

Witness name: Simon Case
Statement No.: First
Exhibits: 188
Dated: 9 June 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SIMON CASE

I, Simon Case, will say as follows:

1. SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1.1 I welcome the independent public inquiry into the COVID-19 pandemic and the opportunity to provide a witness statement. The pandemic was a global tragedy, costing millions of lives and widespread damage to economies, public services and wider societies. I pay tribute to the millions of public servants, key workers and volunteers across the UK for meeting our biggest peacetime challenge in a century with extraordinary courage, compassion and resilience. It is important that we, as a nation, learn from our experience of the main COVID-19 era.
- 1.2 The Inquiry provided me with an initial request, pursuant to Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006, for the provision of a personal witness statement to set out key aspects of my involvement in core political and administrative decision-making relating to the UK's response to COVID-19. This statement does not purport to be a comprehensive account of my role during COVID-19. Rather, it describes - to the best of my memory and with the materials available to me - my role generally in respect of decision-making and specifically the issues that the Inquiry has raised with me. My statement should be read alongside my corporate statement on behalf of the Cabinet Office including Number 10 Downing Street (No.10), submitted on 25 January 2023. I stand ready to provide any further assistance the Inquiry may require.
- 1.3 The Inquiry requested that this personal statement cover the period between the beginning of January 2020 and 24 February 2022, with a particular focus on the period 1 January 2020 to 26 March 2020. By way of introduction, I now summarise each role I carried out during that time (hereafter referred to as the 'specified period').

- 1.3.1 This statement does not cover the period until 5 April 2020. During that time I worked in the Royal Household and was not involved in the decision-making relating to the UK's response to COVID-19.
- 1.3.2 From 6 April 2020 to 21 May 2020, I was in government on loan from the Royal Household as a Director General in the Cabinet Office, responsible for coordinating the Government's efforts to support 'non-shielded, vulnerable' people.
- 1.3.3 From 22 May 2020 to 8 September 2020, continuing my loan from the Royal Household, I was Permanent Secretary in No.10 with responsibility for coordinating the COVID-19 response.
- 1.3.4 On 9 September 2020, I rejoined the Civil Service and was appointed to my current position of Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service, with responsibilities broader than COVID-19¹.
- 1.4 Section 2 covers my role as Director General in the Cabinet Office. When I arrived, the Prime Minister was in hospital. The staff and structures managing the crisis were under significant strain. Mark Sedwill, then Cabinet Secretary, asked me to set up a cross-government programme of work to support non-shielded vulnerable people. This reported into the General Public Services Ministerial Implementation Group (GPSMIG) which was chaired by Michael Gove, then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster (CDL).
- 1.5 Section 3 covers my role as Permanent Secretary in No.10. The Prime Minister, having returned to his post after his illness, oversaw the publication of the first roadmap out of lockdown. The Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary asked me to lead the central coordination of the COVID-19 response, based in No.10. Broadly I had two tasks. First, adapting the structures which supported decision-making, as we learned lessons from our response. I worked to set up a new more streamlined governance model and a single unit at the centre which would lead the response, the COVID-19 Taskforce. Second, co-ordinating the policy on lifting the lockdown ('unlocking'). As the roadmap said, the Government was seeking "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 is safe and continues to protect our NHS".² Section 3 is the longest of the sections on my different

¹ My biography is available at: www.gov.uk/government/people/simon-case (**Exhibit SC/1 - INQ000137291**)

² Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy: May 2020; available here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/884760/Our_plan_to_rebuild_The_UK_Government_s_COVID-19_recovery_strategy.pdf (**Exhibit SC/2 - INQ000137210**)

roles because it was for this period, as Permanent Secretary in No.10, that I was the lead official on the COVID-19 response in the centre of government.

- 1.6 Section 4 covers my role as Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service. For just over a month, the COVID-19 Taskforce continued to report to me, while the appointment process for my successor was carried out. I supported the Taskforce as necessary but its day-to-day work was led - and typically presented to the Prime Minister and other Ministers - by other senior Taskforce officials. From 19 October 2020, the Taskforce reported to James Bowler, who was appointed as Second Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office. This period included the arrival of the vaccines, which were the major inflection point which shaped and conditioned the whole response thereafter. Between the big strategic moments on COVID-19, where naturally I was involved, I came in as needed to help join the dots with the other policies the Government was delivering (particularly EU exit) and to help solve problems on specific issues (particularly on vaccines and international matters).
- 1.7 Section 5 addresses a small number of additional issues that the Inquiry has raised with me.
- 1.8 Section 6 summarises my main lessons learned, drawing upon the Declaration of Government Reform in June 2021 and my annual lectures as Cabinet Secretary in October 2021 and January 2023. The lessons are organised around five tests which can help assess how institutions, such as the Civil Service are performing.
- 1.9 A common thread of these lessons is about how well, or otherwise, the workings of government adapt to the internal and external contexts. The pandemic began with a novel virus, which we knew very little about. This was met with a lockdown, which we had never imagined before and which directly impacted many of the fundamental ways in which our country operates. This required big, complex policy-thinking and the design and delivery of new frontline services on an unprecedented scale, harnessing the diversity of skills and thought across the Government (including the Civil Service) in partnership with the wider public, private and voluntary sectors. The overall strategy had to weigh the impacts across COVID-19 epidemiology, non-COVID health, the economy and society. As the pandemic progressed from an acute crisis into a new chronic paradigm for all of government, we learned and adapted in how we equipped decision-makers, with data at the heart of decision-making. But at the same time, as the impacts (and 'hidden harms') of the first lockdown became clearer, the debate got more difficult, choices were increasingly politicised, government messages got more complex, and the response fragmented across the country. It was the vaccine - a bold

early bet, and one that we did not know would pay off until late 2020 - that re-clarified the response, gave us an exit strategy and enabled us to live with COVID-19.

1.10 This witness statement has been drafted with the assistance of the Government Legal Department, Counsel and a limited group of my staff. I have been dependent to some extent on others putting documents before me to refresh my memory of events but this statement reflects my own subjective views when I have expressed them and my own recollection of events. The remainder of this statement is structured in the following sections:

Section 2: Director General in the Cabinet Office

Section 3: Permanent Secretary in No.10

Section 4: Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service

Section 5: Other issues raised by the Inquiry

Section 6: Lessons learned and tests for the future

2. SECTION 2: DIRECTOR GENERAL IN THE CABINET OFFICE

- 2.1. In early April 2020 Mark Sedwill, then Cabinet Secretary, asked me to return to the Government on loan from the Royal Household. Previously I had spent 15 years in a range of positions at the centre of government and elsewhere, including as Principal Private Secretary to Prime Ministers David Cameron and Theresa May.
- 2.2. The shielding programme had been introduced for the clinically extremely vulnerable, but there was increasing recognition in government of the dangers that the lockdown posed to non-shielded vulnerable people³. Mark Sedwill asked me to set up a cross-government programme of work to coordinate the support provided to these people and run it from the Cabinet Office. We started with inadequate data available about who needed help, where adequate help was being provided and where the gaps were. As such, one of my first priorities, as I go on to explain, was equipping Ministers with a 'dashboard' to inform their decisions.

Supporting the non-shielded vulnerable

- 2.3. An email on my first day setting out my early impressions to the CDL is [Exhibit SC/3 - INQ000137204](#). I said: "My initial impression is that there is an awful lot of work being done across government that is relevant, but it is not yet sufficiently joined-up nor is the sum total being properly articulated or represented to the centre of government...I think we are looking at a fairly typical demand/supply problem. We need to get better at identifying actual demand (as opposed to perceived demand) and ensuring we have adequate and effective supply of support and solutions. This is the prism through which I am looking at this problem". There were also frustrations in No.10 about the pace of departments' delivery in this area. In my view a clearer direction was needed: a common strategy which departments could be held accountable for delivering, particularly through partnerships with the local, private and voluntary sectors.
- 2.4. On 24 April 2020 I presented on the non-shielded vulnerable programme to the COVID-19 Strategy Ministerial Group which was chaired by the First Secretary of State in the Prime Minister's absence. The paper is [Exhibit SC/5 - INQ000088666](#) and the annex is [Exhibit SC/6 - INQ000088666](#). I now cite these materials:

³ For example, DEFRA had set up the Food and Essential Supplies to the Vulnerable Task Force. Its purpose, as set out in its Terms of Reference ([Exhibit SC/4 - INQ000137205](#)), was "to drive and facilitate activity at the national and local levels to ensure that (non-shielded) vulnerable people have access to food and other essential supplies during the COVID-19 pandemic, by signposting to existing services or supporting the creation of bespoke solutions".

- 2.4.1. The first phase, “signpost[ing] people to existing, available support (whether local, national or voluntary)”, had been completed.
- 2.4.2. The second phase, “where we identify unmet needs and build new solutions”, was “being developed in partnership with relevant delivery departments, local government and working with the voluntary and community sector”. This phase was underway with analysis “to arrive at a high-level estimate of cohort size” (while noting that individuals in need should be allowed to self-identify) and then map existing support and unmet needs (“where demand for services outstrip[ped] supply; and, where demand for entirely new support” had emerged).
- 2.4.3. Importantly, there was “a significant [but underused] supply of unskilled volunteers, both through existing local volunteer capacity and the GoodSam volunteering app”. For example, 750,000 people had signed up to be NHS volunteers in just four days, a remarkable and inspiring testament to the character of this country. I agreed with Mike Adamson, Chair of the Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies Partnership (VCSEP), to work together “to build more effective coordination mechanisms at national and regional levels” which would help “to match volunteer supply with demands for support”.
- 2.5. The meeting agreed that the General Public Sector Implementation Group (GPSMIG) should “oversee ongoing follow up work on improving data available on different vulnerable groups, the work of HMT and DWP to consider the support being provided by the welfare state, and making sure there was the right balance between Government and local intervention in supporting vulnerable people. Overall, the [GPSMIG] should make sure that the policy was being delivered on the ground, accurate information was being collected, and that all elements of Government are operating in an effective and joined up way. This should make sure there is no disconnect between shielded and non-shielded vulnerable”. The actions are at **Exhibit SC/7 - INQ000137206**.
- 2.6. Building on this, to help ensure that lines of accountability were clearer, on 26 April 2020, I wrote to the Cabinet Secretary with a proposal for the governance of the vulnerable and volunteering work (**Exhibit SC/8 - INQ000137208** and **Exhibit SC/9 - INQ000137209**).

2.7. The CDL agreed that one meeting of GPSMIG each week would focus on the performance and delivery of our support to vulnerable groups (both shielded and non-shielded⁴), including how we were using the volunteer workforce.

2.8. At the GPSMIG on 6 May 2020, I presented the first iteration of the dashboard for the volunteering and vulnerable programme. The cover note is [Exhibit SC/10 - INQ000083539](#), the dashboard is [Exhibit SC/11 - INQ000083541](#) and the actions and decisions are [Exhibit SC/12 - INQ000083537](#). The dashboard was to “be a standing item each week to allow GPS MIG to look at performance and discuss how to remove any obstacles to the delivery of support to vulnerable groups”. We recognised that the risks to the vulnerable would change as lockdown persisted and the response (for example, the extent of social distancing) evolved. The dashboard was being further developed with departments and the support of the consultants Newton Europe, who had originally come into government to support the preparations for EU exit. Alongside the dashboard, the GPSMIG on 6 May 2020 also took an update on the NHS volunteer responders, [Exhibit SC/13 - INQ000083540](#).

2.9. The second iteration of the dashboard was provided the following week, at the GPSMIG on 14 May 2020. I now cite from the cover note at [Exhibit SC/14 - INQ000083569](#) and the dashboard at [Exhibit SC/15 - INQ000083570](#). All departments were from the following week “asked to self-assess on policy, delivery and outcome confidence for the vulnerable groups covered by the dashboard as part of their reporting to the central C-19 PMO”. The Cabinet Office was “building capacity to support departments, on request, with their programmes” and encouraged them “to ask for support where it would be most helpful”. We proposed that from the following week, GPSMIG hold a deep-dive on one or two programmes each week. This started on 21 May 2020 with deep-dives on vulnerable children and access to food.

Working in the centre of government

2.10. More broadly, this was a time of significant strain on the government and this was showing on the critical teams in the Cabinet Office including No.10.

2.11. In the previous times I had worked in the centre of government, there had always been a sense of everybody being ‘in it together’. The camaraderie and teamwork enabled the centre to absorb a wide range of stresses and manage the many unexpected

⁴ Clinicians suggested that risks to the vulnerable were a continuum, not a binary distinction between shielded and non-shielded. A binary distinction could have risked people falling between the cracks.

challenges which arise every day in government. This was only possible because the key figures worked well together - that was the essential starting point.

- 2.12. When I came back into government I was struck by how difficult the atmosphere at the centre was. The context is important.
- 2.13. The Prime Minister had just gone into hospital. As his condition worsened and he was admitted to intensive care, there was a grave concern that he might not survive. This was a challenge unprecedented in the living memory of all those involved. (We later had to revisit the protocols for managing a scenario in which the Prime Minister were to die or become seriously incapacitated, learning lessons from the April 2020 COVID-19 episode⁵).
- 2.14. The whole of government had thrown itself at the COVID-19 response, with everyone working under immense professional and personal pressure. Ministers and officials were working phenomenally hard in extremely difficult circumstances, but processes (such as ineffective data collection and project management) were getting in the way of delivery. By way of example, I provide:

- 2.14.1. Draft proposals which were circulated in my first week regarding the nomination of 'senior responsible owners' (SROs) for priority workstreams and the establishment of the Programme Management Office. My reaction at the time to such a complex system being run from the centre was that "a constitutional expert might wonder where Ministers and Accounting Officers appear in all this. SROs having their authority direct from the PM is an easy thing to write but I am not sure this matches the reality that most of them experience" (my email is at

[Exhibit SC/16 - INQ000218317](#)

The proposals are at

[Exhibit SC/17 - INQ000218318](#)

and

[Exhibit SC/18 - INQ000218319](#)

- 2.14.2. An example of a specific frustration related to the mooting of a stocktake with the Cabinet Secretary on the non-shielded vulnerable. I

⁵ There is now a more systematic process including a standing principle that Prime Ministers are advised in forming their Cabinets to appoint a Deputy Prime Minister who can stand in for them if needed in an emergency. Where a Prime Minister is unable to carry out their functions on an extended basis to the extent that they are unable to fulfil the duties of the office, Cabinet would meet as soon as possible to nominate somebody who could step into the role of Prime Minister in the belief that they could fulfil that requirement and command a majority in the House. Cabinet would need to identify an honest broker in the room to facilitate the Cabinet discussion so that a rapid and clear recommendation can be made to the Sovereign. The assumption is that the honest broker would be the Chief Whip. The Cabinet Manual is in the course of being revised to ensure protocols are up to date.

said: “I do not want to find ourselves with parallel structures running, which is the present risk, with us and departments constantly being trapped in competing stock-takes with different bits of the central architecture”. These processes were limiting the time available to us to focus on delivery [Exhibit SC/19 - INQ000218321]

2.14.3. I expanded on the challenges which were affecting the non-shielded vulnerable work, particularly in respect of overlapping project management and data, in an email to the Cabinet Secretary on 12 May 2020. I had in mind “more of the old-fashioned [Prime Minister’s Delivery Unit] (from Blair/Barber-era) approaches...including departments being required to pursue better data (especially outcome-based metrics) and greater accountability against performance”. This could be supported by “a more local-regional-national escalation model for collecting and reporting intelligence about what is happening on the ground” in respect of the vulnerable [Exhibit SC/20 - INQ000218322]

2.15. In mid-March 2020, new teams and structures had been set up in the Cabinet Office and No.10, with the response brigaded through Ministerial Implementation Groups⁶. Officials at all levels paused their day jobs to come and assist with the management of the response. But by April 2020, the scale of the challenge and the complexity of the response had grown to such an extent that the new structures were not functioning well: they were beginning to appear too complicated, duplicative and unsustainable. I believe such concerns were shared by some colleagues across Whitehall.

