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Director General, Propriety & Ethics

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@cabinetoffice.gov.uk

Permanent Secretaries
Via email

10 June 2021

Dear Permanent Secretaries,

COVID-19 INDEPENDENT INQUIRY - RECORD RETENTION

As you know, the Prime Minister has announced that a statutory inquiry into HM Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic will take place, commencing in spring 2022.

Whilst our focus is, rightly, on meeting the challenges the pandemic brings, I am writing to ask that you take steps to assure yourself that your Department will be ready to meet its obligations to provide relevant records, information and data to the inquiry as it is requested. This includes ensuring that no material of potential relevance to the inquiry is destroyed. Since the inquiry's terms of reference are not yet set, it is necessarily a matter of judgement as to whether material is likely to be relevant to its work. Where there is doubt, you should assume that material may be relevant and ensure that it is retained and is accessible. You should also obtain similar assurances from any relevant arms length bodies for which your Department is responsible.

I know that well-established records management processes are in place across government and that all government organisations are aware of the need to keep a full and clear record of their part in events. This includes the decisions they take, the process by which those decisions were reached, the reasons for those decisions and the evidence and data used to support them, and applies whatever the format in which that information is held and on whatever device or system. Please do continue to follow these important processes.

Separately, I know that people in your organisations will have questions about the eventual inquiry itself and the support which will be available to those officials who may be called upon to assist it, such as by providing evidence. The principles here are clear: civil servants are expected to cooperate with inquiries fully. As is normal practice, to support them in doing so and where needed, serving and former officials called upon as witnesses can expect: legal support through the Government Legal Department; welfare and pastoral support including adequate time to prepare; as well as support from Departmental Press Offices on any communications issues which arise. The same principles apply to more proximate forms of