramp-up</b> [2] 91/3	
	<b>protecting</b> [2] 110/15 138/8			
	<b>protection</b> [1] 4/19			
	<b>provide</b> [2] 86/12			

<b>R</b>	<b>recorded [2]</b> 128/11 140/8	<b>reinstalled [1]</b> 7/23	193/4 193/13 193/14	170/19
<b>really... [18]</b> 120/17 120/25 124/15 134/1 134/3 141/3 148/19 149/21 152/9 152/9 152/19 155/18 165/1 169/6 177/11 177/22 180/3 183/20	<b>recruit [2]</b> 34/7 34/20	<b>reject [1]</b> 28/19	193/16 193/16 194/1	<b>respondents [1]</b> 152/4
<b>reason [24]</b> 8/4 36/21 47/12 57/11 61/15 63/18 67/23 75/23 84/19 86/7 93/9 113/1 113/8 113/11 115/13 115/14 132/15 136/24 159/10 165/6 167/20 190/3 191/9 192/7	<b>recruiting [1]</b> 35/6	<b>related [4]</b> 5/20 6/20 16/8 130/11	<b>remind [1]</b> 1/10	<b>responding [3]</b> 78/16 83/7 190/22
<b>reasonable [15]</b> 25/12 56/12 57/24 57/25 72/1 72/18 85/10 85/12 85/16 85/21 86/17 87/16 88/8 116/25 122/9	<b>rectify [1]</b> 34/19	<b>relates [1]</b> 31/24	<b>remission [1]</b> 149/4	<b>responds [1]</b> 50/17
<b>reasons [9]</b> 133/21 151/22 157/1 162/8 168/11 168/14 168/15 176/20 177/3	<b>red [2]</b> 81/23 115/1	<b>relation [19]</b> 3/17 11/2 20/9 20/11 27/13 47/10 63/19 100/5 112/15 129/23 131/14 153/17 157/12 157/14 157/15 158/1 161/2 162/4 171/15	<b>removed [1]</b> 9/7	<b>response [16]</b> 12/11 14/16 33/4 38/25 51/13 51/18 71/5 78/22 103/15 123/13 123/19 154/9 159/13 175/15 187/1 189/13
<b>reassurances [1]</b> 101/22	<b>red box [1]</b> 81/23	<b>Relationships [1]</b> 154/21	<b>repeat [1]</b> 191/9	<b>responses [1]</b> 157/12
<b>rebuild [3]</b> 145/15 180/8 180/21	<b>redacted [1]</b> 73/2	<b>relationship [2]</b> 104/3 153/18	<b>repeated [6]</b> 45/14 108/23 110/24 160/6 170/13 192/19	<b>responsibility [5]</b> 12/3 12/5 12/9 12/18 17/14
<b>rebuilding [1]</b> 181/19	<b>redirection [1]</b> 119/14	<b>relationships [3]</b> 30/9 33/19 34/3	<b>repeatedly [7]</b> 45/13 105/16 160/12 169/5 169/22 174/19 192/21	<b>responsible [4]</b> 42/5 104/5 120/4 181/22
<b>recall [21]</b> 20/7 20/12 45/14 45/16 46/8 46/13 48/13 79/12 104/12 108/2 122/5 122/14 123/1 123/2 123/9 123/10 135/19 146/13 155/9 155/10 172/24	<b>reference [22]</b> 31/7 33/1 35/17 38/20 39/5 55/21 59/20 73/11 76/4 83/1 87/20 88/21 89/9 107/7 129/14 135/11 139/17 142/6 166/1 180/24 181/1 183/6	<b>relatively [8]</b> 51/6 83/6 93/23 96/5 150/6 165/17 166/22 167/10	<b>report [14]</b> 8/11 46/8 87/1 88/13 88/20 89/21 142/20 170/1 171/17 171/20 171/22 172/25 172/25 174/16	<b>rest [5]</b> 111/21 114/7 130/21 130/24 175/22
<b>receipt [1]</b> 86/3	<b>referring [7]</b> 4/16 6/17 10/25 76/19 83/9 87/12 127/8	<b>relaxing [1]</b> 83/12	<b>reported [2]</b> 49/7 154/21	<b>rested [3]</b> 12/8 17/15 21/12
<b>receive [5]</b> 42/13 57/1 81/23 82/3 116/21	<b>refers [3]</b> 37/8 70/18 89/7	<b>relay [1]</b> 24/6	<b>reporting [2]</b> 100/19 113/4	<b>restrain [1]</b> 138/7
<b>received [9]</b> 22/18 22/23 23/2 23/20 66/5 66/9 81/22 101/7 128/21	<b>reflect [2]</b> 41/4 41/5	<b>release [2]</b> 95/6 147/11	<b>reports [5]</b> 1/4 46/10 62/9 168/23 170/13	<b>restrict [2]</b> 68/7 118/3
<b>receiving [2]</b> 21/20 158/19	<b>reflected [6]</b> 15/20 42/7 42/12 42/14 42/25 174/25	<b>released [1]</b> 147/15	<b>representation [1]</b> 163/16	<b>restricting [1]</b> 105/1
<b>reckoning [1]</b> 129/11	<b>reflecting [1]</b> 123/5	<b>releasing [2]</b> 148/3 149/19	<b>represented [2]</b> 21/16 167/14	<b>restriction [2]</b> 138/17 163/5
<b>recognising [1]</b> 120/9	<b>reflected [6]</b> 15/20 42/7 42/12 42/14 42/25 174/25	<b>relevant [6]</b> 5/17 6/18 55/2 64/17 135/3 158/15	<b>reproduction [2]</b> 59/4 59/20	<b>restrictions [6]</b> 13/4 13/12 66/3 67/18 68/20 161/10
<b>recognizable [1]</b> 180/7	<b>reflective [1]</b> 149/8	<b>reliance [1]</b> 100/18	<b>reputation [4]</b> 33/23 35/1 36/11 41/25	<b>restrictive [1]</b> 146/21
<b>recoiled [1]</b> 95/15	<b>refers [3]</b> 37/8 70/18 89/7	<b>reliant [3]</b> 21/25 24/6 80/5	<b>requested [2]</b> 6/19 160/7	<b>rests [1]</b> 10/21
<b>recommendation [1]</b> 103/18	<b>referring [7]</b> 4/16 6/17 10/25 76/19 83/9 87/12 127/8	<b>reluctant [2]</b> 19/25 38/7	<b>requesting [1]</b> 7/6	<b>result [5]</b> 21/7 57/5 87/18 141/18 141/20
<b>recommendations [1]</b> 43/1	<b>refers [3]</b> 37/8 70/18 89/7	<b>remain [2]</b> 22/6 173/13	<b>requests [2]</b> 160/6 192/19	<b>resulted [1]</b> 61/8
<b>recommended [1]</b> 154/24	<b>reflecting [1]</b> 123/5	<b>remained [1]</b> 146/21	<b>require [2]</b> 47/10 71/23	<b>resurgence [1]</b> 39/22
<b>reconciled [2]</b> 125/18 125/19	<b>reflection [3]</b> 44/8 44/12 89/20	<b>remarkable [1]</b> 190/18	<b>required [5]</b> 5/16 45/12 48/16 119/23 131/17	<b>retail [4]</b> 131/24 134/14 134/17 167/9
	<b>reform [1]</b> 182/5	<b>remarks [3]</b> 5/9 170/1 188/11	<b>respects [2]</b> 160/6 192/19	<b>retrospect [3]</b> 24/25 67/25 102/11
	<b>reformed [1]</b> 42/14	<b>remember [61]</b> 6/16 8/22 17/7 20/15 35/3 35/5 45/17 45/21 48/18 51/1 51/2 51/3 54/24 64/9 64/10 65/17 68/9 69/10 69/10 69/11 69/11 80/10 82/5 82/5 86/21 86/21 89/1 90/16 90/17 97/22 97/22 97/23 103/4 103/7 107/11 108/4 108/7 113/17 114/12 115/9 115/10 116/14 122/15 130/4 130/13 131/20 148/16 155/10 162/18 164/6 168/9 184/8 184/10 186/7 186/8	<b>respective [1]</b> 6/4	<b>return [2]</b> 44/17 81/25
	<b>refused [4]</b> 33/22 34/25 41/24 192/18	<b>remedy [1]</b> 146/21	<b>requires [1]</b> 141/9	<b>returned [1]</b> 81/20
	<b>refusing [1]</b> 40/1	<b>remarkable [1]</b> 190/18	<b>reset [5]</b> 8/13 8/16 8/16 8/18 8/20	<b>returning [1]</b> 172/10
	<b>regard [1]</b> 164/1	<b>remarks [3]</b> 5/9 170/1 188/11	<b>residential [1]</b> 13/1	<b>returns [1]</b> 82/2
	<b>regardless [8]</b> 51/18 97/18 137/20 137/21 137/23 173/16 173/18 190/17	<b>remember [61]</b> 6/16 8/22 17/7 20/15 35/3 35/5 45/17 45/21 48/18 51/1 51/2 51/3 54/24 64/9 64/10 65/17 68/9 69/10 69/10 69/11 69/11 80/10 82/5 82/5 86/21 86/21 89/1 90/16 90/17 97/22 97/22 97/23 103/4 103/7 107/11 108/4 108/7 113/17 114/12 115/9 115/10 116/14 122/15 130/4 130/13 131/20 148/16 155/10 162/18 164/6 168/9 184/8 184/10 186/7 186/8	<b>resignation [2]</b> 2/7 2/9	<b>revealed [1]</b> 29/11
	<b>regional [1]</b> 135/23	<b>remedy [1]</b> 146/21	<b>resigned [1]</b> 3/20	<b>reverse [1]</b> 38/13
	<b>registration [1]</b> 4/11	<b>remarkable [1]</b> 190/18	<b>resolved [3]</b> 116/11 130/22 158/24	<b>revert [1]</b> 68/22
	<b>regret [3]</b> 146/13 169/11 169/14	<b>remarks [3]</b> 5/9 170/1 188/11	<b>respect [4]</b> 1/14 155/22 157/10 179/17	<b>review [5]</b> 91/16 154/20 168/17 168/20 172/23
	<b>regrettable [1]</b> 143/8	<b>remember [61]</b> 6/16 8/22 17/7 20/15 35/3 35/5 45/17 45/21 48/18 51/1 51/2 51/3 54/24 64/9 64/10 65/17 68/9 69/10 69/10 69/11 69/11 80/10 82/5 82/5 86/21 86/21 89/1 90/16 90/17 97/22 97/22 97/23 103/4 103/7 107/11 108/4 108/7 113/17 114/12 115/9 115/10 116/14 122/15 130/4 130/13 131/20 148/16 155/10 162/18 164/6 168/9 184/8 184/10 186/7 186/8	<b>respectfully [1]</b> 16/25	<b>revolution [1]</b> 181/2
	<b>regular [5]</b> 27/20 47/13 155/1 155/6 155/25	<b>remedy [1]</b> 146/21	<b>respectively [1]</b> 6/4	<b>Reynolds [5]</b> 6/4 122/18 172/16 173/15 173/21
	<b>reinstall [1]</b> 8/14	<b>remedy [1]</b> 146/21	<b>respiratory [1]</b> 48/3	<b>rhetorically [1]</b> 67/7
		<b>remedy [1]</b> 146/21	<b>respond [2]</b> 90/5 190/20	<b>rhythm [2]</b> 153/23 177/22
		<b>remedy [1]</b> 146/21	<b>responded [2]</b> 12/16	<b>right [90]</b> 2/19 4/4 7/12 7/13 8/1 8/23 9/5 10/10 13/23 25/7 25/8 29/1 32/17 38/22 41/9