2.16. An exchange I had with Helen MacNamara and colleagues on 26 April 2020, a few weeks after returning to government, is at [Exhibit SC/21 - INQ000198066] and [Exhibit SC/22 - INQ000218320]. As I said: “we can all see the flaws at present, but those are not anyone’s “fault”. Most things are Covid’s fault - it is challenging us like very few things have before! Based [on] experiences from the crisis so far, we ought to take the opportunity now to ask ourselves, “what could we do differently from here?””⁷.

⁶ I expanded on this in my corporate statement.

⁷ Helen MacNamara convened an informal meeting of senior officials to discuss this on or around 7 May 2020 but I do not have a record of the discussion. I describe in the next section the subsequent changes to ministerial governance (paragraph 3.5) and the formation of the Covid-19 Taskforce (paragraphs 3.6-3.14)

3. SECTION 3: PERMANENT SECRETARY IN NO.10

- 3.1. Section 3 describes my time as Permanent Secretary in No.10. The Prime Minister had returned to his post and overseen the publication of the first roadmap out of lockdown. He and the Cabinet Secretary considered the leadership of the COVID-19 response (in discussions which unhelpfully were happening alongside destabilising briefing about the Cabinet Secretary's own position). They decided to ask me to lead the central coordination of the COVID-19 response⁸. On the basis that I would report to them, I agreed to the role on a temporary basis. I remained concerned that the centre of government was not working well (as I go on to cover in more detail in paragraphs 3.6 and 6.33).
- 3.2. The Cabinet Secretary's email announcing my appointment to the Cabinet Secretariat is at: [Exhibit SC/23 - INQ000137211](#). I also provide an internal email setting out my early thoughts on my initial priorities: [Exhibit SC/24 - INQ000137212](#). The volunteering and vulnerable programme continued and was tracked alongside the many other programmes by the central Project Management Office. Over time, the lifting of lockdown and the loosening of shielding reversed some of the triggers (crucially, allowing more activity outside the home and interaction with others) which had been causing particular challenges and risks for vulnerable people in March and April 2020. The underlying threat from the virus to some of the particularly medically vulnerable did not change of course⁹.
- 3.3. There were two main dimensions to my role as Permanent Secretary: getting the structures right and coordinating the development of the policy for unlocking. Common to both of these tasks was the requirement to put the data and evidence at the heart of decision-making. In my corporate statement I described the role and development of the COVID-19 Dashboard (a much broader product than the dashboard for the volunteering and vulnerable programme which I described in the previous section of this statement). Issues would often emerge at Dashboard meetings, then be developed further by the core team into policy proposals for discussion with the Prime Minister and other key Ministers, then finalised through formal collective governance.

⁸ I was Permanent Secretary in No.10, not the Permanent Secretary of No.10. Martin Reynolds, Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, had overall responsibility for the No.10 operation, reporting directly to the Cabinet Secretary.

⁹ An example of the continued consideration in government of the risks to the vulnerable is the COVID-O meeting on shielding on 3 June 2020. More broadly, at each significant policy moment, there was always a discussion about what the message and measures should be for shielded people. COVID-O also tasked the COVID-19 Taskforce, on 24 September 2020, with ensuring that decisions on future interventions fully factor in the likely impacts on disproportionately impacted groups (including due consideration of Equalities Impact Assessments).

Structural changes

- 3.4. When I started, the Government was in the early stages of lifting the lockdown. With the first acute phase of the crisis passing, it was clear that COVID-19 would be a chronic challenge for the foreseeable future. Decisions about how we came out of lock-down needed to take in a wide set of factors. The Government needed to balance pressures relating to the COVID epidemic, non-COVID health, society and the economy. In keeping with the history of how government works, it is the role of the centre to bring in and balance views from departments so that the Prime Minister and the Cabinet can take rounded decisions. I focused on updating two kinds of structure: ministerial committees (paragraph 3.5) and the official support (paragraphs 3.11-3.15).
- 3.5. On my first day as Permanent Secretary, Helen MacNamara and I proposed to the Prime Minister simpler, leaner Cabinet structures for managing the response to COVID-19 in this next phase. There was a widespread view that the XS (strategy) and XO (operations) committee model had worked well for EU exit. Like COVID-19, EU exit was an all-encompassing challenge for the Government, requiring strategy and tactics, politics and policy, planning and delivery. XS was a small format for the most senior ministers to set the overall direction while XO worked through the specific issues with a wider and expert cast-list. I now cite from the proposals on COVID-19, at

Exhibit SC/25 - INQ000137215

- 3.5.1. “Given the significance of your decisions, your Cabinet should be asked to discuss and agree to the Government policy on the C-19 response”. This continued throughout the specified period.
- 3.5.2. “It is useful to have a smaller Ministerial group to shape the strategy. You have used the quad for this in recent weeks. We advise that you formalise a small strategy committee in the style of XS”, chaired by the Prime Minister. He agreed.
- 3.5.3. “We will stand down the MIGs as they have served their purpose...We recommend that a new Covid Operations committee is established to drive delivery and provide assurance on the implementation of programmes”. The Prime Minister agreed, following which I wrote to the core members: the CDL, Chancellor and Health Secretary (

Exhibit SC/26 - INQ000137220

- 3.5.4. “In keeping with a move back to normal structures”, COBR would stop

meeting on COVID-19 unless “a crisis situation” returned. As is normal practice, the devolved administrations would not be involved in UK Government Cabinet Committees, but we proposed instead that they be involved through “a Joint Ministerial Committee when needed”. The Prime Minister did not address this point specifically, and in practice COBR continued to meet periodically, when a four nations approach was needed. I cover engagement with the devolved administrations more broadly, including the role of the Joint Ministerial Committee and the CDL’s regular calls with the devolved administrations, in my corporate statement.

3.5.5. “Given the seriousness of the economic situation that we are faced with, you may want to discuss with the Chancellor whether he wants to establish an Economic Recovery Council along the lines of the National Economic Council that was used to coordinate the response to the 2008 crisis”. The Prime Minister asked me to plan for a “Bounceback Committee”, including a dashboard. Starting on 2 June 2020, we turned two of the daily morning COVID-19 meetings a week into economic-focused discussions, with an economy dashboard. (As the economic data tended to be refreshed at a slower rate than twice-weekly, and was less granular than the epidemiological and other health data, the frequency of these meetings reduced over time). The frequent bilaterals between the Prime Minister and the Chancellor continued to be the primary channel by which the Prime Minister shaped economic policy¹⁰.

3.6. As well as addressing the governance, we needed to address the structures and processes for supporting decision-makers. As I settled into the role, and saw the difficulties at first hand, the scale of change I thought was needed increased. A short internal review, led by Helen MacNamara and concluded in late May 2020, considered the central organisational design for the COVID-19 response. I now cite from these documents ([Exhibit SC/27 - INQ000137221](#) and [Exhibit SC/28 - INQ000137222](#)). “We conducted interviews of 15 SCS [Senior Civil Servants] of those

¹⁰ Similarly, these bilaterals will have been an important forum for the Chancellor to provide his views to the Prime Minister on economic policy and the COVID-19 response more generally, which of course had many indirect economic impacts. My understanding is that the Prime Minister and Chancellor would typically discuss COVID-19 strategy at a relatively early stage of policy development, ahead of decisions being discussed in wider forums such as the Quad and then formally taken by collective agreement. Responsibility for recording the discussion as appropriate rested with the Prime Minister and Chancellor’s private offices.

most closely involved in the C19 response as well as several other Civil Servants and Contractors also closely involved. Below is a distillation of the common points raised that are relevant to the organisational design for the next phase of the Government's response to C19":

- 3.6.1. "Several interviewees asked us to record what an outstanding job had been done by so many of the people that they work with in incredibly challenging circumstances".
- 3.6.2. "A key point highlighted by nearly everyone we spoke to was that roles and responsibilities are not set out and appeared to change regularly. No-one was clear about whose role it is to design the organisation. Many of those interviewed were filling a COVID role in addition to holding other responsibilities. Some felt that the timing and scale of the change to the Cabinet Secretariat added further confusion by removing the sense of an underlying existing structure".
- 3.6.3. "Resilience was a common theme with most feeling that the organisation is not resilient. At the outset a significant proportion of people were absent due to catching C19 or needing to self-isolate. In their absence it wasn't clear how their roles should be reassigned. A number of interviewees talked us through how they approached the absence of others, and all said that it was an uncomfortable time. Most interviewees also feel that the ways of working and pressure on individuals are not sustainable over the timescales required to manage C19 response/recovery/renewal. One of our reflections after several interviews was that interviewees were displaying unhealthy levels of stress. There remains a high risk of burn out to key individuals".
- 3.6.4. "Interviewees highlighted several challenges around leadership and culture. The dominant culture was described as 'alpha', 'macho', and 'unpleasant'. Many felt there is a belief that 'intellect will out', implying that a small core of people is clever enough to think their way out of the problem without support. Diversity of thought was not recognised. Leadership styles were described as 'macho' and 'superhero'. Those that are willing to speak confidently are listened to, competence/experience are overlooked and there is no 'parity of voice'. Where things have begun to go wrong people felt there has

been a tendency to increase pressure to drive performance. Meetings and general interactions were described as fractious and stressful – ‘a lot of people all being very clever in a room, and no one leaving the room and thinking it's their job to fix the issue.’ Interviewees also expressed views that those with relevant experience (such as driving strategy across government, contingency planning, organisational design and analysis) were side-lined because they didn't fit the mould”.

- 3.6.5. “A lack of trust and transparency between teams who need to work together was frequently cited. It is the perception of a number of people we spoke to that information is very tightly held in a way that is detrimental to delivering successful outcomes. When asked why they felt that that was the case, interviewees pointed towards a fear of leaks and a lack of confidence in the ability of other teams to deliver. Some of the consequences of a small circle of trust were felt to be very little challenge on policy/strategy development and more junior staff unable to engage meaningfully”.
- 3.6.6. “A common theme was seemingly parallel chains of command and tasking; particularly between No10 and the Cabinet Office. It was often unclear who people were working to and who was making decisions. Commissioning of work was described as ‘relentless and ill disciplined’ with the MIGs, in particular, generating a lot of work for the same small groups of people. In addition, some of the basics went awry, such as minute taking and action tracking. Consequently, one of the only places where issues seemed to come together was the PM's Strategy Meeting”.
- 3.6.7. “Most interviewees highlighted that no team was tasked with driving urgent issues which meant, in practice, that the strategy team was pulled away from important strategic planning to manage daily issues. Consequently decision making / strategic planning suffered. Several interviewees also described how they did not conduct contingency planning, assuming that they could not do so because they did not have the available data. At least three groups of people were tasked with conducting future planning. No system was in place to draw through plans to implementation. Issues were predominantly identified

‘bottom up’ rather than ‘top down’”.

3.6.8. “An interesting observation by those most experienced in crisis response is that coming out of initial crisis response is the period of maximum risk organisationally. There is a natural tendency to wind down structures and leave behind only skeleton staffing. Several people advised that adequate focus and resourcing should be maintained. There was a range of views about the extent to which those resources should be centralised versus pushed back into departments”.

3.7. In summary, the review identified a need to: “plan further ahead; build greater resilience in structures; reduce parallel chains of command and tasking; increase understanding of organisational roles and responsibilities; and improve openness to diversity of backgrounds, views and styles of leadership”.

3.8. This chimed with discussions I myself had at the time. For example, on 27 May 2020 I met with Chris Wormald, the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). He indicated that data, science and project planning were all playing an effective role in the response. But there were two big and related issues:

3.8.1. First, the centre was sending out random and multiple commissions. There were lots of good people at the centre but they needed to be properly organised.

3.8.2. Second, DHSC was struggling to work through non-pharmaceutical interventions (restrictions, etc.) and weigh up the impacts of COVID-19 on health, the economy and society collectively¹¹. In the same way that HMT ran the ‘Budget scorecard’, consolidating all measures across government into a single and coherent view so that the trade-offs between departmental interests could be understood and weighed, the Cabinet Office including No.10 needed to provide strategic leadership to the COVID-19 response across government.

¹¹ This is a good example of a broader theme considered by the Crisis Capabilities Review of February 2022. It found that “in practice..the [Lead Government Department] model is enjoying mixed success. Against well understood or recurrent risks (e.g. flooding or types of terrorist attack) the model works well...However, for novel forms of crisis which do not sit neatly with a single department, the LGD approach can stall”. I think it will be vital in the event of a future low-probability, high-impact event to get the balance right between strategic leadership from the centre and ensuring that all departments understand their policy roles and provide assurance about the delivery of their responsibilities, given they have all the key levers to have impact on the ground.

- 3.9. The Chief Medical Officer (CMO), Jenny Harries, Jonathan Van-Tam and the Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA) wrote to me along similar lines. Their biggest concern was “that the combination of multiple small decisions across government, all made in good faith and if taken in isolation, unlikely to push R above 1, do not lead in aggregate to a significant risk of a return to exponential growth...No individual department can see the totality of the changes made, and you and your team are central to leading in government and ensuring the whole package is coherent and safe” (their letter of 26 May 2020 is at [Exhibit SC/29 - INQ000137216](#)).
- 3.10. In my view at the time, it was important to ensure that the Government continued to receive the most up-to-date advice on the state of play on the ground, was guided by the science, and continued to adopt a holistic approach to decision-making to ensure that the impact of all decisions was assessed in the round. For this, it would be critical to have a strong central strategy and coordination function leading the COVID-19 response, ensuring that officials in the Cabinet Office and No.10 were working closely and productively with government departments and experts.
- 3.11. Helen MacNamara’s review proposed to bring together a new central unit to lead the response, organised around strategy, implementation and evidence.
- 3.12. On 5 June 2020, I wrote to Permanent Secretaries (at [Exhibit SC/30 - INQ000137226](#)) announcing the COVID-19 Taskforce. It was to “be responsible for supporting the Prime Minister and Cabinet in developing the Government’s COVID-19 response and recovery policies, and leading implementation”. Organising ourselves “for an enduring task”, with “the right people in the right places”, was essential to the success of the new structure. (With my colleagues’ support, the Taskforce grew significantly in size over that summer). I set out three principles for ways of working: minimising duplication and ensuring clarity of roles; a consistent and purposeful approach to cross-departmental engagement; and, a positive and confident culture within and beyond the core team. Further detail on the role of the Taskforce is provided in the corporate statement, and will be provided by the Cabinet Office in additional information on the role of the Taskforce during the specified period.
- 3.13. A key part of setting up the Taskforce was clarifying the process for scientific input into the next stage of the response to the pandemic. The extant SAGE guidance said that “given SAGE is part of COBR and its focus on coordinating advice during an emergency, SAGE would normally deactivate once there was no longer a need for UK

cross-government decisions on emergency response or recovery¹². As I noted above (in paragraph 3.5.4), COBR was going to stop meeting on COVID-19 regularly. But the Government would clearly continue to have wide-ranging requirements for scientific advice on the pandemic. I discussed this with GCSA, following which he set out to the Cabinet Secretary and I the 'science requirements and governance for next phase of Covid-19 response' (the draft note is **Exhibit SC/31 - INQ000218329**). The cover email, and a subsequent exchange between the Cabinet Secretary and GCSA, is

Exhibit SC/32 - INQ000218332 The final note is **Exhibit SC/33 - INQ000137247** with a cover email, and my view - that this all looked sensible - **Exhibit SC/34 - INQ000218335** GCSA's note said: "Government Office of Science and SAGE will remain central to providing independent scientific advice to Ministers during the Covid-19 outbreak and will involve the Devolved Administrations fully in this. However it is clear that there will be a bigger need for detailed science within departments and more operationally focused science activity". To support the new organisational structure set out in his note, it was agreed that all commissioning of SAGE by the Cabinet Office including No.10 would be funnelled through the COVID-19 Taskforce.

