

Witness Name: James Slack

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: 14

Dated: 17 July 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JAMES SLACK

I, James Slack, will say as follows: -

Introduction

1. I provide this statement on matters of relevance to the Government's core political and administrative decision-making on Covid-19 from 1 January 2020 to 24 February 2022. I have been assisted in drafting this statement by the Government Legal Department and Pinsent Masons LLP.
2. I should say at the outset that much of my interaction with others at No. 10 was face-to-face. We were working together in a small office, so it was typically easier to speak with each other in person than to send and receive large numbers of emails.
3. In the circumstances, although I have been given the opportunity to review available contemporaneous materials to assist with the drafting of this statement, very little of the work that I was involved in would be reflected in emails. Therefore, I have elected not to conduct a full and extensive document-review exercise but rather to base the statement on my recollection of events with reference to some documents such as emails I sent and received during the period.
4. WhatsApp messages were mostly used for answers on urgent matters out-of-hours. Otherwise, I would only use WhatsApp to obtain factual answers from colleagues on the implications of any decisions being made so that I could communicate them

effectively to the Lobby (I describe the Lobby in more detail at paragraphs 24-26 below). With this statement I provide the various WhatsApp groups that I have retained since leaving employment in the Cabinet Office.

5. I appreciate that I may have participated in further WhatsApp groups that I have not retained. Uniquely, among those who worked in senior positions in No10 during the pandemic, I left to return to a career in journalism, where I hold a senior role at The Sun. Upon my departure from Government, the Cabinet Office required that I should not benefit in my future role from any information I had gathered while in Government. In my case, this would obviously apply to messages containing political gossip from my time in No. 10, which inevitably has a high news value. It is a requirement that I took extremely seriously and have complied with. Therefore, on the day of my resignation from No. 10 in March 2021, I deleted WhatsApp threads with individuals who I was likely to have ongoing contact with as a journalist, including Simon Case and Boris Johnson. I also deleted some WhatsApp groups, for example 'Onwards', which contained some inevitably newsworthy content. In deleting these threads and some groups, I was protected from any suggestion that I was using old WhatsApp messages to produce news stories for my new employer, or any perception I might even have considered doing so.
6. Although the public inquiry had not yet been announced or established, I did preserve WhatsApp groups specific to Covid-19, in the event anybody should require them in the future. I had left all these groups upon my resignation from No10, and many were defunct in any event.
7. It is feasible that other witnesses have retained other threads or groups in which I have participated. I would of course be willing to answer any questions about these should the Inquiry wish to provide them to me.

My Background

8. I have worked in journalism or political communications throughout my career. Prior to joining the Cabinet Office, from October 2015 to February 2017, I was the Political Editor at the *Daily Mail*. In February 2017, I was appointed Prime Minister's Official

Spokesperson ("PMOS"), which is a role within the press office at the Cabinet Office, succeeding Helen Bower. In this role, I worked for Theresa May and later Boris Johnson. In mid-November 2020, I succeeded Lee Cain as No. 10 Director of Communications (also part of the press office) under Boris Johnson, a role I held until March 2021, when I returned to journalism to take up my current position as Deputy Editor-in-Chief at *The Sun* newspaper, after a period of gardening leave.

9. As outlined above, my previous experience was as a journalist. Both of my roles in Government were concerned with communications. Other than as a journalist, I have had little to do with politics. Over the period of my employment in the Cabinet Office I was a civil servant. Some individuals who have been Director of Communications for No. 10 have done so as political appointees. Whether the Director is or is not appointed from within the civil service is within the discretion of each Prime Minister.

