

Witness Name: Thomas Shinner

Statement No.: First

Exhibits: 76

Dated: 31 July 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF THOMAS SHINNER

I, THOMAS SHINNER, will say as follows:

1. I make this witness statement in response to the Inquiry's request for evidence dated 12 December 2022, to address my understanding of matters of relevance to the Cabinet Office's role in the UK's core political and administrative decision-making during the Covid-19 pandemic.
2. This witness statement has been drafted with the assistance of the Government Legal Department, Pinsent Masons LLP and Counsel instructed by the Cabinet Office legal team.
3. In preparing this statement, I have been provided with access to limited government records from the time. In particular, neither I nor the legal team assisting me have had full access to a searchable version of my 10 Downing Street email account, as I understand that it is not possible for these accounts to be uploaded in their entirety onto the Cabinet Office's disclosure platform, and I understand that my government-provided mobile phone, which I handed back when I left my post, was not retained. As a result, this statement is drafted from memory and with the assistance of a limited number of documents available to me and which the legal team assisting me have drawn to my attention.
4. Additionally, due to the timescales required by the Inquiry for the provision of this statement, it would not have been possible to have reviewed every document and email that I would have seen at the relevant time, even if I had full access to them. This statement therefore provides a full and accurate picture to the best of my recollection, but if the Inquiry wish me to consider further documents I am happy to do so in due course, and will supplement or amend my statement accordingly as may be necessary.

5. Due to the passage of time, the nature of my role, and the limited access to documents I have been provided, I do not have a clear recollection of every discussion or meeting about issues in which the Inquiry has expressed interest. In some instances (which I have indicated below), my lack of any substantive recollection means that I am wholly reliant upon a limited set of documents that have been highlighted to me by the Cabinet Office Legal Team. In these instances, while I am able to confirm that I might have seen those documents at the time, I am unable to offer comment as to my contemporaneous views about them, nor as to my level of involvement (if any) with the discussions surrounding those documents or issues.

6. SECTION A: BACKGROUND AND ROLES

- 6.1 I worked as a civil servant between February 2013 and August 2019. During this time, I held several roles, including Director of Strategy at the Department for Education (DfE) between 2013 and 2016, and Director, Policy and Delivery Coordination at the Department for Exiting the European Union (DExEU) between 2016 and 2019. I sat on the main boards and executive management boards of both departments.
- 6.2 Since September 2019 I have been employed as the Chief Operating Officer at Entrepreneur First, a company that helps aspiring entrepreneurs around the world to build technology companies.
- 6.3 For four months between 16 March 2020 and 17 July 2020 I was seconded to the Office of the Prime Minister (No 10), working at 10 Downing Street as an advisor to the Prime Minister. I was asked to help set up and temporarily lead the interim No 10 Covid unit, until more permanent staffing arrangements could be established.
- 6.4 The initial aim of this secondment was to add capacity to the Prime Minister's advisory staff, in anticipation of a significant increase in their workload. I believed that I was conveniently positioned to augment the No 10 team because: my DExEU role meant I was familiar with how No 10 and the Cabinet Office operated; I still held the relevant security clearances, having only left the civil service eight months earlier; and I could offer some supernumerary capacity since I had left government and was therefore not working on the Covid response already. I was able to begin work at No 10 the day after my secondment was requested on Sunday 15 March 2020.
- 6.5 Initially, the secondment was expected to last for two or three months, but it was subsequently extended by a further month. However, the agreement at the outset was always that I would return to my permanent employment outside government at the earliest

opportunity, once the Covid response infrastructure had been established and longer-term appointments could be made.

- 6.6 During the first part of my secondment, between 16 March 2020 and approximately 22 May 2020, my line-manager was the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary, Martin Reynolds, who was the ranking Senior Civil Servant with overall responsibility for No 10. During this first period, I took most of my day-to-day direction either directly from the daily ministerial meetings described below, or from the Prime Minister's principal advisors: the Cabinet Secretary, Lord Sedwill, and the Prime Minister's *de facto* Chief of Staff, Dominic Cummings.
- 6.7 Throughout the period, I typically attended: Covid-S and Covid-O meetings; the Prime Minister's daily morning meetings held in the Cabinet Room and the pre-briefings with the Prime Minister in his study; the Cabinet Secretary's daily meeting with Permanent Secretaries; and some of the Cabinet Secretary's senior staff meetings. I attended other decision-making meetings as required. During the short period in which they operated, I would sporadically attend the Ministerial Implementation Groups ("MIGs") on a case-by-case basis, since these normally had ample representation from other No 10 colleagues. During that period, I focussed primarily on the Public Services MIG chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. I describe my reflections on the MIG structure in section H from paragraphs 13.17 to 13.19.
- 6.8 During the second part of my secondment, from soon after 22 May 2020 until 17 July 2020, I reported to Simon Case, and I took my day-to-day direction either from him, or directly from the daily ministerial meetings described above. This second period began shortly after Simon was appointed as the No 10 Permanent Secretary with responsibility for the Covid response.
- 6.9 During this second period, the No 10 and Cabinet Office covid structures merged into the Covid Taskforce. From this point until Kate Josephs' appointment, I led the taskforce's Delivery Unit, Dashboard team and Programme Office on an interim basis for approximately six weeks. These functions are described below. During this period, I worked alongside Simon Ridley, who led the taskforce's strategy, policy and secretariat teams. I attach an organogram dated 5 June 2020 [TS/1 - INQ000174746] which I believe is a reasonable approximation of the organisational structure for much of that six-week period. During this period, Stephen Aldridge was the Chief Analyst and led the analytical team.

- 6.10 Over the four months of my secondment my responsibilities varied as requirements rapidly changed in what was a fast-moving, fluid situation, and I sought to add capacity wherever it was most needed. The need for flexibility was particularly acute because many of the permanent appointees to senior roles in No 10 and the Cabinet Office themselves caught Covid during the course of my secondment. While they were ill, those remaining had to cover the absentees' responsibilities as effectively as possible.
- 6.11 In the following paragraphs, I summarise in broadly chronological order the main parts of my role, and how the role evolved over the four months.
- 6.12 On my first day in role, on 16 March 2020, the Cabinet Secretary asked me to help the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) develop the Covid Dashboard that was used to support the Prime Minister's daily meetings. The aim of the Dashboard was to provide a single situation report across government. Supporting this effort became my first area of focus, and I explain it more fully in section D below.
- 6.13 This work saw the materials used to provide ministers and senior officials across government with a daily summary of the current situation evolve from the PowerPoint slide format used on 16 March **[TS/2 - INQ000174707 and TS/3 - INQ000174708]** to the digital dashboard that I believe was first used on 24 March 2020. The dashboard continuously evolved over subsequent weeks in response to ministerial and senior officials' feedback, as detailed in section D and shown in these illustrative examples from the beginning of April, May, June and July. **[TS/4 - INQ000083360, TS/5 - INQ000174730, TS/6 - INQ000174743 and TS/7- INQ000174759].**
- 6.14 Second, around the same time (and also at the Cabinet Secretary's request) I supported the Cabinet Office's establishment of its Programme Management Office (PMO) for Covid. Until the formation of the Covid Taskforce in late May, the PMO reported to Mark Sweeney, the Cabinet Office Director General leading the overall policy response across Whitehall and I was its main No 10 liaison. Following the formation of the Covid Taskforce, the Director of the PMO reported to me.
- 6.15 The Programme Management Office's main purpose was to oversee medium-term planning of various workstreams contributing to the Covid response, across government. Typically, short-term, immediate decisions and actions would be communicated and tracked by the secretariat to each ministerial forum, in the normal way. The PMO sought to complement this work by ensuring there were more forward-looking (high-level) delivery plans for the various programmes of work required to support the Covid response. It also sought to track,

at a very high level, progress toward implementing these plans, to provide senior decision-makers in the centre of government with some high-level visibility of progress, and to identify emerging implementation risks or barriers.