3.14. Also consistent with us moving beyond the initial short-term crisis response was the handing over from the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS) to the Taskforce key roles such as the running of the Dashboard¹³. There is an important difference between a secretariat and a taskforce. CCS was, as a secretariat, primarily a coordination function. That meant reaching into the rest of government to collate a single picture of an acute crisis and enabling Ministers to convene and oversee a response. The Taskforce was much larger, reaching hundreds in size within six months, and played a much broader strategic leadership role for the long, chronic phase of the pandemic. Departments remained responsible for the policy issues within their remits and the delivery of the strategy.

3.15. In creating the COVID-19 Taskforce, we were learning lessons in real time about how best to manage the response to the pandemic. From July 2020 for example, the Taskforce had 'field teams' which carried out visits to key local areas, bringing back observations and requests from local stakeholders. I now point to some other examples of learning lessons.

¹² Enhanced SAGE guidance: A strategic framework for the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE): published 16 October 2012; available here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/80087/sage-guidance.pdf (**Exhibit SC/35 -**)

¹³ As the corporate statement explained, the remit of the separate data science and analytics team in No.10, known as 10DS, was to support more general policy decisions across the breadth of the Government's agenda. Its specific work on COVID-19 was limited.

3.16. I described in my corporate statement (paragraphs 5.30-5.31) how, shortly before I became Permanent Secretary, plans were set in motion to establish three new COVID Taskforces (not to be confused with 'the Taskforce' which I headed). These were headed by: Paul Deighton for PPE; Kate Bingham for Vaccines and Treatments; and, Dido Harding for Test, Track & Trace. I aligned their reporting lines to the relevant Departments while making sure the Prime Minister was able fully to engage with these issues.

3.17. Also during my time as Permanent Secretary, plans began to form to create a new centre for health protection. I now cite from proposals provided by the Health Secretary via the COVID-19 Taskforce to the Prime Minister ([Exhibit SC/36 - INQ000137240](#)) and ([Exhibit SC/37 - INQ000137241](#)).

3.17.1. "The paper proposes a new Executive Agency - the Centre for Health Protection - that merges Dido Harding's TTCE, the JBC, the health protection functions of PHE, (including its emergency response centre and regional / local public health structures) and some of the analytical functions performed by SAGE and SPI-M. This would create a single centre for future disease outbreaks with a singular focus on communicable diseases (like Japan; whereas Germany and the US have a more integrated model, like the PHE now). It also suggests creating a new 'reserve' force to be trained and ready to stand-up in the event of a future pandemic". The Prime Minister asked for the plans to be taken forward at speed.

3.17.2. "A more complex issue is what role the new centre should have regarding the [devolved administrations]. The paper notes in section F that public health is devolved, but as you have previously observed, running four approaches has proven challenging - for example, it has been difficult to share data and it would be complex to enact track-and-trace across the England/Wales or England/Scotland border". The Prime Minister wanted to launch it as a UK-wide entity.

Policy development

3.18. Shortly before I became Permanent Secretary, the Government published its first roadmap out of lockdown (on 11 May 2020: Our plan to rebuild¹⁴). It announced step one would proceed on 13 May 2020 (a change of emphasis in the guidance, including

¹⁴ See reference at footnote 2.

encouraging those who could not work from home to go into work). When I joined No.10, the Government was about to decide whether to take step two: it was planned for no earlier than 1 June 2020, and would begin the return of early years settings and schools, with the opening of non-essential retail. Step three was further out, to be taken no earlier than 4 July 2020, with an ambition to open at least some of the remaining businesses and premises that had been required to close.

3.19. My role was to lead the central coordination of policy development necessary to deliver this roadmap and make sure that the Prime Minister and Cabinet received the right advice to make decisions on the speed and nature of unlocking. Before I illustrate this with some of the key pieces of advice I provided during this time, I want to explain how the roadmap set the context for my role:

3.19.1. The roadmap said “we must stay alert, control the virus, and in doing so, save lives”. It set out (on pp.12-13) eight “challenges ahead”. The first was: “This is not a short-term crisis. It is likely that COVID-19 will circulate in the human population long-term, possibly causing periodic epidemics. In the near future, large epidemic waves cannot be excluded without continuing some measures”. In practice, incidence of the virus was broadly stable as unlocking proceeded through June and July, but as those changes took hold in behavioural patterns, incidence rose in August and September.

3.19.2. Each step was to be decided according to five tests, first presented on 16 April. These were set out in the roadmap as follows: (1) Protect the NHS’s ability to cope. We must be confident that we are able to provide sufficient critical care and specialist treatment right across the UK. (2) See a sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rates from COVID-19 so we are confident that we have moved beyond the peak. (3) Reliable data from SAGE showing that the rate of infection is decreasing to manageable levels across the board. (4) Be confident that the range of operational challenges, including testing capacity and PPE, are in hand, with supply able to meet future demand. (5) Be confident that any adjustments to the current measures will not risk a second peak of infections that overwhelms the NHS.

3.19.3. On a weekly basis, we took the Prime Minister through the data for each test - as well as the key enabling programmes such as test and trace - agreeing a red, amber or green rating. An early example of

these is [Exhibit SC/38 - INQ000137219](#) i. Over time these discussions merged into the dashboard meetings.

3.19.4. The roadmap did not provide a detailed design for step two or three. A lot of the policy content was left open, consistent with the prevailing uncertainty and the world's scientific understanding of the virus still developing rapidly. The roadmap said: "if the UK tips back into an exponential increase in the spread of the infection, it could quickly get out of control". Many of the remaining choices were, therefore, discussed internally in terms of a 'R budget' - how much would each measure add to the reproduction number of the virus and how far could the Government go without tipping it over 1, meaning the return of exponential growth. We increasingly took on a role akin to a COVID-19 'scorecard', as I had discussed with Chris Wormald.

3.19.5. Science alone could not tell us when and how to unlock. Models for example are only as capable as the data that goes into them. There were no historical precedents for (say) moving from '2 metres' to '1 metre plus' and the impacts of doing so would always take time to show up in the data. These and many other issues were about scientific advice and policy development working together on a collaborative, iterative basis. Scientific advice was not about giving permission to decisions: it was one of the inputs into risk-based decision-making.

3.19.6. As I noted in an email to colleagues in No.10 and the Cabinet Office, "the 11 May roadmap runs out of specific steps beyond 4 July. It might be valuable, therefore, to publish a short additional chapter/update which sets out a little more of how we will approach handling COVID through the rest of this year...[including] our preparations for Winter and any second wave" [Exhibit SC/39 - INQ000137228](#) i. As I explain below, I led the development of this extra chapter to the roadmap, published on 17 July 2020. The Prime Minister was very keen for schools to return after the holidays, and for the 'bounceback' of the economy to begin in earnest.

3.19.7. Planning for winter was a key aspect of this role. But crucially, we did not know with confidence whether and when we would get an effective vaccine at scale. This is in stark contrast to the roadmap process in

2021, by which time the Government knew with increasing confidence that vaccines were the way out and had a rollout plan against which it could measure the pace of unlocking.

3.20. In the paragraphs below, I set out at a high level my involvement in how the roadmap unfolded. At the Dashboard meeting on 25 May 2020, all the indicators were going in the right direction, but there was recognition that R was potentially only just below 1 (the Dashboard insights circulated that morning are **Exhibit SC/40 - INQ000137214**)

i. Later that day, the Cabinet agreed that the Government should proceed in line with step two of the roadmap beginning on 1 June (the minutes are **Exhibit SC/41 - INQ000089074**). In his paper to the Cabinet meeting, the Prime Minister said - on the basis of its assessment of the five tests - that “we are...in a position to move to step 2 in a careful and phased way...The Government will continue to proceed with caution and will keep these proposals under continuous review in the context of the latest scientific advice regarding the spread of the virus”. (**Exhibit SC/42 - INQ000137213**)

3.21. On 1 June 2020, step two began, with easements in primary schools, in outdoor markets and car showrooms and in social settings. I wrote to colleagues in the Cabinet Office including No.10 on the focus for the week (**Exhibit SC/43 - INQ000137223**):

3.21.1. “As many of us have discussed, the overall tone and approach must remain cautious...we must see how the virus is being contained in the UK before we take more steps. R remains just below 1 (0.7-0.9) and our levels of new cases every day remain high (ONS estimates something like 7.7k a day, with confirmed cases via testing at something like 2k per day)...Levels of incidence in high-risk settings (eg NHS, social care etc) seems to remain high”.

3.21.2. “I’d be grateful for everyone’s assistance in managing the constant lobbying from departments for their own easements on lock-down...it is the combination of easements that we need to assess and judge...We will release things as soon as we can, but only when it is safe to do so”. Advice to the Prime Minister on social distancing on 27 May 2020 set out the ‘edge cases’ where there was pressure to ease restrictions. Annex C sets out that certain Ministers were arguing for changes in respect of weddings, outdoor spaces and places of worship (the cover note is **Exhibit SC/44 - INQ000218324**) and the advice to

the Prime Minister is [Exhibit SC/45 - INQ000183937](#) These were supported by impact assessment at [Exhibit SC/46 - INQ000183935](#) and [Exhibit SC/47 - INQ000183936](#), and equality analysis at [Exhibit SC/48 - INQ000183938](#)

3.21.3. “New elements of our operational response are just being stood up. The NHS Test and Trace programme launched last Thursday. The Joint Biosecurity Centre begins work today. It will take time for these bits of critical architecture to become effective...they are crucial enablers to our strategy (shift from national level-NPIs to local management of outbreaks)...There is potentially a gap in our system, which is about the operational effectiveness of the final stage of the new local operating model - which relates to PHE boots-on-the-ground”.

3.21.4. “Our strategy also totally depends on the public - their behaviour matters...It is crucial we re-double our efforts around public messaging on the basics”.

3.22. Later that same day, 1 June 2020, I updated the Prime Minister with the latest on COVID-19. The readout is at [Exhibit SC/49 - INQ000137224](#)¹⁵. It says: “The PM expressed his concern over the current level of incidence of the virus - which appeared flat in recent weeks according to the ONS data - and on the limited headroom for further easing. There was a risk that the public would take an on-or-off approach to social distancing, and over-interpret the recent measures as a general easing. We needed to be clear in our communications that the gains made so far would be put at risk if compliance fell. The PM indicated that he was ready to apply the brakes to pre-announced measures if the data justified it, in line with the approach set out in the roadmap and his address to the nation”.

3.23. On 4 June 2020, there was a mixed picture at the Dashboard meeting. Daily incidence and deaths were up slightly, but the ONS survey was more encouraging. Later that day I presented a strategy stocktake to COVID-S ([Exhibit SC/50 - INQ000137225](#)). I now cite from that paper, which set out the choices which would need to be made, not in this meeting, but in the coming weeks.

3.23.1. Three significant changes to the Government’s approach were underway: “moving from lockdown to smarter controls”, including the

¹⁵ As I note in paragraph 5.7, the Chief Medical Officer and Government Chief Scientific Adviser were present in the vast majority of discussions on COVID-19 with the Prime Minister. This meeting on 1 June 2020 is an example of this not being the case: I forwarded the readout to them.

Test, Trace and Isolate programme; “moving from national to local responses”; and, “making social contact less infectious using COVID-19 guidelines”.

3.23.2. I noted that “the UK faces a structural challenge in delivering a localised strategy, given its weaker tradition of local government. Local Authorities, already under pressure, may not be capable of enforcing COVID-19 Secure guidelines or making the necessary and complex trade-offs between health, economic and social considerations. In deciding how to respond to local outbreaks, Local Authorities will also face different incentives to central Government; they are not responsible for fiscal support, national infrastructure or other considerations which might balance the case for closing venues. Central Government provides a backstop if this local response fails”.

3.23.3. I recommended that government proceed with caution, recognising the backdrop of: higher incidence (which, while stable and flat, was higher than comparable countries); the costs and trade-offs of measures (described in Annex B of the paper); and, the prevailing uncertainty about the timing and impact of any second wave (illustrated in three illustrative sketches of the future in Annex C).

3.24. On 10 June 2020, the Prime Minister announced that further step two easements would go ahead on 15 June 2020¹⁶.

3.25. On 19 June 2020, the four UK CMOs provided an update on the COVID-19 alert level. They agreed it should move down for the first time from Level 4, where it had been through the lockdown, to Level 3 (‘A COVID-19 epidemic is in general circulation’), noting that there continued to be a steady decrease in cases in all four nations, but that localised outbreaks were likely to occur¹⁷. A COVID-O meeting on the same day considered the COVID-secure guidelines, concluding that the existing enforcement regime should remain in place, and that the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (MHCLG) should work with local authorities and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) to support inspector capacity in local areas and a more efficient,

¹⁶ Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 10 June 2020; available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-at-the-coronavirus-press-conference-10-june-2020> (**Exhibit SC/51 - INQ000137279**)

¹⁷ Update from the UK Chief Medical Officers on the UK alert level: 19 June 2020; available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/update-from-the-uk-chief-medical-officers-on-the-uk-alert-level> (**Exhibit SC/52 - INQ000137289**)

data-informed approach to their activity.

3.26. Shortly after, on 22 June 2020, I presented to COVID-S on the key components of step three (the paper is at [Exhibit SC/53 - INQ000088239](#)). This would “represent a major reopening of the economy and society”. I explained that “Ministers will need to balance a range of considerations when deciding whether to proceed with these changes. Retaining the existing measures would suppress the spread of the infection to a greater degree, and so prioritise direct-COVID impacts on health. This needs to be balanced with consideration of the economic, social and non-COVID health impacts, all of which suggest revising the existing measures”. Our medical and scientific colleagues were very nervous about step three, believing it to be at the edge of the safe envelope of changes. My paper said, therefore, that “any changes should be implemented cautiously and in the knowledge that an unsafe increase in social contact will increase the risk of a second national outbreak”.

3.27. This paper also concluded the two metre social distancing guidance review. Over the previous fortnight, a review panel, including the GCSA, CMO, the Chief Economic Adviser to HMT and myself had considered the efficacy of the Government’s social distancing guidelines in the context of the current prevalence of the virus. We had “considered the scientific evidence, the economic impact of social distancing, behavioural responses and international comparators”.

3.27.1. We also noted that: “the social, economic, and health impacts of changing the 2m guidance are not evenly distributed. People employed in closed sectors are more likely to be young, not have a degree, and to work in low-skilled occupations. COVID-19 death rates are higher among older people, people in Black and Asian ethnic groups, and for men. It will continue to be important to advise medically vulnerable people to avoid closed spaces, crowded places and close-contact settings. An equalities impact assessment should be conducted on any policy change”.

3.27.2. The committee agreed that guidance should change from 2m to 1m with risk mitigation (where 2m is not practically or economically viable). The email I had sent commencing the review is at

[Exhibit SC/54 - INQ000137227](#)

with replies from GCSA and CMO at

[Exhibit SC/55 - INQ000218325](#)

A summary of our findings was later

published¹⁸.