The role of PMOS & No. 10 Director of Communications

10. In this section I explain my roles as PMOS and Director of Communications. The roles are subtly different in that the Director role is more strategic. It can be a political role, although I took it on as a civil servant. In contrast the role of PMOS involves answering questions from the Lobby on a daily basis on behalf of the Prime Minister, and is always done by a civil servant.
11. I joined the Cabinet Office as PMOS to assist with the UK's departure from the European Union. I ended up staying longer than I expected at the Cabinet Office, to assist with the pandemic and because the Brexit process took longer to complete than I had anticipated. Accordingly, during my time as PMOS, my two main focuses were our future relationship with the European Union and the pandemic. The role of PMOS is one which is driven by events of major significance to the country at the time. When I started as PMOS, Brexit was the dominant theme, and my role was explaining to the media the PM's position on the type of Brexit deal we were seeking to negotiate. I had no direct influence on the policy around this and the same applied during the Covid-19 pandemic.

12. The role of PMOS is non-political and limited to communications. I was in this role from February 2017 to November 2020. To help me fulfil that role, I had standing invitations to all key decision-making Ministerial meetings within the Cabinet Office, so that I could better understand why and how the Government had arrived at policy decisions to best prepare myself in communicating that to the media on behalf of the Prime Minister.
13. Although my role in relation to leaving the EU continued after the pandemic hit, the rest of this statement focusses on my work during the pandemic unless otherwise stated.
14. In mid-November 2020 I was appointed No. 10 Director of Communications. I took over from Lee Cain who was not a civil servant and held this post as a political role. I was only in this role for a short period of time as I stepped down in March 2021 (although I stayed on for a few weeks until April 2021 to tie up a few loose ends).
15. My two main focuses as No. 10 Director of Communications were: the vaccine roll-out, and our future relationship with the European Union (by the time of my appointment to Director of Communications, the negotiations on a future partnership agreement were reaching a conclusion.)
16. In April 2021, I left Government, partly because I had joined the Government with the goal of assisting with Brexit and had promised my family that I would be in the job for 2 years, and partly because after 4 years in Government, and with what seemed like a clear way out of the pandemic in sight, I felt it was an opportune time to move back to journalism.
17. During my time in these roles, I never saw it as my job to publicly express my own opinions. Whatever answers I gave to questions from the Lobby, and whatever briefing I gave as Director of Communications, simply reflected the PM's position on the subject matter concerned and was based on decisions that were being made or had been made by others, namely the PM or Ministers.

Covid-19

18. I first became aware of COVID-19 when media reports emerged from China about a new respiratory disease. I recall this being in the first few days of January 2020.
19. At that time, No. 10 received briefings from the Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, and others (including Sir Chris Wormald, the Permanent Secretary to the Department of Health). These briefings were on the possibility of Covid-19 becoming a global pandemic if efforts to contain the virus in China proved unsuccessful.
20. There followed five COBR meetings on Covid-19, on 24 and 29 January 2020, and on 5, 18 and 26 February 2020, chaired by the Health Secretary before the PM chaired the COBR meeting on 2 March 2020.
21. During the pandemic, I continued to have a standing invitation to observe all Cabinet and COBR meetings, but I also had standing invitations to observe the COVID-S (Ministerial), COVID-O (Ministerial) and the 9.15 strategy meetings. I cannot recall whether I also had a standing invitation to the various Ministerial Implementation Groups ("MIGs") which preceded the COVID-O and COVID-S meetings, but I expect so given the nature of my role.
22. During my attendance at those meetings (both in relation to the UK's departure from the EU and the pandemic), whilst I may have responded to the occasional query, I did not formally contribute to the discussions and instead attended to see how the government had arrived at its decisions so that I could better explain those decisions to the media. In practice, the competing demands on my time meant that I only attended meetings on issues which I thought were likely to attract a significant amount of media attention. After attending, I would often seek clarification from the various decision-makers to help me explain their decisions to the public. For example, in relation to the pandemic I sent the following emails:
 - a. on 10 June 2020, in relation to the bubble exemptions for children and single adult households [*Exhibit JS/1* - INQ000146040],
 - b. on 17 July 2020, in relation to updated roadmap [*Exhibit JS/2* - INQ000146041],