- 6.16 On 6 April 2020 the Cabinet Office wrote to senior officials across government to describe Covid-related responsibilities in the centre of government [TS/8 - INQ000174719 and TS/9 - INQ000174720] week established a new Programme Management Office (PMO) to support delivery, implementation and reporting on key work streams. Tom Shinner will also work on this agenda from in No10, leading a small team focused on data and delivery."
- 6.17 In asking me to help support this part of the Covid response infrastructure, I understood from the Cabinet Secretary that he wanted me to share good practice and lessons learned from the process of preparing the EU Exit delivery portfolio, including developing the contingency plans for the 'no deal' scenario. I had been responsible for coordinating this work across government departments between 2016 and 2019. During that time, I worked closely with Lord Sedwill, so I believed I had a good understanding of what he wanted a PMO for Covid to achieve, albeit under very different (and in particular much more time-constrained) conditions.
- 6.18 In section H I reflect on PMO's efficacy and the lessons I would draw from its operation during the period of my secondment.
- 6.19 Third, around the same time and continuing throughout my secondment, I worked closely with members of the Joint Intelligence Organisation and the Foreign Office to help establish a dedicated capability to understand how other countries were responding to Covid. This sought to distil relevant insights for ministers and senior officials across Whitehall, to inform the policy-making process. In April 2020 this capability was formalised as the International Comparators Joint Unit (ICJU). Working alongside the relevant No 10 private secretaries, members of my team were its main point of liaison with No 10 throughout the period of my secondment.
- 6.20 Fourth, between early April and mid-May, I worked closely with the Cabinet Office's Covid strategy team to develop the wider 'recovery' strategy. The results of this work were agreed by ministers and published on 11 May as 'Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy' [TS/10 - INQ000174731]. I explain this more fully in section C below.
- 6.21 Fifth, throughout the period, I was the No 10 liaison for specific projects. One significant example was Project Defend. This was an extensive piece of work to scrutinise the

resilience of a large number of the UK's critical supply chains, to identify potential medium-term risks and near-term vulnerabilities, and to propose mitigations. The scope of this work extended beyond, but was heavily influenced by the context of, the Covid pandemic.

6.22 Project Defend was led by the Permanent Secretary at the Department for International Trade and the ministerial sponsor was the Foreign Secretary. I sat on the Steering Group as the No 10 representative.

6.23 I described this work, at a high level, in emails sent on 19 April and 19 May 2020 [TS/11 - INQ000174724 and TS/12 - INQ000174738]. On 29 May 2020 the Foreign Secretary wrote to the Prime Minister summarising the work to date [TS/13 - INQ000174741]. The Prime Minister replied on 10 June 2020 agreeing the work should continue. [TS/14 - INQ000174751]

6.24 A second example is a paper on preparing for the challenges we expected Covid to present in the Winter of 2020 [TS/15 - INQ000088301]. This was developed by members of my team and I presented it on behalf of the Covid Taskforce at a Covid-S meeting chaired by the Prime Minister on 2 July 2020.

6.25 The minutes of that meeting [TS/16 - INQ000088245] detail the discussion and the committee's agreement to its recommendations. I did not draft the paper personally, but the normal consultation and clearance processes should detail which other senior officials and advisers across government provided input and clearance. I do recall establishing specifically that the CMO, GCSA and Health Secretary were supportive before the paper was submitted, and my senior colleagues in the Covid Taskforce would have also cleared it for release. My recollection is that the paper was received by Ministers at the Covid-S meeting uncritically; I do not recall receiving any challenging questions at the Covid-S meeting, or from officials or advisers before or afterwards.

6.26 This paper followed from a note I circulated to senior officials in the Covid Taskforce on 21 June 2020, summarising my own thoughts on what measures might improve the UK's preparedness for the particular challenges of a second Covid wave during the winter months [TS/17 - INQ000174752]. I do not recall sharing this specific paper beyond its addressees and my immediate team who wrote the Covid-S paper mentioned above, which sought to develop some of its themes for Ministerial consideration.

6.27 The Inquiry has asked how the matters raised in this note were received. The purpose of this particular note was limited to briefing my Permanent Secretary, who at that point was relatively new to his role. By this point I had stopped attending the Prime Minister's daily

senior staff meetings, where I would previously have spoken with the Prime Minister directly. Instead, the Taskforce was by this stage represented in those fora by our Permanent Secretary, so I expect I would have been trying to use this note as part of preparing him for these daily conversations with the Prime Minister and his senior political advisers. However, I would not have seen which parts, if any, were communicated, or how they were received.

- 6.28 Indeed, to place this note in context: by the time I wrote it, I was already beyond the original end date of my secondment, so I was actively seeking to step back from advising the Prime Minister directly. Instead, by this stage I was trying to act in support of Simon Case and Simon Ridley while the third 'permanent' member of the Taskforce senior team was being recruited. I do recall discussing the note with both recipients and that in response, my Permanent Secretary commissioned the Covid-S paper cited above, which aimed to develop a more concise set of recommendations for Ministers, including addressing some of the more important issues discussed in this initial note.
- 6.29 The main difference between the two documents are, first, that while the note of 21 June 2020 represented my own personal views, a Cabinet Committee paper clearly involves more input and consultation, and typically reflects the collective views of a wider group, so the Covid-S paper would have incorporated considerable input from stakeholders across government to present a consensus view that all the principal stakeholders were willing to support. Second, my 21 June note also comments on other more detailed matters (for example, staffing and organisational structures) that would have been for my Permanent Secretary to consider with his peers; these would not normally have been topics for ministerial committees.
- 6.30 On 3 July 2020, following ministers' decisions at the 2 July Covid-S meeting, a number of teams across government were tasked with various preparatory actions (see for example this email to the Project Defend team regarding supply chains and stockpiles **[TS/18 - INQ000174758]**, and I presume this programme of work continued after my departure.
- 6.31 Sixth, I formed and led the No 10 Covid cell, which was a small team of around ten people at any one time. Its brief was to augment the Prime Minister's Private Office to provide more capacity to liaise closely with the owners of a small number of delivery plans in which the Prime Minister and his senior advisors were particularly interested.
- 6.32 The members of the team were drawn from across government and beyond. They included secondees from the Senior Civil Service, a former senior military officer, secondees from management consultancies and former civil servants who returned to government on

secondment to help. For a brief period during the first month of my secondment, the team was also augmented by civil servants and a special adviser from Taskforce Europe to provide some initial capacity.

- 6.33 In my first week in post, when Mark Sweeney (then the Cabinet Office Director General coordinating the overall Covid response) asked me to create this function, he described it as “a deep dive/progress-chasing capacity which we could deploy on blocked or problem issues” where I “would be tasked by No 10 as well as CO (sort of the delivery unit approach).” **[TS/19 - INQ000174710]**
- 6.34 In broad terms, delivering this capability typically involved trying to offer the relevant SRO (or member of the Cabinet Office secretariat) guidance, in order to help them anticipate the Prime Minister’s thinking or what materials I thought he was likely to need to reach a decision. Doing so in what was invariably a fast-moving environment sought to minimise both the number of occasions when a ministerial meeting would be unable to reach a decision because ministers wanted more or different information, and also to minimise the amount of nugatory work being asked of busy SROs and their operational teams.
- 6.35 Normally, members of the team would work closely with senior members of the relevant departmental or agency delivery team to understand the nature of a particular plan and its underpinning rationale and assumptions, as well as any constraints the team was facing that were matters No 10 or the Cabinet Office could help address.
- 6.36 On occasion, when it became clear there was a particular challenge or a difference of view – for example, over a timeline – these discussions would progress to a ‘stocktake’ or ‘deep dive’ meeting where I, or another senior official from No 10 or the Cabinet Office, would discuss the plan directly with the relevant SRO or members of their team.
- 6.37 An example of this process is the workshop on the design of the Test, Trace, Contain, Enable (‘TTCE’) programme held on 18 May with Baroness Harding. This was also attended by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), the Government Chief Scientific Advisor (GCSA), Public Health England (PHE) and various others **[TS/20 - INQ000174734]**.
- 6.38 By exception, when I did not believe such discussions were likely to resolve an issue, I would sometimes escalate to more senior officials or advisors holding permanent appointments matters of confusion or concern, cross-cutting issues, or questions of organisational structure or capacity.