<b>R</b>	142/12 <b>Royal Society [1]</b> 142/12 <b>Ruislip [1]</b> 3/20 <b>rulebook [1]</b> 78/21 <b>run [9]</b> 37/19 121/10 132/21 132/22 133/14 172/22 180/10 180/22 181/5 <b>rung [1]</b> 186/11 <b>running [7]</b> 18/5 34/15 50/9 108/11 111/19 148/8 189/11 <b>rushed [1]</b> 97/11 <b>RWCS [8]</b> 72/4 75/24 76/1 84/3 84/11 89/3 93/11 99/21	139/3 140/16 141/12 148/25 149/7 152/5 152/8 153/2 155/23 157/2 160/17 163/22 164/14 165/15 171/17 172/12 176/14 177/15 179/12 187/20 191/9 <b>sailed [1]</b> 121/11 <b>salaciousness [1]</b> 29/8 <b>salient [1]</b> 139/25 <b>same [17]</b> 20/24 31/19 31/19 41/3 47/6 82/12 93/9 110/21 116/4 120/13 126/18 128/12 129/13 157/17 157/22 158/23 176/23 <b>sanction [1]</b> 133/18 <b>SARS [2]</b> 51/3 61/6 <b>satisfaction [1]</b> 141/25 <b>satisfied [1]</b> 81/11 <b>Saturday [6]</b> 121/6 121/16 122/8 123/14 124/25 139/10 <b>save [7]</b> 28/21 110/14 110/14 111/23 150/2 161/2 193/20 <b>saving [2]</b> 138/9 139/19 <b>saw [18]</b> 15/16 34/5 41/22 45/12 58/6 83/20 116/11 121/1 123/20 123/21 129/8 142/12 170/23 174/22 174/24 176/16 183/24 186/2 <b>say [127]</b> 2/12 2/22 3/11 3/12 9/14 9/16 10/24 11/1 11/22 14/25 15/24 16/5 16/23 16/24 16/25 17/22 19/24 20/4 24/4 24/24 28/9 29/19 31/8 33/5 34/24 37/23 41/11 41/23 45/1 45/3 45/10 48/24 50/5 50/19 51/8 51/24 53/19 53/25 57/14 57/19 58/3 59/5 59/24 60/11 61/14 61/19 62/15 63/4 63/24 68/3 68/5 69/5 69/14 70/24 71/6 71/10 71/19 71/20 72/9 75/19 76/21 77/9 77/12 79/15 79/16 85/21 89/15 89/21 90/8 92/2 95/18 97/3 99/10 99/18 100/13 100/17 105/21 105/23 107/4 109/18 110/8 111/10 111/14 111/17 112/20 113/17 113/20 114/2	114/19 115/15 120/20 121/23 125/25 127/1 133/12 135/8 138/13 138/15 138/20 140/3 141/8 143/15 143/20 146/8 147/25 151/5 158/3 158/13 159/5 163/25 169/2 169/7 169/22 171/6 171/11 173/18 175/7 176/1 176/19 177/23 178/19 182/16 184/21 184/24 185/11 186/5 193/1 <b>saying [40]</b> 14/21 32/18 40/18 41/21 45/18 48/19 63/13 80/11 85/15 87/6 87/8 88/8 89/2 90/23 97/14 97/22 97/23 108/2 108/4 112/1 113/7 123/10 126/16 126/22 128/5 129/2 138/6 141/5 146/13 148/19 149/12 149/13 149/18 149/21 149/24 162/10 170/19 182/12 193/15 194/1 <b>says [28]</b> 26/3 35/24 45/7 63/20 67/6 67/14 78/5 79/21 86/23 88/13 99/4 104/5 122/7 122/24 152/21 152/21 159/12 159/17 160/6 163/21 173/20 173/21 180/17 180/20 182/15 192/17 193/13 193/19 <b>scale [4]</b> 31/20 32/4 52/2 99/21 <b>scaled [1]</b> 93/2 <b>scaled-up [1]</b> 93/2 <b>scales [1]</b> 101/23 <b>scare [1]</b> 69/11 <b>scenario [14]</b> 25/12 56/12 56/16 56/17 56/21 57/24 58/1 72/2 85/17 85/19 85/20 85/22 86/18 87/16 <b>scenarios [2]</b> 56/13 72/19 <b>scenes [2]</b> 80/9 138/25 <b>scepticism [3]</b> 69/3 69/8 69/22 <b>scheme [2]</b> 13/6 150/10 <b>schemes [1]</b> 28/1 <b>school [1]</b> 145/17 <b>schools [7]</b> 106/14 117/11 131/23 134/13 134/16 145/16 157/14 <b>science [7]</b> 26/3 26/4 40/6 73/25 117/7 117/7 118/22	<b>scientific [26]</b> 23/4 23/23 24/4 25/9 25/15 25/17 39/15 51/25 54/7 62/9 65/24 66/11 66/17 67/17 71/20 79/6 87/23 94/17 98/6 117/18 120/20 128/21 132/16 137/18 144/3 158/8 <b>scientifically [1]</b> 143/8 <b>scientist [2]</b> 70/15 71/3 <b>scientists [19]</b> 40/16 49/6 52/12 52/16 53/1 53/13 67/22 68/4 68/5 80/22 97/25 97/25 98/2 98/3 121/24 134/7 144/1 147/17 179/11 <b>Scotland [3]</b> 10/14 152/13 152/21 <b>scratch [2]</b> 78/22 125/8 <b>scratchy [1]</b> 174/15 <b>screen [2]</b> 35/9 149/8 <b>screening [1]</b> 66/3 <b>screenshot [2]</b> 126/14 179/25 <b>scribbled [1]</b> 170/1 <b>scroll [11]</b> 35/20 35/23 114/25 123/23 126/14 135/25 136/1 140/1 140/2 180/1 182/10 <b>scrutiny [1]</b> 5/12 <b>second [21]</b> 14/22 15/19 16/9 20/11 27/12 34/4 35/22 37/6 56/14 56/17 56/21 85/20 89/20 91/6 101/16 111/4 122/20 131/7 138/10 143/10 165/11 <b>secondly [3]</b> 34/5 116/3 191/8 <b>Secretariat [4]</b> 78/5 78/14 88/4 100/11 <b>secretaries [11]</b> 20/23 21/16 21/22 26/25 33/16 39/16 91/11 148/20 149/22 192/20 193/14 <b>secretary [56]</b> 3/23 6/2 6/3 6/3 6/5 6/17 21/1 21/19 22/7 22/10 22/23 23/8 23/11 23/12 28/16 30/25 34/23 36/6 36/10 36/24 37/1 37/1 37/6 37/16 37/16 39/16 41/20 43/13 43/16 46/5 48/24 58/17 60/4 62/24 63/2 68/20
----------	---	--	---	---

S				
<p><b>secretary...</b> [20] 68/24 69/1 77/1 77/3 79/6 79/21 89/7 128/10 149/9 153/23 172/17 173/11 173/25 175/16 183/3 184/13 191/4 191/7 192/23 193/7</p> <p><b>secretly</b> [2] 188/23 189/15</p> <p><b>sector</b> [5] 12/24 13/2 69/12 129/20 164/25</p> <p><b>sectorial</b> [1] 166/2</p> <p><b>sectors</b> [3] 166/5 166/25 167/14</p> <p><b>security</b> [2] 7/7 173/12</p> <p><b>Sedwill</b> [18] 23/1 30/25 41/23 46/6 122/17 172/12 172/13 172/18 172/25 173/2 173/7 173/9 182/8 182/12 184/7 184/15 191/25 193/19</p> <p><b>see</b> [64] 14/4 14/5 27/8 28/2 34/5 34/9 41/6 42/23 44/2 49/18 52/4 52/6 53/7 54/5 56/5 57/9 58/6 58/14 67/25 71/25 74/15 75/24 78/3 79/22 93/10 93/16 95/4 100/24 100/24 104/21 105/24 106/17 107/15 108/17 112/5 114/18 120/22 123/22 123/23 124/5 124/21 125/9 126/11 127/5 127/20 132/4 132/10 133/7 133/10 135/11 136/1 139/25 143/4 147/3 148/18 152/20 154/10 162/15 168/15 182/11 182/23 183/13 186/7 191/13</p> <p><b>seeing</b> [5] 25/16 51/5 75/24 80/10 186/8</p> <p><b>seeking</b> [1] 177/8</p> <p><b>seem</b> [4] 6/24 67/19 80/17 160/3</p> <p><b>seemed</b> [6] 63/3 113/16 120/20 134/4 137/10 166/14</p> <p><b>seemingly</b> [1] 126/12</p> <p><b>seems</b> [3] 15/6 40/1 154/15</p> <p><b>seen</b> [24] 15/3 15/12 16/1 17/4 19/17 37/18 38/17 50/25 51/14 101/13 102/5 111/25 120/1 121/13 132/20 136/24 138/25 139/17</p>	<p>139/23 147/7 156/16 174/22 176/19 186/9</p> <p><b>sees</b> [2] 43/1 146/1</p> <p><b>self</b> [16] 17/15 34/12 34/12 37/13 41/7 52/19 52/24 55/6 87/22 113/18 188/23 188/24 189/15 189/16 189/24 189/25</p> <p><b>self-critical</b> [1] 41/7</p> <p><b>self-criticism</b> [5] 34/12 34/12 188/24 189/16 189/24</p> <p><b>self-defeating</b> [1] 37/13</p> <p><b>self-doubt</b> [3] 188/23 189/15 189/25</p> <p><b>self-evident</b> [1] 17/15</p> <p><b>self-isolation</b> [1] 113/18</p> <p><b>self-sustaining</b> [4] 52/19 52/24 55/6 87/22</p> <p><b>sends</b> [1] 70/9</p> <p><b>senior</b> [5] 38/14 43/23 187/8 191/1 191/23</p> <p><b>sense</b> [9] 49/12 77/13 89/18 113/9 134/8 134/25 163/11 183/13 183/24</p> <p><b>sensed</b> [2] 132/17 133/15</p> <p><b>sensitive</b> [1] 73/2</p> <p><b>sensitivity</b> [1] 160/25</p> <p><b>sent</b> [6] 7/16 41/12 99/3 117/25 179/18 186/3</p> <p><b>sentence</b> [3] 87/1 89/19 89/20</p> <p><b>separate</b> [3] 44/16 162/24 178/9</p> <p><b>separated</b> [1] 30/1</p> <p><b>September</b> [7] 2/9 13/9 38/19 109/24 150/10 158/17 165/10</p> <p><b>September 2020</b> [1] 158/17</p> <p><b>September/October</b> [1] 150/10</p> <p><b>sequelae</b> [1] 169/1</p> <p><b>sequence</b> [2] 20/15 52/5</p> <p><b>series</b> [4] 17/6 126/8 141/19 153/18</p> <p><b>serious</b> [9] 19/18 19/18 57/6 57/7 58/22 60/7 61/6 73/6 154/7</p> <p><b>seriously</b> [4] 61/14 81/5 121/13 138/4</p> <p><b>seriousness</b> [7] 47/7 48/15 69/20 72/10 85/8 91/25 143/12</p> <p><b>servants</b> [7] 3/2 22/5</p>	<p>22/12 33/17 34/1 111/17 191/24</p> <p><b>served</b> [1] 14/13</p> <p><b>service</b> [12] 21/19 32/14 37/17 111/15 173/13 173/21 173/24 174/5 174/8 174/25 175/12 175/15</p> <p><b>session</b> [1] 160/18</p> <p><b>set</b> [12] 3/12 9/18 45/19 60/13 64/21 81/18 111/19 111/21 132/3 164/8 177/24 181/12</p> <p><b>sets</b> [2] 56/19 123/15</p> <p><b>setting</b> [2] 155/7 181/18</p> <p><b>seven</b> [3] 113/13 113/19 114/23</p> <p><b>seven days</b> [2] 113/13 113/19</p> <p><b>seven-day</b> [1] 114/23</p> <p><b>several</b> [3] 118/2 161/20 184/8</p> <p><b>severe</b> [3] 87/15 89/3 106/7</p> <p><b>Shafi</b> [6] 69/1 79/6 89/7 119/20 122/18 128/11</p> <p><b>shaking</b> [1] 102/9</p> <p><b>shall</b> [1] 44/17</p> <p><b>shape</b> [2] 132/20 133/13</p> <p><b>shared</b> [1] 107/25</p> <p><b>sharing</b> [1] 1/12</p> <p><b>she</b> [7] 37/17 87/6 87/11 163/22 163/23 164/14 164/15</p> <p><b>she's</b> [1] 87/8</p> <p><b>shed</b> [1] 29/13</p> <p><b>sheer</b> [2] 47/5 84/2</p> <p><b>sheet</b> [1] 157/22</p> <p><b>shield</b> [1] 167/24</p> <p><b>shielding</b> [2] 125/7 166/18</p> <p><b>ship</b> [1] 79/17</p> <p><b>shit</b> [1] 125/12</p> <p><b>shocking</b> [1] 4/14</p> <p><b>shook</b> [1] 101/25</p> <p><b>shops</b> [1] 135/22</p> <p><b>short</b> [8] 44/20 79/25 97/21 98/24 138/21 145/7 158/12 165/15</p> <p><b>shortly</b> [1] 109/5</p> <p><b>shot</b> [3] 31/6 37/15 138/8</p> <p><b>should</b> [55] 6/13 9/2 11/17 17/22 19/6 23/5 34/13 34/21 37/14 39/17 43/3 48/14 63/24 70/6 75/9 75/14 79/15 80/18 80/18 80/19 84/25 91/10 92/7 92/23 94/23</p>	<p>96/12 98/12 102/12 102/12 104/8 112/25 116/9 116/11 118/22 126/13 128/1 133/11 135/8 138/15 145/22 145/24 153/4 153/23 153/25 154/25 155/5 158/1 159/18 159/20 169/12 172/13 184/12 187/15 188/19 191/25</p> <p><b>shoulders</b> [3] 12/9 17/15 21/12</p> <p><b>shouldn't</b> [3] 102/10 102/11 138/13</p> <p><b>show</b> [4] 28/10 108/10 118/10 153/1</p> <p><b>showed</b> [3] 79/18 120/2 135/14</p> <p><b>showing</b> [1] 130/17</p> <p><b>shown</b> [3] 101/8 167/2 