- 3.28. On 23 June 2020, the Prime Minister announced that step three would go ahead, with the new '1 metre plus' guidance, on 4 July 2020 - which was referred to in the media as 'Super Saturday'.
- 3.29. On 29 June 2020, the Transport Secretary announced the first review of the UK's border measures which had been introduced three weeks previously to help keep down incidence and protect from a second wave. The Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) had developed a categorisation of countries and territories from which passengers could enter the UK without a requirement for 14 days' self-isolation. Details were announced later that week, with updates to the advice provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on outbound travel. I remember there were many lengthy and repetitive discussions in government around this: travel was one of the areas where the trade-offs between epidemiology and the economy were most stark. The balancing of these trade-offs and the management of these operations at the border cut across a wide range of government departments, including: the Department for Transport; the Home Office; the Foreign and Commonwealth Office; and, the Department of Health and Social Care¹⁹. It took time to get the governance model right. As I described in the corporate statement, by early 2021, to support the launch of the Managed Quarantine Service, there was a dedicated sub-committee of COVID-O. (Travel and quarantine remained, however, challenging to deliver and politically contentious, with the complex rules adding to the confusion that the public faced).
- 3.30. Also on 29 June 2020, Matt Hancock announced that the UK's first local lockdown would be applied in Leicester and parts of Leicestershire. The slides shown by the health authorities to the Prime Minister are at Exhibit SC/57 - INQ000137231. While cases in Leicester had not reduced in line with the rest of the country, the data picture behind that was highly inadequate. I was frustrated that the leadership of DHSC and NHS Test and Trace had been advising for some time that public health measures - including a local surge team and mobile testing sites - had the situation under control, only raising the alarm that a local lockdown may be needed when the decision was, in their view, very pressing. The argument for a local lockdown seemed

¹⁸ 24 June 2020: Review of two metre social distancing guidance: Summary of review findings; available here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/894961/6.6731_CO_Review_of_two_metre_Social_Distancing_Guidance_FINAL_v3_WEB_240620.pdf

(Exhibit SC/56 - INQ000181693)

¹⁹ There were discussions of border policy at COVID-O on, for example, 26 June 2020 and 23 July 2020.

to come as a surprise. As it continued, local politicians in Leicestershire voiced increasing opposition to the measures²⁰. Meanwhile, I agreed with Dido Harding that we would address the mutual frustrations and improve the relationship between NHS Test and Trace and the centre.

3.31. On 1 July 2020, I met with CMO and GCSA to discuss: the challenges around local management of the virus, and preparing for winter²¹. My notes from that meeting, at [Exhibit SC/58 - INQ000265754](#) record that we discussed the balance of national and local responsibilities and the tensions and ambiguities which were arising from that (a theme I consider further in Section 6)²². The dashboard circulated that evening is at [Exhibit SC/59 - INQ000137232](#) and [Exhibit SC/60 - INQ000137233](#). Slide 15 of the latter indicated that the death rate among all major BAME groups significantly exceeded the expected death rate based on age structure. I was concerned that the other concerning local areas had, like Leicester, BAME communities of considerable size.

3.32. The following day, I presented to COVID-S on contingency planning.

3.32.1. Around this time the Prime Minister was concerned about falling compliance, particularly the reports of crowded beaches ([Exhibit SC/61 - INQ000137230](#)).

3.32.2. The Taskforce's COVID-S paper ([Exhibit SC/62 - INQ000088286](#)) set out "how the Government would respond to a nationally-significant increase in infections should local responses fail, or look set to do so". It had a menu of eleven possible responses, including "smarter NPIs" which could reduce risk when reopening further, to be developed by an expert panel.

3.32.3. While noting that "the UK cannot afford a second lockdown" and "every effort" should be made to avoid it, three of the responses entailed the return of national restrictions. For the same meeting, the

²⁰ City mayor accuses Government of 'shameful political gestures' as lockdown extended in some areas: 16 July 2020; available here: <https://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/news/leicester-news/city-mayor-accuses-government-shameful-4335383> ([Exhibit SC/63 - INQ000137283](#))

[Exhibit SC/64 - INQ000062451](#) is a note provided by GCSA shortly afterwards, which "summarises the challenges in controlling SARS-CoV-2 and factors that could lead to a resurgence. Until a highly effective vaccine or therapeutic becomes available careful detection and management of local outbreaks, and adherence to guidelines will be vital". The cover email is at: [Exhibit SC/65 - INQ000062450](#)

²² We also spoke about the need for a lead Director in each Department for winter. This programme of work was discussed at COVID-S the following day and continued over the summer, as described in paragraph 3.32.3 and footnote 23.

Taskforce provided a paper on winter preparedness

Exhibit SC/66 - INQ00088301

COVID-S agreed a programme of work and three planning scenarios which departments should prepare for²³. In hindsight, it is striking that risks from the mutation of the virus are acknowledged (e.g. at paragraph 4d) only briefly and on a long list of potential challenges. Variants only really became a core part of our risk assessment and way of thinking about the virus in central decision-making when the Alpha variant was detected in Kent in December 2020, as discussed in the next section.

- 3.33. The dashboard circulated on 10 July 2020 pointed to recent ONS analysis indicating that the number of people testing positive for COVID-19 had decreased over time, but had levelled off, with around 1 in 4,000 estimated to have the active virus (

Exhibit SC/67 - INQ000137234).

- 3.34. On 11 July 2020, the Taskforce submitted advice to the Prime Minister on the ‘route to normal’ **Exhibit SC/68 - INQ000137237**). We described three “vignettes” from after the COVID-emergency, when “life has returned to normal”: a large family Christmas, a busy Oxford street and a capacity Twickenham.

3.34.1. There were, “in theory, six routes” to these scenes. “The end state is likely to need a combination of them”. The first was vaccines: “there are no guarantees a vaccine will be found. Whilst there has been good progress, we judge it highly unlikely we will have a vaccine to deploy at scale in the next 9 months...In the event that a vaccine is found, and depending *what* vaccine it is, the advice would likely be to deploy only to those at high risk, rather than the whole population”. In practice, the UK started deploying vaccines 5 months later, and made them available (in time) to nearly the whole population.

3.34.2. To continue moving towards the scenes described, the Government needed “to press ahead with action” on testing, tracing, compliance, contingency planning and COVID-secure guidelines. “We need to stamp out the remaining epidemic in care homes, hospitals and

²³ A key strand of this programme was operational planning. On 12 August 2020, the Cabinet Secretary wrote to SROs across government. His letter began: “In early July the Prime Minister approved the setup of a number of workstreams for ensuring the country is ready for C-19 related pressures that it will face over the autumn and winter. I am grateful for your work since then in developing operational delivery plans against the three scenarios shared last month. The continued development, testing and execution of these winter plans should remain a high priority for us all”

**Exhibit SC/69 -
INQ000218336**

**Exhibit SC/70 -
INQ000218338**

and

**Exhibit SC/71 -
INQ000218337**

i

disadvantaged communities, and keep it out. Crucially, we need prevalence to be very low: if we can bring it down to 0.01%, then just 1 in every 10,000 people will be infected. And we must continue to push investment in drugs, vaccines, diagnostics and scientific understanding”.

3.34.3. This strategy would “not return life to its pre-COVID state this year” but would offer “some version of the vignettes...albeit in a modified form”. The Prime Minister broadly agreed, while noting that if incidence fell to very low levels, and the reopening had not triggered big new outbreaks, he would prefer life even closer to normal (the box return for our 11 July 2020 submission is at [Exhibit SC/72 - INQ000218327](#))

3.34.4. The Prime Minister requested more detail and timing on the ‘route to normal’, which we provided to a bilateral he had with the Chancellor on 13 July 2020 (I attended). The papers are [Exhibit SC/73 - INQ000137235](#) and [Exhibit SC/74 - INQ000137236](#) with the cover email [Exhibit SC/75 - INQ000218328](#). An email setting out the agenda items is at [Exhibit SC/76 - INQ000218326](#)

3.35. On 15 July 2020, the COVID-19 Taskforce submitted a package of advice to the Prime Minister ahead of COVID-S the following day, including a draft extra chapter to the roadmap (discussed in more detail in the next paragraph). This package (for which the cover email is [Exhibit SC/77 - INQ000218330](#)) included two options on working from home guidance [Exhibit SC/78 - INQ000137238](#). The Taskforce recommendation was to maintain the current messaging - including that people who can work from home should continue to do so - for the coming months. The Prime Minister preferred to update the guidance, giving employers more discretion while continuing to ensure

²⁴ I do not have a record of any readout or minutes of this meeting. Any such record would be held by the private offices for the Prime Minister and Chancellor.

employees are kept safe²⁵. He announced this shortly after at a press conference²⁶.

- 3.36. On 16 July 2020, I presented the 'route to normal' to COVID-S (the paper is at [Exhibit SC/79 - INQ000088282](#)). The Government was planning to publish the extra chapter to the roadmap the following day (it was called "The next chapter in our plan to rebuild: the UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy"²⁷). The extra chapter set out a roadmap for the reopening of all remaining sectors and settings, starting on 1 August 2020 (CMO and CSA had cautioned against doing too much before seeing the impact of the wide-ranging changes on 4 July 2020, despite urging from some departments to go faster). It was based on the most optimistic of the three scenarios referred to in paragraph 3.32.3 above. A "key enabler" to the delivery of the roadmap was the "ambition for a world class NHS Test and Trace service". The paper explained that "the programme will launch backward tracing in August, its new app in September and be able to provide 485k tests a day by October, which should make it a world leading programme by the autumn".
- 3.37. The paper also noted that "we will seek to ease social contact restrictions as soon as possible" with a further paper to follow in the subsequent weeks. It referred to the draft extra chapter which set out that impacts of the virus had been disproportionate on certain groups of people. I added: "Easing restrictions will help to reduce these disparities in some instances, but if transmission of the virus increases then the health impacts are likely to fall disproportionately on older people, disabled individuals, BAME people and men".
- 3.38. The 22 July 2020 SPI-M-O consensus statement on COVID-19 said that its consensus

²⁵ I do not have a formal record of the Prime Minister's views but based on a discussion with him, Henry Cook provides draft changes to guidance at [Exhibit SC/80 - INQ000218331](#) decision was made by COVID-S on 16 July 2020 as part of agreeing "The next chapter in our plan to rebuild". The paper to COVID-S, exhibited in paragraph 3.36, said in paragraph 10 that the chapter "sets out that the choice about working from home will remain for employers and employees to decide".

²⁶ The Prime Minister said, on 17 July 2020: "From 1 August, we will update our advice on going to work. Instead of government telling people to work from home, we are going to give employers more discretion, and ask them to make decisions about how their staff can work safely. That could mean of course continuing to work from home, which is one way of working safely and which has worked for many employers and employees. Or it could mean making workplaces safe by following Covid Secure guidelines. Whatever employers decide, they should consult closely with their employees, and only ask people to return to their place of work if it is safe. As we reopen our society and economy, it's right that we give employers more discretion while continuing to ensure employees are kept safe". Source: Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 17 July 2020; available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-coronavirus-17-july-2020>

[Exhibit SC/81 -](#)

²⁷ 17 July 2020: The next chapter in our plan to rebuild: the UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy; available here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/901521/6.6783_CO_Our_Plan_to_Rebuild_FINAL_170720_WEB.pdf

[Exhibit SC/82 - INQ000137239](#)

estimate was “that the epidemic is slowly shrinking in the UK, with a growth rate each day that can be interpreted as -4% and -1% per day”. Also on that day, I presented to COVID-S an update on contingency planning. The slides are at [Exhibit SC/83 - INQ000088291](#). They looked ahead to the planned reopening of a number of higher risk settings the week after. I recommended these go ahead “if prevalence remains around current levels and if COVID-Secure guidance is in place”. But if necessary, the first resort would be to pause that step.

- 3.39. On 31 July 2020, with cases having crept up domestically, and early signs of the second wave in Europe, the Prime Minister announced a two-week pause in easing: “we should now squeeze [the] brake pedal in order to keep the virus under control”²⁸.
- 3.40. In this context of rising cases, there remained a very strong emphasis from Ministers on the need for schools to come back on time after the summer holidays. Anxiety was very high amongst parents. On 6 August 2020, the Taskforce presented illustrative scenarios for the period shortly after the return of schools in September ([Exhibit SC/84 - INQ000088294](#)).
- 3.41. On 13 August 2020, the Taskforce (at [Exhibit SC/85 - INQ000137249](#)) provided advice to the Prime Minister on whether to proceed with the reopenings that had been postponed from 1 August 2020 to 15 August 2020 ‘at the earliest’. The advice noted: “Whilst the latest ONS data suggests that the number of infections may have levelled off (prevalence at 0.05%) after recent growth, indications are that R may be above 1 in England. Any further reopenings increase the risk of growth in transmission. Consistency in Government messaging remains essential. These decisions are set against the priority of schools returning in three weeks’ time”. The paper recommended to proceed on 15 August 2020, “but to do it in a low key way with continued cautious messaging, and balanced with tougher messaging on enforcement”. The Prime Minister agreed with these openings but wanted the focus of messaging to be on enforcement and fines.
- 3.42. On 17 August 2020, the Secretary of State for Education and the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual) announced that students in England would receive teacher-assessed grades for that summer’s GCSE, AS and A level results. The government announcement said: “Ofqual had consulted on and implemented a standardisation process for exam results this summer, but the system

²⁸ Prime Minister’s statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 31 July 2020; available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19-31-july-2020> [Exhibit SC/86 - INQ000137278](#)

has resulted in too many inconsistent and unfair outcomes for A and AS level students. Over the last few days, it has become clear that the algorithm has revealed a number of anomalies that had not been anticipated by Ofqual and which severely undermined confidence in the system”²⁹. Many at the centre, including myself, were frustrated about how this had been handled at the political and official level by the Department for Education, and the distress it had caused to students and their families. There were some failures of process in the centre as well as the department. I now cite from Helen MacNamara’s note to the Prime Minister on exam results 2020 ([Exhibit SC/87 - INQ000137250](#)). “Here are some initial reflections on why things went wrong”:

3.42.1. “It is striking that none of the bigger questions about what the Department was trying to achieve (e.g. prioritising no grade inflation) were tested at the early stage; and there is a significant contrast here with the more generous approach taken to other C-19 impacts, e.g. furlough”.

3.42.2. “It took the department a long time to accept the scale of the challenge and the impact of the pandemic, and the potential problems it would cause for these students: from what we’ve seen the concern from DfE was about the sector and the process and not the pupils and parents”.

3.42.3. “Many of the issues with the algorithm were known about and could have been corrected in advance of results day (which incidentally could have been a different day - the real results were known far in advance). The reasons why they were not are likely to include: the Department not owning this problem enough; the relationship between the Department and Ofqual as independent regulator; the failure of the centre to hold the Department and Ofqual to account; and the lack of technical scrutiny of the Ofqual model until too late”.

3.43. On 28 August 2020, the key Dashboard indicators were flat or rising ([Exhibit SC/88 - INQ000137250](#)). That day, the Taskforce submitted advice to the Prime Minister on the ‘Covid strategy for Autumn’. (The note is at [Exhibit SC/89 - INQ000137251](#) with accompanying slides at [Exhibit SC/90 - INQ000137252](#)).

²⁹ 17 August 2020: GCSE and A level students to receive centre assessment grades; available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/gcse-and-a-level-students-to-receive-centre-assessment-grades>

[Exhibit SC/91 - INQ000218357](#)

- 3.43.1. The paper described Plan A, which the Prime Minister had “consistently directed” and which we were using “to mobilise Whitehall”, as: to begin the return to normal in November. The plan relied on “deploying an effective vaccine, game-changing therapeutic or Moonshot mass-testing programme in the Autumn. That could enable a significant relaxation of remaining restrictions ahead of Christmas. The efficacy of the vaccine, treatment or testing programme, and the scale at which it can be deployed, will determine how close we can get to ‘normal’”. The paper acknowledged that the likelihood of having a vaccine or game-changing therapeutic in time was low, and the mass-testing programme needed more work to prove that it is deliverable at scale. “We therefore also need a Plan B and a Plan C”.
- 3.43.2. Plan B involved “the aggressive optimisation of the existing elements of our strategy” and “would deliver a Christmas which will look and feel normal”.
- 3.43.3. Plan C was “the scenario that we must plan for as a matter of responsible Government, while putting all of our efforts into making sure that it does not come to pass”. More localised outbreaks, higher transmission in the general population and increased rate of transmission from abroad could mean “by November, we would need to take a call on a national response. It is unlikely that we would be able to press ahead with the planned return of mass events in October and the proposed end to social distancing at Christmas”.
- 3.43.4. The Prime Minister’s preference was to deliver Plan A by Christmas 2020. Exhibit SC/92 - INQ000218343 Noting the rising levels of infection in France and Spain, he wanted a new vision that did not involve another lockdown, and called for pace on the testing programmes which had been identified by GCSA. The next paragraph provides further detail.
- 3.44. During the summer of 2020, testing became increasingly prominent in the strategy and seen, if delivered on a mass scale, as an alternative to lockdowns. The Taskforce docked in closely to the work of NHS Test and Trace in this area. I now point to some of the meetings which the Prime Minister held during this time.