- c. on 30 October 2020, in relation to the relaxation of lockdown [*Exhibit JS/3* - INQ000146042] and
 - d. On 22 February 2021, in relation to furlough policy [*Exhibit JS/4* - INQ000146043].
23. However, as these emails illustrate, whilst I often sought clarification on various points of policy, I was not a part of the formal decision-making/policy-making process.
24. My main role (both in relation to the UK's departure from the EU and the pandemic) – and the main reason I had a standing invite to observe the meetings referred to above – was to provide daily briefings to political journalists, known as the 'Lobby'.
25. The Lobby can ask whatever questions it likes during the daily briefing. The role of PMOS, with the assistance of the press team, is to answer these questions on behalf of the Prime Minister. On average, I would say the briefings lasted approximately an hour a day during the pandemic.
26. My team and I would do our best to anticipate the questions we would be asked. We would prepare "Lobby scripts" for the main topics of interest to the media. Every day a large number of these would be placed in a paper file which I would take to the briefing. It is likely that during the period of the pandemic hundreds of Lobby scripts would have been generated and kept by the Cabinet Office. These will do no more than show what I was briefing to the Lobby on a day-to-day basis and will be reflected in the media coverage at the time.
27. Aside from these briefings, I was also required to assist the Prime Minister if he was hosting any press conferences. Initially, these were less frequent but, as the pandemic wore on, they became an increasingly significant part of my role.
28. A typical day for me would run as follows:
- a. at 8:15am I would meet with colleagues in the No. 10 press office. I would give a summary of the day's media and we would agree what we thought would be the issues of the day. (We would receive the newspapers at 10.30pm the night

before and we would have someone on duty in the No. 10 press office overnight.)

- b. At 8:45am I would meet with the PM and summarise what I thought the media would be focussing on that day.
 - c. At 9:15am there would be the strategy meetings, which I attended as an observer.
 - d. The rest of my morning was spent preparing for the Lobby briefings - this would involve assisting with and reviewing Lobby scripts prepared by my team and testing the government's position on any issues which we thought would arise.
 - e. Lobby briefings were traditionally held twice a day – at 11am and again at 3:45pm. However, when we moved to remote working in response to the pandemic, this was replaced by a single Lobby briefing which took place instead at 12pm.
29. Initially, the Lobby's questions were focused on whether the UK was monitoring the spread of the virus, and whether travel restrictions would be imposed on people arriving from Wuhan/China. The questions often raised comparisons to how other countries were responding. The information that I required for Lobby scripts was initially primarily provided by the Department of Health – details of the first Lobby scripts and answers given will be held by Number 10.
30. After preparation for the Lobby briefing, my focus would switch to assisting the Prime Minister if he was hosting a press conference that day. Often the questions would be the same as those I had received in the morning's Lobby briefing and so the Lobby scripts prepared for me earlier on would also be useful for any press conference that afternoon.
31. On an ad-hoc basis, I also helped to prepare the various Secretaries of State who took part in the briefings, although most would attend the briefings with their own press officers or advisors.

32. As mentioned, the frequency of press conferences increased dramatically during the initial stages of the pandemic – I discuss this in more detail below.
33. I would attend Covid-O / Covid-S meetings regularly and such meetings would generate a lot of paperwork, including a briefing note to the Chair. I would read these notes and provide advice if any was sought from a communications perspective.
34. I do not recall attending any meetings of SAGE or any of its sub-groups, although I was aware that the meetings were taking place and that SAGE was looking at modelling the spread of the virus and the potential effectiveness of various NPIs (non-pharmaceutical interventions) to contain it.
35. I did attend the COVID-O meetings relating to the decisions to close schools, require face coverings and implement travel restrictions. Again, I did not have any input into these decisions - my role was to assist in communicating those decisions to the public.
36. My recollection is that relevant ministers considered the impact on vulnerable groups of the various NPIs and sought to ensure that that they only remained in place for as long as was necessary to slow the spread of the virus.
37. The approach to the closure of schools is a good illustration of the Government's concern for vulnerable groups. The PM wanted this to be a measure of last resort because of concerns over the effect on children, who were seen as very vulnerable.
38. A lot of work was put into keeping schools open. It was hoped that children would be able to return to school after the 2020/2021 Christmas break. The PM announced on 4 January 2021 that children should return to school after the break and then, two days later we entered another national lockdown. You could see that the Government was concerned about the effects on vulnerable school children but the data around the more transmissible variant led ministers to believe that they had no other choice.

