

**IN THE MATTER OF THE INQUIRIES ACT 2005 AND IN THE MATTER OF THE INQUIRY  
RULES 2006**

**THE UK COVID-19 INQUIRY  
CLOSING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE CABINET OFFICE  
FOR MODULE 2 (CORE DECISION-MAKING AND POLITICAL GOVERNANCE)**

---

*References to oral witness evidence in this statement are inserted in brackets in the format 'Day of hearing: Page of Transcript: Line of Page'*

**INTRODUCTION**

1. In order to learn lessons for the future, it is vital to examine the decisions that have been the focus of this module, and the structures in which those decisions were made. We hope that the breadth of views expressed in the evidence of witnesses supported by the Cabinet Office, including No.10, demonstrates our commitment to assist the Inquiry in this important module.
2. The Inquiry will need to consider the evidence in this module in the context of a novel, global threat where all governments, not just in the United Kingdom, were working in an environment of significant uncertainty about both the characteristics of the virus and the path of the pandemic.
3. As we have heard throughout this module, as the threat from the virus became clearer, the Government had to balance its wide range of possible impacts to protect lives and livelihoods in ways that were unprecedented in peace time. There were different, strongly held, opinions on the right response to take. Cabinet Government was required to harness the full range of perspectives across departments based on the evidence available at the time in order to take into account the impacts of the virus on health, on the economy and on society.
4. To learn lessons and identify what needs to be done differently, the Inquiry will want to understand not just whether judgments turned out with hindsight to be right or wrong, but whether they were reasonable in light of what was known at the time and the options that were available.

5. The hearings in this module have, largely, focussed on 2020, particularly its early months. As we noted in our opening statement, the UK response, having started in a climate of acute uncertainty, evolved over time as the virus was better understood, as more tools were developed to combat it, and as lessons were learned.
6. We would emphasise that the Government has instigated significant and material evolutions to the way in which it handles crises and is making rapid progress against a longer-term programme to build a more resilient UK. Over and above the many practical improvements already in place, the Resilience Framework, published in December 2022, is a foundation upon which ongoing action and future lessons will be layered. This will include the careful consideration of recommendations from this Inquiry.
7. The Deputy Prime Minister made the first Annual Statement to Parliament on Risk and Resilience on 4 December 2023. This forms part of the Government's commitment to raise awareness on resilience and to be more transparent and accountable, so that there is opportunity for scrutiny.
8. The Government set wholly exceptional Terms of Reference for this Inquiry in order to reflect the once in a generation circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Government's response required unprecedented restrictions on personal freedoms via a unique, whole of government response and it was vital that lessons were learnt to assist with any future pandemic. Documents that would not normally be disclosed for many years have, therefore, been made available in order to assist the Inquiry and meet its requests. As such, this module represents an unprecedented moment of public transparency on the decision-making process in a recent crisis. This included the Government making an exception to its usual approach to the disclosure of the proceedings of Cabinet and its committees. The principle of Cabinet Collective Responsibility requires that the privacy of opinions expressed at Cabinet and in its committees should be maintained. It is a long established constitutional convention that information relating to the discussions that have taken place in Cabinet and its committees is not normally disclosed. Both the courts and previous inquiries have also recognised the weight of the strong public interest in protecting that principle. Disclosures of material which by their nature engage this principle were made by exception solely in order that the Inquiry could fulfil the purpose for which it was established.

9. The Cabinet Office has provided the Inquiry with 30 individual and corporate Rule 9 statements and over 8,000 documents to support its work in this very important module. They provide vital context for the decisions that were made and form part of the totality of the evidence that the Inquiry will want to consider when it looks at these matters in the round. We would encourage the Inquiry also to consider the wide range of data and information that the Government provided in the public domain at the time, such as at the daily press conferences.
10. The Cabinet Office invites the Inquiry to look at the past through the lens of the future so that this country can be better prepared. As we noted in Module 1, a future pandemic could be very different, so the Government and the broader system must be able to adapt to novel risks and challenges. In this written closing statement, the Cabinet Office invites the Inquiry to consider a number of themes that were raised in the evidence, before turning to the ways in which crisis and resilience structures are improving.

### **CULTURE AT THE CENTRE**

11. Evidence has been heard in particular about the tone and content of private communications between colleagues which, the Cabinet Office accepts, was clearly not always of the standard that the public would expect.
12. This should be considered both in the context of the nature of the communication - largely informal messaging that was intended to be private - and the prevailing circumstances - a fast-paced, uncertain, and high-pressure environment where staff were facing stress both in the workplace and in their personal lives.
13. The Cabinet Office takes very seriously the broader evidence that has been heard about certain elements of the culture in the centre of government in this period. In any workplace, even in a crisis, colleagues should be respectful to each other.
14. In 2022, the Cabinet Office launched a significant programme - 'A Better Cabinet Office' (ABCO) - in order to effect lasting change to the employee experience. The programme has six core themes, including one on leadership, respect and inclusion.

### **DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES**

15. Given the magnitude of the crisis that was facing not only the UK but also countries around the world, it was exceptionally difficult to balance the huge impacts of the

pandemic across health, the economy and society. There were countless trade-offs and no good options.

16. Cabinet, the ultimate decision-making body of government, met and discussed COVID-19 throughout the relevant period. Boris Johnson said in his written statement that *“During Cabinet meetings we would have proper discussions with very full exchanges”*<sup>1</sup>.
17. As is usual, Cabinet was supported by a system of Cabinet Committees. The Cabinet Manual explains that *“Cabinet and its committees are established by convention but it is a matter for the incumbent government to determine the specific arrangements for collective decision-making...The Prime Minister decides – with the advice of the Cabinet Secretary – the overall structure of the Cabinet committee system, including the chair, deputy chair (if any), membership and the terms of reference of each Cabinet committee”*.
18. The Cabinet Manual further explains that *“An agenda is set for each Cabinet and Cabinet committee meeting. In the case of Cabinet, items for the agenda are agreed by the Prime Minister. For other Cabinet committees, the agenda is agreed by the relevant chair”. Once a matter has been considered, “It is for the Prime Minister, as chair of Cabinet, or the relevant Cabinet committee chair to summarise what the collective decision is, and this is recorded in the minutes by the Cabinet Secretariat”. The Cabinet Manual is clear that “Cabinet committee decisions have the same authority as Cabinet decisions”*<sup>2</sup>.
19. The early months of the pandemic were an exceptionally fluid time at the centre of government as structures evolved with the path of the virus in circumstances of extreme uncertainty. Its sheer scale, pace and breadth meant that individuals and teams in the Cabinet Office including No.10 were seeking to manage a large volume of daily decisions. Any structure would have faced challenges in implementation.
20. Therefore, as the initial, acute phase of the crisis passed, new and clearer structures were introduced for the prolonged challenge that followed, including the COVID Strategy Committee (COVID-S) and the COVID Operations Committee (COVID-O). COBR continued to meet periodically. In his written statement, Dominic Raab recalled that the system of Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIGs) had been a *“very intense”*