- 6.39 For example, following the stocktake described at 6.37 above, I shared my assessment of the situation with the permanent senior team across Downing Street and the Cabinet Office, ahead of a Prime Ministerial stocktake I had requested on the same topic. In a note to the Cabinet Secretary's private office, the Deputy Cabinet Secretary, the Cabinet Office Directors General leading the Cabinet Office's Covid response, the Prime Minister's Deputy Principal Private Secretary and Private Secretaries overseeing the Covid response, and the Prime Minister's senior political advisers, I explained my concerns that there seemed to be a relatively large number of unanswered questions or apparent differences of view regarding the design of the TTCE programme [TS/21 - INQ000174735]. These issues were subsequently brought to a meeting between the Prime Minister and Baroness Harding on 20 May 2020 [TS/22 - INQ000174739].
- 6.40 As one might expect in such a wide-ranging response, discussions around the most complex issues typically continued over a prolonged period. For example, on the topic above, there continued to be correspondence with Baroness Harding's team into June 2020, seeking to assist her team with the difficult task of establishing the Test and Trace system at pace (e.g. [TS/23 - INQ000174745]). Throughout this period, the challenges around designing and establishing the TTCE programme became a significant focus of the Covid Taskforce and the Ministerial Covid-O meetings [TS/24 - INQ000174747 and TS/25 - INQ000174744], for example, those that took place on 11 June and on 25 June 2020.
- 6.41 It was clearly very challenging to design and implement a Test and Trace system at the scale required, to the timeframes necessary, during the pandemic. I reflect further on the lessons that I think might usefully be drawn from this in Section H below.
- 6.42 This example outlined above is, in my view, a fairly typical illustration of how, if ministerial scrutiny was required after official and advisor level discussions, the relevant issue would normally be brought to one of the various ministerial meetings. This would typically happen if there was an important choice to be made or a risk judgement to be agreed.
- 6.43 The small size of the No 10 Covid cell meant its remit was both narrow and relatively shallow. It sat alongside the Cabinet Office PMO and secretariat, which together served as the centre of government's 'wide angle lens,' looking across a fuller array of what was being delivered across government.
- 6.44 In contrast to the PMO and Cabinet Office secretariat, the No 10 Covid cell would typically focus narrowly on whatever was of greatest concern to the Prime Minister (or, often, on matters that his senior advisers judged might become so).

- 6.45 However, even with careful prioritisation there remained many inter-connected matters with which the Prime Minister had to engage, and timelines were often exceptionally compressed. This meant that in most cases, only relatively shallow scrutiny was possible (compared with, for example, a typical Prime Minister's Delivery Unit project conducted over several months). The cell therefore typically focussed on ensuring implementation-related advice to the Prime Minister was clear and consistent with previous decisions, and it worked closely with the Prime Minister's private office to do so.
- 6.46 From the point the Covid Taskforce was formed in mid-May, the No 10 Covid cell folded into the taskforce as its 'Delivery Unit,' but it continued to play the same role.
- 6.47 Seventh, throughout the period, and working alongside the Prime Minister's private office and his political advisers, I would often liaise with the Cabinet Office secretariat or directly with departmental SROs to help scope the agendas and 'commissions' for materials supporting Prime Ministerial (and, later in the period, Covid-O) decision-making meetings.
- 6.48 This could involve asking: the responsible teams or the secretariat for further advice to be developed for ministers on particular policy options; for the secretariat to seek further analysis when commissioning meeting papers; or for clarifications on recommendations that seemed to me to be unclear.
- 6.49 One fairly typical example of this was my engagement with the SRO at DHSC and the Deputy Cabinet Secretary, with whom I corresponded about PPE on 17 and 20 April 2020 [TS/26 - INQ000174727 and TS/27 - INQ000174723]. A second example was my discussion with senior officials at the Department for Education over the school re-opening proposals the DfE presented to the Covid-O committee in June 2020 [TS/28 - INQ000174753]. A third example was my close engagement with the TTCE programme, reflected in a note I sent to the Health Secretary, Baroness Harding and [Name Redacted] on 1 July 2020 [TS/29 - INQ000174756].
- 6.50 Finally, following the publication of the 11 May recovery strategy, the Deputy Cabinet Secretary and Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary asked me to conduct a quick review of the wider delivery oversight structures supporting the Prime Minister on the Government's wider agenda beyond the Covid response effort. In particular, the goal of this review was to recommend a Target Operating Model for a new Prime Minister's Delivery Unit.
- 6.51 I led a small team to conduct this review over June and July and circulated a report to the steering board comprising senior Cabinet Office, No 10 and Treasury officials, the No 10

Permanent Secretary and the Prime Minister's chief adviser, with a view to reporting to the Cabinet Secretary and Prime Minister. This final report included, on page 26, some high-level initial reflections on lessons that might be drawn from the operation of the delivery infrastructure supporting the Government's Covid response [TS/30 - INQ000174765, TS/31 - INQ000174764, TS/32 - INQ000174736 and TS/33 - INQ000174742].

7. **SECTION B: INITIAL UNDERSTANDING AND RESPONSE TO COVID-19 (JANUARY-MARCH 2020)**

- 7.1 I began my secondment to No 10 on 16 March 2020. I was therefore not involved in, and have no insight into, the Government's response or decision-making during the period from January 2020 to mid-March 2020.
- 7.2 My observations about the situation as I found it when I began my secondment are covered in the sections below.
- 7.3 However, one week after I arrived I privately shared some initial reflections with the Cabinet Secretary [TS/34 - INQ000174711], and at the end of weeks two and three, some further reflections with the Prime Minister's senior staff and my initial team [TS/35 - INQ000196539, TS/36 - INQ000196538]. These notes provide a contemporary record of some of my initial, high-level impressions of the situation as I perceived it when I arrived. I expand on these themes in the lessons I draw out in Section H below.
- 7.4 The Inquiry has asked me to what extent 'herd-immunity' was an adopted strategy for responding to Covid-19 during January to March 2020. I was not present for most of that period so I am unable to comment on this. Throughout my secondment, it was clear that ministers had decided to take decisive action to attempt to control the spread of the virus. The response strategy adopted during my time in role is best articulated in the 11 May 2020 publication referenced at paragraph 6.20 above [TS/10 - INQ000174731].
- 7.5 I have been shown, but have no independent recollection of, a 24 March 2020 note by David Halpern addressed to the Cabinet Secretary and Prime Minister's chief adviser, on which I was copied, which discussed 'herd-immunity' [TS/37 - INQ000174716]. I have also been shown, but do not recall reading at the time, a 5 April 2020 note summarising a paper for SPI-M by epidemiologists at the University of Edinburgh [TS/38 - INQ000174718] that set out potential routes to combat the disease.