- 3.44.1. On 24 July 2020, the Prime Minister held a meeting on testing. The

papers included: a cover email (Exhibit SC/93 - INQ000218333), an agenda with draft conclusions (Exhibit SC/94 - INQ000218334), a note from GCSA on new rapid testing technologies (Exhibit SC/95 -

) and a proposal from Professor Keith Godfrey outlining a proposal to use the new technologies “to rapidly scale up whole population surveillance and COVID testing in any area of the United Kingdom to avoid lockdown whilst saving both lives and our prosperity” (Exhibit SC/96 - INQ000137242). The Prime Minister tasked Dido Harding to: test various new technologies that had become available; start a new (“moonshot”) subteam to start developing the infrastructure to do mass testing of a population; and, very quickly pilot a new approach in a specific location.

3.44.2. On 5 August 2020, the Prime Minister held a further meeting on testing. The slides from NHS Test and Trace are Exhibit SC/97 - INQ000137248. The slides said that “Project ‘moonshot’ will pilot screening a whole population...and can be commenced within 8 weeks and would last 6-8 weeks”. The pilot would involve testing approximately 250,000 asymptomatic participants once per week.

3.44.3. At a further meeting on testing on 3 September 2020 (Exhibit SC/98 - INQ000137254), NHS Test and Trace said mass testing had two uses: “testing at-risk groups” (to “achieve a marked impact on R”) and “to enable a return to normal life by allowing people to do things they otherwise wouldn’t be able to such as going to the theatre or the football”. But the technology for the former was further ahead than the latter. Mass testing was always considered an ambitious plan and at times during this process I thought signs of optimism bias were coming into the planning³⁰.

3.45. On 3 September 2020, the CMO wrote to me (Exhibit SC/99 - INQ000137255). He said: “The PM has stated his strong desire to avoid a national lockdown (I am sure

³⁰ An example of this is a meeting between the testing team and the Prime Minister on 27 August 2020. The papers are at Exhibit SC/100 - INQ000325219, Exhibit SC/101 - INQ000218340, Exhibit SC/102 - INQ000218341 and Exhibit SC/103 - INQ000218342. Shortly ahead of that meeting, a No.10 official identified the significant falls in projected capacity shown in - but not highlighted by - the papers, and the private office advised the team to give the Prime Minister their candid view of what was possible and why (Exhibit SC/104 - INQ000218339). However, in the meeting itself, Professor Sir John Bell was unrealistically optimistic, which was frustrating given the importance of a shared understanding of the plans and challenges in respect of manufacturing and deployment.

shared by the rest of the population) and to protect the Christmas/New Year festive season as much as possible. I think there are broadly three scenarios over winter". A was the preferred, and B a worst case of rapid national exponential growth needing a national intervention at speed. He described C as: "It is clear we are going to need a national intervention because the exponential growth is national (or at least over wide regions) but we have a bit of flexibility on when because doubling time is weeks rather than days. A 2-3 week partial or full lockdown, especially after a high risk event, would act as a fire break, and a return from a doubling to a halving of the virus. I think we should be considering this scenario quite seriously, as I think it is as likely as the other two. There will be weeks of the year between now and Easter which would be at least/most damaging economically and socially to have a lockdown of some sort, and we should identify those and plan to have them as structured firebreaks if needed. This would reduce the negative effects". Alongside work to address the immediate rise in incidence (with measures announced on 9 September, per paragraph 4.8), the Taskforce looked ahead to the winter (see paragraph 4.10).

- 3.46. On 8 September 2020, the Taskforce presented to COVID-S on the 'response to rising incidence'. The paper is at [Exhibit SC/105 - INQ000137257](#) and the minutes are at [Exhibit SC/106 - INQ000218347](#). The accompanying data pack from the JBC ([Exhibit SC/107 - INQ000218346](#)) showed "that the number of people testing positive for COVID-19 is increasing sharply across England. This increase has been particularly stark in the 17-21 age group, but, as in the US, Spain and France, an initial outbreak in the young has been followed by a general growth of infections in other age groups. These comparison countries are also, after a lag, beginning to show an uptick in hospitalisations and mortality. The key conclusion from this data is that if the trend is allowed to continue, we could expect to follow France and Spain into a second wave of significantly increased infections". The paper presented the options for the Government's response:

3.46.1. "The short-term choice is whether to go harder now, with a greater degree of disruption, or whether to adopt a softer approach, buying time to see whether the response is effective, while accepting that this might necessitate a more onerous response in the future. Given the rate at which infections are increasing, the recommendation is that any package launched this week must be designed to, at the very least, stop the growth in infections".

3.46.2. "The long-term choice is whether the Government intends this

response to be a short, temporary intervention designed to deal with a specific outbreak, or whether it is recalibrating to a new position which should endure until the Spring. The recommendations...are all for a permanent shift in the Government's approach, adopting a new posture that could last through the winter".

3.46.3. The recommended response (in Table 1 of the paper) was "to double down on the current strategy. This means more forceful communications, tighter social contact [including the rule of 6] and tougher enforcement...In addition, the Government will develop proposals to go further, by increasing compliance with self-isolation following a positive test result, standardising its local interventions into tiers and strengthening the policies applied at the border".

3.47. The work on 'smarter NPIs' over the summer had proved challenging (I reflect on this in paragraph 6.28). It evolved into considering the possibility of segmenting the population as an alternative to a full national lockdown, with the aim of allowing normal economic activity to continue amongst the less vulnerable while protecting the most vulnerable. Our analysis, and work done by SAGE, concluded that we were unlikely to be able to deliver 'hard' segmentation successfully. We were not set up for a segregated or parallel society, which would require a complete overhaul of public services and divide thousands of families, with long-term societal and mental health impacts Exhibit SC/108 - INQ000070579. The Prime Minister saw the point, agreeing with the Taskforce that a softer form of segmentation, using the lessons learned from shielding and the experience in care homes to protect the most vulnerable if prevalence rose significantly, was needed. He also continued to push the 'Moonshot' (see paragraph 4.9).

3.48. As my time as Permanent Secretary in No.10 came to an end, I felt that the streamlining of new ministerial committees and setting up of the COVID-19 Taskforce had broadly been effective. Unlocking had been carried out in line with the Government's strategy and progress had been made on preparing for winter. But with incidence having begun to rise, there was a sense that the bigger challenges lay ahead.

4. SECTION 4: CABINET SECRETARY AND HEAD OF THE CIVIL SERVICE

- 4.1. Following the announcement of Mark Sedwill's departure, there was an initial, open competition for the role of Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service (hereafter, for brevity, I will use the shorter title of Cabinet Secretary). I did not apply initially. My understanding is that, after seeing a number of candidates, the Prime Minister asked the First Civil Service Commissioner Ian Watmore to extend the competition and spoke to a range of other potential candidates, including myself. The Prime Minister asked me to think about applying. Following that conversation I put in an application and, after being interviewed by the First Civil Service Commissioner and the Prime Minister, was appointed as Cabinet Secretary. This was announced on 1 September 2020 and took effect on 9 September 2020³¹.
- 4.2. As Cabinet Secretary my role was much broader than COVID-19. I was the Prime Minister's most senior official policy adviser, Secretary to the Cabinet and responsible for supporting all Ministers in the running of government. Unless unavoidably absent, I attended all meetings of Cabinet and was responsible for the smooth running of Cabinet meetings and for preparing records of its discussions and decisions. I also took on leadership of nearly half a million public servants who work in public institutions, administer tax, benefits and pensions systems and put government policy into practice.
- 4.3. The breadth and context of this role is illustrated by the letters which the Prime Minister and I wrote to Secretaries of State and Permanent Secretaries on 17 September 2020 setting out the Government's priorities and each department's priorities for the following six months. Each department received its own letter. In the Cabinet Office's letter, we wrote: "over the next 6 months we must continue with our response to the coronavirus pandemic and ensure we are fully prepared for the end of the EU transition period. These are critical priorities for the whole of Government. We must also ensure that we can deliver at pace on the Government's key priorities for domestic reform" (Exhibit SC/109 - INQ000137260). Following these letters I carried out, alongside the Head of the No.10 Policy Unit Munira Mirza and other senior officials from the centre including HMT, a series of stocktake meetings with Permanent Secretaries from across Whitehall.

³¹ Simon Case appointed as Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service: 1 September 2020; available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/simon-case-appointed-as-cabinet-secretary-and-head-of-the-civil-service> (Exhibit SC/110 - INQ000137276)

4.4. In this broader role, as Cabinet Secretary, my input on COVID-19 began to change. It was broadly in two phases:

4.4.1. For just over a month, alongside my new role as Cabinet Secretary, the COVID-19 Taskforce continued to report to me, while the appointment process for my successor was carried out³². I attended key meetings on COVID-19 and supported the COVID-19 Taskforce as necessary. But the day-to-day work of the Taskforce was led - and typically presented to the Prime Minister and other Ministers - by other senior leaders of the Taskforce.

4.4.2. James Bowler became Second Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office with effect from 19 October 2020. From this point on, the COVID-19 Taskforce reported to James Bowler. My role as Cabinet Secretary was primarily to make sure that the principles of collective Cabinet government were followed, including that evidence was duly considered and that ministers were presented with the full range of options. Between the big strategic moments, where naturally I was involved, I came in as needed to help join the dots with the other things the Government was doing (e.g. EU exit) and to help solve problems on specific issues, particularly on vaccines and international matters. James Bowler or other senior leaders of the Taskforce presented papers and made presentations in meetings with the Prime Minister or ministerial committees. I attended all Cabinet discussions of COVID-19, and many (not all) meetings on COVID-19 with the Prime Minister, but rarely the meetings on COVID-19 at the Cabinet Committees.

9 September 2020 to 18 October 2020

4.5. To begin with the overall context, this was a very difficult period for the Government's response to COVID-19. The strategy was buffeted by significant internal and external pressures, with significant voices pushing for greater relaxation of or further stringency in the Government's response to rising incidence. All options had painful trade-offs in terms of their consequences, with the decisions taken against a backdrop of continued uncertainty about the path of the virus. The rise in cases continued through September

³² As part of this process, now that the COVID-19 Taskforce had been fully established in the Cabinet Office, it was agreed that my successor would be a Permanent Secretary in the Cabinet Office, not No.10 as I had been.

and into October, making CMO and GCSA increasingly nervous. The idea of a circuit-breaker lockdown gained in traction and was endorsed by SAGE as part of a shortlist of options on 21 September 2020. With cases continuing to rise, the circuit-breaker option subsequently received the backing of HM's Official Opposition. The Government's preferred approach initially was to avoid a national lockdown, by doubling down on local interventions and stronger enforcement. This approach developed into a tiering system which was increasingly contentious politically. The Government also revisited its position on working from home. With everyone across the Government conscious of both the rising incidence and the serious economic and social consequences of another lockdown (particularly, for example, when it came to closing schools), the Government's strategy was increasingly contested internally³³.

- 4.6. The discussions were made harder by the fact that the Government did not know with any confidence what the exit from any lockdown would look like. The Phase 3 trial results for the vaccines did not land until mid-November 2020. A government that did not want to introduce a lockdown but did not yet have a vaccine was in a very difficult position when facing rising incidence.
- 4.7. At the beginning of this period, on 9 September 2020, SPI-M-O observed that "the current situation is in line with the reasonable worst-case scenario (RWCS), where incidence doubled once in August and once in the first two weeks of September, before re-imposed measures halt this growth". The following day, SAGE concluded that "the current situation in the UK is analogous to the one in early February...It is highly likely that further national and local measures will be needed to bring R back below 1 in addition to those already announced"³⁴.
- 4.8. In this context, on 9 September 2020, the Prime Minister announced the package of new measures which had been agreed at COVID-S (paragraph 3.46) and set out a

³³ To illustrate this, I provide at paragraph 3.46 the minutes for COVID-S on 8 September 2020, at paragraph 4.14 the minutes for COVID-S on 21 September 2020, and at paragraph 4.19 the minutes for COVID-O on 30 October 2020. These each set out the points that were made in discussion between Cabinet Ministers. Comparing them to each other shows clearly that the debate within the Cabinet became more contested over the course of September and October 2020.

³⁴ SAGE 56 minutes: Coronavirus (COVID-19) response, 10 September 2020; available here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/928699/S0740_Fifty-sixth_SAGE_meeting_on_Covid-19.pdf [Exhibit SC/111 - INQ000120554]

range of ways in which the rules already in place would be more strongly enforced³⁵. This was informed by discussions with the police (for example at footnote 61).

4.9. I continued to work with colleagues from the Taskforce, No.10 and NHS Test and Trace to help ensure that NHS Test and Trace had what they needed from the rest of the Government to push forward the 'Moonshot'. The Prime Minister described this at his press conference on 9 September 2020, noting: "We are hopeful this approach will be widespread by the spring and, if everything comes together, it may be possible even for challenging sectors like theatres to have life much closer to normal before Christmas". As an example, I have provided the slides presented by NHS Test and Trace to the Prime Minister on 10 September 2020, covering current capacity and the plans for mass testing, at [Exhibit SC/112 - INQ000137259](#) and [Exhibit SC/113 - INQ000137258](#). Rising prevalence was driving up demand for testing and capacity was very tight, which caused frustration at the centre given the communications efforts to drive uptake of testing. But looking further ahead, a cross-government team had stood up to plan for 'Covid freedom' pilots whereby stadium/venue/arts venues would operate at near-full capacity through the provision of testing. Given the weight the Prime Minister was placing on the Moonshot, to help avoid a national lockdown, the continuing signs of optimism bias from some experts were unhelpful.

4.10. On 19 September 2020, the Taskforce submitted advice to the Prime Minister on COVID-19 winter strategy ([Exhibit SC/114 - INQ000137293](#)).

4.10.1. The advice began: "The infection is spreading rapidly. The 7-day average of confirmed cases has risen from 1,077 in mid-August to 3,598 today and is on a sharply upward trajectory. This trend has now translated into hospitalisations, which have doubled in a fortnight. SPI-M-O's view is that if no further measures are implemented, "such a high level of hospital admissions has the potential to overwhelm the NHS in around six weeks"

4.10.2. "The Government aims to keep R at or below 1 between now and March to prevent an exponential growth in cases and mortality. At

³⁵ Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 9 September 2020; available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-press-conference-statement-9-september-2020> ([Exhibit SC/115 - INQ000137275](#)). The COVID-19 Taskforce presented a paper to COVID-O on 21 September 2020 on developing the approach to enforcement ([Exhibit SC/116 - INQ000090038](#)), based on input from the relevant delivery departments such as: the Home Office; MHCLG; DHSC; and, the Ministry of Defence.

present, R in the UK is estimated to be between 1.1 and 1.4. The Government needs to change people's behaviour to bring R back to 1, while balancing the societal, economic and non-COVID health impacts of its intervention".

