

- If a team is failing in a department and the Permanent Secretary can't or won't solve it then the Cabinet Office is supposed to (the SoS cannot insist on officials being removed). But it can't fix itself. In September the Cabinet Secretary ordered his own head of HR to stop slowing down the testing team recruiting people but was initially ignored and we had to repeat the meeting and repeat the demands to make this happen. (I threatened to have the official fired by the PM if necessary to make progress and often only such threats were sufficient to force action.)
76. Given its crucial role and powers in fixing personnel problems elsewhere, its slowness and its own problems inevitably added to the friction and delays and made it harder to fix the rest of government.
 77. On 19/3 I was appalled to be told that Mark Sweeney, the senior official recently put in charge of covid by the Cabinet Secretary, was not working on it that day because he had been asked to work on the Windrush report. (NB. I am not blaming Sweeney for this.) I felt this was symptomatic of the failure of the Cabinet Office to appreciate the urgency and scale of the disaster hitting us. I complained to the Cabinet Secretary.
 78. My views are not idiosyncratic. They were widely shared across No10 and the Cabinet Office itself (cf. my meeting with Private Office about it in May).

COBR

79. The team that runs the COBR rooms were competent, disciplined, professional. They rightly enforced tightly the very strict rules necessary to preserve COBR as a 'STRAP' environment, i.e they are run such that STRAP material (the most sensitive material) can be safely discussed. This means that phones, laptops etc are not allowed in. The room is closed to outside data by design.
80. COBR works well for things where a) the crisis is not too big, b) the problem is familiar, c) there is established process. For example, I dealt with COBR on minor terrorist incidents and floods. It worked well. With some adjustments it also worked well for 'XS' and 'XO' meetings, the Brexit strategy and operations meetings, that ran from July 2019 though this was partly because senior No10 officials and spads focused on this very sharply.
81. But the closed system was totally unsuitable as the place to handle the pandemic. In such a huge and fast-moving crisis, it was crucial that officials could access data and systems not through COBR systems.
82. The COBR meetings with the Devolved Authorities were particularly bad as Sturgeon immediately briefed everything discussed to the media. They therefore became even more scripted, formulaic and pointless than the normal Cabinet. They were 'handling' meetings rather than the place where issues were really hashed out.
83. In early March it became clear that the COBR system could not cope with the vast scope of issues. The communications people were screaming at me that the communication meetings were hopeless because the policy response was so far off the pace. I started an 8/815 meeting in the Cabinet Room with officials and advisers, chaired initially by me and Mark Sweeney, before a meeting with the PM at 915. (We installed video conferencing in the Cabinet room via Zoom which I believe was another major security failure.) This helped