- 7.6 I do not remember any ministerial discussion or advice that considered pursuing 'herd - immunity' – that is to say, encouraging (or doing nothing to stop) the spread of infection to deliberately expedite population-level immunity absent a vaccine.
- 7.7 I do recall discussions around what was termed "enhanced shielding," which was a term used differently in various contexts, sometimes referring to providing enhanced support for the shielded population, and sometimes to the concept of adjusting Non-Pharmaceutical Interventions (NPIs) according to a more granular assessment of personal risk.
- 7.8 The latter was perhaps best described at page 23 in the 11 May recovery strategy as follows: "the Government will continue to recognise that not everybody's or every group's risk is the same; the level of threat posed by the virus varies across the population, in ways the Government currently only partly understands. As the Government learns more about the disease and the risk factors involved, it expects to steadily make the risk-assessment more nuanced, giving confidence to some previously advised to shield that they may be able to take more risk; and identifying those who may wish to be more cautious. The Government will need to consider both risk to self, and risk of transmitting to others." [TS/10 - INQ000174731]
- 7.9 I believe that this thinking influenced, for example, the response to the July Leicester outbreak (i.e. this focussed on differentiating the extent of the NPIs according to geographic risk), and a differentiated approach to personal risk was the subject of a review led by Dr Harries.

8. **SECTION C: NON-PHARMACEUTICAL INTERVENTIONS**

- 8.1 I was only present in government for the first national lockdown, so I will confine my comments to that lockdown, as well as the non-'lockdown' NPIs that were imposed and eased during the period of my secondment.
- 8.2 I believe ministers took the decision to introduce the first national lockdown that occurred between March and July 2020 in, broadly, two stages.
- 8.3 When I started my role on Monday 16 March 2020, I understood that the first stage of decision-making had taken place during the previous weekend, when ministers had taken what I understood to be an 'in principle' decision that the response required more restrictive measures than those outlined in the Government's 3 March 'action plan.'

- 8.4 The immediate consequences of this first decision were announced on my first day in role, when the Prime Minister made a statement asking people to work from home wherever possible, providing shielding advice and advising people to stop non-essential contact and travel **[TS/39 - INQ000086753]**
- 8.5 The following day, on 17 March 2020, the FCO advised against all non-essential travel **[TS/40 - INQ000086768]** and the Chancellor announced further support for the economic response **[TS/41 - INQ000086739]**.
- 8.6 I would consider the second stage of ministers' decision-making process to have been the various discussions that took place at the daily 0915 strategy meetings during my first week in role, the advice for and minutes from which the Inquiry will have.
- 8.7 I recall that these discussions sought to define the scope of what became the first national lockdown, but I do not remember the detail of these discussions particularly clearly: I had only just arrived, I had little context at that stage, and my initial focus in that first week was, at the Cabinet Secretary's request, to help the Civil Contingencies Secretariat revamp the daily Common Recognised Information Picture into what became the Covid Dashboard, as described in Section D.
- 8.8 I believe the advice supporting these decisions originated in the Department of Health and Social Care and the Cabinet Office Covid secretariat. I was not involved in preparing it. I did not consider that I had much to add to these conversations at the daily meetings given the number of permanent appointees already focussed on these decisions.
- 8.9 I do recall that in the first part of that week, the discussions at the daily 0915 strategy meetings centred on a London-only 'lockdown,' with the Cabinet Office secretariat presenting advice scoping options for this more limited course of action **[TS/42 - INQ000056261, TS/43 - INQ000056262 and TS/44 - INQ000056265]**. It was not clear to me at the time, or now, how far these options were drawing on existing planning, and how far the options were being developed in real-time.
- 8.10 My main contribution to the first national lockdown was to help the Prime Minister's permanent advisory team and the Cabinet Office secretariat 'troubleshoot' a small number of specific issues that emerged that week. For example, I recall that when the Prime Minister announced the closure of schools on 18 March 2020 **[TS/45 - INQ000086755]** part of the policy was that schools were asked to make provision for vulnerable and disadvantaged children, and the children of "key workers who would otherwise be forced to stay home."

- 8.11 However, at this point there was no agreed way to define a “key worker,” so this definition had to be generated quickly. Following ministerial steers at a GPSMIG meeting on Thursday 19 March 2020 [TS/46 - NQ000056038, TS/47 - INQ000055987] I acted as the No 10 liaison to help the Cabinet Office and Department for Education finalise an initial definition, which was published later that day. The fast-moving nature of this decision is reflected in the Civil Contingencies Secretariat note supporting the decision [TS/48 - INQ000055991 and TS/49 - INQ000174709].
- 8.12 I was more closely involved in, and so can more usefully comment on, the subsequent discussions regarding the easing of the various NPIs in which the Inquiry is interested, where those discussions took place between April 2020 and July 2020.
- 8.13 These discussions typically took place at the Prime Minister’s morning meetings and ministerial ‘quad’ meetings, and subsequently at Covid-S and Covid-O meetings, with various preparatory discussions taking place between officials and advisors in advance of each such ministerial discussion.
- 8.14 The outcomes of the discussions with which I was most closely involved were published on 11 May 2020 in ‘Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government’s COVID-19 recovery strategy’ [TS/10 - INQ000174731].
- 8.15 Much of my time between the end of March and the publication of the recovery strategy in May was spent working closely with the Cabinet Office team drafting this document and running the publication process, and engaging directly with departmental officials on its contents. I acted as the main No 10 liaison on this document and helped draft it.
- 8.16 I believe this publication served an important purpose in providing a single articulation of both the Government’s high-level strategic aims, and the major strands of work required to deliver them. I think that at that point in time, the 11 May 2020 recovery strategy was among the more comprehensive Covid strategy publications released by any government worldwide.
- 8.17 I hope that ministers’ decision to publish this strategy meant that the public and businesses were able to make their own plans more effectively. I also recall thinking at the time that sharing the Government’s thinking openly should help any issues with the approach surface.

- 8.18 The considerations that influenced ministers' decisions regarding the type and duration of the NPIs will be set out comprehensively in the various papers provided to, and the minutes of, each ministerial meeting, so I will not attempt to precis those here.
- 8.19 I believe the 11 May 2020 recovery strategy serves as a useful, accurate, high-level summary of the thinking at the time. It stated at page 15 that "the Government's aim has been to save lives. This continues to be the overriding priority at the heart of this plan." It went on to explain that the strategy sought to "return life to as close to normal as possible, for as many people as possible, as fast and fairly as possible, in a way that avoids a new epidemic, minimises lives lost and maximises health, economic and social outcomes." **[TS/10 - INQ000174731]**
- 8.20 The recovery strategy detailed how each of the health (page 15), economic (page 16) and social (page 17) effects were being considered, proposed a phased approach to adjusting the NPI restrictions (pages 19-23), and summarised at a high level the fourteen supporting programmes of work that were envisaged to enable the roadmap (pages 33-45).
- 8.21 Throughout the various ministerial discussions surrounding the easing of the NPIs that constituted the first national lockdown, I remember the central consideration being how to find the best way to balance the direct covid health implications of the pandemic with the NPIs' indirect, wider health implications, social costs and economic effects, essentially as detailed in the 11 May 2020 publication.
- 8.22 For example, Ministers' decision to implement the 'extended household bubble' policy derived from weighing these considerations: accepting some additional risk regarding the spread of the virus in order to mitigate some effect of the NPIs for a group that was affected particularly acutely. I believe this was a positive mitigation. **[TS/50 -INQ000174749]**.
- 8.23 Similarly, I think this balancing of different harms drove Ministers' March 2020 decision to urge up to 20% of the student population to remain in school, with priority given to vulnerable and disadvantaged children (e.g. those who were looked-after, children in need and those receiving pupil premium), with schools asked to judge which pupils' attendance to prioritise.
- 8.24 The broad approach set out at pages 20-23 in this recovery strategy was to move as quickly as possible to a phase of rolling out an effective treatment or vaccine by investing in research, developing international partnerships and distributing treatments and/or a vaccine at scale, via an intermediate phase of "smarter controls."