Public health communications

39. As lockdowns of this nature were completely unprecedented, the communications to the public had to be handled very carefully to maximise compliance.
40. As the pandemic started to take hold of the country, we had to consider the best way to communicate with the public to keep pace with events.
41. I was not involved in the creation of the “slogans” that were adopted (such as “Hands, Face, Space” or “Stay At Home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives”).
42. Regarding press conferences, Dominic Cummings, Lee Cain and I quickly agreed that the regular press conferences were a good idea, something with which the Prime Minister agreed. We had been looking around the world at how other countries where the pandemic was perhaps more advanced were dealing with the communication of information to the public. A good example of this was New York City, where the Mayor was holding daily press conferences with medics either side of him. These were very effective, and we thought we could replicate that.
43. The decision to move to daily, formalised, on camera press briefings was taken on 15 March 2020 and briefed to the media the same day. The media subsequently started reporting the press conference from 10:30pm that night. The only messages I hold relating to this are the exchange between myself, Lee Cain and Dominic Cummings on the morning of 15 March 2020 at 11am, in the No10/DHSC COVID-19 WhatsApp Group [*Exhibit JS/5* - INQ000146047, *Exhibit JS/6* INQ000146045 and *Exhibit JS/7* – INQ000146046]. From this exchange you can see that we all swiftly agree on the need to progress to daily briefings from 16 March 2020 onwards. The Health Secretary agreed [*Exhibit JS/7* – INQ000146046 – No. 10/DHSC Covid-19 WhatsApp group 15 March 2020] The CSA and CMO were very receptive to the idea. We put the press conferences in place very quickly.
44. In terms of PM involvement in the decision, Dominic Cummings sets out in the WhatsApp chat that he will speak to the PM in person later to get his agreement [*Exhibit JS/5* – INQ000146047 - No. 10/DHSC Covid-19 WhatsApp group – 15 March 2020]. From memory, that is what happened. The PM always understood the need to communicate directly with the public on COVID-19, so there would have been full expectation that he would agree to the request. I can’t recall a single

occasion where it was suggested to him that he should do a COVID-19 press conference or media appearance where he declined to do so. He had a strong understanding of the need to be seen at the forefront of the Government's response, and to be providing leadership.

45. It is important to stress that ministers, including the PM, had already been providing regular media updates in the preceding weeks, and I had been personally providing twice daily off camera briefings to Lobby journalists in my capacity as official spokesman. The move to have these press conferences daily reflected the need to give the public more information on the spread of the virus and the steps being taken to control it.
46. I believe it is one of the things that worked very well during the pandemic, and I would advocate repeating it. During lockdown, people were stuck at home and wanted information. Watching the conferences became a regular part of the day for many people.
47. The Prime Minister would usually take the press conferences on the days when there was a significant announcement, ranging from the imposition of or lifting of NPIs, to breakthroughs in the development of vaccines or the approval of new drugs. We sought to ensure that, whenever possible, the Prime Minister took at least one briefing a week.
48. Also, whenever possible, we would ask Sir Chris Whitty, the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), and Sir Patrick Vallance, the Chief Science Advisor (CSA), to join the Prime Minister. This was to create a sense of familiarity and routine for the public and reflected the close working relationship between the three. It also showed that the Government was following an approach guided by science and medicine. The Prime Minister, Chris and Patrick were the public face of the pandemic response.