---

<sup>1</sup> Witness statement of Boris Johnson p.200 (INQ000255836)

<sup>2</sup> All quotations from the Cabinet Manual are from the 1st edition, October 2011 (INQ000182315)

emergency structure which “was good for bringing people together and proceeding in a collaborative and consensual way but once you know where you are going, the strategy and operations structure is better”<sup>3</sup>. In his expert report, Alex Thomas agreed that the COVID-S and COVID-O structure was a success, “allowing senior ministers to set direction, and ministers and officials to work together on operationalising and monitoring high level decisions”<sup>4</sup>.

21. The overall structure of the Cabinet committee system is a decision of the Prime Minister, on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary. Decision-making structures should remain the prerogative of the Prime Minister of the day<sup>5</sup>.
22. COVID-S and COVID-O were supported by the COVID-19 Taskforce (CTF). As Roger Hargreaves told the Inquiry in Module 1: “I think if we were going through the same experience again, from the off we would understand that we would need immediately to begin to prepare to deliver the Covid Taskforce...and COBR would fill the space until it was up and running” (8:13:20-25). In his written statement for Module 2, Simon Ridley said “The CTF became increasingly effective over time, and the team grew considerably over the summer [of 2020]. By late 2020, the CTF was operating at full capability and capacity, settling on its lasting organisation, and coordinating different parts of Government to contribute to decision making”<sup>6</sup>.
23. Throughout this evolution, summarised in the Annex to this written closing, these structures ensured that ministers were able to make formal decisions in appropriate forums, supported by the evidence that was available at the time. In his written statement, Boris Johnson said: “I felt that the UK Government/Cabinet Office structures and processes for dealing with emergencies at Prime Minister, Cabinet, Cabinet Office, Ministerial and departmental levels worked effectively and properly enabled key decisions in relation to the response to Covid-19...I felt the structures we had in place to deal with the situation were effective, strong and resilient. They enabled key decisions to be taken speedily and to coordinate different parts of government”. In his view, the evidence “shows that we were prepared to learn lessons and strive to improve as well

---

<sup>3</sup> Witness statement of Dominic Raab p.47 (INQ000268041)

<sup>4</sup> Expert report for the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry on Module 2 by Alex Thomas p.40 (INQ000236243)

<sup>5</sup> The Cabinet Manual explains that “The committee structure varies depending on the requirements of the incumbent government”, *ibid* footnote 2

<sup>6</sup> Witness statement of Simon Ridley p.87 (INQ000252914)

*as trying to ensure the decision-making structures had the necessary flexibility to work effectively. When they had served their purpose (or if we found they were not as effective as hoped), they evolved or were replaced. These processes and structures necessarily needed to evolve throughout the pandemic response — as they would throughout any term of government. What works for some people or situations does not work for others”<sup>7</sup>.*

## **COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT**

24. Under Cabinet collective responsibility, Cabinet and Cabinet Committees - such as COVID-S, COVID-O and COBR - took decisions which were binding on all members of the Government. Collective responsibility allows ministers to express their views frankly and put forward their arguments freely, in private, while maintaining a united front when decisions have been reached. This in turn requires that the privacy of opinions expressed in Cabinet and Ministerial Committees, including in correspondence, should be maintained. This is critical to obtaining consensus and enabling good decision making.
  
25. Having now heard the ministerial witnesses, the Inquiry will appreciate that ministers are responsible for representing within government their department’s position on matters under consideration. It is reasonable and expected for the Chancellor of the Exchequer to have regard for the economy, just as it is for the Justice Secretary to have regard for those in prisons and for the Secretary of State for Education to have regard for schools. It should not be expected to be any other way. There was typically an iterative process by which relevant ministers had the opportunity in a range of forums to provide relevant advice and information from their departmental perspectives before decisions were ultimately made in a formal decision-making meeting. It is a strength of our system that it ensures that the full range of objectives and issues are raised, understood and taken into account in the collective decision-making process. As the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said in his oral evidence, decisions on COVID-19 were *“incredibly consequential decisions for tens of millions of people, in all spheres...So the fact that there was debate and that people were passionate about it and they had different points of view is, I think, (a) unsurprising and (b) good, because it would be worse if we were having this conversation and all the commentary was: well, there was no debate about any of this whatsoever, it was all just signed off, straightforward, someone put a piece of paper, someone checked [it] and that was the last we heard of it. I think that would actually be*

---

<sup>7</sup> Witness statement of Boris Johnson p.201 (INQ000255836)

*far worse, quite frankly*" (33:46-47:12-3).