- 8.25 The term “smarter controls” was defined at page 19 as an approach where “the government will gradually replace the existing social restrictions with smarter measures that balance its aims as effectively as possible” – that is to say, a process of steadily adjusting the portfolio of NPIs so that those in place had “the largest effect on controlling the epidemic but the lowest health, economic and social costs.”
- 8.26 Following the recovery strategy’s publication, I sought steadily to reduce my participation in the subsequent discussions as I tried to wind down my interim role and hand over my responsibilities to those being appointed into the more permanent positions being created. On 11 May 2020 I wrote to the senior team at No 10 to initiate a discussion about where No 10 might usefully focus its efforts next [TS/51 - INQ000174732].
- 8.27 By late May 2020, the new taskforce structure was operating, with Simon Case and Simon Ridley’s team leading the taskforce’s follow-on advice to ministers on strategy and policy development, including the detailed proposals on how to enact each of the “steps” the 11 May recovery strategy envisaged at a high level.
- 8.28 Advice, analysis, information or data to ministers regarding the imposition or easing of NPIs would typically originate from the Cabinet Office’s strategy and analysis functions, or directly from the relevant SRO, and discussions would be informed by the data and insight produced by my teams described in Section D.
- 8.29 I believe that the only ‘local lockdown’ that took place during the period of my secondment was in Leicester at the end of June 2020. I attended some of the Gold meetings for this, and arranged for the Covid Dashboard team (which at that point was reporting to me) to share relevant data it held with the JBC and TTCE programmes, to support the decision-making process they were leading. I also shared some immediate, informal, high-level reflections on the response to the Leicester outbreak with officials in Simon Ridley’s policy team on 6 July [TS/52 - INQ000174760].
- 8.30 The areas I recall working well and the main lessons I would draw are covered in section H below.

9. **SECTION D: ROLE IN RELATION TO MEDICAL AND SCIENTIFIC EXPERTISE, DATA AND MODELLING**

- 9.1 On my first day in role, on 16 March 2020, the Cabinet Secretary asked me to help the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) revise the daily Common Recognised Information Picture (CRIP) / Situation Report (SitRep) process into what became the Covid Dashboard process.

- 9.2 As it stood when I joined the No 10 team, the CRIP aimed to provide ministers with basic situational awareness to inform their decision-making, but it lacked much of the information and insight that would be added over the following weeks. For example, the CRIP circulated for the COBR meeting on Wednesday 18 March contained relatively few data fields, and of those it included, several important ones, like hospitalisation rates, were unpopulated. **[TS/53 - INQ000056187]**
- 9.3 I acted as CCS' main No 10 contact during the new dashboard's initial development, and I supported CCS' leadership with the design and execution of what would quickly become a major undertaking: to assemble and 'fuse' into a single, integrated picture a richer array of qualitative and quantitative information that could usefully inform all decision-makers across government by providing them with the same, reliable, information picture.
- 9.4 Since CCS already had a new digital reporting platform in development, the main tasks were to agree what it would contain, how that information would be sourced, how it would be shared, and how it would be used.
- 9.5 I believe the live dashboard was first released on 24 March 2020 and I recall using it to brief the Prime Minister for the first time on 26 March 2020. It could be accessed by a wide range of individuals across government departments and agencies. A pdf version of the dashboard was typically circulated widely at the end of each day **[TS/54 - INQ000174712 and TS/55 - INQ000174713]**, though I believe most users would have interacted mainly with the digital version that was used in the briefing meetings.
- 9.6 The dashboard on the first day of release **[TS/55 - INQ000174713]** can be compared with the dashboard being used the week previously (see paragraph 6.13 above). By 5 May 2020 the pdf version of the dashboard ran to 85 pages each day.
- 9.7 Once the Covid Dashboard was operating, the duty CCS Director would typically brief significant changes, trends, and novel insights to ministers and senior officials at the start of the Prime Minister's daily morning meeting. This (verbal) briefing aimed to provide a common situational awareness and build attendees' familiarity with the main indicators and trends. Occasionally I would provide these briefings, and I would typically participate actively in the ensuing discussions, for example to ask questions of meeting attendees to clarify the implications or significance of information in the Dashboard.
- 9.8 These briefings would occur at the opening of the daily morning meetings, and I estimate they would last between five and fifteen minutes, including questions. They were designed to call meeting attendees' attention to particularly important charts, usually those where

there had been a change in trajectory, or an otherwise significant movement, or topics that Ministers had previously flagged as being of particular interest. Of course, meeting attendees could also raise any other data about which they had a question, if they had reviewed the materials in advance.

- 9.9 The Inquiry has asked whether these briefings were prepared or provided in writing. I don't recall seeing any written briefing beyond the commentary incorporated into the slides themselves and the cover emails distributing them. The slides were designed to stand alone as an independent resource, because most dashboard users would not have been present at the Prime Minister's daily morning meeting. This required the meaning of each chart to be clear to a reader without any verbal augmentation.
- 9.10 The intent of the daily briefings and the dissemination of a single dashboard was to ensure that the subsequent policy or delivery discussions, which would be supported by their own bespoke papers and analysis, were also informed by a common fact-base, and that the general trends were well and widely understood.
- 9.11 At different points during my secondment, the ministerial briefings would focus on different parts of the Dashboard. For example, there was a period during which there were serious concerns about a shortfall of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). During this period, changes in PPE 'stock-out' dates were being reviewed most days, if not every day. However, once stock levels rose, although the data would still be available in the Dashboard on a daily basis, for any user to access, this topic became a less frequent area of focus and would not necessarily be called out in the oral briefings as often.
- 9.12 All subscribers to the Dashboard also had continuous access to it outside these meetings, so that they could use it as a reference point for their own analysis and more detailed papers: the intent here was that all government departments and relevant agencies would be working from the same core information. Once it was running, the dashboard replaced the static CRIPs and served as a dynamic CRIP/SitRep, used broadly in line with normal COBR doctrine.
- 9.13 The Prime Minister and other attendees of the daily morning meeting would typically use the Dashboard briefings to ask questions about the current situation and request more detailed follow-up briefings on matters of particular interest. These daily discussions would also inform where more detailed analysis or policy recommendations would be commissioned for a fuller discussion or decision at a subsequent meeting.

- 9.14 Delivering this dashboard each day was a significant undertaking, given the complex, wide-ranging and fast-moving nature of the crisis. I had participated in the COBR response to the Ebola outbreak in 2014 and my impression was that the volume of information that had to be managed and synthesised for the Covid response was very significantly greater.
- 9.15 To manage the volume of requests, a form of 'editorial board' was established within CCS, to oversee what information would be included, and to consider change-requests (whether for additional information to be included, dormant information to be removed, or changes to how existing information was presented). For example, after the first local lockdown began in Leicester a further tab was added to the dashboard to reflect the situation there. Novel collation mechanisms also had to be established to cater for a wide variety of information from multiple sources, many of which did not exist in March 2020.
- 9.16 One important consideration was the establishment of fast feedback loops. In a rapidly moving, crisis-management environment, information will change quickly. I therefore considered it important that the information the CCS Situation Centre team considered to be the best available at the time was shared as widely as possible; that widespread comment and critique was invited; and that the information (or its presentation or commentary) was then quickly updated in response to feedback as better sources, more context or improved understanding became available.
- 9.17 The dashboard typically showed both the source of each item of data shown, and the analysts' confidence in its validity, to help readers gauge how much weight to attach to it (see examples exhibited at paragraph 6.13 above).
- 9.18 My team and I acted as CCS' main point of contact within No 10 such that any Downing Street requests for changes, improvements or additional data were routed through my team, to enable triage and prioritisation of these requests. This sought to ensure CCS' Situation Centre received coherent requests from No 10.
- 9.19 I believe the Covid Dashboard was relatively basic, 'baseline' functionality for the management of a pandemic response: that is to say it was not a particularly exceptional or sophisticated data management tool. Once it was operational I believe it played a useful role by providing regular, quality-assured data, along with a degree of scrutiny and analysis. By using digital distribution to enable many stakeholders across government to access a single source-of-truth 'on demand,' confident in the knowledge that they were accessing the most current information, discussions could take place from an agreed fact-base.