185/25</p> <p><b>shows</b> [12] 50/19 52/15 57/24 61/4 62/8 86/11 91/2 105/20 112/18 131/12 139/13 172/20</p> <p><b>shrift</b> [2] 138/21 165/15</p> <p><b>shut</b> [4] 116/22 118/17 131/23 134/17</p> <p><b>sic</b> [1] 105/11</p> <p><b>side</b> [3] 11/9 114/18 172/11</p> <p><b>sidelined</b> [1] 175/16</p> <p><b>sides</b> [1] 178/17</p> <p><b>sign</b> [1] 34/5</p> <p><b>significance</b> [1] 51/22</p> <p><b>significant</b> [11] 39/10 39/12 42/2 73/8 100/15 105/6 119/15 161/14 171/18 174/20 189/25</p> <p><b>signifies</b> [1] 187/14</p> <p><b>silence</b> [1] 186/4</p> <p><b>similar</b> [1] 16/17</p> <p><b>similarly</b> [1] 165/19</p> <p><b>Simon</b> [6] 6/4 23/1 33/21 34/23 184/11 193/19</p> <p><b>Simon Case</b> [6] 6/4 23/1 33/21 34/23 184/11 193/19</p> <p><b>simple</b> [1] 132/15</p> <p><b>simply</b> [10] 33/17 36/14 93/3 95/24 98/8 107/10 112/2 138/2 151/23 152/19</p> <p><b>since</b> [1] 15/20</p> <p><b>singing</b> [1] 157/21</p> <p><b>single</b> [2] 17/21 154/19</p> <p><b>singular</b> [1] 71/5</p> <p><b>Sir</b> [16] 31/3 68/25</p>	<p>70/18 79/7 85/19 124/19 124/19 131/3 137/15 142/17 147/13 162/3 175/20 187/3 187/6 189/17</p> <p><b>Sir Chris</b> [1] 137/15</p> <p><b>Sir Chris Whitty</b> [4] 79/7 85/19 124/19 131/3</p> <p><b>Sir Chris Wormald</b> [1] 68/25</p> <p><b>Sir Ed Lister</b> [1] 70/18</p> <p><b>Sir Mark</b> [1] 175/20</p> <p><b>Sir Patrick Vallance</b> [4] 31/3 124/19 187/6 189/17</p> <p><b>Sir Patrick Vallance's</b> [4] 142/17 147/13 162/3 187/3</p> <p><b>sit</b> [5] 2/16 2/16 2/18 126/21 164/23</p> <p><b>sitting</b> [3] 178/24 179/1 179/4</p> <p><b>situation</b> [7] 46/8 54/8 74/18 77/18 102/20 115/11 135/10</p> <p><b>sketch</b> [1] 90/21</p> <p><b>skilled</b> [1] 50/8</p> <p><b>Slack</b> [1] 107/25</p> <p><b>slide</b> [1] 14/21</p> <p><b>slightest</b> [1] 185/13</p> <p><b>slightly</b> [3] 10/13 120/12 120/12</p> <p><b>slot</b> [2] 172/22 173/2</p> <p><b>slump</b> [1] 99/8</p> <p><b>small</b> [2] 49/9 150/13</p> <p><b>so</b> [186] 1/12 3/7 6/14 6/20 7/16 8/8 9/23 10/5 10/12 10/19 11/6 11/6 12/5 12/16 15/21 18/10 18/17 18/21 19/4 20/9 21/11 22/14 23/12 24/22 25/12 28/9 28/10 28/13 36/4 36/4 36/16 37/13 38/6 38/7 40/2 40/5 45/10 49/12 51/4 51/12 52/22 53/11 53/21 53/23 55/10 55/20 57/8 58/2 59/4 59/18 61/9 61/17 62/1 62/10 62/10 62/11 63/3 63/24 64/18 68/3 70/10 71/19 72/7 72/9 72/24 73/13 74/19 75/5 75/15 77/21 79/9 80/8 80/16 80/17 82/14 82/21 84/10 87/11 88/19 89/6 89/17 90/23 90/23 93/21 94/1 95/20 95/22 96/1 96/19 97/22 97/24 100/25</p>

<p><b>S</b></p> <p><b>so...</b> [94] 101/6  101/23 102/14 103/21  103/25 104/14 104/16  104/21 105/16 106/3  106/21 108/11 108/16  108/21 109/5 111/17  113/6 114/16 114/19  115/15 117/4 118/2  118/9 118/12 120/11  121/5 121/9 124/12  126/8 129/14 131/22  133/10 134/12 138/9  138/11 140/13 141/5  141/10 142/9 144/11  144/23 145/23 147/10  148/9 148/15 148/20  149/2 150/9 150/14  152/23 154/5 154/14  154/21 157/2 157/14  157/16 160/8 163/19  164/13 165/7 166/6  166/9 167/17 169/6  169/23 170/6 170/6  170/9 170/20 171/6  173/5 174/24 175/11  176/12 177/9 177/11  178/14 179/23 180/18  180/23 181/1 181/4  182/2 183/1 184/1  184/1 187/23 187/23  188/7 190/19 191/22  192/15 194/2 194/11</p> <p><b>so-called</b> [1] 129/14</p> <p><b>social</b> [22] 18/20  21/2 28/16 58/17 77/4  92/15 94/20 97/15  103/11 103/14 104/11  105/1 105/5 106/17  118/4 130/2 131/22  135/7 135/13 136/11  166/23 187/18</p> <p><b>societal</b> [4] 5/4 21/6  21/11 26/14</p> <p><b>society</b> [3] 142/12  163/16 166/25</p> <p><b>sole</b> [1] 88/3</p> <p><b>solely</b> [1] 57/2</p> <p><b>solicitors</b> [3] 7/1 7/18  8/11</p> <p><b>solution</b> [3] 40/25  41/7 178/8</p> <p><b>solutions</b> [1] 176/17</p> <p><b>solved</b> [1] 190/14</p> <p><b>sombrero</b> [1] 120/8</p> <p><b>some</b> [71] 7/16 11/13  19/19 25/9 27/24  29/15 36/21 36/21  38/14 38/25 40/23  42/21 42/24 43/2  57/21 60/19 61/7 61/8  65/15 79/23 81/14  82/15 90/9 90/18</p>	<p>100/12 103/2 106/6  109/24 110/6 110/6  111/11 112/14 124/6  131/12 131/17 131/21  133/23 135/15 135/24  136/9 137/10 138/1  138/13 144/3 144/9  146/12 146/21 146/24  153/7 154/8 155/13  157/3 159/25 160/25  162/1 163/18 163/19  163/20 163/22 169/3  169/22 170/23 172/7  175/1 175/13 178/11  178/13 178/15 179/7  179/21 192/13</p> <p><b>somebody</b> [6] 36/18  36/18 75/19 83/12  192/13 192/14</p> <p><b>somehow</b> [1] 8/6</p> <p><b>someone</b> [2] 171/7  191/15</p> <p><b>something</b> [36] 8/5  17/13 32/8 34/21  41/15 41/21 46/19  47/14 47/17 47/20  49/24 50/25 53/18  67/10 71/22 76/16  90/15 97/11 99/16  99/20 110/1 116/14  117/17 121/14 125/22  129/1 154/1 154/15  159/6 166/7 171/4  171/5 176/20 177/14  180/17 182/16</p> <p><b>sometimes</b> [13]  10/11 34/17 34/19  67/5 152/18 153/11  156/5 157/9 164/20  164/21 176/21 188/20  188/21</p> <p><b>somewhere</b> [1] 80/10</p> <p><b>soon</b> [5] 17/23 40/19  79/23 116/11 128/17</p> <p><b>sooner</b> [4] 80/19  130/18 143/11 147/15</p> <p><b>sorry</b> [36] 2/13 2/17  2/24 18/13 23/5 35/12  35/21 41/19 42/1  54/10 55/8 60/16  63/24 64/18 65/13  65/13 78/11 81/17  83/8 86/1 86/14 96/19  96/21 102/15 118/9  138/11 142/24 168/14  170/22 176/25 176/25  181/25 182/22 187/23  187/24 189/18</p> <p><b>sort</b> [8] 10/15 14/1  20/17 31/19 106/21  126/7 129/22 156/12</p> <p><b>sort of</b> [2] 31/19  106/21</p> <p><b>sorts</b> [3] 42/18 129/5</p>	<p>133/20</p> <p><b>sound</b> [2] 37/15  57/18</p> <p><b>sounded</b> [1] 116/25</p> <p><b>sounding</b> [2] 103/5  189/3</p> <p><b>sounds</b> [2] 25/7  152/8</p> <p><b>source</b> [2] 23/24  93/18</p> <p><b>South</b> [2] 3/20 62/3</p> <p><b>South Korea</b> [1] 62/3</p> <p><b>sovereign</b> [1] 128/6</p> <p><b>sowed</b> [1] 173/20</p> <p><b>space</b> [1] 178/7</p> <p><b>spaces</b> [1] 117/3</p> <p><b>SPADs</b> [2] 42/12  42/16</p> <p><b>spared</b> [1] 133/6</p> <p><b>speak</b> [2] 127/20  176/18</p> <p><b>speaking</b> [3] 18/16  78/11 87/9</p> <p><b>spec</b> [1] 140/4</p> <p><b>special</b> [2] 175/1  175/13</p> <p><b>specific</b> [1] 22/17</p> <p><b>specifically</b> [2] 132/6  193/15</p> <p><b>Spectator</b> [1] 140/4</p> <p><b>speed</b> [9] 12/10 13/4  19/22 24/15 63/8  84/17 137/2 147/11  165/16</p> <p><b>speedily</b> [3] 24/20  51/23 84/23</p> <p><b>Speeding</b> [1] 107/22</p> <p><b>speeds</b> [1] 124/5</p> <p><b>spend</b> [1] 155/17</p> <p><b>SPI</b> [2] 94/11 102/6</p> <p><b>SPI-B</b> [2] 94/11 102/6</p> <p><b>spoke</b> [6] 45/1 45/23  107/5 160/16 176/21  186/4</p> <p><b>spoken</b> [1] 45/22</p> <p><b>spongiform</b> [1] 69/6</p> <p><b>sporting</b> [2] 116/23  118/16</p> <p><b>spread</b> [22] 49/6 52/9  52/23 55/3 55/6 56/14  56/15 59/14 59/15  62/2 63/19 68/7 71/11  75/10 75/18 87/6  88/16 88/18 88/19  94/2 94/3 94/9</p> <p><b>spreading</b> [10] 61/23  61/24 62/2 63/22 64/1  64/3 75/2 85/1 107/11  121/3</p> <p><b>spring</b> [7] 17/11  44/10 95/8 95/16  107/16 111/1 111/9</p> <p><b>squash</b> [1] 120/7</p> <p><b>stability</b> [1] 173/21</p>	<p><b>staff</b> [1] 55/25</p> <p><b>stage</b> [15] 57/14  65/15 71/21 76/21  90/18 96/5 100/6  106/10 119/1 132/15  134/17 134/18 138/21  150/6 192/13</p> <p><b>stages</b> [3] 61/4  159/13 160/11</p> <p><b>stamp</b> [1] 129/3</p> <p><b>stance</b> [1] 68/19</p> <p><b>stand</b> [1] 3/19</p> <p><b>standing</b> [1] 141/7</p> <p><b>start</b> [8] 1/3 79/23  99/2 104/10 105/1  125/15 126/2 132/11</p> <p><b>started</b> [7] 104/15  126/1 141/18 150/5  150/8 168/4 177/22</p> <p><b>starting</b> [5] 94/21  99/17 104/22 132/16  148/6</p> <p><b>starts</b> [1] 82/16</p> <p><b>state</b> [28] 4/7 4/16  16/13 20/23 21/1  21/17 21/22 26/25  28/16 36/7 42/6 48/24  58/17 60/4 68/20 77/1  77/3 80/6 91/11  120/14 126/4 148/20  149/9 149/22 189/24  190/11 190/17 191/4</p> <p><b>state's</b> [1] 5/15</p> <p><b>stated</b> [3] 9/1 29/7  39/11</p> <p><b>statement</b> [36] 1/6  1/8 2/1 9/14 9/17 10/4  11/4 11/22 19/8 19/11  19/14 45/1 45/7 45/19  61/19 63/20 65/22  67/6 72/17 76/22  102/16 115/16 122/7  145/15 145/25 151/5  155/23 158/13 159/12  159/17 163/7 172/16  180/1 187/4 192/17  193/3</p> <p><b>statements</b> [2] 67/19  188/3</p> <p><b>states</b> [3] 65/22  189/20 189/23</p> <p><b>statistical</b> [1] 15/7</p> <p><b>statistically</b> [1] 16/18</p> <p><b>statistics</b> [1] 15/24</p> <p><b>statutory</b> [2] 4/1  