Preparation for the press briefings

49. Each press briefing normally involved eight questions: one from each of six journalists selected by the Lobby chairperson (elected annually by fellow Lobby journalists), and two questions from members of the public.
50. The Prime Minister would be provided with a skeleton script written by the press office/private office approximately ninety minutes beforehand. The script would contain that day's statistics on cases, hospital admissions, deaths, and other data. It also included an outline of any announcement being made.
51. The Prime Minister would then craft this into a statement himself, usually working on his laptop. He preferred to write the bulk of it himself.
52. Once the statement was complete, the CMO, CSA, myself and others would join the Prime Minister in his study and check the statement for accuracy. It was not my role to change the substance of those statements.
53. The PM, CSA and CMO would then be briefed by the press team, including myself, on likely topics for questions. This was educated guesswork, based on issues in the news that day, and the questions I had myself received earlier that day at Lobby. The Prime Minister had no advance sight of the actual questions, he would simply be provided with a list of the journalist's names so that he could call them in turn.

Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions ("NPIs")

54. Before going on to discuss the various lockdown measures that were implemented during my time at the Cabinet Office, I wish to make it clear that I did not provide advice to the Prime Minister or any other ministers on whether to implement lockdown. My role was limited to helping communicate the decisions which were being made by ministers to the public, and to advise on how the media would likely report on these announcements.
55. In each of the three instances when lockdown was implemented, I recall it being decided in response to data and modelling provided by SAGE, CMO and CSA, which suggested that such action was necessary to protect the NHS from being

overwhelmed. In each case, as far as I can recall, the PM followed the scientific advice he was given.

Lockdown 1 – 26 March 2020

56. In the run up to the first lockdown, I recall that the PM was presented with various modelling: some of it prepared by SAGE and some prepared internally at No. 10 by Ben Warner a data scientist brought in by Dominic Cummings. There was a lot of concern about the doubling time of the virus. The main consideration was the capacity of the National Health Service (NHS) to ensure it could meet demand.
57. I recall that the modelling suggested that, without any intervention, the NHS would be unable to cope with the number of patients being admitted to hospital and ICU, and we would risk a repeat of the scenes witnessed in Lombardy, Italy.
58. The conclusion was that, in order to avoid this, the R-number (i.e., the rate of transmission of the virus) had to be reduced by breaking the chains of transmission.
59. The view of the UK Government was that the way to achieve this was to severely restrict social contact using lockdown measures. Part of this view came from looking towards other countries that were ahead of us on the curve. The Italians had moved to something akin to lockdown, as had the French.
60. The move towards a lockdown was a gradual process. Restrictions were gradually tightened in response to the rising number of cases and the increase of pressure on the NHS.
61. The following WhatsApp messages in early 2020 are helpful in illustrating the build-up to lockdown, all of them in the No. 10/DHSC Covid-19 group.
 - a. 12 March WhatsApp from the Health Secretary saying our current position that pubs are a greater risk of transmission than outdoor events, but are okay to keep open, is not sustainable (*Exhibit JS/10 – INQ000146044*).

- b. 15 March Dominic Cummings says we need a plan for schools only partially coming back after Easter, but stresses this will not definitely be the case (*Exhibit JS/11* - INQ000146048).
- c. 16 March PM announces public should avoid pubs and bars but does not force their closure (*Exhibit JS/12* - INQ000146050).
- d. 19 March media reports we are considering closing the London transport system and imposing a transport ban in or out of London. (*Exhibit JS/13* - INQ000146049)
- e. 23 March - lockdown is announced by the PM in an address to the nation (*Exhibit JS/14* - INQ000146051).

62. Lockdown 1 was announced by the Prime Minister during a press conference on 23 March 2020, and came into force on 26 March 2020.

Local Lockdown in Leicester – 4 July 2020

63. As the number of cases started dropping around most of the country, restrictions were beginning to be relaxed. However, I understand that concerns were raised about an increase in infections in certain parts of the country. From my attendance at the meetings I have discussed, I became aware that the government intended to introduce local lockdowns to curtail the spread of the virus.

64. As a result, on 29 June 2020, the Health Minister announced that the UK's first local lockdown would be applied in Leicester and parts of Leicestershire, and this came into force on 4 July 2020.