26. The Inquiry has raised an issue as to whether decision-making sufficiently engaged Cabinet and its committees, particularly in the early part of the crisis. Lord Sedwill's answer was: *"Actually, in terms of the formal procedures, the key decisions were taken either in Cabinet or in the UK COBR with the devolved First Ministers and their teams in attendance. So I think in terms of formal decisions, the constitutional position, we sought to follow it"* (20:15-16:1-5).
27. Lord Sedwill was asked about the views of others in relation to the specific criticisms of whether the Cabinet and its committees were adequately involved. He explained that the early months of the pandemic were a very challenging period. The Prime Minister, with his officials and advisers, had to determine his view, balancing the range of impacts and taking into account fluid and evolving data and scientific advice. Structures were put in place to ensure decisions were formally taken in the proper collective way. In his oral evidence Lord Sedwill said: *"My job was essentially to create a system which insulated the rest of Whitehall and turned whatever process of getting to a decision in the centre of government into regular government decisions and business, and the main mechanisms I used for that...was trying to ensure the last group of people from whom [the Prime Minister] would hear would be his Cabinet colleagues and in collective agreement"* (20:121:13-21).
28. Professor Sir Chris Whitty's recollection accords with that of Lord Sedwill's. In his written statement Professor Whitty said that *"I formed the view that almost all major decisions that needed to be taken by elected political leaders were taken via a formal process. That is however not to say that all of the thought process that led up to the formal decision being made was via a formal process, although in my view this was inevitable given the speed of the pandemic. For example, the Prime Minister might have a pre-meeting with a small group of his advisers, sometimes including a few Ministers and/or me and the GCSA [Government Chief Scientific Adviser] where technical advice was relevant. These pre-meetings allowed him to test his own views and understanding of the issues, and might lead to him coming to a provisional view on the best next steps. The formal decision would subsequently be taken in a formal meeting, often Cabinet, a Cabinet sub-committee or occasionally COBR, in which other senior Ministers could, and in meetings I was in often did, challenge the initial view or interrogate the technical advice*

*underpinning it. The degree of time and space for challenge that I observed was, unsurprisingly, greater in smaller meetings of Ministers than large groups*<sup>8</sup>.

29. This evidence, from those who were closely involved in the constitutional process and perhaps viewing the position from a slightly more independent standpoint, indicates that collective decision-making was maintained.
30. WhatsApp was used to communicate, perhaps not surprisingly given the pace and remote nature of much of the work, but the evidence does not demonstrate that decisions were made on WhatsApp, or that it had significant influence on the decision-making systems or structures. In his written statement, Michael Gove said: "*WhatsApp facilitated bringing together the key issues and relevant people at short notice to support the rapidity of decision making required, especially when many colleagues and officials were necessarily working remotely, but the decisions themselves were taken at Committees, informed by or based on the papers and information brought to the Committees, all of which was underpinned by a vast amount of work and data by officials and advisers, and all of which were formally recorded*"<sup>9</sup>.
31. In recognition of the increasing use of instant messaging, in March 2023 the Cabinet Office published updated guidance on the use of non-corporate communication channels which includes tools such as WhatsApp, SMS and private email. In addition, updated guidance on the management of private office information and records prepared by the Cabinet Office and The National Archives was published in December 2023<sup>10</sup>.

## **THE RESPONSE OF THE CENTRE TO THE EMERGING PANDEMIC**

32. The Inquiry has also raised an issue of whether the system of governance was too slow to react during the early part of 2020.
33. In order for lessons to be learned, the Inquiry has to look at the decision-making, whilst fully recognising the fast moving and uncertain context at the time and the advantages of hindsight. In examination of this issue, the key question is what was known

---

<sup>8</sup> Witness statement of Professor Sir Chris Whitty p.64 (INQ000251645)

<sup>9</sup> Witness statement of Michael Gove p.76 (INQ000259848)

<sup>10</sup> Guidance: Management of Private Office information and records (INQ000397235)



contemporaneously.

34. The written statement from Katharine Hammond,<sup>11</sup> formerly the Director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS), a witness the Inquiry heard from in Module 1 but not in this module, sets out the work done by her team from early January 2020 in response to the risk posed by the virus. CCS was notified of the disease in the first week of January 2020, and on 6 January 2020 the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and Deputy CMO agreed a set of triggers for further action. Katharine Hammond chaired the first cross-government senior officials meeting on the emerging coronavirus on 17 January 2020.
35. Katharine Hammond explained that SAGE was due to meet on 23 January 2020 and the first Ministerial COBR was scheduled to take place after that to ensure ministers had time to consider the advice from SAGE before deciding on what actions were appropriate.
36. The COBR meeting on 24 January 2020 was chaired by the Secretary of State for Health, as would be usual under the Lead Government Department Model during a health-related crisis. COBR agreed actions - focused on monitoring the emerging risk and joining up with devolved administrations - and made decisions on the triggers for reassessing the UK response, confirming that the CMO would advise on whether they had been met<sup>12</sup>.
37. On 27 January 2020, CCS formally stood up a Policy Cell, a Situation Cell and an Operations Cell to coordinate its response to the novel coronavirus (although the work in all three of these areas had already begun). On 28 January 2020, SAGE agreed that the first iteration of the Reasonable Worst Case Scenario (RWCS) should be based on existing planning assumptions for pandemic influenza. This first iteration was agreed for planning at the COBR meeting the following day, 29 January 2020.
38. The crisis machinery provided for full and regular collective consideration and decision-making. The chronology demonstrates that there were 14 ministerial COBR meetings between 24 January to 26 March 2020 and 8 further Cabinet meetings where COVID-19 was discussed between those dates. At each of them there was input from SAGE and at

---

<sup>11</sup> Witness statement of Katharine Hammond (INQ000221567)

<sup>12</sup> Actions and decisions from Novel Coronavirus meeting on 24 January 2020 (INQ000056161)

each CCS continued to work on the recommendations of SAGE.