18/11</p> <p><b>stay</b> [9] 125/3 133/18  134/14 135/8 141/14  143/17 146/2 182/13  182/16</p> <p><b>stay-at-home</b> [5]  133/18 135/8 141/14  143/17 146/2</p> <p><b>step</b> [4] 34/10 43/15</p>	<p>43/18 136/17</p> <p><b>stepped</b> [2] 43/22  43/25</p> <p><b>steps</b> [6] 51/23 71/10  88/15 88/24 106/4  140/13</p> <p><b>Steward</b> [1] 3/22</p> <p><b>stick</b> [1] 192/7</p> <p><b>sticks</b> [1] 183/23</p> <p><b>still</b> [26] 57/19 57/20  60/8 89/24 89/24  93/12 93/23 99/22  99/25 101/2 101/3  109/8 109/8 120/7  120/18 120/18 126/19  136/23 137/10 141/4  147/7 147/21 150/2  150/15 170/6 170/7</p> <p><b>stocktake</b> [2] 68/12  68/15</p> <p><b>stop</b> [18] 2/15 37/9  50/12 50/16 50/19  66/21 66/24 108/2  110/3 110/4 120/10  126/21 127/16 136/5  155/13 167/10 171/13  171/14</p> <p><b>stopped</b> [5] 7/10  49/17 59/24 60/18  185/15</p> <p><b>stopping</b> [4] 52/25  75/2 106/14 185/23</p> <p><b>story</b> [1] 140/4</p> <p><b>straightaway</b> [1]  88/24</p> <p><b>straightforward</b> [2]  10/7 193/6</p> <p><b>strategic</b> [1] 131/5</p> <p><b>strategies</b> [1] 124/17</p> <p><b>strategy</b> [14] 78/24  89/9 89/11 108/13  108/22 110/16 119/12  119/14 129/18 131/7  131/9 132/9 139/9  139/10</p> <p><b>stream</b> [1] 181/19</p> <p><b>streaming</b> [1] 18/10</p> <p><b>Street</b> [5] 36/13  81/20 160/4 181/14  182/12</p> <p><b>stress</b> [2] 31/16 33/3</p> <p><b>stressed</b> [2] 68/18  104/20</p> <p><b>stricken</b> [1] 31/13</p> <p><b>stride</b> [1] 183/17</p> <p><b>strike</b> [2] 88/14 90/3</p> <p><b>striking</b> [3] 88/22  163/10 166/14</p> <p><b>stringent</b> [7] 106/2  106/3 119/22 120/5  121/20 124/9 128/22</p> <p><b>stringently</b> [1] 66/1</p> <p><b>strong</b> [3] 17/4 42/21  43/3</p>
--	---	--	--	--

<b>S</b>	<b>suggesting [4]</b> 82/22 82/25 88/6 111/12	52/24 55/6 87/22	170/21 180/10 180/21 184/12 191/5	151/15 151/19 153/16 157/21 158/4 176/12
<b>strongly [1]</b> 146/22	<b>suggestion [5]</b> 64/1 107/8 107/18 127/18 133/16	<b>swap [1]</b> 193/10	<b>take weeks [1]</b> 56/17	<b>terrible [8]</b> 4/14 11/1 15/1 31/5 32/16 32/16 126/24 171/1
<b>struck [2]</b> 74/19 89/24	<b>suggests [2]</b> 15/3 107/25	<b>swear [3]</b> 48/6 55/10 86/8	<b>taken [17]</b> 13/24 19/4 29/17 36/6 41/16 45/5 106/4 113/1 125/17 136/11 140/13 156/23 159/16 162/12 162/13 184/15 188/13	<b>terrific [1]</b> 162/21
<b>structure [4]</b> 26/9 26/17 155/8 177/13	<b>sum [1]</b> 76/25	<b>sweep [4]</b> 70/16 71/4 71/8 71/16	<b>takes [5]</b> 40/17 56/25 90/18 90/22 140/25	<b>terrifying [1]</b> 147/7
<b>structures [5]</b> 23/7 153/16 153/17 177/5 178/22	<b>summaries [1]</b> 25/3	<b>swept [1]</b> 177/14	<b>taking [11]</b> 3/14 65/20 88/14 154/16 156/25 158/1 163/15 177/25 178/16 178/20 181/20	<b>terrifyingly [1]</b> 125/12
<b>struggle [1]</b> 11/18	<b>summarise [2]</b> 129/8 156/9	<b>swine [8]</b> 51/3 67/15 69/7 72/8 72/12 72/14 99/7 100/7	<b>talent [1]</b> 174/8	<b>territory [1]</b> 133/9
<b>struggled [1]</b> 15/25	<b>summary [3]</b> 124/1 131/5 131/19	<b>swine flu [8]</b> 51/3 67/15 69/7 72/8 72/12 72/14 99/7 100/7	<b>talented [3]</b> 31/12 34/6 188/20	<b>test [20]</b> 52/21 53/3 53/5 54/13 54/25 55/2 63/10 74/5 75/12 75/13 75/15 76/15 92/4 92/20 93/1 93/2 93/21 101/24 102/22 127/4
<b>Stu [1]</b> 121/7	<b>summer [14]</b> 6/23 8/24 27/12 107/16 146/19 146/20 149/3 150/1 161/11 169/20 170/17 179/24 181/16 192/18	<b>sworn [2]</b> 1/20 195/3	<b>talk [8]</b> 53/24 70/25 71/19 89/1 119/3 152/15 161/19 188/5	<b>testing [8]</b> 32/24 35/17 35/19 74/7 76/19 162/20 162/23 192/4
<b>stuck [2]</b> 36/25 192/5	<b>Sunak [1]</b> 145/25	<b>symbol [1]</b> 118/20	<b>talked [5]</b> 75/11 75/12 121/6 121/18 155/14	<b>tests [2]</b> 103/2 103/6
<b>study [1]</b> 142/12	<b>Sunday [6]</b> 20/4 112/9 124/18 125/2 135/6 137/12	<b>sympathetic [1]</b> 168/25	<b>talking [15]</b> 19/23 37/9 48/18 53/22 99/8 100/8 115/24 119/4 126/20 127/9 127/10 176/7 178/13 182/3 188/8	<b>text [2]</b> 70/9 167/6
<b>stuff [4]</b> 31/12 80/17 170/4 187/16	<b>superb [1]</b> 22/7	<b>system [36]</b> 13/10 16/13 20/25 40/4 42/12 42/13 50/13 50/19 51/2 52/7 52/22 53/12 54/14 54/16 69/18 69/24 74/7 76/15 78/21 79/3 93/2 93/22 102/18 102/23 125/7 148/8 151/8 153/15 161/11 177/20 180/17 181/11 181/12 181/14 186/18 187/1	<b>team [7]</b> 34/13 34/16 55/13 111/11 147/25 149/7 175/22	<b>texts [4]</b> 6/20 29/12 180/3 180/16
<b>stupid [1]</b> 126/22	<b>superconfident [1]</b> 188/21	<b>systematically [1]</b> 137/2	<b>tedros [1]</b> 87/11	<b>texture [1]</b> 30/8
<b>Sturgeon [2]</b> 158/17 159/17	<b>supplies [2]</b> 92/6 92/22	<b>systemic [2]</b> 153/16 176/5	<b>Tedros Ghebreyesus [1]</b> 87/11	<b>Thailand [2]</b> 49/6 62/3
<b>style [2]</b> 29/9 30/11	<b>support [8]</b> 55/13 158/19 159/1 161/25 162/6 175/15 183/2 183/4	<b>systemically [2]</b> 53/15 190/25	<b>technical [4]</b> 7/16 8/9 8/11 171/24	<b>than [32]</b> 5/11 14/18 15/13 19/25 24/9 25/2 25/25 38/13 46/2 50/20 69/25 73/4 77/11 78/23 84/7 84/9 96/9 97/1 100/1 113/14 117/7 118/21 121/3 144/18 147/16 151/24 152/7 164/24 167/12 175/7 179/10 192/8
<b>subcommittees [1]</b> 94/12	<b>supportive [1]</b> 130/10	<b>systems [5]</b> 16/17 80/3 137/4 164/9 182/14	<b>tell [12]</b> 22/6 68/10 82/4 103/25 104/23 108/6 122/3 141/21 149/14 167/7 181/10 193/23	<b>thank [20]</b> 1/17 1/18 1/25 1/25 3/15 18/12 44/18 48/22 66/10 89/10 91/8 98/21 108/20 139/1 139/7 145/4 194/5 194/7 194/10 194/12
<b>subject [7]</b> 9/2 19/7 146/8 151/3 166/11 182/13 191/12	<b>suppose [3]</b> 17/21 77/14 143/7	<b>table [6]</b> 15/4 15/5 15/17 16/2 16/3 64/11	<b>telling [10]</b> 71/21 103/22 104/10 108/1 116/4 116/13 122/12 122/25 191/1 192/13	<b>thank you [15]</b> 1/17 1/18 1/25 1/25 3/15 44/18 48/22 66/10 89/10 91/8 98/21 139/7 145/4 194/10 194/12
<b>submissions [1]</b> 169/8	<b>suppress [5]</b> 109/23 110/2 110/16 125/20 141/17	<b>tabletop [2]</b> 73/15 73/17	<b>tells [1]</b> 90/20	<b>that [1261]</b>
<b>submit [2]</b> 30/19 178/1	<b>suppressed [1]</b> 40/1	<b>tackle [2]</b> 75/10 128/14	<b>tempo [5]</b> 81/6 82/16 83/1 83/18 84/14	<b>that's [101]</b> 4/4 7/13 8/1 8/10 14/1 14/24 17/18 19/2 19/19 21/13 24/1 24/4 25/22 28/9 28/19 30/7 30/23 36/22 37/20 38/19
<b>submitted [1]</b> 46/15	<b>suppressing [1]</b> 110/25	<b>tactical [1]</b> 131/5	<b>ten [1]</b> 126/18	
<b>substantiate [1]</b> 141/7	<b>suppression [1]</b> 120/9	<b>tactics [2]</b> 150/2 150/3	<b>tendency [1]</b> 192/1	
<b>substantive [1]</b> 157/12	<b>sure [28]</b> 10/15 11/12 14/20 18/10 32/14 38/24 41/1 46/15 50/16 63/4 64/13 73/21 90/1 90/16 95/21 108/17 140/14 160/13 162/1 166/12 169/9 172/2 172/9 183/23 188/4 191/16 193/4 193/18	<b>take [36]</b> 12/2 12/5 12/9 12/18 28/14 40/10 51/23 56/17 61/9 71/10 77/19 79/25 80/22 83/17 88/23 89/12 90/1 90/9 93/4 93/7 97/17 102/4 106/25 113/7 124/15 140/22 145/2 149/19 149/20 159/4 165/15	<b>tends [1]</b> 38/3	
<b>succeed [1]</b> 68/2	<b>surprise [1]</b> 149/25	<b>tactic [1]</b> 131/5	<b>term [7]</b> 81/2 81/7 81/21 82/1 83/2 83/4 169/1	
<b>success [2]</b> 32/9 181/10	<b>surprised [1]</b> 164/14	<b>tactics [2]</b> 150/2 150/3	<b>terms [18]</b> 9/18 19/22 39/17 83/6 94/1 94/2 107/16 115/24 117/22 117/22 140/18 142/7	
<b>successful [1]</b> 93/20	<b>surprising [2]</b> 139/21 188/17	<b>take [36]</b> 12/2 12/5 12/9 12/18 28/14 40/10 51/23 56/17 61/9 71/10 77/19 79/25 80/22 83/17 88/23 89/12 90/1 90/9 93/4 93/7 97/17 102/4 106/25 113/7 124/15 140/22 145/2 149/19 149/20 159/4 165/15		
<b>such [16]</b> 4/7 8/22 14/13 26/10 26/22 31/5 33/17 43/2 89/25 102/8 106/11 108/6 127/12 137/19 137/25 146/22	<b>survey [1]</b> 170/2			
<b>sudden [1]</b> 144/17	<b>sustained [3]</b> 59/23 87/4 93/25			
<b>suddenly [1]</b> 119/5	<b>sustaining [4]</b> 52/19			
<b>suffer [2]</b> 16/7 169/11				
<b>suffered [4]</b> 5/10 11/6 15/1 30/14				
<b>suffering [10]</b> 2/14 2/24 3/10 11/2 168/5 169/1 169/2 171/3 171/5 171/10				
<b>sufficient [4]</b> 61/1 84/17 158/7 158/8				
<b>sufficiently [3]</b> 63/17 84/23 92/1				
<b>suggest [7]</b> 26/16 27/4 36/5 36/9 36/12 162/3 189/13				
<b>suggested [3]</b> 100/5 129/25 172/13				