- 4.10.3. Packages A and B comprised a variety of ways to double down for winter. Many of these formed part of the Prime Minister's announcement on 22 September 2020 (paragraph 4.14)
- 4.10.4. The paper had a package C: "harder, temporary measures" which "would apply for three weeks and be intended to decisively drive down the rate of infections" (although there was a risk the package did not deliver the "intended, decisive bending of the curve"). The measures comprised tough social distancing measures and a range of closures. While "lighter than the March lockdown" - "non-essential retail, universities and schools would remain open" - "the economic impact would be exceptionally severe. First, many firms are in greater distress than in March. Second, the package would likely lead to further job losses...Third, it would disproportionately affect younger adults...Fourth, it could make the UK an outlier from key European neighbours".
- 4.10.5. "These economic impacts would need to be considered alongside the health costs of a continued growth in infections in the event that package A and B are deployed, but found to be insufficient. The economic damage of these measures is, however, a function of the severity of any measures and how long they persist; if delaying decisive action necessitates tougher and longer measures later, the damage, all told, will be greater".
- 4.10.6. There were also choices on timing and geography. "The Government could decide to introduce [Package C] in October half-term, and announce that intent in advance...[but] this delay could see infections reach their April peak before action is taken". The Government could also "consider deploying these circuit breakers regionally; Packages A and B would be applied nationally, with Package C becoming an additional tool in the management of the regional variation of the spread of the virus". Broadly, with some differences, the latter is what

happened with England's doubling down on local interventions (paragraph 4.15).

4.11. I chaired a meeting between the Prime Minister, Chancellor, CMO, GCSA and a range of scientists on 20 September 2020³⁶. The briefing I received as Chair is at

[Exhibit SC/117 - INQ000137261](#). The papers for the meeting are at [Exhibit SC/118 - INQ000195984](#), [Exhibit SC/119 - INQ000146607](#), [Exhibit SC/120 - INQ000195985](#), [Exhibit SC/121 - INQ000146609](#), [Exhibit SC/122 - INQ000183963](#) and [Exhibit SC/123 - INQ000146606](#)³⁷. This discussion was part of preparing the Prime Minister for a key decision-taking period that followed. We deliberately sought a wide range of views which brought home to Ministers, I believe, quite how much debate there continued to be across the scientific community about the "right" response to rising incidence. CMO and GCSA played a vital role in helping Ministers determine how to interpret these range of views.

4.12. On 21 September 2020, the four CMOs recommended that all four nations of the UK should move back up from COVID-19 alert level 3 to 4 ('COVID-19 epidemic is in general circulation, transmission is high or rising exponentially). They said: "After a period of lower COVID cases and deaths, the number of cases are now rising rapidly and probably exponentially in significant parts of all 4 nations"³⁸. Also that day, CMO and GCSA gave a data briefing, warning that at the current estimated rate of doubling, seven days, there could be 50,000 cases per day by the middle of October³⁹.

4.13. Also on 21 September 2020, SAGE met⁴⁰. The record of its discussion, released publicly three weeks later, noted that "a package of interventions will need to be adopted to reverse this exponential rise in cases...The shortlist of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) that should be considered for immediate introduction includes":

³⁶ The attendees were: the Prime Minister, Myself (Chair), CMO, GCSA, Martin Reynolds, Stuart Glassborow, Ben Warner, Imran Shafi, Lee Cain, Henry Cook, Ed Lister, Dominic Cummings, Cleo Watson, the Chancellor, Simon Ridley, Catherine Cutts, [NR](#), Kate Joseph, Oliver Illott, Professor John Edmunds, Professor Sunetra Gupta, Professor Carl Heneghan, Dr Anders Tegnell, Professor Dame Angela McLean.

³⁷ I do not have any record of minutes or a readout of this meeting.

³⁸ Update from the UK Chief Medical Officers on the COVID-19 alert level: 21 September 2020; available here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/update-from-the-uk-chief-medical-officers-on-the-covid-19-alert-level> ([Exhibit SC/124 - INQ000137288](#))

³⁹ Chief Scientific Advisor and Chief Medical Officer briefing on coronavirus (COVID-19): 21 September 2020; available

here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/chief-scientific-advisor-and-chief-medical-officer-briefing-on-coronavirus-covid-19-21-september-2020-2> ([Exhibit SC/125 - INQ000137282](#))

⁴⁰ SAGE 58 minutes: Coronavirus (COVID-19) response, 21 September 2020; available here:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/925853/S0768_Fifty-eighth_SAGE_meeting_on_Covid-19.pdf ([Exhibit SC/126 - INQ000137290](#))

- 4.13.1. “A circuit-breaker (short period of lockdown) to return incidence to low levels”.
- 4.13.2. “Advice to work from home for all those that can”.
- 4.13.3. “Banning all contact within the home with members of other households (except members of a support bubble)”.
- 4.13.4. “Closure of all bars, restaurants, cafes, indoor gyms, and personal services (e.g. hairdressers)”.
- 4.13.5. “All university and college teaching to be online unless face-to-face teaching is absolutely essential”.

4.14. Also on 21 September 2020, the Prime Minister chaired a meeting of COVID-S. The COVID-19 Taskforce presented a paper which began: “The Government’s objective has been to suppress the epidemic, while balancing the societal, economic and non-COVID health impacts of any intervention”. The paper set out that cases were on a “sharply upward trajectory” but there was also a risk that “new interventions may have a more significant impact than in March, given the weakened position of many firms and individuals, and would compound existing inequalities” ([Exhibit SC/127 - INQ000088299](#)). The meeting agreed to the recommendation on the COVID-19 alert level and to a package of measures for England (the minutes are at [Exhibit CAB000092102](#)). These measures were discussed at COBR and Cabinet and [Exhibit SC/128 - INQ000088294](#) Minister the following day, 22 September 2020. In his address to the nation ([Exhibit to follow](#)), he framed the choice and outlined the package as follows:

- 4.14.1. “If we let this virus get out of control now, it would mean that our NHS had no space – once again – to deal with cancer patients and millions of other non-covid medical needs”.
- 4.14.2. “And if we were forced into a new national lockdown, that would threaten not just jobs and livelihoods but the loving human contact on which we all depend. It would mean renewed loneliness and confinement for the elderly and vulnerable, and ultimately it would threaten once again the education of our children. We must do all we can to avoid going down that road again”.

- 4.14.3. “We must take action now because a stitch in time saves nine; and this way we can keep people in work, we can keep our shops and our schools open, and we can keep our country moving forward while we work together to suppress the virus”.
- 4.14.4. He set out a “tougher package of national measures [in England] combined with the potential for tougher local restrictions for areas already in lockdown”. These included early closing for pubs and bars, table service only, closures of businesses that were not COVID-secure, expanded use of face coverings, new fines for those that failed to comply with the rules, and working from home⁴¹. (Working from home was the only measure included in full from the SAGE shortlist, although some others formed part of local measures in certain areas).
- 4.14.5. The Prime Minister, having met with each of the devolved administrations and chaired a COBR meeting which they attended, was able to say that “I believe this broad approach is shared across the whole UK”. (This was reinforced by a joint statement of the four nations on 25 September 2020⁴²).
- 4.15. Over the following weeks⁴³, the Government doubled down on local interventions in England, at first negotiated with local leaders but increasingly prescribed. The aim was to strike the balance between the health and economic impacts in a way more conducive to the recovery than a national lockdown. On 12 October 2020, following meetings at COBR and COVID-O, as well as an update call with Cabinet, the Prime Minister announced that “the Government would further simplify and standardise local

⁴¹ The measures were announced in further detail here - Coronavirus (COVID-19): What has changed – 22 September; available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-covid-19-what-has-changed-22-september> (**Exhibit SC/129 - INQ000137285**)

⁴² Joint statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 25 September 2020; available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/joint-statement-on-covid-19/joint-statement-on-coronavirus-covid-19> (**Exhibit SC/130 - INQ000137281**)

⁴³ During this period, on 4 October 2020, PHE announced that a technical issue was identified in the data load process that transferred COVID-19 positive lab results into reporting. 15,841 cases between 25 September 2020 and 2 October 2020 were not included in the reported daily COVID-19 cases, although the individuals had received their results as normal. The JBC and PHE confirmed that this would not have impacted the evidence base on which decisions about local action were taken that week, as the majority of people would not have tested positive at that stage. See 4 October 2020 (updated with background information on 5 October 2020): PHE statement on delayed reporting of COVID-19 cases; available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/phe-statement-on-delayed-reporting-of-covid-19-cases#full-publication-update-history> (**Exhibit SC/131 - INQ000218360**)

rules by introducing a three tiered system of local COVID Alert Levels in England". These were Tier 1 (medium), Tier 2 (high) and Tier 3 (very high)⁴⁴. The restrictions came alongside financial support for local authorities and support for businesses required to close. The Prime Minister announced that one area would be at Tier 3 - Liverpool City Region - following significant local engagement, including with the Mayor Steve Rotherham. The following week, on 20 October 2020, having chaired discussions at COVID-O, he announced that Greater Manchester would also move into Tier 3, despite not having reached agreement with Mayor Andy Burnham. There was increasing recognition that moves such as this would not be enough to bring COVID-19 back under control. In practice, local tiering failed to hold off a second national lockdown: I reflect on the approach in Section 6 as part of my lessons learned.

19 October 2020 to the end of the specified period

- 4.16. At the beginning of this period, when I handed over the leadership of the COVID-19 Taskforce to James Bowler, the case for the second lockdown was becoming increasingly hard to resist. Having not been in government in March 2020, this was my first direct experience of a government grappling with a lockdown decision, trying to weigh the different impacts and a deteriorating data picture. As Cabinet Secretary, and no longer the lead on the policy, I played a role in helping to ensure that the risks on both sides were considered and that any emerging proposition was tested so that it was coherent and could achieve its purpose.
- 4.17. The circuit-breaker lockdown idea, including a "stay at home" order, was implemented in Wales (referred to as a "fire-break"). On 19 October 2020, the Welsh Government announced a "two-week fire-break to help bring coronavirus under control in Wales. This period will begin at 6pm on Friday October 23 and will end on Monday November 9. This includes the half-term holiday for many children in Wales".
- 4.18. On 25 October 2020, the Prime Minister met with senior officials and advisers at Chequers. The papers are at: Exhibit SC/132 - INQ000218348, Exhibit SC/133 - INQ000136671, Exhibit SC/134 - INQ000062803 and Exhibit SC/135 - INQ000062804⁴⁵. The data were presented in detail and

⁴⁴ Prime Minister announces new local COVID Alert Levels: 12 October 2020; available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-new-local-covid-alert-levels> (Exhibit SC/136 - INQ000137280)

⁴⁵ I do not have any record of minutes or a readout of this meeting. I provide at Exhibit (to follow) a page of my notebooks from around this time which is not marked as being written at Chequers but might have been. The outlook for both the health system (including the elective backlog) and the economy were worrying. Whereas regional action against the virus raised a question of effectiveness, national action raised a question of fairness. It was important to have a plan which the government could stick to, but with time-limited measures and a realistic exit strategy.

Exhibit SC/137 - INQ000265755/148

the urgency of taking strong action was urged upon the Prime Minister. The approach to tiers was not expected to be sufficient to bring R below 1. The Prime Minister agreed that the COVID-19 Taskforce should rapidly develop options to go further, so that the full range of options could be considered across local and national action. Following the discussion at Chequers, the Taskforce provided to the Prime Minister, on 28 October 2020 a note on Covid strategy (Exhibit SC/138 - INQ000218349) and Exhibit SC/139 - INQ000218350). The readout from the Private Office of the Prime Minister's views, with a subsequent email from myself, is at Exhibit SC/140 - INQ000218351). These illustrate the uncertainty at this time about the medium-term outlook and our reliance on mass testing and vaccination: factors which together made the decisions facing Ministers in the short-term exceptionally difficult.

4.19. These discussions culminated in a small number of options summarised by the Taskforce at Exhibit SC/141 - INQ000136685). The decision on a national lockdown was made on 30 October 2020 in a COVID-O meeting⁴⁶ which followed a Dashboard meeting and a small group meeting chaired by the Prime Minister.

4.20. Given the lack of evidence on transmission in hospitality and non-essential retail, I was unconvinced that shutting them would have enough of an impact to keep alive the subsequent prospect of a more normal Christmas. Given what we knew about transmission in schools, I suggested it was worth considering the Swedish option of putting 15+ education online for three weeks. The announcement of the second national lockdown - with hospitality and non-essential retail closed, and schools kept open - was accelerated to the following day, 31 October 2020, due to a leak.

4.21. Building on the winter planning work over the summer, on 23 November 2020 the Government published the 'COVID-19 Winter Plan'⁴⁷: "a programme for suppressing the virus, protecting the NHS and the vulnerable, keeping education and the economy going and providing a route back to normality". It set out how the second national lockdown in England would be replaced by a stronger tiering system. It added that "scientific advances in vaccination and treatments should reduce the need for economic and social restrictions from the spring. Until that point, the Government must

⁴⁶ The minutes of the COVID-O meeting are at Exhibit SC/142 - INQ000090156)

⁴⁷ COVID-19 Winter Plan, 23 November 2020; available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/937529/COVID-19_Winter_Plan.pdf (Exhibit SC/143 - INQ000137262). As the Winter Plan was developed, other issues were taking up significant bandwidth in the centre, including the spending review (which concluded on 15 December 2020), the EU exit negotiations (which concluded on 24 December 2020) and the integrated review of foreign policy, defence, security and international development (the deadline for which was pushed back from autumn 2020 to early 2021, concluding on 16 March 2021).

rely on other tools to suppress the virus". The community testing programme would "offer Local Authorities in tier 3 areas the opportunity to participate in a six week testing surge". The Government would also "roll-out rapid testing nationally to NHS front-line staff, social care and other high-risk or critical settings". It also planned to "continue piloting further rapid testing in schools, colleges and universities, and will deploy rapid testing for specific one-off events". I recall the testing plans had received a lot of scrutiny and challenge from Ministers, particularly at a COVID-O meeting on 21 November 2020.

- 4.22. Following the second lockdown, in December 2020, cases rose in Kent. The Government's early response to this was shaped by its experience in Leicester. The Government had learned how difficult it was to communicate in a hyper-local way and to reach communities with little engagement in politics or trust in what the Government was doing. It had seen the correlation between disadvantaged communities (where working from home, to take just one example, is less available) and areas of so-called enduring transmission (where case rates were stubbornly high).
- 4.23. It turned out, thanks to the UK's world-leading genomic sequencing, that rising cases in Kent were not to do with local patterns of compliance, but because a new, more transmissible variant of COVID-19 had taken hold and was spreading fast.
- 4.24. It became clear that the Government's COVID-19 strategy needed to change. The Government quickly informed the World Health Organisation about the new variant and - following a COVID-O chaired by the Prime Minister - the Health Secretary informed Parliament in an oral statement on 14 December 2020, in which he also announced that Greater London and a range of areas in the South East and East of England would move to Tier 3. Doing the right thing in terms of transparency came with a cost globally, as governments overseas - despite the variant likely also being present in other countries - quickly labelled the 'Kent' or 'British' variant (but was later formally named 'Alpha'). The French put in testing at the border which caused long haulier queues at Dover over Christmas⁴⁸. Rising incidence of Alpha quickly escalated the pressure on the NHS (which, by this time, had also begun to try and address the elective backlog)⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Travel restrictions were imposed on India (over Delta) and countries in Southern Africa and elsewhere (over Omicron). While COVID-19 was a global pandemic, the response was essentially shaped by national governments acting in their domestic self-interest. For all the good words on international cooperation, whenever it appeared that a country was ahead of its comparators (in terms of vaccines) or looking like an outlier (in terms of variants), national concerns came to the fore.

⁴⁹ Exhibit SC/144 - INQ000325220 an update from Helen MacNamara to myself about the contingency planning which was set in train regarding NHS capacity.