39. In his oral evidence, Professor Whitty commented on the invitation for him to attend Cabinet on 14 February 2020: *“it’s extremely rare, in fact, that the Chief Medical Officer is invited to Cabinet under ordinary circumstances. This reflects the fact, I think, that government was acknowledging that this was a substantial threat”* (24:177:3-5).
40. The Inquiry heard the evidence of Mr Johnson regarding his activities during the February half term and his involvement with the COVID-19 response over the period. His diary shows that he returned to London from Chevening on three occasions during the week and was kept informed of issues relating to COVID-19 over the period. Notes referring to COVID-19 were sent to the Prime Minister on 14, 16, 17 and 19 February 2020.
41. It was not the role of CCS to run all planning across all of government. In his expert report, Alex Thomas said *“That the lead department is clear and its responsibilities well established is fundamental - reflecting guidance that goes back to 2004. The lead department is responsible for the overall management of the central government response, with its role set out in CCS documentation in advance of incidents occurring, but with increasing central CCS involvement as the scale of a crisis becomes more severe”*<sup>13</sup>.
42. Katharine Hammond’s witness statement exhibits a more detailed chronological record of the response to COVID-19 by the CCS<sup>14</sup>. As it shows, CCS stepped in to coordinate cross-government considerations of the wider impacts of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) following the consideration of these measures at the SAGE meeting on 25 February 2020.
43. CCS and the centre more broadly brought together input from departments on the significant implications of NPIs outside of the health system. As the pace and scale of the crisis increased, officials from the Economic and Domestic Secretariat (EDS) helped prepare material for COBR meetings to consider when and how to implement measures to mitigate the spread of the disease, given their wide social and economic impacts. Similarly, officials from the National Security Secretariat (NSS) provided support. The Inquiry has received many documents showing the wide range of work undertaken by

---

<sup>13</sup> Expert report for the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry on Module 2 by Alex Thomas pp.14-15 (INQ000236243)

<sup>14</sup> Witness statement of Katharine Hammond (INQ000221567)

the Joint Intelligence Organisation (JIO) to understand the implications of COVID-19 for the UK's national security. JIO is an assessment body that informs policy making.

44. Katharine Hammond's statement also sets out the evolution of the RWCS following its first iteration in January. Professor Whitty, in a written statement, explained that *"Inevitably the science was least clear in the early months of the pandemic. Little was known with confidence about the virus, testing was very limited and clinical data were sparse, there were no tested drugs or vaccines and the non-pharmaceutical countermeasures had not been used at this scale in living memory in the UK, and in the case of full lockdown had not been used at all. Several key features of the clinical infection such as the prolonged symptoms collectively known as Long Covid had not been identified. Advice at this stage often had to be based on public health principles and extrapolation (from influenza, MERS, SARS) with wide uncertainty"*. He also said: *"as in almost all science, evidence accumulated incrementally and the midpoint of scientific thinking therefore moved incrementally over many topics. Although policy decisions are often binary, and therefore occur on a certain date, the balance of scientific advice usually moves continuously as evidence accumulates"*<sup>15</sup>.
45. When asked about the early period in oral evidence, and the prevailing uncertainty at that time, Professor Whitty said: *"I was very aware that we essentially had two different things we were trying to balance, the risk of going too early, in which case you get all the damages from this with actually fairly minimal impact on the epidemic, and the risk of going too late, in which case you get all the problems of the pandemic running away"* (23:20-21:25-6). Later in his evidence he added: *"You know, I think it's very important we don't look back and say, "Well, of course you can see this is what would have happened", and "I'm just pointing out the international evidence on this at the time is relatively clear. It was uncertain at this stage"* (23:140:12-15). The World Health Organisation (WHO) only declared a pandemic on 11 March 2020.
46. What is clear, with hindsight, is that the virus was moving through the population quicker than anyone, including SAGE, had appreciated. Once this was understood, government advice was updated and the strategy to tackle the virus adapted. In his oral evidence, Sir Patrick Vallance explained how the data that came in during the week leading up to 14-15 March showed clearly that *"we were much further ahead, it [lockdown] was much*

---

<sup>15</sup> Witness statement of Professor Sir Chris Whitty p.13 (INQ000248853)

*more likely to be needed urgently than anyone had realised. That's a data problem, but it was also, I think, a scientific problem, in that you can't manage this with the precision that you think you can, and you therefore have to take different action" (22:41:4-10).*

47. Therefore, on examination of the contemporaneous evidence, the Cabinet Office rebuts the suggestion that it was not taking the virus seriously from an early stage. As to the decisions on whether and when the mandatory stay at home order be implemented, and other decisions in this early period, the Inquiry will want to examine all of the factors in the round and consider the learning for the future.

48. While the evidence demonstrates that the emerging virus was taken seriously and action was taken to respond from an early stage, the Cabinet Office recognises that the experience of the pandemic demonstrated a need to strengthen further the resilience system and the UK's ability to respond rapidly and effectively to future challenges. Action is already being taken in the following areas, among others.

48.1. Risk assessment was considered in Module 1 and the Inquiry has continued to hear evidence in Module 2 about the role of the RWCS as part of planning and response. The Government has reviewed and materially changed the way it assesses the most serious risks facing the UK, inviting wider external challenge to strengthen the internal, classified National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) and considering multiple scenarios in which a risk can manifest, rather than a single RWCS where appropriate. The NSRA has moved to a dynamic process of risk assessment. Furthermore, the Government published the most transparent ever National Risk Register (NRR) in August 2023 - the public-facing version of the NSRA - to support wider society in responding to risks. The Government has also developed a chronic risks analysis to support proactive action in tackling drivers or indications of risk at an earlier stage.

48.2. As Alex Thomas explained<sup>16</sup>, the long-established Lead Government Department (LGD) model had a role to play, but the Inquiry has also heard evidence of how the pandemic required a response encompassing the whole of government, and tested the LGD model. In August 2023, the Government updated LGD emergency management responsibilities, to ensure that

---

<sup>16</sup> *ibid* footnote 13 pp.14-15

responsibilities are led by those best placed to discharge them. This provides clarity around LGD accountability, by setting out broad types of emergencies and confirming which government department, or other public body, should lead across each phase of the emergency management cycle (in England). It also confirms in which situations the devolved administrations will lead if responsibility is devolved.

- 48.3. COVID-19 was not just a novel virus: it caused by far the most significant global pandemic in a century and had cascading consequences for every part of society and all parts of government. Building on an improved understanding of risk and sharpened accountabilities, the Government has undertaken a cross cutting assessment of government preparedness to respond to the impacts of NSRA risks through a capabilities review, and is driving a programme of improvements in response. This work is supported by the National Exercising Programme, which tests preparedness to respond to risks across government, with partners and sectors, as well as work to improve the resilience of Critical National Infrastructure and supply chains. To drive improvement in how government prepares for and responds to risks with the most significant impacts across society, the Government has established a Catastrophic Impact Programme. This programme is reviewing preparedness for the collection of highest impact risks in the NSRA and ensuring that there are sharpened accountabilities and ownership for the cascading impacts that flow from these most significant and severe events.