<b>T</b>	23/4 27/5 27/12 34/23 35/23 37/5 37/12 37/16 39/2 40/15 40/19 46/22 46/23 46/23 46/24 47/6 55/5 55/21 55/23 56/10 58/23 60/5 60/6 63/22 66/1 66/3 70/18 70/24 73/22 84/10 89/14 90/24 91/22 93/23 94/7 95/6 95/25 96/17 103/3 104/6 104/6 106/7 111/14 113/17 113/21 113/22 114/1 114/3 122/17 122/19 122/20 122/21 125/17 126/4 126/8 130/15 134/14 136/3 138/24 141/7 143/16 144/25 147/17 147/23 148/13 150/7 153/20 159/6 160/19 170/6 172/5 174/23 176/24 177/6 178/6 178/8 180/6 183/6	18/21 18/24 18/25 19/3 23/23 24/15 26/23 31/5 38/1 38/7 38/8 38/8 38/15 38/16 40/18 42/4 43/25 44/2 44/3 44/3 49/17 49/21 51/14 52/20 57/20 58/11 58/20 66/4 66/14 67/25 69/5 69/16 74/5 80/12 87/24 92/13 93/12 95/12 97/24 102/19 106/2 108/1 110/8 113/17 114/2 117/1 118/3 119/5 119/21 121/3 121/21 124/14 132/13 134/8 136/15 136/16 138/2 138/5 141/2 141/3 144/20 147/6 147/7 147/8 150/6 150/7 150/7 150/8 151/22 151/23 152/14 152/16 153/20 156/4 156/24 158/21 158/22 158/22 159/5 161/18 161/18 161/24 162/22 162/22 164/25 169/9 171/2 172/9 174/9 176/23 176/23 177/11 177/12 179/8 184/2 184/15 185/2 189/23 189/23	179/21 181/9 182/4 184/8 184/23 184/25 185/2 190/10 <b>think [348]</b> <b>thinking [13]</b> 45/17 57/20 106/23 111/17 115/10 115/17 116/14 126/5 148/17 160/18 167/8 167/19 193/6 <b>thinks [2]</b> 99/7 99/7 <b>third [1]</b> 144/2 <b>thirds [1]</b> 112/7 <b>this [268]</b> <b>those [59]</b> 1/11 1/13 2/25 3/6 3/6 4/21 5/4 5/4 5/9 5/17 8/2 9/13 9/16 21/19 22/13 24/21 26/20 30/15 41/4 41/5 43/23 45/21 47/5 48/3 48/7 48/15 49/14 50/10 52/4 60/23 61/22 69/4 79/13 96/3 114/1 114/2 120/21 127/2 128/12 129/21 132/10 140/15 141/22 145/21 155/8 157/19 163/20 163/20 165/3 165/5 167/14 167/24 169/1 172/11 173/23 176/12 178/14 189/1 189/20 <b>though [17]</b> 3/1 8/4 13/12 15/5 33/7 38/3 53/25 81/23 86/5 90/16 113/19 116/9 127/6 134/10 138/5 152/24 155/16 <b>thought [62]</b> 26/15 26/21 29/15 29/16 36/24 36/25 37/1 37/3 37/4 43/7 52/10 61/13 61/14 64/8 65/20 66/14 67/21 67/21 74/6 77/15 77/15 80/10 80/12 83/11 84/5 84/8 94/2 97/21 104/21 113/14 115/12 120/18 132/21 132/22 133/14 134/10 134/11 135/1 136/23 138/22 138/24 139/18 143/8 144/18 152/17 157/5 157/8 164/2 165/22 169/12 177/2 179/9 190/15 191/6 191/9 191/17 191/17 191/18 191/19 192/8 192/11 193/10 <b>thoughts [1]</b> 31/22 <b>thousands [3]</b> 3/1 135/21 139/4 <b>threat [1]</b> 90/5 <b>threats [1]</b> 98/7 <b>three [15]</b> 3/22 32/25	58/25 59/4 59/6 70/22 73/22 79/9 81/20 114/2 114/3 135/11 137/1 139/21 141/11 <b>three days [2]</b> 79/9 139/21 <b>three weeks [1]</b> 114/3 <b>through [30]</b> 4/12 5/2 7/1 11/21 32/15 33/11 39/22 44/13 44/14 52/5 66/7 66/8 80/22 90/18 90/22 109/22 110/9 115/3 125/23 126/1 127/12 128/9 164/7 165/4 172/23 174/18 178/9 182/9 187/7 188/18 <b>throughout [16]</b> 3/4 6/22 6/23 48/17 62/11 75/3 83/18 116/20 117/15 124/3 128/25 147/1 149/3 158/25 181/16 191/22 <b>throw [2]</b> 126/7 136/23 <b>Thursday [6]</b> 114/16 128/11 129/23 129/24 130/15 194/15 <b>tier [3]</b> 13/10 20/25 161/11 <b>tiering [1]</b> 40/4 <b>tiers [3]</b> 28/13 157/13 178/20 <b>till [1]</b> 62/22 <b>time [82]</b> 6/12 7/18 7/20 11/14 11/16 14/6 15/20 17/3 24/24 24/24 26/16 29/22 32/16 36/16 41/11 42/5 42/19 42/24 58/8 61/7 63/11 66/6 82/17 94/25 97/1 97/19 100/16 100/20 102/6 103/7 103/12 104/9 104/24 108/1 108/6 109/14 109/20 110/21 112/3 112/8 116/4 116/16 116/25 120/19 122/6 124/25 125/10 125/14 126/2 129/13 130/3 134/11 137/9 137/13 142/1 143/9 146/11 146/17 146/20 148/7 152/18 155/8 155/15 155/17 155/18 157/6 157/6 158/14 161/5 161/24 165/2 167/7 169/3 169/18 171/2 173/10 175/4 176/2 185/1 186/8 191/14 193/11 <b>timeliness [7]</b> 12/19 17/2 105/11 107/2
<b>that's... [81]</b> 44/8 46/25 50/22 54/19 59/10 70/6 70/7 76/2 76/2 77/21 77/22 78/12 79/14 83/25 84/2 89/24 90/2 90/7 90/11 91/14 93/8 93/8 93/13 98/5 98/15 98/19 104/2 104/7 105/21 105/23 106/5 106/21 107/21 108/17 111/11 111/23 112/20 114/4 114/4 114/19 116/2 117/13 131/1 131/15 131/20 134/12 134/23 134/24 134/24 136/22 143/1 143/7 147/10 148/7 148/21 149/23 149/24 150/11 150/16 150/20 151/7 156/2 156/2 166/25 168/7 168/13 168/24 170/15 170/18 174/7 175/18 175/21 176/20 179/15 180/6 183/17 183/24 184/19 184/25 185/5 193/18	<b>therapeutics [4]</b> 9/24 40/22 40/23 95/23 <b>there [280]</b> <b>there's [15]</b> 21/13 22/14 36/16 41/14 42/18 47/14 48/18 64/20 113/21 113/22 123/19 126/6 128/5 156/9 157/7 <b>thereabouts [1]</b> 104/25 <b>thereafter [1]</b> 130/25 <b>thereby [1]</b> 144/12 <b>therefore [9]</b> 7/4 23/14 51/22 64/4 121/4 150/21 162/16 163/4 193/3 <b>therefore</b> <b>Manchester [1]</b> 162/16 <b>Theresa [1]</b> 2/8 <b>Theresa May [1]</b> 2/8 <b>these [39]</b> 2/23 6/23 18/18 25/18 32/25 35/9 37/13 38/14 39/17 41/10 42/4 43/6 50/5 53/17 59/16 75/24 79/4 87/23 88/6 96/24 97/17 99/19 104/11 105/5 106/19 115/24 119/12 128/21 135/15 140/13 142/15 148/9 163/2 170/1 178/15 183/9 184/9 184/12 189/14 <b>they [112]</b> 1/11 6/14 7/16 9/5 10/8 12/19 13/21 15/2 17/1 17/8 17/11 17/11 17/24	161/18 161/18 161/24 162/22 162/22 164/25 169/9 171/2 172/9 174/9 176/23 176/23 177/11 177/12 179/8 184/2 184/15 185/2 189/23 189/23 <b>they'd [3]</b> 61/3 144/18 147/7 <b>they're [6]</b> 37/15 44/7 74/24 141/24 153/5 164/24 <b>thing [35]</b> 8/22 30/8 32/4 32/10 41/3 64/12 66/25 82/13 84/10 92/9 110/9 114/6 116/10 119/5 120/25 126/18 127/7 127/15 137/13 142/5 144/16 146/18 149/4 167/19 170/25 174/10 174/12 174/15 175/24 180/11 180/22 183/13 184/22 185/8 191/19 <b>things [53]</b> 8/7 10/16 11/13 11/17 13/20 14/4 14/5 28/25 30/1 41/10 42/18 51/3 57/21 61/25 62/5 62/14 63/13 63/23 66/11 66/12 79/2 81/19 84/24 95/17 97/7 104/4 104/22 106/19 113/18 115/14 115/18 126/8 126/22 129/4 141/19 147/2 156/5 158/12 163/22 175/7 175/18 176/1 176/12 177/21 179/20	<b>think [348]</b> <b>thinking [13]</b> 45/17 57/20 106/23 111/17 115/10 115/17 116/14 126/5 148/17 160/18 167/8 167/19 193/6 <b>thinks [2]</b> 99/7 99/7 <b>third [1]</b> 144/2 <b>thirds [1]</b> 112/7 <b>this [268]</b> <b>those [59]</b> 1/11 1/13 2/25 3/6 3/6 4/21 5/4 5/4 5/9 5/17 8/2 9/13 9/16 21/19 22/13 24/21 26/20 30/15 41/4 41/5 43/23 45/21 47/5 48/3 48/7 48/15 49/14 50/10 52/4 60/23 61/22 69/4 79/13 96/3 114/1 114/2 120/21 127/2 128/12 129/21 132/10 140/15 141/22 145/21 155/8 157/19 163/20 163/20 165/3 165/5 167/14 167/24 169/1 172/11 173/23 176/12 178/14 189/1 189/20 <b>though [17]</b> 3/1 8/4 13/12 15/5 33/7 38/3 53/25 81/23 86/5 90/16 113/19 116/9 127/6 134/10 138/5 152/24 155/16 <b>thought [62]</b> 26/15 26/21 29/15 29/16 36/24 36/25 37/1 37/3 37/4 43/7 52/10 61/13 61/14 64/8 65/20 66/14 67/21 67/21 74/6 77/15 77/15 80/10 80/12 83/11 84/5 84/8 94/2 97/21 104/21 113/14 115/12 120/18 132/21 132/22 133/14 134/10 134/11 135/1 136/23 138/22 138/24 139/18 143/8 144/18 152/17 157/5 157/8 164/2 165/22 169/12 177/2 179/9 190/15 191/6 191/9 191/17 191/17 191/18 191/19 192/8 192/11 193/10 <b>thoughts [1]</b> 31/22 <b>thousands [3]</b> 3/1 135/21 139/4 <b>threat [1]</b> 90/5 <b>threats [1]</b> 98/7 <b>three [15]</b> 3/22 32/25	



<b>T</b>	158/14 163/22 169/18 170/10 191/20	<b>transparent [3]</b> 27/17 27/21 27/23	58/25 59/4 59/5 67/19 75/20 84/19 84/22	10/7 18/4 50/21 51/21 65/13 66/23 67/1
<b>timeliness... [3]</b>	<b>tool [2]</b> 75/7 139/6	<b>travel [1]</b> 68/20	93/19 93/24 95/17	67/23 69/16 72/25
116/7 116/13 120/25	<b>tools [1]</b> 137/6	<b>travellers [1]</b> 54/20	112/7 116/10 129/23	76/16 89/4 94/18
<b>times [9]</b> 19/9 24/2	<b>top [21]</b> 23/6 32/24	<b>Treasury [7]</b> 26/23	137/1 168/21 174/22	103/21 109/13 142/14
29/22 31/5 81/20	33/22 34/25 37/8	27/6 27/16 28/6 29/2	182/6	184/13 186/19 188/12
117/24 126/18 152/16	41/24 44/7 76/5 91/7	127/13 127/20	<b>two and [1]</b> 58/25	<b>understandably [3]</b>
163/20	136/3 147/25 149/7	<b>treated [1]</b> 162/16	<b>two years [1]</b> 168/21	21/2 141/1 152/14
<b>timeset [1]</b> 105/11	153/17 167/6 172/4	<b>trends [1]</b> 131/13	<b>Two-thirds [1]</b> 112/7	<b>understanding [9]</b>
<b>timing [5]</b> 94/14	180/1 180/8 180/13	<b>tribute [1]</b> 163/23	<b>two-week [2]</b> 84/19	22/9 40/6 62/4 73/17
94/16 112/16 113/6	180/21 181/20 191/12	<b>tried [9]</b> 7/11 8/16	84/22	74/10 85/24 124/8
145/2	<b>top-drawer [3]</b> 33/22	34/19 34/20 50/22	<b>two/three weeks [1]</b>	167/25 170/11
<b>timings [1]</b> 11/12	34/25 41/24	155/16 155/17 155/18	137/1	<b>understands [1]</b>
<b>tin [1]</b> 26/4	<b>topic [3]</b> 44/16	175/7	<b>type [2]</b> 30/4 30/17	13/17
<b>tired [1]</b> 95/12	171/15 182/6	<b>trite [1]</b> 152/8	<b>types [1]</b> 79/4	<b>understood [15]</b>