- 4.25. The context at the time of the Alpha outbreak included that the whole top team in the Cabinet Office including No.10 were also working intensely to finalise the negotiations on the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement with the European Commission, with no-deal a significant possibility. These issues combined to put significant weight on the country as well as the state.
- 4.26. At the Dashboard meeting on 18 December 2020, the Prime Minister was updated on the conclusions of the NERVTAG Committee earlier that day (the slides are at [Exhibit SC/145 - INQ000217008](#) and [Exhibit SC/146 - INQ000217009](#)). I also provide the readout at [Exhibit SC/147 - INQ000146623](#) which records that “the PM asked the Taskforce to develop urgent options for a policy response, including further NPIs (regional or national), and national and international travel restrictions to minimise further seeding (accepting it would not be possible at this stage to stop the spread entirely). This would also need to interact with messaging and transport plans for Christmas. We should also consider the fact that some pressures would be reduced over this period e.g. with schools breaking up”. Following subsequent meetings of COVID-O, the Prime Minister announced that those parts of London, the South East and the East of England which were currently in Tier 3 would move into a new Tier 4, broadly equivalent to the national restrictions which were in place in England in November. He added that the Christmas bubbles would not proceed as originally planned.
- 4.27. As the data picture continued to worsen, and more areas moved up the tiers in the following weeks, the factor that appeared to weigh most heavily on Ministers, as the third national lockdown came into view, was a reluctance to close schools again. There were, however, reports that some would even struggle to reopen after the holidays. Given the pace at which the new variant was spreading, and the continued uncertainty over its properties, there were risks from not acting strongly enough on transmission and regretting it later. COVID-O agreed to the third national lockdown on 4 January 2021 (the minutes are at [Exhibit SC/148 - INQ000218352](#)). The paper updating Cabinet that same day on the plans - which included, most painfully for the Government, the closure of schools - is at [Exhibit SC/149 - INQ000088942](#). This was followed by an uncomfortable period while the Government waited for the data to indicate whether the measures were working while seeking to do what it could to reinforce the approach in the meantime. On 10 January 2021, the Prime Minister chaired COVID-O which decided on measures to strengthen lockdown, including reinforced communications and more visible enforcement.

4.28. The six months or so following the third lockdown saw the vaccine roll-out and the delivery of the spring roadmap (published on 22 February 2021⁵⁰). The following sub-paragraphs provide some further detail on these.

4.28.1. I spent a lot of time on both the supply and delivery of vaccines. For example, on 29 January 2021, the European Commission released new rules controlling the export of COVID-19 vaccines out of the EU. The EU also said it would trigger emergency safeguarding measures under Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol. It later retracted these measures. On this and more broadly, the Prime Minister was heavily involved in discussions with his European and wider international counterparts about vaccine supply - I and other officials supported him in that activity, including through discussing these issues with our counterparts.

4.28.2. To illustrate Cabinet's involvement in the roadmap process, I provide at [Exhibit SC/150 - INQ000137265](#) the update paper which was discussed at a Cabinet call on 5 April 2021, regarding the go-ahead of step two of the roadmap. When the Delta variant arrived, the Government went ahead with step three but paused step four. The paper to Cabinet on 14 June 2021 regarding the pause is at [Exhibit SC/151 - INQ000089001](#) and the data briefing is at [Exhibit SC/152 - INQ000137266](#). While there were worrying real-world data from the North West (in particular), I was keen that the length of any pause was not arbitrary, but focused on what we could do with vaccines during the time. The Government set the pause at up to four weeks, with a review after two. It brought forward its vaccine roll-out targets and accelerated the deployment, helped by a shorter gap between first and second jabs for all people aged 40 or over.

4.29. On 5 July 2021, the Government published the COVID-19 Response: Summer 2021⁵¹. (the Cabinet paper that day is at [Exhibit SC/153 - INQ000137269](#)). It said that when England moved to the final step of the roadmap, it would enter "a new phase in

⁵⁰ COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021 (Roadmap); available here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/963491/COVID-19_Response_-_Spring_2021.pdf ([Exhibit SC/154 - INQ000137264](#)). The vaccine roll-out and the roadmap went together. Unlike in 2020, the unlocking in 2021 had a clear yardstick: the (planned) increase in vaccines administered over time.

⁵¹ 5 July 2021: COVID-19 Response: Summer 2021; available here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/999419/COVID-19_Response_Summer_2021.pdf ([Exhibit SC/155 - INQ000137268](#)).

the Government's response to the pandemic, moving away from stringent restrictions on everyone's day-to-day lives, towards advising people on how to protect themselves and others, alongside targeted interventions to reduce risk". The Government decided to go ahead with step four on 19 July 2021 (the Cabinet paper is at [Exhibit SC/156 - INQ000088904](#)). While the future was highly uncertain, it was clear that COVID-19 would have significant impacts for some time. The success of the vaccine programme, however, meant the Government was able to balance the impacts of COVID-19 more evenly. I was keen to make sure that the Government was preparing for the impact that high prevalence could cause in public and critical services over the summer. The CDL examined the risks around step four in advance. As the 'pingdemic' began, his COVID-O committee agreed a workforce testing scheme and changes to isolation policy, mitigating the disruption to the functioning of the economy and services.

- 4.30. On 14 September 2021, the Government published the COVID-19 Response: Autumn and Winter Plan 2021⁵² (the Cabinet paper is at [Exhibit SC/157 - INQ000088908](#)). This included a Plan B, laid out in advance and in case the data suggested further measures were necessary to protect the NHS. This included legally mandating vaccine-only COVID-status certification in certain settings and face coverings in certain settings.
- 4.31. With the economy now fully reopened, but the virus not yet endemic, labour force problems began emerging. The Government set up the supply chains unit (SCU), focused on planning for Christmas 2021.
- 4.32. On 25 November 2021, DHSC announced that the Government was taking precautionary action against a new COVID-19 variant by introducing travel restrictions on arrivals from a number of countries in Africa. The variant was later named Omicron. Over the following weeks, cases rose very quickly and countries across the world re-introduced travel measures. The Government announced on 8 December 2021 that it would move to the Plan B package and shortly afterwards launched the Get Boosted Now campaign.
- 4.33. On 20 December 2021, the Prime Minister updated the Cabinet on Omicron. The Dashboard briefing is [Exhibit SC/158 - INQ000088918](#) . Against the backdrop of some optimistic signs (including the data from South Africa) and significant

⁵² 14 September 2021: COVID-19 Response: Autumn and Winter Plan 2021; available here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1020982/COVID-19-response-autumn-and-winter-plan-2021.pdf ([Exhibit SC/159 - INQ000137270](#))

uncertainties (such as the level of protection from boosters), the Prime Minister encouraged a discussion of the options which ranged from focusing on boosters through to increasing restrictions. The minutes at [Exhibit SC/160 - INQ000217347](#) record the Prime Minister summing up as follows. “Throughout history populations had looked to the Government to support them through pandemics. People paid their taxes expecting the Government to protect their health. The Cabinet discussion was the furthest it had been during the pandemic from the current scientific position. However, while the data was uncertain, it was premature to reimpose restrictions. Given the uncertainty of the data and the downsides of more stringent measures, it was right to proceed on the basis of: actively implementing Plan B, increasing capacity in the NHS (e.g. discharge); procuring antivirals; encouraging the public to exercise caution; making changes to self-isolation [see footnote 53]; and focussing on accelerating the booster campaign. There was an optimistic world where the Government may not need to act further. At the same time, he was absolutely resolved to protect public health, and the Government needed to prepare to go further if required. These issues would be brought back in front of the Cabinet”. At the end of that day, 20 December 2021, the Prime Minister’s Private Office circulated an update and plan for the following few days ([Exhibit SC/161 - INQ000218355](#)):

4.33.1. Consistent with the steer to prepare to go further if required, the Taskforce was “working up more of the detail of ‘Plan C’. Some of [No.10] will meet with them tomorrow to nail down as much as possible”. I was not in this discussion and in practice no Plan C was implemented.

4.33.2. Given the clinical view at a meeting which I attended earlier that day about shielding for the clinically extremely vulnerable, No.10 was “not pushing this any further”. The paper for that meeting - attended by the Prime Minister, Health Secretary, CMO and GCSA and others - is at [Exhibit SC/162 - INQ000218354](#) with the cover at [Exhibit SC/163 - INQ000218353](#). The clinicians advised that the benefits of bringing back shielding would be significantly outweighed by the downsides.

4.34. As during the Delta wave, I was worried about the impact on public services and key sectors. The SCU supported a ministerial process by which the Government was able to understand and respond to the pressure that rising prevalence and therefore absences was putting on workforces across the economy. For example, the

government made changes to self-isolation policy which supported essential public services and workforces over the winter⁵³.

- 4.35. On 5 January 2022, Cabinet was updated on the response to Omicron ([Exhibit SC/164 - INQ000088945](#)). Since the briefing on 20 December 2021, there had been some positive developments, including latest analysis from UKHSA suggesting that “hospitalisations from Omicron in a population with high immunity are around one third of Delta”, and the success of the Get Boosted Now Campaign. But a number of ambiguities remained (including when the wave would peak) and the situation was challenging (with cases at by far the highest levels of the pandemic and admissions data showing sharp rises). The Government therefore decided to continue with the Plan B measures. On 19 January 2022, the Cabinet agreed that the Government should return to Plan A. The paper for that meeting is at [Exhibit SC/165 - INQ000137271](#) ; and the analysis pack is at [Exhibit SC/166 - INQ000089036](#) .
- 4.36. On 21 February 2022, the Government published the COVID-19 Response: Living with COVID-19⁵⁴. “The Government’s objective in the next phase of the COVID-19 response [was] to enable the country to manage COVID-19 like other respiratory illnesses, while minimising mortality and retaining the ability to respond if a new variant emerges with more dangerous properties than the Omicron variant, or during periods of waning immunity, that could again threaten to place the NHS under unsustainable pressure”. The paper discussed at Cabinet that morning is at [Exhibit SC/167 - INQ000088925](#) and the data briefing is at [Exhibit SC/168 - INQ000088923](#)

⁵³ The Government published new guidance that enabled the 10-day self-isolation period for people who had tested positive for COVID-19 to be reduced to 7 days, in most cases. See 22 December 2021 Press release - [Self-isolation for COVID-19 cases reduced from 10 to 7 days following negative LFD tests](#); available here: [Exhibit SC/169 - INQ000086633](#) <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/self-isolation-for-covid-19-cases-reduced-from-10-to-7-days-following-negative-lfd-tests>). The position was reviewed again in the new year: from 17 January 2021, people with COVID-19 in England could end their self-isolation after 5 full days, as long as they test negative on day 5 and day 6. As the press release explained, “the decision [had] been made after careful consideration of modelling from the UK Health Security Agency and to support essential public services and workforces over the winter”. See 13 January 2022 Press release - [Self-isolation for those with COVID-19 can end after 5 full days following 2 negative LFD tests](#); available here: [Exhibit SC/170 - INQ000218359](#) <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/self-isolation-for-those-with-covid-19-can-end-after-five-full-days-following-two-negative-lfd-tests>

⁵⁴ 21 February 2022: COVID-19 Response: Living with COVID-19; available here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1056229/COVID-19_Response_-_Living_with_COVID-19.pdf ([Exhibit SC/171 - INQ000137273](#))

5. OTHER ISSUES RAISED BY THE INQUIRY

- 5.1. The Inquiry asked me to describe what impact, if any, I consider alleged breaches of rules and standards by Ministers, officials and advisers during the relevant period, and public debate regarding those alleged breaches, had on public confidence in the UK Government's response to COVID-19.
- 5.2. There were a number of high-profile breaches of the rules and guidance by public figures across the United Kingdom. My impression, including from conversations I had at the time with people outside of work, is that these breaches did register with the public and eroded the legitimacy of the government's response to COVID-19. But the polling I saw at the time, referred to in paragraph 6.28.2 with Exhibit SC/172 - INQ000137245, suggested to me that there were a number of factors which weighed on public trust and confidence. The percentage who agreed Government information could be trusted started falling in early April 2020, falling steadily to early June 2020. The percentage who strongly agreed or agreed the Government was putting the right measures in place to protect the public started falling in late April 2020 and was more than 20 points lower in about a fortnight, coinciding with the build-up to the first roadmap out of lockdown and its publication on 11 May 2020. This included the replacing of the simple 'stay at home' message with a more nuanced 'stay alert' message.
- 5.3. As such, the public trust which enabled the most intrusive and comprehensive suspension of liberties ever seen in this country was eroded from an early stage. It seems likely that breaches by public figures were a factor in that, and made that trust even harder to regain. Some breaches by political figures also put CMO and CSA - asked frequently to appear at press conferences and help explain the rules and guidance that Ministers had decided - in a difficult position.
- 5.4. The Inquiry asked me about the Prime Minister's style of decision-making.
- 5.5. I said to the COVID-19 Taskforce, in one of its first meetings in early June 2020, that probably no Prime Minister since Churchill and Attlee had faced challenges as frightening as those presented by COVID-19. (Challenges which included, of course, the Prime Minister's own illness). Decision-making was pressured and complex. Helping the Prime Minister and the Cabinet navigate their way through this was a vital task.
- 5.6. In my experience, Boris Johnson's great strength lay in his abilities as a communicator.

When he had understood and personally internalised an argument or position, he was highly skilled in delivering public messages in a very engaging manner.

- 5.7. When decisions approached, I observed the Prime Minister starting with the big picture rather than the detail and consulting widely before forming his own views through debate and drawing on instincts. The human dynamics were important to him. The Chief Medical Officer and Government Chief Scientific Adviser were present in the vast majority of discussions with the Prime Minister: I think he saw them as his most important official advisers on COVID-19. Given the scale of economic damage it caused, the Prime Minister's discussions and relationship with the Chancellor also shaped a lot of his thinking. The Prime Minister was not an instinctive reader of quantitative data, and did not easily retain detailed information, but was able to use it once he had become familiar with it.
- 5.8. The Prime Minister's view on an issue could sometimes vary unpredictably and his style could make the governance process difficult to manage. As one of the people responsible for trying to manage those processes, in a disciplined way that both the Prime Minister and his officials could have trust and confidence in, such characteristics were at times sources of frustration for me, especially in the first few months of working closely with him. This is not in any way to suggest the Prime Minister lacked the ability or willingness to take the hugely significant and complex decisions required of him during the pandemic period. Indeed, I am sure that at times he was frustrated with officials for what he considered to be over-reliance on processes, at the expense of action and grip. We tried, therefore, a number of different ways to support the Prime Minister, structure his meetings and make sure he received the clearest possible advice.
- 5.9. We found the Prime Minister's style of decision-making was best suited to meeting formats which included expert and political views, not just ministerial ones, but which were small enough to enable a lively discussion. This could at times be a difficult balance to strike. As I described in Section 4 of my corporate statement, while decisions were made formally in the collective process for ministerial decision-making, they sometimes had already crystallised in more informal meetings beforehand.
- 5.10. I have been asked to provide to the Inquiry documents, emails and WhatsApp messages relevant to the UK Government's response to COVID-19 and I have worked to assist the Cabinet Office's legal team in this task. I understand they are providing relevant materials to the Inquiry in line with the Inquiry's request.

- 5.11. Specifically in respect of the WhatsApp messages available to me, initially I provided - to the Cabinet Office legal team for the assistance of the Inquiry - the relevant messages I exchanged on a one-to-one basis with a list of other individuals involved in the response to COVID-19. This was not only in respect of the Cabinet Office and No.10, but also others external to the department including the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the CMO and the GCSA. These messages included my one-to-one thread with Boris Johnson. Since that initial assessment of relevance, I have reviewed the names published in the section 21 notice to the Cabinet Office and I have provided additional messages to the Cabinet Office legal team following a second review.
- 5.12. A number of the WhatsApp groups (separate from the above mentioned one-to-one exchanges) that I was included in were deleted by accident from my phone when I attempted to export and preserve the group messages. The names of these groups, and the names of the people in them, were retained and have been provided to the Cabinet Office legal team. Any WhatsApps that I did author as part of these groups may be on other individuals' phones. I have been advised that witnesses should not communicate with each other about their evidence. For this reason, I have deliberately not contacted any other member of a WhatsApp group to see whether they have a copy of any of the deleted material. However, I understand that some of the deleted material has been recovered and provided to the Cabinet Office legal team as the Cabinet Office went through the process of collecting the evidence of some of the other individuals who were part of the groups.
- 5.13. As regards the group messages that I understand have not as yet been recovered in this way from other Cabinet Office witnesses, a number involved third parties external to the Cabinet Office such as Sir Chris Whitty, Sir Patrick Vallance and Matt Hancock. Again, I anticipate that at least some other members of these group threads will have kept the messages and be able to assist the Inquiry with their side of the threads, even if they were lost from mine.
- 5.14. I asked a technical team in the Cabinet Office to examine my laptop (where I believed backups of these messages had been stored) to see whether the deleted messages could be recovered, but no messages were restored. I have now asked the Cabinet Office to engage the services of external forensic specialists to see whether they can recover the missing material.