## **DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS**

49. A further issue that the Inquiry has heard evidence about is the relationship between the UK Government and the devolved administrations.
50. The response to the pandemic was a UK-wide effort, underpinned by UK-wide collaboration. The Cabinet Office sought to involve the devolved administrations in decision-making throughout the pandemic. Given the national scale of the crisis, the devolved administrations were invited to COBR meetings from January 2020. The First Ministers were invited to meetings, although in practice they delegated to their health ministers for the first few meetings. This was in accordance with the LGD model.

51. As central governance structures evolved, the devolved administrations remained involved, attending MIG meetings, and subsequently COVID-O meetings where a UK-wide approach was needed. At ministerial level, Michael Gove, as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, chaired regular calls with First Ministers of the devolved administrations. At official level, the Cabinet Office's UK Governance Group supported a UK-wide response by helping departments to ensure the response fully considered the devolution perspective and UK-wide impacts.
52. The virus did not, of course, respect borders. The evidence in this module has shown that while the first lockdown was delivered uniformly across the UK, there was some divergence of approach later in the period. As the former Prime Minister Boris Johnson notes in his statement, this risked considerable public confusion and frustration - when clarity of message was crucial.
53. In January 2022, the Review of Intergovernmental Relations was published<sup>17</sup>, setting out new, jointly-agreed principles and ways of working between the UK Government and the devolved administrations, building on the lessons learnt during the pandemic. A Minister for Intergovernmental Relations was appointed in 2021.
54. The Cabinet Office also invites the Inquiry to consider how different legislative options available to the UK government might, in future, support a more uniform UK-wide response to a future pandemic or equivalent emergency.

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

55. By early September 2020, prevalence of the virus was rising but was very diversely spread across the country. Leicester had been the first area to enter a local lockdown, at the end of June, and other areas had entered local measures over the summer. Alongside ongoing local measures and the evolution of the Test and Trace system, the Government tightened national restrictions incrementally, starting on 9 September 2020 when the 'rule of 6' was announced.
56. The minutes of Cabinet on 30 September 2020 record the CMO as saying that *"that the UK's nationwide outbreak during the first wave had been an exception to the pattern across Europe. Italy and Spain in particular had seen highly localised outbreaks. It was*

---

<sup>17</sup> Review of Intergovernmental Relations 13 January 2022 (INQ000102928)

*possible that this second wave in the UK would remain localised, but the winter was a lengthy period and the pandemic could well become national once more*<sup>18</sup>.

57. In October 2020, local measures were formalised into the tiering system. As part of this, the Government sought to agree the precise nature of the restrictions in each area under Tier 3, according to the evolution of the pandemic locally, and the accompanying support. The evidence of Simon Ridley and Lord Udney-Lister provide further detail on the engagement with local government leaders. Elected mayors have also provided their views during this module. The Government subsequently decided to apply a second national lockdown, which began on 5 November 2020.
58. The Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) in England and Wales, together with the Regional Resilience Partnerships (RRPs) in Scotland and Emergency Preparedness Groups (EPGs) in Northern Ireland, played - and continue to play - their important role in bringing together local responders, such as the emergency services, to plan and prepare for emergencies of all kinds.
59. The Strengthening LRFs Programme will significantly strengthen and empower LRFs in England, broadening their mission to place an increased emphasis on the active building of resilience in their areas and communities, alongside their risk-based planning and operational activity. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) has confirmed eight pilot areas that capture the breadth and diversity of the sector, and is working with these LRFs to develop their fuller pilot plans.
60. More broadly, the UK Resilience Forum (UKRF) provides a formal arena for cross-sectoral communication and collaboration on risk and emergency preparedness by bringing together national, regional and local government, private and voluntary sectors, and other interested parties. The Deputy Prime Minister chaired two UKRF meetings in 2023, providing challenge and insight to the government on the strategic resilience programme and aligning emergency preparedness activities, for example for winter pressures.

## **EQUALITIES**

---

<sup>18</sup> Minutes of Cabinet, 30 September 2020, p.5 (INQ000089096/5)

61. Equality issues were an important part of understanding and responding to the virus. As the Inquiry has heard in the course of this module, the Equality Hub provided multiple inputs across the Cabinet Office and other government departments, including on the impact of COVID-19 on ethnic minority groups, disabled people and other disproportionately impacted groups.
62. The Government responded quickly to the emerging data on ethnic disparities in COVID-19 infections and deaths. Public Health England was commissioned at the beginning of May 2020 to conduct a rapid review of the evidence and reported on 2 June. On 4 June 2020, the then Minister for Equalities was appointed by the Prime Minister and Health Secretary to lead cross-government work to understand why COVID-19 had such a disproportionate impact on ethnic minority groups and to review and inform the Government's response. HM Treasury was also commissioned to consider the disproportionate impact of restrictions on lower income and ethnic minority groups.
63. The Minister for Equalities published four quarterly reports on progress with this work. These made a number of recommendations which helped improve the quality of data and to identify, with more precision, which groups were adversely affected and for what reason. They also recommended specific changes such as recording ethnicity on death certificates and the incorporation of lessons learned from the vaccination roll out to improve take up in future vaccination schemes. Work was done, and continues to be done, to help build trust in UK health institutions through the local partnerships established during the pandemic, by communicating key messages through community partners, specialist media and trusted voices and ensuring that public health communications do not stigmatise ethnic minority groups.
64. The Government responded to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, with the report 'Inclusive Britain' in March 2022, which included a commitment to increasing ethnic minority participation in clinical trials, in order to build confidence in future vaccination schemes, and other health interventions and to tackling wider, underlying health disparities<sup>19</sup>.
65. The Disability Unit within the Equality Hub was declared a Critical Business Function of the Cabinet Office from April 2020 onwards, recognising the cross-government work and

---

<sup>19</sup> Inclusive Britain: government response to the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (INQ000328153)



impact of the Disability Unit on behalf of disabled people and the importance of improving outcomes for disabled people during the pandemic. At that time, the Disability Unit had higher than average levels of disability among staff - two-thirds of staff were disabled themselves or had caring responsibilities for disabled people. This diversity of lived experience also fed into and strengthened the unit's work throughout the period.