<b>today [3]</b> 1/25 10/19	<b>Total [1]</b> 115/2	<b>trouble [1]</b> 153/6	<b>typhoon [1]</b> 46/3	24/20 56/20 61/23
70/15	<b>totally [8]</b> 32/25	<b>troubled [3]</b> 64/12	<b>typical [1]</b> 58/24	62/15 63/7 63/21
<b>today's [1]</b> 1/19	40/10 52/11 115/5	84/2 133/20		66/18 74/3 85/1
<b>together [3]</b> 43/11	125/12 127/11 149/15	<b>true [20]</b> 19/19 20/1	<b>U</b>	136/14 144/11 149/23
152/10 177/22	188/12	30/2 36/23 40/14	<b>UK [20]</b> 14/21 16/1	153/15 171/11 187/15
<b>told [60]</b> 33/21 37/9	<b>touch [1]</b> 66/3	45/22 57/9 62/16	32/15 51/7 52/9 56/11	<b>undoubtedly [1]</b> 42/4
40/12 41/21 57/3 60/4	<b>tough [3]</b> 67/3 161/24	67/18 67/20 101/21	56/16 66/21 84/9	<b>undue [1]</b> 74/24
63/2 64/10 64/23 65/5	165/2	117/13 117/14 134/24	88/18 121/3 128/5	<b>unease [2]</b> 174/25
65/8 65/10 65/11	<b>tougher [1]</b> 66/19	143/11 147/3 155/23	138/6 138/25 152/9	175/12
65/14 70/15 72/7	<b>towards [2]</b> 45/25	156/3 185/6 192/12	152/17 154/9 156/13	<b>unexpurgated [1]</b>
76/12 78/20 78/24	58/7	<b>truly [6]</b> 46/20 58/9	157/6 159/7	37/25
78/25 80/5 83/21	<b>toxic [5]</b> 33/17 33/23	138/25 140/6 140/14	<b>UK Government [1]</b>	<b>unfit [1]</b> 35/14
84/11 86/16 86/17	35/1 36/10 41/25	169/4	152/17	<b>unfortunate [1]</b> 18/6
90/13 92/6 92/21	<b>toxicity [1]</b> 176/8	<b>Trump [1]</b> 82/12	<b>UK's [3]</b> 77/7 82/8	<b>unfortunately [1]</b>
93/17 96/10 96/22	<b>trace [20]</b> 52/22 53/3	<b>trundled [1]</b> 109/11	87/17	51/1
97/12 99/17 100/16	53/5 54/14 54/25 55/2	<b>truth [4]</b> 2/3 99/11	<b>ultimate [6]</b> 23/15	<b>unified [1]</b> 156/13
101/12 102/15 102/16	63/11 74/5 75/12	129/2 169/15	27/6 28/12 119/17	<b>unimmunised [2]</b>
102/21 103/12 105/16	75/13 75/16 76/15	<b>try [20]</b> 11/11 11/21	133/18 136/17	59/6 149/2
112/16 112/23 113/4	92/4 92/20 93/1 93/2	25/1 32/6 33/10 45/9	<b>ultimately [6]</b> 7/14	<b>united [28]</b> 4/10
113/5 113/10 113/12	93/22 101/24 148/6	45/11 67/1 68/1 69/16	15/22 21/9 51/6	14/18 15/8 15/14
115/13 118/2 132/18	148/8	74/4 109/14 111/20	151/17 157/19	16/15 49/7 52/22
137/17 173/3 173/7	<b>tracing [2]</b> 76/20	136/22 146/23 156/14	<b>unacceptable [1]</b>	52/25 58/19 61/7 75/3
175/21 178/25 191/25	93/18	169/16 178/21 181/2	186/5	76/9 76/10 87/5 93/19
192/3 192/5 192/20	<b>track [2]</b> 148/6 148/8	181/9	<b>unanimous [1]</b> 158/5	93/22 151/7 151/10
192/23 193/20	<b>traction [1]</b> 148/4	<b>trying [20]</b> 4/25 11/7	<b>unaware [2]</b> 36/5	152/2 152/7 154/25
<b>tomorrow [5]</b> 70/15	<b>trade [3]</b> 19/21	32/11 32/13 57/19	36/9	155/25 157/17 157/25
79/23 194/8 194/9	192/10 193/9	58/9 63/16 66/18	<b>unbelievably [1]</b>	158/3 158/7 158/23
194/11	<b>trade-offs [1]</b> 19/21	80/21 109/17 110/8	146/18	160/22
<b>tone [1]</b> 44/11	<b>trading [1]</b> 191/16	120/7 124/14 129/7	<b>uncertain [1]</b> 133/17	<b>United Kingdom [23]</b>
<b>tonight [2]</b> 6/9 55/15	<b>traditionally [1]</b> 28/4	158/4 162/20 169/14	<b>unchecked [1]</b> 110/9	4/10 14/18 15/8 15/14
<b>too [33]</b> 3/11 17/5	<b>traffic [1]</b> 160/13	171/6 179/2 179/5	<b>uncoiled [3]</b> 95/16	16/15 49/7 52/22
19/9 19/10 34/17	<b>tragedy [5]</b> 4/7 4/15	<b>tube [1]</b> 136/3	111/1 111/9	52/25 58/19 61/7 75/3
34/17 40/19 52/10	4/16 4/18 72/16	<b>Tuesday [3]</b> 20/9	<b>uncoiling [1]</b> 17/10	76/9 76/10 87/5 93/19
52/10 94/9 94/23	<b>tragic [3]</b> 96/17 96/17	80/24 81/3	<b>uncritically [1]</b> 33/6	93/22 151/10 152/2
95/11 96/6 96/10	138/25	<b>tumour' [1]</b> 128/14	<b>under [8]</b> 5/15 31/15	154/25 155/25 157/17
96/22 97/13 97/20	<b>tragically [2]</b> 15/13	<b>tune [1]</b> 58/1	60/13 84/3 146/21	158/3 158/7
98/8 100/18 107/6	106/24	<b>turn [5]</b> 44/16 44/23	187/12 188/16 190/9	<b>United Kingdom's [1]</b>
116/5 120/10 131/22	<b>trailed [1]</b> 9/9	46/3 79/20 172/5	<b>underestimate [1]</b>	151/7
137/13 137/14 144/6	<b>train [1]</b> 177/1	<b>turned [8]</b> 40/13	73/8	<b>unity [2]</b> 157/23
144/10 147/21 148/10	<b>transition [1]</b> 54/6	52/13 61/6 69/13	<b>underestimated [6]</b>	159/9
148/13 177/21 180/7	<b>transmission [21]</b>	69/23 72/21 72/22	52/2 52/9 52/19 61/21	<b>unknown [2]</b> 30/12
186/24	40/10 49/11 52/20	122/24	137/2 137/2	58/2
<b>took [25]</b> 28/20 61/14	56/9 59/23 63/6 63/8	<b>Turning [1]</b> 85/14	<b>underestimating [2]</b>	<b>unless [2]</b> 62/23
81/12 84/21 118/7	64/9 64/15 64/25 65/6	<b>turns [2]</b> 73/5 101/6	52/8 54/4	183/10
127/17 127/20 133/6	65/10 65/18 87/4	<b>twice [1]</b> 24/8	<b>undermined [1]</b>	<b>unlikely [1]</b> 62/22
133/20 135/2 135/4	87/22 94/1 105/21	<b>twigged [3]</b> 80/18	157/7	<b>unlocked [1]</b> 96/18
135/9 137/12 138/4	106/6 106/8 117/3	80/19 80/20	<b>undermines [2]</b> 1/15	<b>unmitigated [2]</b>
143/25 151/16 151/20	143/14	<b>two [22]</b> 17/8 30/1	183/3	107/19 115/3
151/21 155/8 156/15	<b>transmitted [1]</b> 62/5	40/19 56/13 58/18	<b>understand [20]</b> 2/22	<b>unnecessary [1]</b>

<b>U</b>	152/7 152/7 174/2 174/11 <b>use</b> [15] 38/15 40/25 68/1 87/23 91/10 94/16 110/17 130/2 136/19 145/23 148/12 156/14 156/18 173/1 181/3 <b>used</b> [6] 7/2 30/17 40/2 77/13 107/5 154/3 <b>useful</b> [3] 28/7 28/8 38/12 <b>useless</b> [1] 31/4 <b>ushers</b> [2] 2/18 2/19 <b>using</b> [4] 7/11 108/5 154/1 169/12 <b>usual</b> [2] 2/3 108/7 <b>usual'</b> [1] 108/2 <b>usually</b> [1] 98/18 <b>utmost</b> [2] 85/8 183/4 <b>utter</b> [1] 57/16 <b>Uxbridge</b> [1] 3/19	66/23 66/25 72/4 73/6 82/7 82/25 88/12 88/25 93/12 95/4 96/2 96/14 97/9 97/9 98/5 100/15 106/2 106/22 107/1 108/20 109/5 110/20 110/20 119/7 119/7 120/19 121/13 121/14 124/8 129/4 130/5 133/16 133/17 133/25 138/4 138/4 139/1 139/13 142/4 142/13 146/17 147/6 147/7 147/11 147/12 147/14 148/1 148/10 149/5 149/5 149/6 149/12 150/13 150/16 150/16 150/18 150/18 150/24 155/12 155/12 155/17 156/14 157/24 160/10 160/10 161/14 161/24 161/24 164/7 164/12 164/12 164/12 168/11 168/20 169/12 169/14 169/14 171/1 171/25 172/2 173/10 174/9 174/13 174/19 175/3 183/5 183/5 184/3 187/8 188/20 189/5 191/3 193/6 193/10 193/10 194/5 194/6 194/7 <b>via</b> [1] 6/7 <b>vice</b> [1] 38/5 <b>victim</b> [1] 170/23 <b>victims</b> [6] 2/23 2/25 3/6 150/16 164/9 170/24 <b>videos</b> [1] 170/23 <b>view</b> [22] 19/11 38/5 40/11 64/10 66/12 94/25 104/19 110/10 119/15 127/19 137/12 153/3 153/10 153/12 156/15 156/23 162/12 162/13 177/21 187/9 188/13 193/8 <b>viewpoint</b> [2] 50/10 51/17 <b>views</b> [8] 24/12 30/22 37/24 40/8 43/3 43/4 124/14 155/23 <b>violence</b> [3] 164/3 164/5 164/9 <b>viral</b> [3] 49/1 56/22 143/14 <b>virtue</b> [3] 6/15 150/18 150/24 <b>virus</b> [44] 5/1 10/6 13/1 13/11 39/22 40/1 46/12 47/7 48/3 49/15 52/23 55/6 57/4 60/1 66/18 66/21 68/7 71/7 73/9 75/2 75/8 75/19	76/8 76/13 77/6 77/10 79/16 87/3 87/21 93/5 94/9 105/22 109/23 110/5 110/25 121/2 125/21 126/5 126/10 129/3 129/3 137/4 137/8 143/21 <b>virus-fighting</b> [2] 126/5 126/10 <b>visited</b> [1] 102/25 <b>vital</b> [5] 23/24 112/17 117/25 162/22 165/3 <b>vocabulary</b> [1] 134/1 <b>vulnerable</b> [3] 114/1 162/25 167/3	27/16 46/19 48/1 50/2 50/3 53/2 53/9 54/25 61/15 63/17 77/23 80/25 81/12 86/19 95/1 95/15 106/3 113/10 120/3 125/4 129/6 130/16 139/16 157/17 159/9 166/7 166/16 168/2 169/19 169/20 177/24 181/22 193/9 193/11 <b>watch</b> [1] 186/6 <b>watching</b> [1] 18/9 <b>wave</b> [9] 44/4 44/4 56/23 106/5 106/5 106/7 107/1 107/19 111/4 <b>waves</b> [2] 38/7 105/21 <b>way</b> [51] 4/4 10/7 12/14 12/19 20/22 21/15 23/18 27/16 27/17 28/14 31/25 40/24 42/10 42/10 43/1 45/15 48/7 49/4 50/22 60/17 63/19 64/5 68/1 68/5 69/13 71/5 90/14 109/22 112/7 127/15 127/16 129/7 129/9 149/14 153/13 154/9 154/19 156/13 157/8 164/19 166/13 166/23 168/15 171/13 173/17 175/18 176/21 179/3 181/9 187/7 193/13 <b>ways</b> [4] 118/5 120/16 129/5 187/14 <b>we</b> [431] <b>we'd</b> [16] 32/17 60/20 60/24 63/7 63/11 84/25 84/25 96/18 104/16 125/22 132/21 132/21 133/14 137/1 138/25 178/8 <b>we'll</b> [16] 9/19 10/17 18/15 20/7 20/20 25/9 31/1 41/1 48/12 64/13 72/6 88/1 95/20 145/2 162/2 194/9 <b>we're</b> [25] 19/23 29/18 35/10 40/2 40/3 40/4 40/5 44/23 48/11 55/20 75/24 76/1 90/2 90/25 94/19 97/7 97/7 104/25 107/22 111/22 115/13 121/19 121/25 129/19 141/6 <b>we've</b> [30] 39/24 40/2 40/3 75/11 75/12 80/13 92/6 92/21 99/14 99/14 100/21 100/21 111/19 112/8 115/15 115/25 120/1