- 9.20 It is impossible to quantify the effect this had, but I believe it is likely to have accelerated and eased decision-making to some extent, and that it reduced the likelihood of selection- or optimism-bias from cherry-picked data being deployed selectively in support of a particular position.
- 9.21 Indeed, throughout the period, we received consistently positive informal feedback on the Dashboard's utility from officials and ministers across government; it appeared to be a welcome innovation.
- 9.22 However, it was not straightforward to obtain all the data needed, and we were starting cold, from a low base. Trying concurrently to create and to understand such a wide body of data was a challenge that often frustrated senior colleagues [TS/56 - INQ000174715], and I expand on this theme in section H.
- 9.23 For example, while the dashboard team sought and ultimately obtained clearer and more reliable data from the Devolved Administrations to try to ensure the whole UK situation was better reflected than it was at the beginning of my secondment [TS/57 - INQ000174714], I recall this proving surprisingly difficult. Similarly, while CCS sought care home data as a priority, and some data was included from 2 April [TS/58 - INQ000174717], I was aware that it remained challenging for CCS to obtain good-quality information on, for example, case numbers.
- 9.24 Of course, the Dashboard was far from ministers' only source of information and data. Decision-making meetings would also typically be provided with bespoke papers prepared by the responsible officials or advisers like SAGE. These would contain more detailed analysis and information relevant to the decision at hand.
- 9.25 Such papers would be submitted through the secretariat or private office in the normal manner. I believe this process is set out more fully in the Cabinet Office's response to the Inquiry, so I will not repeat that in full here, but I will briefly summarise the process as I observed it typically happening.
- 9.26 The preparation of a ministerial decision paper would typically involve the responsible officials in a department or the Cabinet Office preparing a first draft. An "O meeting" (Official meeting) would then normally be called to review the draft and provide comments and feedback. I would often engage on No 10's behalf at this point, typically to feed in any particular questions I thought the Prime Minister might have, or to draw links to other decisions he had made or was considering. His Private Office would normally do the same.

- 9.27 Given the pandemic restrictions and the pace of turnaround required, the “O meeting” would often take place asynchronously by email correspondence rather than in a meeting. The paper’s author would then decide whether or how to incorporate any feedback and suggestions received, before submitting a final paper to the secretariat for circulation ahead of the meeting. Officials would then brief their own ministers ahead of the meeting; the meeting would take place; decisions would be made; and the secretariat would record and disseminate these.
- 9.28 Separately from the Covid Dashboard, I also supported the design and establishment of the International Comparators Joint Unit (ICJU), which aimed to provide regular reports on what the UK could learn from other countries around the world. Throughout the period I believed there was much the UK could learn from observing the similarities, differences and effects of other countries’ responses. **[TS/59 - INQ000174750]**.
- 9.29 As the ICJU’s No 10 liaison, I worked closely with the JIO and Foreign Office to agree its taskings. The aim was to ensure these provided more in-depth, qualitative insight into issues that would inform ministers’ decision-making, to learn from what was working well (and did not appear to be so effective) in other countries grappling with similar issues to the UK.
- 9.30 Examples include the ICJU’s 18 May study of Test, Track and Trace systems **[TS/60 - INQ000174737]**, the 28 May, 5 June and 6 July papers on social distancing **[TS/61 - INQ000174740, TS/62 - INQ000174748 and TS/63 - INQ000174762]**; the 25 June papers on border controls **[TS/64 - INQ000174755]** and superspreading events and clusters **[TS/65 - INQ000174754]**; and the 15 July paper on mandatory face coverings **[TS/66 - INQ000174763]**.
- 9.31 Like the covid dashboard, standing up the ICJU was a major undertaking, with around six major reports and four short snapshots being produced each week, as well as a daily dashboard.
- 9.32 Throughout my time at No 10, my understanding is that the Prime Minister’s medical advice came directly from the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and his scientific advice from the Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA), who was sometimes representing SAGE, as its chair. Both were typically present in the decision-making meetings I attended.
- 9.33 Of course, the remits of the CMO and GCSA were medicine and science; when taking decisions, ministers had to consider a broader array of factors – broadly those summarised in the 11 May strategy publication.

9.34 Indeed, my view throughout was that it was important that a full and rigorous analysis of these issues should be considered [TS/67 - INQ000174733 and TS/68 - INQ000174722]. Throughout my time in post, I was keen to ensure that the Prime Minister had access to as much analysis as possible to inform the decisions he had to take (see, for example, [TS/69 - INQ000174725, TS/70 - INQ000174726, TS/71 - INQ000174728 and TS/72 - INQ000174729]).

9.35 The areas I recall working well and the main lessons I would draw are covered in section H below.

10. SECTION E: ROLE IN COVID-19 PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATIONS

10.1 No 10 and the Cabinet Office both had well-established, expert communications teams who took the lead on these issues. The leaders of these teams were directly represented in the various decision-making fora I attended, and the full-time teams were augmented by external secondees with specialist communications expertise, to add capacity.

10.2 Throughout my secondment I had visibility of many, but not all, public communications prior to their release and I would often be on email copy lists for draft press releases and ministerial speeches. Given the importance of public understanding and confidence to a pandemic response that relied on behavioural change, communications considerations were prominent in many of the daily ministerial meetings I attended, and major trends and issues were often summarised in, for example, CCS' daily CRIPs in the early part of the period.

10.3 However, although I had pre-publication access to many public communications, I rarely engaged in discussions about communications strategy or tactics, which were beyond my expertise. I would sometimes offer informal comments or suggestions to the officials and advisers with responsibility for communications on drafts of important materials that related to a topic on which I was working (for example the Prime Minister's public remarks ahead of the release of the 11 May roadmap), or to make generic suggestions (for example that I believed government guidance documents and the UK's suite of NPIs would be better understood and more effective if simpler and more concise).

10.4 I would typically only be asked to engage on communications matters if it was necessary to confirm the policy or delivery discussions at ministerial meetings I had attended had been properly translated into the public communications. That would normally only happen when decisions were moving especially quickly and there was insufficient time for a wider check, or when an issue was particularly complex.

- 10.5 Given the fast pace at which events were moving, substantive policy would occasionally be developed through the medium of a publishable statement or document, for example, in the case of defining “key workers” for the purpose of school attendance. On these occasions I would offer comments on these communications materials directly, typically through the lens of the delivery implications (rather than the communications considerations being considered in this section), or I would try to point the communications teams to the right people from whom to source further information.
- 10.6 The Situation Centre that ran the internal Covid Dashboard I describe in section D also provided a subset of the same data for broadcast in the daily press-conferences. I did not play a role in selecting the data to be broadcast, deciding how it was presented or choosing the topics of the press conferences. These would often be decided at the Prime Minister’s daily morning meeting on the advice of his communications staff, and I believe a member of the communications team was embedded in the dashboard team to support this process.
- 10.7 The Inquiry has asked me to explain what impact, if any, I consider alleged breaches of rules and standards by Ministers, officials and advisers during the specified period, and public debate regarding those alleged breaches, had on public confidence in the UK Government’s response to Covid-19.
- 10.8 The whole response relied on public understanding and confidence, so clear public communications and public trust were both essential. I do not believe there could have been any credible method of enforcement that would have enabled the Government to impose NPIs without widespread public consent. Indeed, my recollection is that during my time in post, there were remarkably high levels of consent, support and adherence across the UK.
- 10.9 Any change in adherence or public attitudes toward the Government’s response after each instance of rule-breaking that became public during my time in post should be evident from the various tracking data that were collected throughout. This would have been an area owned and examined by Cabinet Office and No 10 communications and public engagement teams, and I do not recall being made aware of any material changes, although I was aware of media reporting that there was significant public anger about each of the three widely-publicised breaches of the rules or guidance during my time in post.