66. The Disability Unit worked across government departments to identify risks affecting disabled people and to support departments to mitigate these. This included: ensuring processes and guidance better reflected the needs of disabled people; promoting accessible communications; coordinating across government departments to ensure the needs of disabled people were better considered in policy development and delivery; building a broader evidence base on disability and COVID-19 impacts; and working closely with disabled people's organisations and disability stakeholders to hear and amplify the voices of disabled people.
  
67. As set out in the written statement of the then Minister for Disabled People, Justin Tomlinson<sup>20</sup>, the Disability Unit's work to support the cross-Government's COVID-19 response on disability included:
  - 67.1. increasing the accessibility of communications and improving messaging;
  - 67.2. coordination across departments to improve the information on, and policy development in relation to, disabled people;
  - 67.3. working across government and with other external stakeholders to improve the broader evidence base;
  - 67.4. engaging closely with disabled people's organisations and disability stakeholders;
  - 67.5. learning from and sharing information about the lived experiences of disabled people during the pandemic; and,
  - 67.6. working closely with external stakeholders and across government to develop longer term plans and an ambitious National Disability Strategy, published in March 2021<sup>21</sup>.

---

<sup>20</sup> Written statement of Justin Tomlinson dated 7 August 2023 (INQ000233735)

<sup>21</sup> National Disability Strategy (INQ000187638)

68. The Disability Unit worked with No.10 to introduce British Sign Language (BSL) interpretation at the daily press conferences via the BBC news channel and iPlayer and on government social media channels, and to ensure that key COVID-19 press conferences were made available with BSL interpretation for all broadcasters to use. BSL interpretation was in place from the first of the daily press conferences onwards.
69. The COVID-19 Taskforce had analytical and policy teams dedicated to understanding the impact of the pandemic on disproportionately impacted groups. They conducted a broad range of analysis which informed policy-making across government, ministerial meetings and equalities impact assessments. The Taskforce helped build a shared understanding of these issues across government and ensured they were embedded into wider activity.
70. The Government also established a disproportionately impacted groups workstream, led by Dr Emran Mian, to consider COVID-19 impacts more widely with which Cabinet Office officials (in the Equality Hub and COVID-19 Taskforce) worked very closely. The Equality Hub workstreams around ethnic minority groups and disabled people were part of this broader programme. On 24 September 2020, Ministers agreed a package of measures to help prevent disproportionate healthcare outcomes for disproportionately impacted groups, including ethnic minorities. £23.75 million funding was allocated for the Community Champions Scheme launched in January 2021<sup>22</sup>.
71. The Government continues to develop its approach to identifying and supporting vulnerable people across all risks, working with LRFs, the Voluntary and Community Sector, local partners and others in England. The Government is also working continuously to assess and mitigate vulnerability to specific risks. In addition, the draft Disability Action Plan (published for consultation between 18 July and 6 October 2023<sup>23</sup>) included proposals for the Disability Unit to work with relevant policy teams in Cabinet Office and across government, as well as other relevant partners, to ensure stronger engagement with disabled people in resilience and emergency planning. These proposals aimed to help to magnify disabled people's voices and the experiences of

---

<sup>22</sup> Second quarterly report on progress to address COVID-19 health inequalities (INQ000089744)

<sup>23</sup> Draft Disability Action Plan 18 July 2023 (INQ000397234)

disabled people, and support more disability-inclusive policy making in emergency planning and resilience work.

## **DATA AND EVIDENCE**

72. The Inquiry has heard much evidence in relation to data, in particular the lack of data at the start of the pandemic. This was in part an inevitable consequence of seeking to keep pace with the development of a novel virus and its implications.
73. The evidence that the Inquiry has heard sets out the issues with data at the early stage of the pandemic and the difficulties with obtaining data from different departments and across government.
74. To understand how data were provided to decision-makers, in particular in the early stages of the pandemic, the Inquiry will benefit from considering the full range of evidence that has been provided, particularly the Cabinet Office's written statements and the improvements that have been made. The Inquiry's data expert witness produced his statement without reference to the evidence submitted by the Cabinet Office, citing time constraints. There have been other criticisms of the capability and capacity within government on analytics, science and software engineering and barriers to data sharing. These are challenges which the creation of the National Situation Centre has helped to resolve and which were also addressed in the Declaration on Government Reform<sup>24</sup>.
75. The CCS provided ministers and officials attending COBR with critical data, including during the early phase of the pandemic. On 24 January, the CCS produced its first Commonly Recognised Information Picture (CRIP), which provided the latest information to COBR meetings and expanded to include data on domestic cases and deaths and the NHS. On 4 February 2020, the CCS produced its first cross-department Situational Report on the novel coronavirus, a snapshot in time drawn from information provided by a range of departments on live issues, which included data on international cases and deaths. In total, 27 CRIPs and 40 SitReps were circulated by 16 March 2020.
76. From 16 March 2020, the cross-department SitRep was replaced by a specific COVID-19 Dashboard ("C19 Dashboard"). On 24 March 2020, the CCS launched the interactive version of the C19 Dashboard, which was available across government and used to brief

---

<sup>24</sup> Declaration on Government Reform (INQ000137267)

the Prime Minister and senior members of Cabinet. A key surveillance tool feeding into the Dashboard was the COVID-19 Infection Survey (CIS) which was carried out by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), with the first results made available in May 2020. Sir Ian Diamond has provided evidence on the CIS<sup>25</sup>. In his written statement, Ben Warner described it as: *“the gold standard globally...I think that the UK was the only country in the world that had a robust estimate of the number of infections at any point in time”*<sup>26</sup>.