	<b>V</b>		<b>W</b>	
	<b>vaccination</b> [1] 95/23 <b>vaccine</b> [2] 40/24 44/10 <b>vaccines</b> [1] 9/24 <b>Vallance</b> [7] 31/3 122/12 122/17 122/25 124/19 187/6 189/17 <b>Vallance's</b> [4] 142/17 147/13 162/3 187/3 <b>valuable</b> [1] 25/1 <b>value</b> [2] 59/4 66/14 <b>valued</b> [1] 42/21 <b>variant</b> [1] 123/19 <b>variety</b> [2] 119/11 124/4 <b>various</b> [5] 12/14 20/5 61/4 166/25 182/13 <b>vary</b> [1] 15/24 <b>vastly</b> [1] 61/21 <b>veered</b> [2] 126/25 127/24 <b>ventilators</b> [2] 40/11 40/13 <b>version</b> [4] 174/23 174/24 182/19 183/2 <b>versions</b> [1] 174/22 <b>very</b> [140] 3/5 5/10 10/10 11/8 11/8 13/12 13/16 14/7 16/8 17/1 17/1 17/3 18/5 19/2 25/3 25/22 25/22 28/7 28/8 29/1 29/1 34/16 37/2 37/3 44/1 44/1 44/3 44/5 44/5 52/4 54/5 57/6 57/6 58/22 59/8 59/8 60/7 61/14 64/5 66/1 66/4 66/19		<b>wagging</b> [1] 146/11 <b>wait</b> [7] 132/4 132/10 133/10 143/4 143/9 180/19 189/22 <b>waiting</b> [5] 61/17 61/17 61/18 133/7 134/5 <b>wake</b> [2] 5/1 51/21 <b>Wales</b> [2] 152/14 152/22 <b>walking</b> [1] 183/5 <b>walks</b> [2] 3/3 119/4 <b>wall</b> [1] 59/25 <b>want</b> [15] 11/11 23/14 33/18 84/13 101/6 110/5 121/9 121/9 136/22 147/8 182/3 182/9 183/9 187/13 188/18 <b>wanted</b> [28] 28/23 34/6 34/7 67/22 69/15 102/13 102/13 110/11 130/7 130/9 130/9 146/24 146/24 147/3 159/5 159/9 171/10 173/7 173/14 175/21 176/17 176/22 176/23 176/24 182/4 183/20 185/24 192/23 <b>wanting</b> [2] 147/15 148/11 <b>wants</b> [2] 141/10 147/21 <b>war</b> [7] 169/4 170/4 170/8 170/20 170/25 171/4 171/6 <b>warfare</b> [2] 176/9 176/15 <b>warm</b> [1] 117/3 <b>warned</b> [2] 61/5 90/6 <b>Warner</b> [3] 113/3 119/19 124/12 <b>Warners</b> [1] 122/20 <b>was</b> [757] <b>was/is</b> [1] 143/21 <b>wasn't</b> [38] 8/21 16/12 20/1 21/15	

<b>W</b>	153/16 155/22 156/2 156/4 156/5 156/5 157/2 158/11 161/16 167/5 170/15 172/15 173/9 175/8 175/9 175/18 175/19 180/13 181/11 182/15 184/8 184/17 185/2 186/22 186/23 190/3 191/2 191/11 193/4 193/4	34/7 34/15 35/18 36/16 40/18 44/6 44/9 46/8 46/13 47/13 54/13 54/24 55/1 66/16 68/13 71/16 72/7 72/9 76/12 83/2 83/19 83/20 84/15 87/3 88/7 89/12 90/9 90/15 90/18 90/24 97/5 102/25 104/15 104/23 105/6 110/7 111/11 114/5 115/25 119/3 121/16 121/23 124/10 124/18 130/22 132/13 132/24 133/1 134/16 137/22 138/14 140/8 143/14 148/24 148/24 151/22 152/16 152/18 158/11 161/3 164/14 167/8 168/9 177/22 178/15 179/20 181/3 183/19 183/24 185/6 185/8 185/22 186/23 189/1 191/15	26/15 26/19 29/2 31/22 31/25 33/15 34/3 38/25 39/21 41/12 41/17 42/10 42/10 42/13 43/2 46/6 47/12 47/16 49/1 49/22 51/5 53/13 55/5 57/1 57/4 58/1 58/8 59/21 60/8 61/8 64/20 65/1 69/16 70/18 72/23 72/25 75/21 75/23 76/15 77/8 80/17 83/11 85/15 86/16 87/25 88/2 89/2 93/10 94/13 94/20 96/23 100/12 101/8 101/14 103/2 103/18 104/22 105/2 105/14 105/15 105/20 108/12 108/22 109/17 110/10 110/19 112/14 114/8 115/24 116/18 123/15 125/16 127/4 129/2 129/2 130/1 131/14 132/5 132/9 133/17 136/25 140/16 143/17 147/24 148/7 148/19 153/24 154/24 162/5 163/5 164/7 165/16 166/24 173/5 173/6 175/25 176/10 176/18 178/2 178/3 180/17 181/22 181/23 185/11 185/18 185/19 186/1 187/15 188/5 190/4 190/13 192/12	144/3 145/21 150/15 153/4 165/1 167/8 167/14 167/24 169/11 171/1 171/2 171/4 171/10 171/17 180/20 184/15 184/22 187/20 188/21 188/23 188/24 190/9 190/10 193/7 193/7
<b>we've... [13]</b> 120/9 121/19 121/20 124/7 126/7 126/7 129/17 136/25 139/12 140/23 148/3 154/6 168/17	<b>well known [3]</b> 94/16 145/10 181/11	26/15 26/19 29/2 31/22 31/25 33/15 34/3 38/25 39/21 41/12 41/17 42/10 42/10 42/13 43/2 46/6 47/12 47/16 49/1 49/22 51/5 53/13 55/5 57/1 57/4 58/1 58/8 59/21 60/8 61/8 64/20 65/1 69/16 70/18 72/23 72/25 75/21 75/23 76/15 77/8 80/17 83/11 85/15 86/16 87/25 88/2 89/2 93/10 94/13 94/20 96/23 100/12 101/8 101/14 103/2 103/18 104/22 105/2 105/14 105/15 105/20 108/12 108/22 109/17 110/10 110/19 112/14 114/8 115/24 116/18 123/15 125/16 127/4 129/2 129/2 130/1 131/14 132/5 132/9 133/17 136/25 140/16 143/17 147/24 148/7 148/19 153/24 154/24 162/5 163/5 164/7 165/16 166/24 173/5 173/6 175/25 176/10 176/18 178/2 178/3 180/17 181/22 181/23 185/11 185/18 185/19 186/1 187/15 188/5 190/4 190/13 192/12	<b>whole [24]</b> 19/22 19/24 22/5 32/9 33/8 53/5 73/1 96/16 96/16 106/15 119/3 130/8 146/18 159/7 161/22 167/7 179/9 180/10 180/22 186/18 186/23 186/25 189/4 192/8	
<b>wear [1]</b> 97/13	<b>went [13]</b> 8/7 11/21 12/19 20/8 53/20 62/21 79/1 89/1 95/18 95/24 134/13 148/24 164/2	<b>where [34]</b> 11/2 28/22 35/19 38/6 39/21 59/14 64/14 72/20 74/25 77/19 79/22 81/21 92/12 117/3 120/15 127/9 130/8 134/25 138/6 144/22 155/16 157/25 159/14 167/1 171/6 171/7 173/3 175/5 175/5 175/6 175/7 177/23 181/7 182/22	<b>wholly [3]</b> 24/6 39/20 51/6	
<b>Wednesday [2]</b> 1/1 85/5	<b>were [342]</b>	<b>whereby [2]</b> 164/9 177/14	<b>whom [6]</b> 5/10 21/24 25/24 43/2 43/10 43/19	
<b>week [26]</b> 27/9 47/9 62/9 73/16 74/12 82/23 84/19 84/22 96/20 111/12 115/25 116/17 116/20 118/13 118/19 119/24 120/5 125/5 125/17 126/24 132/5 132/11 132/13 137/9 165/17 166/8	<b>weren't [12]</b> 36/12 53/20 56/2 67/16 81/22 86/2 102/19 112/20 126/10 133/9 134/17 144/19	<b>wherever [3]</b> 10/14 187/21 187/22	<b>whose [3]</b> 21/11 30/22 42/16	
<b>weekend [13]</b> 91/17 91/18 101/7 101/15 101/16 108/12 108/22 119/10 119/25 124/3 131/3 131/12 134/20	<b>Western [2]</b> 15/10 15/18	<b>whether [55]</b> 4/11 6/13 6/14 13/21 20/12 20/24 20/25 20/25 29/11 39/10 39/11 39/12 40/9 40/11 42/2 42/12 42/25 43/4 46/2 48/14 48/15 71/1 97/18 99/10 99/12 99/20 105/22 106/2 119/13 130/16 132/4 132/10 133/7 133/10 135/6 136/19 140/9 143/5 148/10 148/11 148/12 151/19 151/22 154/13 157/9 158/18 164/24 167/17 169/3 170/3 170/7 177/4 178/25 190/13 190/15	<b>why [59]</b> 8/2 9/13 15/20 15/21 16/4 25/20 49/12 53/2 53/14 57/3 57/7 57/11 58/10 63/16 67/23 71/5 71/6 71/9 75/19 77/22 84/11 86/7 87/6 87/8 88/3 99/19 100/5 105/3 111/11 115/13 115/23 116/3 116/3 120/3 120/5 122/25 128/15 130/8 132/3 132/9 133/10 134/12 136/23 139/8 140/15 141/2 141/23 141/24 141/24 165/6 171/22 172/1 173/17 176/10 176/11 176/21 189/13 189/25 191/5	
<b>Wednesday [2]</b> 1/1 85/5	<b>Western Europe [1]</b> 15/18	<b>whenever [3]</b> 10/14 187/21 187/22	<b>while [2]</b> 150/8 189/10	
<b>week [26]</b> 27/9 47/9 62/9 73/16 74/12 82/23 84/19 84/22 96/20 111/12 115/25 116/17 116/20 118/13 118/19 119/24 120/5 125/5 125/17 126/24 132/5 132/11 132/13 137/9 165/17 166/8	<b>what [267]</b>	<b>whilst [5]</b> 42/8 54/14 117/11 131/12 154/16	<b>whiteboard [2]</b> 119/21 121/17	
<b>weekend [13]</b> 91/17 91/18 101/7 101/15 101/16 108/12 108/22 119/10 119/25 124/3 131/3 131/12 134/20	<b>what we [1]</b> 30/18	<b>Whitehall [12]</b> 26/25 32/22 51/25 57/16 58/3 60/25 69/18 69/19 70/5 71/21 181/6 182/2	<b>Whitehall [12]</b> 26/25 32/22 51/25 57/16 58/3 60/25 69/18 69/19 70/5 71/21 181/6 182/2	
<b>weekly [1]</b> 48/25	<b>what's [9]</b> 80/4 89/9 89/11 109/13 123/2 148/4 149/13 150/1 150/3	<b>whichever [2]</b> 12/19 173/17	<b>Whitty [9]</b> 79/7 85/19 122/12 122/17 122/18 122/25 124/19 131/3 137/16	
<b>weeks [15]</b> 36/2 47/10 56/17 61/22 66/20 109/12 114/3 116/21 137/1 140/3 144/13 144/19 144/20 168/3 174/2	<b>whatever [20]</b> 12/10 12/21 37/2 48/9 84/19 115/2 135/2 143/23 164/25 177/2 177/14 178/10 179/11 181/15 184/23 185/10 189/16 189/23 191/12 193/8	<b>while [2]</b> 150/8 189/10	<b>who [59]</b> 3/3 3/12 4/21 5/10 21/9 22/8 30/14 30/23 31/13 31/14 31/15 32/15 34/1 34/23 36/14 38/11 41/6 41/18 47/17 50/10 55/22 59/7 61/10 71/3 78/5 79/18 87/11 95/1 116/24 119/5 119/8 119/18 128/15 128/16	
<b>weigh [1]</b> 21/9	<b>whatsApp [27]</b> 6/1 30/6 30/15 37/6 38/2 41/12 41/14 41/16 41/20 41/20 41/22 70/12 99/2 107/23 107/24 107/24 108/10 108/11 147/24 149/7 179/13 179/17 179/23 179/24 182/7 185/25 186/3	<b>whilst [5]</b> 42/8 54/14 117/11 131/12 154/16	<b>whiteboard [2]</b> 119/21 121/17	
<b>weighed [1]</b> 26/19	<b>whatsApps [23]</b> 5/20 6/7 6/13 6/18 6/20 7/3 7/20 8/3 9/1 9/5 9/7 9/13 29/10 29/12 32/18 37/25 44/2 124/6 125/11 148/15 188/2 188/11 193/19	<b>whiteboard [2]</b> 119/21 121/17	<b>Whitehall [12]</b> 26/25 32/22 51/25 57/16 58/3 60/25 69/18 69/19 70/5 71/21 181/6 182/2	