Lockdown 2 – 5 November 2020

65. Following the easing of lockdown measures over the summer 2020, as winter approached, I recall that infection rates started to climb dramatically, and I recall three "tiers" of restriction measures being introduced on 14 October 2020. I remember that it quickly became apparent that the tiers system would not be sufficient to protect against the NHS being overwhelmed, and I became aware that the government was again proposing that England enter a second lockdown.

66. As a result, on 31 October 2020, another lockdown in England (Lockdown 2) was announced by the Prime Minister which would last for four weeks. This came into force on 5 November 2020.

Lockdown 3 – 5 January 2021

67. Lockdown 2 lasted for 4 weeks and ended on 2 December 2020, following which England returned to the three-tier system of restrictive measures. I recall that, throughout December 2020, infection rates continued to increase, and a new tier 4 restriction was introduced which meant that anyone in this tier was required to stay at home – for anyone in this tier it effectively meant cancelling Christmas plans for most people. I recall that tier 4 measures were introduced for London and South-East England on 21 December 2020, with further parts of the country moving to tier 4 on 26 December 2020.
68. In early January 2021, the Prime Minister announced that children should return to school after the Christmas break on 4 January 2021, and warned that restrictions in England would get tougher. However, on 6 January 2021, the Prime Minister announced that England would enter another lockdown (Lockdown 3) including that schools would close until the half term in February 2021 at the earliest.

Vaccine Rollout

69. Notwithstanding the various lockdowns I have described, the situation had started to improve from September 2020 with the production of the vaccine, which appeared to be a way out of the pandemic.
70. The narrative changed from being solely about how we manage and contain the virus, to how do we emerge from the pandemic.
71. There were a series of milestones along the way:
- a. The release of AstraZeneca's data on the effectiveness of their vaccine,
 - b. The vaccine's approval by the FCA,
 - c. The first vaccination being administered and

d. The roll-out of the vaccine programme.

72. I had regular meetings with the PM on the vaccine rollout. We were focused on getting people vaccinated as soon as possible. Every week we were building up the number of vaccinated people and the supply of vaccines. Through sitting in these meetings, I became aware of tensions with the EU in relation to procurement of the various vaccines available.
73. The EU set up a system whereby they had to approve everything that left the EU to go to other countries. We were concerned that the UK would not be approved for products relating to the vaccine.
74. The Government's position was that it had a rock-solid legal contract with AstraZeneca that the first 100 million doses should come to the UK. The EU believed they had a similar contract. The PM was determined that the UK should receive what it was entitled to.
75. We found that the EU – in particular, the French and German governments – were seeking to undermine AstraZeneca's reputation in public, whilst also keeping up efforts to secure the vaccine behind closed doors.
76. The UK's response was to keep very factual and measured. We reinforced the safety of the AstraZeneca vaccine based on advice from our scientists and regulatory body.
77. My role at this stage involved me attending weekly meetings with Cabinet Office, No. 10 and DHSC. We all wanted to ensure maximum public confidence in the vaccine and that certain groups in society who were possibly more hesitant than others felt confident in having the vaccine. The vaccine was developed and approved much more quickly than any other major vaccine in living memory, so we needed to be transparent about the vaccine and provide information from experts on the small risks of having the vaccine versus the risks of not having it.

Key challenges throughout the pandemic

78. From a communications perspective, there were several challenges that we had to grapple with throughout the pandemic.
79. In any live briefing or interview, the potential for a loose or factually inaccurate answer always exists, and that was of course true of the pandemic press conferences and other media appearances. For example, on 3 March 2020, the PM said he had shaken everyone's hands on a tour of a hospital containing some coronavirus patients. As I recall, the PM had shaken hands with staff, not patients, and had stuck to all advice on handwashing. But his comments had created confusion and were used to criticise him.
80. Clarity in communication of policy created a further challenge. While the messages were relatively simple and easily digestible during lockdown periods, more difficult stages, such as the tier system I have mentioned were much more difficult to communicate. Regrettably, mistakes were made in communicating some of the NPIs, many of which were complex and included novel concepts. On occasion, despite best efforts, we were left in a position where ministers were unable to explain some of the rules.
81. For example, on 2 December 2020, Tier 2 restrictions meant that pubs and restaurants could only serve alcohol with a 'substantial meal.' The Government did not define the term 'substantial meal' and there was much debate about the meaning of it. Notably, news outlets began questioning ministers on whether a Scotch egg was a 'substantial meal', and the rule was soon ridiculed.
82. Confusion was also created at times when various members of SAGE would go on news programmes to give their 'personal' views. This would create confusion where it differed from Government advice.
83. Leaking of information was another issue. A few cases spring to mind. The leaking in relation to travel restrictions and, more seriously, leaking of the plan to lockdown Leicester. This came out at about 9pm in the evening and we had to hurry to explain why and how we were planning to lock down a specific area of the country.