77. Enhancement to the structures supporting the Dashboard and the broader work building a data and analysis capability through the summer and early autumn of 2020 meant that by October 2020 a workforce of around 100 were focused on the provision of data and information to provide decision makers with the most up to date picture across the economy, society, the NHS and direct COVID-19 impacts.
78. In autumn 2020 the data brought together by the COVID-19 Taskforce was supplemented by insights from the International Comparators Joint Unit (ICJU), which was a partnership between the JIO in the Cabinet Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The ICJU built upon initial work on the international perspective which had been carried out from the beginning of the pandemic. ICJU carried out, inter alia, recurring comparative analysis on NPIs and social distancing.
79. The National Situation Centre (SitCen) now provides routine reporting on 160 key performance indicators, in addition to curated open source intelligence, on its Data, Analysis and Situational Awareness hub, which is available to users across government. In recent crisis responses since the SitCen’s launch, it has provided high-quality data reporting within minutes, and tailors products to the needs of users, such as bespoke ‘data snapshots’. In addition to preparing for all risks, the SitCen is developing specific health capabilities to support the government’s new Biological Security Strategy. It is developing a Biothreats radar which will provide near real-time monitoring of emerging biological threats that may impact the UK, which will be fully operational by 2025. The SitCen is recognised widely and internationally as world-leading and provides a wholly and materially improved service to government decision makers in crisis which would be well above and beyond the experience of senior leaders in early 2020.

---

<sup>25</sup> Witness statement of Sir Ian Diamond, dated 8 September 2023 (INQ000268012)

<sup>26</sup> Witness statement of Ben Warner p.47 (INQ000269182)

80. More broadly, in June 2022, the Government launched “Transforming for a Digital Future, the 2022 to 2025 Roadmap for Digital and Data”, with an ambition to transform public services, deliver world-class technology and attract and retain the best digital talent. 600 senior government executives have been trained on Digital, Data and Technology (DDaT) essentials and a Digital Excellence Programme has been launched<sup>27</sup>. Civil servants are being upskilled in data and analysis: last year over 40% of civil servants took steps to improve their data knowledge and skills.
81. Changes continue to be made to the Fast Stream recruitment programme, with half of the next cohort being Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) graduates. This will ensure that the Civil Service recruits a diverse pipeline of Fast Streamers with the data skills and knowledge needed for the future.
82. Underpinning all of this activity is an additional investment of £8 billion in the 2021 Spending Review<sup>28</sup> to drive digital, data and technology transformation by 2025.

## **IMPROVEMENTS TO CRISIS AND RESILIENCE STRUCTURES**

83. As the Inquiry is aware from Module 1, the foundation of our approach to resilience is set out in the UK Resilience Framework. This framework is focussed around three principles: that a shared understanding of risk is fundamental, that prevention is better than cure where possible, and that a whole of society approach to resilience is required.
84. A new Resilience Directorate, overseen by a new Head of Resilience, is ensuring focus on preparing for, preventing and mitigating risks in the medium and long term, feeding into the National Security Council (Resilience), a new sub-committee which brings together cross-government efforts on risk and resilience, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister.
85. Alongside the Resilience Directorate, the dedicated crisis response and crisis management excellence function in the COBR Unit is in place to horizon-scan immediate risks and respond to crises that emerge, including those of the character of the COVID-19 pandemic.
86. As is noted above, in December 2023, the Deputy Prime Minister gave the inaugural Annual Statement to Parliament on risk and resilience. It set out the Government’s

---

<sup>27</sup> Transforming for a digital future: 2022 to 2025 roadmap for digital and data (INQ000397233)

<sup>28</sup> *ibid*, footnote 27

achievements across these areas over the past 12 months comprehensively, and meets a key commitment in the UK Resilience Framework, accompanied by the 2023 Implementation Update.

87. With regard to specific issues that have arisen in the Module 2 hearings, the COBR Unit has made meaningful, practical improvements to its facilities. This includes the opening of a major extension of the COBR complex to allow more flexible and effective working and decision-making, including the latest technology, data and video teleconferencing capabilities. The practical difficulties referred to in the course of the evidence in relation to getting live data into COBR, including the issues that witnesses have described with not being allowed phones and laptops in certain COBR meetings, have also been addressed and resolved.
88. On crisis communications, the new Crisis Communications Operating Model is embedding communications into crisis management and preparedness structures, with a wholly new approach to public information, set within the context of the Government Communication Service (GCS) strategy to 2025.
89. And the new Crisis Management Excellence Programme provides an opportunity for training, exercising and improving the ability to learn lessons. It is available to civil servants and crisis management professionals. It will build a cross-government pool of individuals equipped with the skills needed to support response efforts to future crises.
90. In line with the principle of prevention rather than cure, the Cabinet Office published a new Biological Security Strategy last year, setting out how we are protecting the UK and its interests from significant biological risks, including future infectious disease outbreaks. This programme is underpinned by £1.5 billion of annual investment.
91. The Cabinet Office acknowledges that our entire system - government and Parliament, health and social care, our scientific and medical infrastructure, local authorities - took historic decisions in 2020/21 unlike any others in peacetime and it is vital for future pandemics and future generations that any improvements continue to be incorporated into the new resilience system. Significant steps have been taken to strengthen this system, which continues to be tested by ongoing events. Ongoing learning will remain at the heart of this work as we continue to build national resilience.

## **CONCLUSION**

92. As part of identifying lessons, the Inquiry should also reflect on what worked well. It is clear from the evidence prepared for this module that the Government got some big decisions right at a very early stage:
- a. Initial funding for the Oxford vaccine came from a research call launched by the National Institute for Health Research and UK Research and Investment Medical Research Council on 4 February 2020, 4 days after the first UK case (and the vaccine technology was repurposed from work on a MERS vaccine which had been funded back in 2016).<sup>29</sup>
  - b. The UK led the world's first successful clinical trial for a treatment for COVID-19: RECOVERY. It identified dexamethasone, an inexpensive and widely available steroid, as an effective treatment for COVID-19, saving many lives.<sup>30</sup>
  - c. Work on the Coronavirus Bill started on 6 February 2020, so the provisions could come into effect ahead of the anticipated peak.<sup>31</sup>
  - d. The Prime Minister launched the ventilator challenge, a 'call to arms' in which 14,000 were produced in around three months.<sup>32</sup>
  - e. The evacuations of British nationals from overseas were completed efficiently and without delay at the early part of the pandemic.
  - f. The system for shielding, which the Inquiry has heard, was a huge and rapid cross-departmental effort.<sup>33</sup>
  - g. The Nightingale hospitals were constructed in record time.<sup>34</sup>
  - h. The Government's unprecedented economic support package, through furlough, business loans and universal credit, was one of the most comprehensive in the world.<sup>35</sup> By the end of the Module 2 relevant period, the Government had provided around £400 billion of direct support for the economy through the pandemic, which helped to safeguard jobs and businesses in every region and nation of the UK.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> UK COVID-19 vaccines delivery plan; 11 January 2021 (INQ000086666)