<b>weighing [2]</b> 21/25 119/1	<b>when [94]</b> 2/6 3/21 4/6 4/16 5/5 5/14 8/7 8/8 11/1 13/10 17/6 17/25 18/1 18/6 25/18 26/19 28/17 34/6 34/6	<b>whilst [5]</b> 42/8 54/14 117/11 131/12 154/16	<b>Whitehall [12]</b> 26/25 32/22 51/25 57/16 58/3 60/25 69/18 69/19 70/5 71/21 181/6 182/2	
<b>weighing-up [1]</b> 21/25		<b>whilst [5]</b> 42/8 54/14 117/11 131/12 154/16	<b>Whitehall [12]</b> 26/25 32/22 51/25 57/16 58/3 60/25 69/18 69/19 70/5 71/21 181/6 182/2	
<b>weight [1]</b> 186/25		<b>whilst [5]</b> 42/8 54/14 117/11 131/12 154/16	<b>Whitehall [12]</b> 26/25 32/22 51/25 57/16 58/3 60/25 69/18 69/19 70/5 71/21 181/6 182/2	
<b>weird [1]</b> 156/7		<b>whilst [5]</b> 42/8 54/14 117/11 131/12 154/16	<b>Whitehall [12]</b> 26/25 32/22 51/25 57/16 58/3 60/25 69/18 69/19 70/5 71/21 181/6 182/2	
<b>well [113]</b> 1/19 7/7 10/4 10/23 11/5 14/1 14/2 15/4 15/4 15/15 16/2 16/20 17/21 20/20 22/1 22/4 26/5 27/2 29/14 32/19 35/3 37/18 40/23 41/14 41/16 42/18 42/23 43/11 43/15 43/22 43/25 45/18 53/3 53/19 57/23 58/4 62/6 62/17 64/7 65/8 66/1 67/10 67/10 67/19 67/20 67/21 70/2 71/7 75/5 75/14 80/13 81/13 82/4 82/25 84/8 84/12 86/6 86/10 90/7 90/23 94/2 94/16 94/25 97/14 99/14 101/5 101/10 101/12 101/23 107/13 113/9 115/13 116/6 119/1 122/16 129/17 130/4 143/20 145/10 148/15 150/9 150/10 152/2		<b>whilst [5]</b> 42/8 54/14 117/11 131/12 154/16	<b>Whitehall [12]</b> 26/25 32/22 51/25 57/16 58/3 60/25 69/18 69/19 70/5 71/21 181/6 182/2	

<b>W</b>	146/15 146/15 147/4 152/2 161/17 166/13 171/23 177/11 177/12 178/11 178/13 182/21 183/23 189/2	99/25 100/18 105/22 106/4 106/6 106/7 107/19 114/13 117/19 117/25 118/1 121/11 124/10 124/21 125/14 125/15 126/23 127/11 127/22 130/17 132/11 132/13 132/25 133/6 133/8 134/18 137/22 137/22 137/23 138/2 138/13 142/5 142/11 143/5 143/24 144/1 144/14 146/4 147/16 149/5 151/24 155/16 155/17 159/6 159/22 160/3 162/7 162/8 162/16 163/2 163/16 168/1 174/3 177/24 177/25 178/5 178/5 178/6 178/7 178/19 178/21 181/8 181/8 181/9 184/21 187/16 187/20 192/11	<b>Yep [1]</b> 47/3 <b>yes [92]</b> 2/11 4/18 5/24 7/16 7/22 9/4 13/3 13/5 13/7 13/12 18/23 22/20 22/22 22/25 23/3 23/5 23/5 23/22 23/25 24/3 24/19 25/7 25/14 29/21 32/3 35/13 37/23 38/22 43/8 44/25 48/18 54/17 54/23 55/8 56/24 59/1 59/3 60/2 63/24 66/10 70/25 82/20 91/6 95/13 101/16 102/2 104/14 106/16 107/8 108/18 108/19 109/3 111/3 112/12 112/19 113/9 115/7 118/15 118/18 118/20 123/18 123/21 124/2 124/12 124/24 129/16 132/1 140/1 143/7 145/13 146/10 148/15 151/9 152/4 154/23 166/4 166/19 166/21 167/16 170/22 172/19 174/23 175/23 180/15 180/18 181/13 181/21 182/24 186/2 188/7 188/15 189/8 <b>yet [17]</b> 46/19 47/18 49/3 54/12 75/25 76/1 85/22 86/25 87/2 87/7 87/9 87/13 92/11 100/24 101/24 135/16 136/20 <b>you [873]</b> <b>you know [102]</b> 10/10 10/15 11/18 28/25 44/6 45/18 47/20 47/23 48/19 51/9 52/11 53/9 53/22 54/5 55/2 58/8 58/9 60/9 60/11 61/15 62/21 66/13 69/13 69/14 69/16 80/11 80/15 80/16 81/9 81/11 83/19 89/2 97/10 100/20 100/23 100/24 101/2 101/23 102/17 103/4 104/3 105/16 107/8 107/9 110/2 111/20 113/13 113/17 114/7 118/22 119/3 123/4 123/6 125/21 126/6 126/6 132/21 133/19 133/22 133/24 134/11 134/13 137/4 139/3 140/23 141/4 141/5 141/6 143/8 144/1 146/25 149/25 150/11 152/6 152/12 152/21 155/19	156/6 156/9 160/18 161/19 161/20 163/23 164/13 164/17 164/22 165/1 167/17 171/9 176/14 178/22 179/5 179/7 179/21 184/12 184/14 184/23 186/12 189/10 190/12 192/7 193/15 <b>you'd [8]</b> 7/10 7/12 37/24 46/10 101/8 121/7 132/13 169/25 <b>you'll [6]</b> 2/17 17/7 79/12 104/12 162/25 172/24 <b>you're [24]</b> 3/13 3/14 31/11 36/17 36/17 38/23 39/22 42/5 50/7 54/23 63/4 71/17 71/25 77/1 80/5 92/5 92/21 93/17 95/17 116/13 119/4 150/14 160/1 189/1 <b>you've [35]</b> 7/3 10/19 17/10 22/13 40/15 42/24 43/6 47/12 56/3 63/25 69/18 71/17 75/17 75/21 81/5 81/9 88/7 95/7 100/7 109/5 112/14 113/19 117/21 139/16 141/12 148/16 150/23 151/1 157/3 167/18 171/16 177/18 186/13 188/20 190/4 <b>your [179]</b> 1/22 1/23 2/1 2/9 2/12 2/22 3/17 3/18 4/23 5/8 5/19 5/19 5/23 6/1 6/3 6/13 6/25 7/1 7/18 8/2 8/11 9/1 9/5 9/14 10/19 10/21 11/5 11/22 12/4 12/8 13/22 14/20 17/15 18/10 19/16 19/23 20/22 21/18 21/22 22/21 23/9 23/10 23/10 23/11 23/13 29/6 30/25 31/3 31/25 32/7 32/19 33/4 33/23 33/23 34/2 34/14 35/1 35/19 36/6 36/6 36/10 36/11 37/5 37/5 38/15 38/16 38/16 38/23 39/13 39/13 40/17 41/25 42/8 42/13 43/13 43/16 43/19 43/21 45/1 46/5 46/9 46/11 47/11 48/13 48/24 51/7 55/12 57/8 60/8 61/19 63/7 63/20 65/22 67/14 68/20 69/1 69/24 70/12 71/14 73/17 74/8 74/22 74/25 77/23
<b>will... [2]</b> 187/23 194/9 <b>willing [3]</b> 38/11 182/18 184/22 <b>windscreen [1]</b> 98/9 <b>winter [4]</b> 148/2 148/14 149/12 149/20 <b>wish [7]</b> 1/10 9/1 15/15 22/1 53/19 75/8 189/18 <b>within [14]</b> 6/12 13/1 37/21 40/11 47/6 56/14 64/25 65/6 71/21 75/11 139/21 160/4 178/7 190/19 <b>without [11]</b> 61/15 95/23 140/14 164/1 164/10 174/18 176/3 176/19 180/5 182/19 190/20 <b>witness [23]</b> 1/5 1/7 1/9 1/19 2/1 9/14 11/22 19/8 19/10 19/14 45/1 45/7 83/10 122/7 145/25 159/17 172/16 180/1 184/16 187/3 188/3 192/16 193/2 <b>witness's [1]</b> 1/8 <b>witnesses [3]</b> 119/11 144/3 190/1 <b>women [1]</b> 164/1 <b>won't [3]</b> 60/5 84/10 126/19 <b>wonder [2]</b> 154/13 157/9 <b>wonderful [1]</b> 34/9 <b>wondering [1]</b> 177/13 <b>word [8]</b> 28/13 33/3 38/15 60/2 77/13 92/11 133/25 140/3 <b>wording [2]</b> 107/4 149/11 <b>words [11]</b> 5/18 32/25 117/6 136/19 145/23 148/12 156/14 156/18 157/3 169/7 194/2 <b>work [53]</b> 27/2 33/18 33/22 34/1 36/14 53/20 54/25 63/14 65/25 67/24 75/15 75/16 75/22 75/22 77/4 78/7 81/6 84/14 104/8 110/12 132/9 133/8 133/11 136/5 136/5 139/2 141/4 141/24 142/10 143/5 145/21 145/22 145/23 145/24 145/24 146/5 146/5 146/12 146/14	<b>worked [4]</b> 37/1 119/22 126/1 142/11 <b>workers [1]</b> 3/2 <b>working [10]</b> 34/3 81/16 83/18 85/16 141/3 153/15 155/12 174/20 178/20 190/8 <b>workings [1]</b> 174/17 <b>works [2]</b> 23/18 104/7 <b>world [10]</b> 15/4 16/3 46/7 47/19 47/25 70/17 71/4 71/8 71/17 101/12 <b>Wormald [2]</b> 68/25 191/8 <b>worried [2]</b> 148/1 149/12 <b>worrying [1]</b> 49/14 <b>worse [3]</b> 15/13 74/19 98/7 <b>worst [19]</b> 15/18 15/19 25/12 36/1 38/5 56/12 57/24 58/1 72/2 72/19 72/20 72/21 85/11 85/17 85/17 85/21 86/18 87/16 88/8 <b>worst-case [9]</b> 25/12 57/24 58/1 72/2 72/19 85/17 85/21 86/18 88/8 <b>worth [3]</b> 67/22 68/4 192/11 <b>would [149]</b> 1/3 5/5 5/16 6/14 6/24 10/12 11/18 11/20 14/13 14/25 16/5 16/25 19/24 20/2 20/23 21/2 21/4 21/7 24/20 26/13 27/7 28/11 28/14 30/4 30/7 30/10 30/16 30/18 31/7 31/10 31/18 32/16 33/5 36/14 38/1 38/5 38/21 39/13 40/12 40/13 45/22 48/8 51/8 51/24 52/11 56/15 56/21 59/16 60/3 61/25 62/14 63/10 63/15 63/15 63/23 64/17 66/21 67/18 68/22 69/14 69/21 70/2 71/20 73/15 74/4 76/14 77/20 80/23 83/3 84/16 85/24 87/17 87/21 88/17 88/19 90/16 95/24 96/8 97/1 97/3 97/4	<b>wouldn't [5]</b> 65/25 102/23 121/9 121/9 125/17 <b>wracked [2]</b> 188/23 189/15 <b>writing [1]</b> 89/8 <b>wrong [23]</b> 11/13 13/21 13/21 36/25 52/12 52/14 54/3 97/24 115/18 120/23 121/19 137/12 144/21 144/21 146/16 149/15 155/24 156/16 160/16 169/19 176/6 176/6 176/6 <b>wrote [1]</b> 158/17 <b>Wuhan [3]</b> 49/10 55/19 73/10		
	<b>X</b>			
	<b>Xi [1]</b> 82/7 <b>XYZ [1]</b> 108/6			
	<b>Y</b>			
	<b>yeah [36]</b> 7/9 7/24 9/11 9/25 26/12 27/10 43/18 50/14 61/13 78/15 78/17 79/11 83/5 91/20 106/1 107/17 108/14 109/2 112/4 114/10 114/17 122/23 130/20 131/1 131/20 135/20 140/19 155/3 161/13 163/14 165/12 168/19 174/25 180/12 181/1 186/21 <b>year [8]</b> 2/10 96/16 96/17 101/18 146/13 161/22 168/22 179/20 <b>years [2]</b> 168/21 168/21			

**Y**

**your... [75]** 79/5 79/8  
79/20 80/5 81/10  
81/23 81/25 82/22  
82/25 89/6 89/17  
92/18 92/24 93/14  
94/19 94/22 96/1  
100/10 109/8 112/11  
113/3 117/6 118/24  
126/12 126/25 127/1  
127/1 127/23 127/23  
128/1 128/10 130/1  
130/3 132/9 141/13  
144/14 145/11 145/15  
145/23 146/7 146/7  
148/12 149/11 151/4  
152/4 153/10 153/22  
155/22 155/23 156/14  
156/18 163/1 163/3  
163/12 166/1 170/12  
170/21 172/17 172/20  
175/11 175/13 175/14  
175/16 175/18 177/18  
179/14 181/15 182/10  
184/5 186/3 187/9  
189/2 190/20 190/24  
191/1  
**yourself [16]** 3/25  
11/25 24/22 32/13  
32/24 34/24 35/10  
49/13 61/9 80/4 81/5  
115/20 122/19 127/20  
147/24 152/24

**Z**

**Zero [1]** 37/11  
**zoonotic [2]** 51/4  
60/24