84. The situation was similar with the second lockdown in November 2020. Word of the lockdown reached the media on 30 October 2020, before we were ready to announce it.
85. I am not sure that we could have stopped the leaks. They were largely the result of having so many other stakeholders involved. It becomes very difficult to control the flow of information in those circumstances.
86. We worked hard to be as transparent as possible without trying to overload the public. We introduced slides as part of the briefings, with information on numbers and hospital admissions etc. We tried to get an understanding of novel information, such as the R-number, across to the public and we attempted to illustrate our position and goals with respect to the pandemic.
87. When concerns came up regarding the vaccines, anaphylactic shock with Pfizer or clotting with the AstraZeneca vaccines, we were again transparent. We got scientists out to reassure the public as to the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine.

Reflections

88. In terms of communications, I believe the introduction of daily press briefings was hugely valuable and should be repeated in the event of any future pandemic or comparable national event.
89. The briefings provided the public with daily advice on scientific data and allowed for senior medics and scientists to provide updates and, where necessary, reassurance. It also provided an important opportunity for journalists to hold the Government to account. The introduction of questions from the public at the press conferences was also a positive step.
90. I believe the vaccine rollout was a great success. The public embraced the vaccines. The concerns about vaccine hesitancy did not manifest, and getting people vaccinated became a national mission. I believe this is partly down to the positive way it was communicated and the transparent and science led approach to vaccine challenges.

91. Overall, I believe the PM and Ministers did the best they could with the information that they had available to them at that time. As we learned more about the virus, we adapted.

Other specific requests contained in the R9 Request Letter

Herd Immunity

92. To the best of my knowledge, 'herd immunity' was never an adopted strategy, and I do not recall it ever being discussed in these terms. I can recall that around the weekend of 16 March 2020 that the PM was told that based on the current doubling times for the virus we needed to do more to stop the NHS being overwhelmed. I recall a simple graph with the capacity of the NHS on one line and the number of people expected to be hospitalised on the other and that the PM was warned that he needed to do more.

Breaches of rules and standards by Ministers, officials and advisers

93. In relation to breaches of the rules and whether this had any impact on public behaviour, in the absence of any evidence to suggest this occurred, it is very difficult for me to speculate on that.
94. On Friday 22 May 2020, the media reported that Dominic Cummings had travelled from London to Durham during the first lockdown when the rules required the UK to stay at home unless a journey was essential. On Saturday 23 May 2020, the story was being reported in all the main newspapers. However, as Lobby briefings did not take place on weekends (even during the pandemic), I was not required to engage with the media as I perhaps might have been had the news broken during the week. It was therefore Mr Cummings who took the lead in response to the story and who decided to host a press conference on Monday 25 May 2020.

95. On 16 April 2021, the day I left Cabinet Office, two leaving events took place one of which was for me. I have apologised unreservedly, and I wish to reiterate this. My event should not have happened, I have accepted full responsibility for it, and I also accept the findings of Sue Gray's investigations and those of the Metropolitan Police.
96. Finally, I am aware that there were other rare occasions where ministers were pictured forgetting to put on a mask before getting in Government vehicles, or in other such situations contrary to social distancing measures. On those occasions, I recall that those individuals would swiftly apologise, and I believe most people were generally accepting of such small slipups. I was presented with no evidence to the contrary.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

Personal Data

Dated:

17/7/23