<sup>30</sup> Witness statement of Professor Sir Chris Whitty paragraph 5.150 (INQ000248853)

<sup>31</sup> Record of CCS response p.47 (INQ000174702/47)

<sup>32</sup> Ventilator Challenge hailed a success as UK production finishes (INQ000106519)

<sup>33</sup> Witness statement of Simon Ridley dated 23 August 2023 (INQ000252914)

<sup>34</sup> Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus 3 April 2020 (INQ000086587)

<sup>35</sup> The Chancellor Rishi Sunak provides an updated statement on coronavirus 20 March 2020 (INQ000065324)

<sup>36</sup> The Module 2 relevant period (as defined by the Inquiry) runs to 22 February 2022. On 21 February 2022, the Government published the Covid-19 response: Living with Covid-19 (INQ000086878). This is the source of the £400 billion figure in paragraph 92.

93. As is to be expected over the whole period with which this module is concerned, the level of uncertainty reduced, and the response evolved over time. The various strands of information could be brought together into a whole picture as:
- a. the virus was better understood by the scientists;
  - b. the data picture improved;
  - c. the uneven impacts of lockdown became better understood;
  - d. the early investments (for example in vaccines) provided new interventions; and,
  - e. lessons were learned about the management of a prolonged whole-of-government response.
94. The evolution in the Government's response was not linear over time. There were successes (such as the rapid roll-out of vaccines) and setbacks (such as the outbreak of the Alpha variant). But crucially, structures were in place that helped to embed learning about the virus and the response as it unfolded, from SAGE and the JCVI to the COVID-19 Taskforce and the Equality Hub. The Dashboard had become a single, integrated picture and tool of learning for ministers, advisers and officials. Learning from 2020 shaped the 2021 Spring Roadmap for the lifting of the third lockdown and the establishment of the National Situation Centre. Structures are now in place to carry the learning into the future and prepare for future crises, from the UK Health Security Agency to the Resilience Directorate.
95. The Inquiry clearly has considerable material to work through which it has been unable to consider in the relatively short timescale of the Module 2 oral hearings. Ultimately it will be for the Inquiry to reflect upon the improvements made and consider what additional lessons should be learned to assist with managing what may be a very different pandemic in the future. However, it should not lose sight of the fact that the UK was not alone in having to rapidly put in place plans and structures which had to be tailored to fit this novel threat.
96. Countries across the world took different steps at different times as the prevalence of the virus varied over the period of the pandemic. Every death is a tragedy for each family, but the United Kingdom's performance can only be understood fully by reference to the whole period and the international context. Estimating excess mortality is complicated and factors such as how the baseline is chosen can have a material impact on the estimate. A joint report by the Government Office for Science and the Office for National



Statistics looked at a range of different studies and found that the United Kingdom placed around the middle of the rankings for excess mortality, regardless of which measure is used<sup>37</sup>. One such study, published in *The Lancet* in April 2022, measured the performance of the UK (126.8 excess deaths per 100,000 population) as comparable to France (124.2) and Germany (120.5)<sup>38</sup>. Taking into account all of its recent revisions, the ONS estimated in November 2023 that UK GDP was 1.8% above pre-pandemic levels in Quarter 2 (April to June) 2023, ahead of France and Germany<sup>39</sup>.

97. The Inquiry has heard from and about very many talented and hardworking individuals who rose to the challenge that the pandemic posed and worked tirelessly for the good of the country. They should be commended for their public service.
98. Finally, the Cabinet Office would like to echo the words of the Prime Minister Rishi Sunak who emphasised in his oral evidence, with respect to all those affected by the pandemic, how important it is that we learn the lessons so that we can be better prepared in future.

---

<sup>37</sup> Comparing different international measures of excess mortality; 20 December 2022 (INQ000137272)

<sup>38</sup> Estimating excess mortality due to the COVID-19 pandemic: a systematic analysis of COVID-19-related mortality, 2020-21 (INQ000234333)

<sup>39</sup> ONS: GDP quarterly national accounts, UK: April to June 2023 (INQ000397231) Quarter on quarter growth, Q2 2023 compared to pre-pandemic Q4 2019, showed the UK at 1.8%, ahead of France at 1.7% and Germany at 0.2%.

## Annex: Summary diagram of Cabinet Office including No.10 core decision-making structures

The below summary diagram illustrates the evolution of Cabinet Office including No.10 core decision-making structures over the Module 2 relevant period (21 January 2020 to 22 February 2022). The summary diagram is not exhaustive and does not attempt to identify all ministerial meetings and/or official-level support structures during the relevant period (for example, there is not sufficient space to include the large number of other teams that worked on the response to COVID-19 alongside their other responsibilities, including among others, the Equality Hub).

The summary diagram is based on the Cabinet Office's Module 2 corporate statement (INQ000092893). Both the diagram and the statement summarise the formal structure of Cabinet, its committees and Ministerial Implementation Groups into three stages. These stages align with the main changes in the formal structure of collective decision-making.

Some meeting formats held outside of this formal structure, and supporting teams of officials, are included in the diagram. Alignment of these with the three stages is approximate and for illustration only. Further detail has been provided to the Inquiry as part of statements and disclosures.

<b>Key</b>
Formal structure of Cabinet, its Committees and Ministerial Implementation Groups
Meetings chaired by the Prime Minister (or deputising Minister) and the CDL outside the ministerial committee structure
Official support structures
Externally-supported advisory and delivery structures