11. **SECTION F: ROLE IN PUBLIC HEALTH AND CORONAVIRUS LEGISLATION AND REGULATIONS**

- 11.1 A dedicated Cabinet Office team was responsible for the complex and quite specialist work of translating the conclusions of the ministerial strategy discussions (which I routinely

attended) into the necessary legislation and regulation. Occasionally I would offer feedback to the policy officials responsible for this area, normally when those teams had a question around how to interpret a position the Prime Minister had taken (e.g. [TS/73 - INQ000174757 and TS/74 - INQ000174761]).

12. SECTION G: INTERNAL GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS

- 12.1 The Inquiry has asked me to comment on how WhatsApp and other informal messaging services were used during the period of my secondment to No 10. It was my experience that these services were used more extensively during the period of my 2020 secondment than they had been during my previous roles in the Civil Service (which ended in July 2019). My assumption at the time was that this was a function of the distributed working protocol and remote work restrictions that began at the same time as my secondment, when other technologies that were novel for Government (for example, Zoom) also began to be used widely. My recollection is of WhatsApp and SMS serving as digital surrogates for the kind of ephemeral, informal 'corridor chat' or scribbled notes that might normally have been passed in a physical meeting. That is to say: trivial, transient, informal communications of little substantive significance. Apart from WhatsApp, SMS and Zoom's 'chat' function used during meetings, I do not recall seeing other informal messaging services being used, though I believe the Cabinet Office sometimes also used the messaging service built into the Google suite.
- 12.2 My recollection is that the types of messages that might have typically been exchanged on these kinds of informal messaging platforms would have included: checking on the timing of, or agreeing who would attend, a meeting; sharing a link to an online article or report; asking to intervene during a remote meeting; asking for someone to be added to a call; checking on someone's welfare (since many of those involved were working around the clock, under considerable pressure); or exchanging personal messages with colleagues who were also friends.
- 12.3 I did not see WhatsApp or any other informal messaging service in any way displace the normal means of formal communication, debate, decision-making or record keeping – that is to say, via email, meeting papers and in meetings minuted by a Private Secretary or dedicated Secretariat, in line with my previous experiences in the civil service.
- 12.4 In terms of specific informal messaging groups and messages exchanged with core decision-makers and advisers, the Minister and decision-maker to whom I was accountable was the then Prime Minister. I believe that the No 10 Private Office and the Prime Minister's

closest advisers operated various WhatsApp groups with him directly, but I was not party to these and do not know how they operated. I did not exchange any WhatsApp or SMS messages (or similar) with the then Prime Minister; I do not believe I have ever held his mobile phone number or personal email address, and believe I would only ever have communicated with him on matters of substance via his Private Office 'box' or in a meeting attended by Private Secretaries, formally, in the normal way.

- 12.5 In terms of other messaging groups, I can particularly recall being a member of two main No 10 groups: one was internal to No 10 senior staff working on covid; and a second had a wider membership that also included senior DHSC colleagues (including, I think, the Secretary of State, Permanent Secretary and CMO). Beyond these, I imagine I would have sent WhatsApp or SMS messages to many advisers and officials involved in the response at some point, directly or in small groups; my recollection is that such messages would have been in line with my generalised description above.

13. SECTION H: CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

- 13.1 I directly observed only a short period of the UK Government's response to covid, and inevitably my general impressions will have been influenced by subsequent events. I should therefore qualify any observations I offer here with the caveat that this limited visibility means I do not offer any reflection with a high degree of confidence; I may well lack important context. I have confined my observations to matters I observed directly during the four months of my secondment.
- 13.2 The period for which I was present was fast-moving and highly pressured. There were many practical challenges to be overcome, and novel policy questions for ministers to decide, as one might expect in a crisis.
- 13.3 Reflecting with the benefit of hindsight, the most important lesson I would draw from my limited vantage point is that I believe the UK's Covid response would have been aided if more pandemic response infrastructure had been created in advance.
- 13.4 Each pandemic is unique, so much of any response will be context specific. There will always be a need to react quickly (and adapt any preparations) to the particular circumstances. Much of the response is also likely to be dynamic: many steps will depend on the effect and efficacy of some of the prior steps.
- 13.5 Covid presented some particularly challenging features that I expect would have made any response challenging, irrespective of the UK's level of preparedness. For example, the

amount we didn't know about the virus' properties during the period of my secondment, and its asymptomatic transmission. One important consequence of this was that the scale of the concurrent activity required was considerable.

- 13.6 However, I recall reflecting in March 2020 that it would have been preferable to have been in a position to be enacting more pandemic response capabilities that had been designed and rehearsed in advance. I also believe that where surge capacity was required, it would have been preferable if a suitable number of well-briefed, well-trained individuals had been pre-identified to move from their regular roles into crisis roles with which they were familiar, much like the military trains reservists and exercises for various scenarios.
- 13.7 During the first two months I was present, from mid-March, it appeared to me that considerable time and focus had to be invested in designing, rather than just enacting, the infrastructure and policy needed to support the response. Examples include: creating data flows to understand what was happening; designing basic organisational structures; and agreeing policy positions that I presume are largely generic to any pandemic (from deciding what constituted a 'key worker,' to how a mass test-and-trace system could operate).
- 13.8 The need to quickly create new capabilities led to many commendable examples of people working extraordinarily hard in difficult, ambiguous, rapidly changing circumstances. For example among the many delivery teams with whom I worked during the period of my secondment were those responsible for: the development of the Nightingale hospitals as a contingency to provide adequate oxygen supply to a larger number of ventilator beds; the rapid increase in ventilator procurement to support the 'reasonable worst case' projections of how many might have been required; the significant scaling up of testing capacity; and the fast development of Oak National Academy to support children's remote learning.
- 13.9 It is impossible to know what might have been different had more of the infrastructure been developed in advance. However, I believe that we can reasonably speculate on some of the more obvious implications. For example, I think it is clear that a rapidly-scalable mass-testing operation must be part of pandemic preparedness, and the UK did not have one, so it had to be designed and built at the point it needed to operate.
- 13.10 Similarly, although the UK had a pandemic stockpile of Personal Protective Equipment, it did not appear to be sized for a realistic projection of what would be required, at least for this scenario, so considerable time and expense was committed to trying to buy from a limited global supply chain at the same time as every other country.

- 13.11 More generally, notwithstanding the impressive feats of delivery in the circumstances, it will normally be the case that any system is improved through testing and iteration over time. If more generic pandemic response infrastructure, capacity plans, policy positions and organisational structures had been developed, tested, and refined prior to a live pandemic, I presume it is likely they could have been improved, at least to some extent.
- 13.12 I also wonder whether it might have been possible to have relieved some of the considerable pressure on operational teams (and in particular on a small number of key senior leaders) if the UK had built more of its pandemic response infrastructure in advance. Especially during the months of March and April, I observed real capacity constraints, with key individuals working extraordinarily long hours and appearing unsustainably stretched. It is, of course, always going to be challenging for any one individual or team to be contributing to the design of one new system or policy while concurrently implementing another.
- 13.13 Clearly, all governments must decide how much contingency preparation is proportionate: how much time, expense, focus and expertise should be invested in something that may never happen, when there are direct trade-offs with live issues happening right now?
- 13.14 However, the main lesson I would draw from the short period during which I worked on the Government's response to Covid-19 is that in future I think more, dedicated, resource could usefully be invested in contingency preparations to create well-designed, well-rehearsed pandemic response infrastructure and capabilities. I would also suggest that to avoid urgent matters diverting attention, it would be important for this resource to be carefully ringfenced from 'current' activities.
- 13.15 Second, with respect to data and information, although some of the data used was novel and specific to the Covid strategy, so necessarily had to be collated at pace, much was generic: how much PPE was being used, current bed capacity, and so on.
- 13.16 The manual effort required to collate and share this information came from capacity that could have been employed to interpret it; and the time it took to establish rudimentary reporting capabilities ate into time when it would have been useful to have had at least a basic level of situational awareness available.
- 13.17 Third, with respect to the core political and administrative decision-making structures that are the focus of this module, I believe the 'Taskforce' structure adopted in May 2020 was an improvement on the arrangements in place in March, when I joined.

- 13.18 Moving to a simpler, more streamlined 'Taskforce' structure led at Permanent Secretary level seemed to me to be more coherent than the arrangements that had developed over the second half of March and April 2020.
- 13.19 I believe that over the course of April a common view emerged across Ministers and Senior Civil Servants involved in the Covid response that the MIG structure risked duplication and, with an out-sized secretariat, too many meetings being held without clear purpose, which risked distracting those in departments and agencies. It was my view from soon after my arrival in March that the cross-Government coordination of the Covid response needed to be led, at official level, by a single permanent secretary. In May this role was created and taken up by Simon Case.
- 13.20 One important capability that began to be developed within the Covid Taskforce during my secondment was the joint analysis function initially led by Stephen Aldridge. The need for this is well summarised in Jonathan Black's 10 April assessment [TS/75 - INQ000174721], which I supported. I believe it would have been useful if this had existed from the beginning of the pandemic response, and, failing that, if it had been established and scaled faster, once the need had been articulated.
- 13.21 Within this function, the development of a stronger integrated forecasting capability was a challenging ambition that I do not think was met during my secondment. This is a good example of a complex capability that proved difficult to design and build while also concurrently meeting the daily need for analysis to support live decisions.
- 13.22 However, if such a capability been designed, built, and refined in advance, I believe it would have had many benefits. For example, it would have been easier for decision-makers to understand the extent to which modelled outcomes were sensitive to different input assumptions.
- 13.23 Ministers will have a more reliable view than mine on what worked for them, but from my perspective, the move to the Covid-O and Covid-S ministerial decision-making structure was also an improvement on the previous MIG-based structure, not least because it proved considerably easier to navigate and to focus on the most pressing and complex issues, with the majority of the response sitting with the accountable department.
- 13.24 Fourth, with respect to the Covid Programme Management Office, the principal challenge was to create a PMO from a standing start, as quickly as possible.

- 13.25 When I began my secondment on 16 March, there was no PMO, and it was not obvious to me that the centre of government – CCS, the Cabinet Office or No 10 – had sufficient visibility of the myriad plans required to implement the covid response.
- 13.26 I believe Ministers in the centre of government wanted to be able to see a clear, concise, picture of which plans existed; a high-level summary of what each plan entailed; who was responsible for each; and the responsible person's assessment of the plan's adequacy. This did not appear to exist initially in mid-March; hence the need to establish a PMO, which first had to be created, and then had to begin the work of gathering this information.
- 13.27 Of course, ownership of many such plans was concentrated in the Department for Health and Social Care (as the lead department for the response) and its agencies, and there is a limit to how much detail the centre of government needs to be able to access. Much of the policy detail should be understood and held in depth in the responsible department; having to share too much of that with the centre of government risks imposing unnecessary and distracting friction.
- 13.28 However, during my first few weeks in role, I formed a general impression that not having clear sight of many high-level summaries of implementation plans was a source of some frustration for the Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Foreign Secretary, Chancellor, and senior officials and advisers in the centre of government. I inferred that Ministers' frustration derived primarily from a concern that basic details not being visible implied that plans were not yet fully developed (though I do not recall whether or when this was articulated explicitly).
- 13.29 The PMO sought to scrutinise the summaries of such plans, where they existed, in order to provide central ministers and officials with visibility of what was, and was not, in place. It also aimed to support departments to create plans where they did not exist, for example, by providing visibility of cross-departmental interdependencies.
- 13.30 For example, the Cabinet Office's Delivery Report of 24 April **[TS/76 - INQ000061987]** shows most delivery plans marked as having "significant gaps, failures or inconsistencies with the broader strategy." I believe this would have been a judgement formed by officials in the PMO on the quality of the written plan, against a series of fairly rudimentary tests, not an assessment of the substantive delivery.
- 13.31 At this point the PMO sat in the Cabinet Office, reporting to Mark Sweeney, so he and the PMO Director would be best-placed to comment on the detail of the judgements, to whom they were briefed, how they were received and how Ministers reacted.

- 13.32 The PMO was formed at pace, initially by re-appointing from elsewhere in the Cabinet Office a number of civil servants who had worked in the EU Exit PMO. This meant that some of the core team were relatively familiar with working together, and that some of the doctrine that had been developed for the planning of the various EU Exit scenarios could be adapted.
- 13.33 This team was augmented by a number of military appointees, including military reservists. They were considered to have the core planning skills required and could be available at relatively short notice. It was further augmented by management consultancy resource to quickly provide more specialist expertise while longer-term appointments were made.
- 13.34 However, whereas the central EU Exit PMO was developed over a longer period and therefore was able to build deeper relationships with the PMOs in each department and agency, an obvious challenge for the Covid PMO was the pace at which it was created and had to familiarise itself with departmental plans. These limitations mean that during my secondment I believe it operated at a rudimentary level of capability, seeking simple plans, and performing basic analyses.
- 13.35 I understand that since my departure in July 2020, the Cabinet Office has undertaken considerable work to build a digital platform that enables much faster and easier sharing of delivery milestones across government, and that a small Cabinet Office team formed from some of the Covid PMO team have used this capability to track the implementation of (non-Covid) priority delivery programmes across government.
- 13.36 One lesson I would draw is that such a platform would have been useful in March 2020. I believe it would have enabled us to more easily gather and synthesise what needed to be delivered, when; for departments to easily update these plans in real-time as circumstances changed; and for all parties to work more efficiently and effectively, saving time for operational and departmental policy teams. I think it would have been beneficial for everyone to have been able to spend less time trying to build basic situational awareness, as this could have allowed more time for substantive delivery, and for the centre of government to better analyse the interdependencies between plans in the portfolio, and the portfolio-level risks, issues, gaps, and opportunities.

14. SECTION I: CONCLUSION

- 14.1 I very much hope the UK is not confronted with another pandemic for many years to come. However, clearly, hope is not a plan. I wish the Inquiry well in its endeavour of drawing out some actionable lessons that help the UK prepare itself as well as possible for the next pandemic. Since we don't know when that might occur, and we do know that it could come

at any time, I hope the Inquiry is able to meet its aspiration of doing so as swiftly as possible, despite the formidable breadth of its scope.

14.2 Any resulting improvements in the UK's readiness will, of course, be too late for the many Covid-19 victims. I fear that we are unlikely to understand for some time the full extent of the many health, social and economic harms that I understand are, sadly, likely to continue for some years to come, here in the UK and around the world. I imagine few of us will not be close to somebody who was, or who continues to be, a victim of the pandemic's effects. And it is sobering to reflect on how much worse the harms might have been if the virus had slightly different properties, or the vaccines had been slightly less effective or slower to arrive.

14.3 I would like to conclude this statement by offering every sympathy to the victims of the Covid-19 pandemic and those close to them. And by offering those conducting the Inquiry any assistance I can, to try to identify how the UK can be better prepared for the next pandemic.

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.

Personal Data

Signed: _____

Dated: 31 July 2023