- 5.15. I wish for there to be no doubt about my commitment and willingness to assist the Inquiry with its work, including my willingness to provide all relevant material the Inquiry requires. Accordingly, in the event that the external specialists are unable to recover the lost material, I am able and willing to contact relevant individuals who were part of the groups and who are not witnesses to the Inquiry, to see whether they still have access to any of those which remain unavailable. Noting that the list of individuals the Inquiry has sought, or intends to seek, evidence from may change, before doing so I would be careful to check first with the Inquiry. I appreciate that the Inquiry may wish to contact these individuals itself and has the legal powers to require them to produce relevant material.
- 5.16. I will update the Inquiry on the outcome of these matters.
- 5.17. The Inquiry asked me to explain how WhatsApp (and other messaging platforms) were used by core-decision-makers as part of the decision-making process during the pandemic, and my role in these messaging groups. The Inquiry also asked me to what extent, and in what respects, did the use of informal decision-making systems, including messaging, assist and/or undermine effective decision-making.
- 5.18. The Government response to COVID-19 required ministers and officials to communicate at high intensity, across multiple locations, in person and/or virtually, every single day. In that context, WhatsApp did help Ministers, officials and experts to communicate with and support each other, sharing information quickly and confidentially across locations (which was particularly important when people were not co-located).
- 5.19. To some extent, WhatsApp substituted for informal and spontaneous conversations that would ordinarily have been in person. Some of these messages read poorly in hindsight, without the full context of the time, because they capture in-the-moment frustrations and remarks - not necessarily meant literally - that tend to accompany human interactions in moments of crisis.
- 5.20. WhatsApp messages were also one input to the decision-making process, but do not provide a complete picture of that process. As I explained in the corporate statement, the use of electronic communication channels (such as email, WhatsApp and the like), played a role in the Government's process for setting strategic direction and making decisions on issues. They were useful accompaniments to the wider traffic of information and discussion which also included - for example - the Dashboard meetings with the Prime Minister and the formal processes for reaching and recording

collective decisions. In my experience, where points on WhatsApp were substantive, in many cases these will have been carried across into the meetings (and therefore meeting records) by people raising them verbally. These of course were matters of judgement in a fast-paced environment.

5.21. During the relevant period, the Prime Minister's Principal Private Secretary was responsible for the operation of No.10 and the Chief Operating Officer for the Cabinet Office was responsible for the operation of the Cabinet Office. I remember being asked on at least two occasions verbally what my understanding was of the procedure regarding WhatsApps on private phones when someone left the Cabinet Office or No.10, and expressed my view that they would be expected to be deleted for security reasons, though a record should be kept of anything substantive. I believe that one of the individuals was Imran Shafi, and the other may have been Stuart Glassborow: these would have been informal discussions in the corridor at around the same time, when Imran Shafi was about to leave Number 10 in February or March 2021. I would not have done anything to ensure that a record was kept of anything substantive - or to review them myself to see if there was anything substantive at all - since that would not have been my role as Cabinet Secretary. From March 2021, reflecting their use in day-to-day communication in government, it was possible to download WhatsApp onto corporate devices. I understand that a No.10 policy on WhatsApps was established at that time Exhibit SC/173 - INQ000218356

5.22. The Inquiry asked if, in or around Autumn 2020, I witnessed or was made aware that the Prime Minister said he would rather "let the bodies pile high" than order another lockdown, or words to that effect. I believe that it is important to note that my memory relevant to this matter could have been prompted or blurred by media coverage, so my memory is only tentative on this point. However, in my recollection, the Prime Minister used this phrase or something close to it as a rhetorical question in which he was asking what opponents to a further lockdown were wanting him to do. This was in the context of the autumn of 2020 during debates about the right response to rising incidence. I have not found any record of this in minutes or any other document.

6. SECTION 6: LESSONS LEARNED AND TESTS FOR THE FUTURE

- 6.1. I am very proud of the achievements of the Civil Service in responding to COVID-19 and am committed to carrying through the relevant lessons for how we can govern better in future⁵⁵. When I became Cabinet Secretary in September 2020, Alex Chisholm (Chief Operating Officer of the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary of the Cabinet Office) and I wrote to the Prime Minister making the case “for seizing this moment to drive a transformation in the operation of government, to move from a machine still recognisable in parts from the 19th century to one that is firmly of the 21st...to imbue the civil service with a relentless focus on delivering for the public” ([Exhibit SC/174 - INQ000137256](#)). This culminated in the Declaration of Government Reform in June 2021, co-signed by the Prime Minister and myself⁵⁶. We said: “There have been successes - the speedy introduction of furlough, the delivery of universal credit, the vaccination programme - which attest to the brilliance, imagination and dedication of public servants. But as with any crisis, the pandemic has also exposed shortcomings in how government works. Some processes have been too cumbersome. Accountability for delivery of services has at points been confused. The speed with which good practice in one department or area of government has been adopted by others has not always been rapid enough. If we are to power the recovery we need, it is imperative we both learn from our successes and are honest about where improvements must come”. The consequent programme of modernisation and reform is now underway.
- 6.2. As I said in my first annual lecture as Cabinet Secretary, in Newcastle in October 2021⁵⁷, “politicians and officials, Westminster and Whitehall, have recognised that the pandemic is an inflection point in our history”. We need to avoid what Peter Hennessy calls the ‘Curse of the Missed Opportunity’: “the quintessential government mistake”, when “we fail to hold on to the lessons we learn as we go along”.
- 6.3. So, looking forward, in my second annual lecture in Bristol in January 2023, I set out five tests which can help assess how institutions like the Civil Service are performing

⁵⁵ During the specified period and to date, I have made reference to COVID-19 in my evidence to the Public Accounts Committee on 10 June 2021 and the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee on 22 October 2020, 26 April 2021 and 28 June 2022.

⁵⁶ Declaration on Government Reform: 15 June 2021; available here: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/993902/FINAL_Declaration_on_Government_Reform.pdf ([Exhibit SC/175 - INQ000137267](#))

⁵⁷ Cabinet Secretary Lecture: 13 October 2021; available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/cabinet-secretary-lecture-wednesday-13-october-2021--2> ([Exhibit SC/176 - INQ000137286](#))

and achieving lasting change⁵⁸. I arrange my reflections on COVID-19 under each of the tests, drawing from and building on my lectures. I will summarise how we learned lessons as we went along and where I think we should go next.

First test: do we know who our customers are? And do we serve them well?

- 6.4. This test is about taking the time to understand who we work for and what they want, and delivering what our elected representatives ask of us, on behalf of the voter and the taxpayer. The whole-of-government response to the pandemic showed us the importance of delivery.
- 6.5. In Newcastle (2021) I said: “If I look back now to when I first joined the Civil Service, the received wisdom was that it was good at policy and poor at delivery. Over the course of my career, I believe this has been inverted. And we saw this during the pandemic in the feats of our colleagues working in what we call Operational Delivery. Their passion for making a difference to the country, communities and their fellow citizens was unleashed in a wonderful way – absolutely enabled by data, expertise, technology – but inspired, I know, by the timeless value of taking pride in public service”. The rapid development and rollout of vaccines stands out as an example, combining the UK’s strength in science with the delivery reach of the NHS, together saving thousands of lives. Other examples include: the furlough scheme which supported nearly 12 million livelihoods; the swift expansion of Universal Credit; and, the ‘Everyone In’ campaign that saw homeless people given shelter.
- 6.6. Having set up multidisciplinary and complex services at high speed and scale, the challenge now is to strive for smarter, more agile delivery across all of the Government’s broader agenda. The mindset and approach that guided the vaccine roll-out, for example, is now being applied to the longer term consequences of the pandemic such as health waiting lists.
- 6.7. In Newcastle (2021) I said: “Michael Barber, the creator of Tony Blair’s Delivery Unit, advised us on the creation of a similar set-up for this government...In each of [the Government’s priority] areas, we are defining the missions; working out the goals and metrics; identifying the players involved in making things happen; and, busting through barriers to progress. The Prime Minister holds regular stock-takes to review all of the above, with Secretaries of State and key officials. These tried and tested approaches directly connect the Prime Minister and his ministers to the realities experienced by the

⁵⁸ Cabinet Secretary Lecture: 25 January 2023; available here: <https://s26304.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/Cab-Sec-Annual-Lecture-Bristol-University-2023.pdf>

people who use public services every day. Inconvenient truths are hard to duck. Accountabilities are laid bare. A lack of progress is plain to see. And at the same time, the collective spirit and desire to overcome obstacles is fostered”.

- 6.8. “Of course, we need to take these broad delivery goals and turn them into individual responsibilities. Secretaries of State and their permanent secretaries have to be clear about what is expected of them, what resources they need to succeed and the like. On appointment, Cabinet ministers receive clear instructions from the Prime Minister, setting out what he expects them to deliver”.
- 6.9. “To accompany this, we have introduced a more rigorous appraisal system for permanent secretaries, to align priorities and work through the specific challenges they face in their departments. We meet multiple times a year in sessions that are supported by data and evidence. First to agree overall objectives across delivery, leadership and management of resources; then at mid-year, to take stock. And finally at the year-end, to review performance. The sessions involve officials from the relevant department, from the Treasury, Cabinet Office and No10, as well as the departmental lead non-executive director. Reports are then sent back to the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister”.
- 6.10. “This approach – the Delivery Unit, the stock-takes, the Mandates, the permanent secretary appraisals – takes huge amounts of time and effort to get right. But this is the level of effort [that is] required to organise effective delivery”.

Second test: are we staying true to our core purpose?

- 6.11. This test is about staying true to our roots as we modernise. The Civil Service is a service: selfless service must remain at the core of what we do and how we do it. But COVID-19 showed us that partnerships - across organisations and with the private and voluntary sectors - can help us carry forward our purpose.
- 6.12. In Newcastle (2021) I said: “like everyone in the country, civil servants have had to adapt to enormous changes in a short space of time. Over the last 18 months the state has determined who people can see, when and where. Large chunks of our high streets were forced to close with the taxpayer picking up the wage bill. I don’t believe any of us could have imagined these sorts of interventions before the pandemic. It is hard to believe that they would have garnered public and parliamentary support. And yet because of the country’s compassion, and its desire to protect the NHS and save lives, people have accepted these extraordinary policy injunctions that ministers and

civil servants have found themselves having to design and legislate for at speed. Now, as we head towards a new normal, transitioning from pandemic to endemic, we will see a shift from the highly protective and directive state that has developed to a more enabling or facilitative state”.

- 6.13. In Bristol (2023) I said: “Everywhere we look, challenges across the economy and society are ever more complex. The answers don’t just lie in the government’s hands. Governing – delivering for the people of this country – is a team sport. We rely on partners across the public and private sectors, in local, national and international spheres, to pull off significant achievements”.
- 6.14. A number of the officials who worked on the COVID-19 response had moved over to work on Homes for Ukraine, applying their own COVID-19 lessons directly into that new challenge. I recalled that “this scheme was designed to capture the warm-heartedness of people up and down this country who wanted to give shelter to the Ukrainians fleeing the war. Here, it’s interesting, the government chose not to be the big-state player of the pandemic era but instead a light-touch digital facilitator. Ukrainians are matched via an online platform with UK sponsors offering up accommodation; they receive an allowance for that generosity of spirit. It’s an interesting model of reaching across institutional boundaries to solve a collective problem – in government, a multidisciplinary Whitehall team, working with local authorities, charities and private sector partners; each providing a key piece of the puzzle”.

Third test: are we updating the way we do things to stay relevant?

- 6.15. This test is about adopting new technologies, systems and processes so that we can solve problems and deliver public services in the way that 21st century citizens would want. I said in Bristol (2023) that “I believe we are at an inflection point in how government works – with better use of data at the heart of it, to solve problems and design better public services”. I note the report by the NAO in May 2021 (Initial learning from the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic⁵⁹).
- 6.16. There were challenges around interoperability of data at the start of COVID-19, but I think we made real strides as we went on around the internal and external use of data. As I recalled in Newcastle (2021), “we started off [the pandemic] with officials emailing

⁵⁹ ONS: Initial learning from the government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic: 19 May 2021; available here: <https://www.nao.org.uk/insights/initial-learning-from-the-governments-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/> (Exhibit SC/178 - INQ00013727)

Excel spreadsheets back and forth late at night, to be turned into Powerpoint slides for ministers the following morning. We didn't know where cases were or how they were spreading. Within months, however, we had automated feeds and digital dashboards showing aggregated tallies from the NHS and Public Health England of new cases; hospitalisations; and mortality rates. Thanks to the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and its Infection Survey we had great insights into the incidence of asymptomatic infection; regional variations in prevalence, and the spread across demographics. Our coders and analysts looked at anonymised data sources to create a more accurate picture of what was happening in the country, in terms of health, the economy and public services”.

6.17. “This more sophisticated use of data gave ministers confidence to take the necessary, but hard, decisions needed to tackle the virus. And this should be the norm: innovative use of data in policy-making. Our new entities such as 10DS, a data science team in Downing Street; the National Situation Centre; as well as the Delivery Unit – are starting to bring better evidence into policy and delivery discussions at the heart of government”. I pointed to two further examples in Bristol (2023):

6.17.1. The ONS is “helping the public understand the effect of rising prices on their spending power through its online personal inflation calculator – which was developed in partnership with the BBC – and a tracker of low cost grocery items. The next step is its Integrated Data Service, set to launch later this year. Although still in beta phase, it will enable us to combine and compare information from right across the public sector about what’s happening in the public services, what’s happening in the economy and what’s happening across society”.

6.17.2. “There’s [also] a team, largely made up of ONS people, who make up the Spatial Data Unit in the Department for Levelling Up. And their work goes down to the minutiae of postcode-level data to map the challenges and opportunities in local neighbourhoods. It’s this kind of work that plays to our ambitions in this area: namely, analysts from across government collaborating on shared problems; building understanding amongst non-experts to make them smarter customers; and integrating data from across government and beyond”.

6.18. I said in Newcastle (2021) that our new entities in the centre “are working with departments to shape their use of data and bring about system change – because of course the really big data guns sit in departments – not in the Centre. Departments are

the real catalysts of change through their use of data in designing and delivering better public services”.

- 6.19. “While data itself is crucial, it is what we do with it that ultimately matters. It is through the application of expertise and specialist knowledge that we identify opportunities, shape policy and refine its delivery. Our levelling up programme, for example, will be all the more robust, if data is collected and, crucially, used, with place at the heart of the approach. We need to have better analytical skills. How we interpret, use, display and communicate data are essential parts of the mission. We need to put rocket-boosters under our plans to equip our own people with these skills, or plug the gap by bringing them in from outside”.

Fourth test: is our approach to managing risk proportionate?

- 6.20. This test is about the need for decision-makers to constantly recalibrate their threshold and appetite for risk, and for officials to ensure their processes are proportionate to the risks and issues being managed, depending on the context and environment.
- 6.21. One of the most difficult aspects of managing the response to the pandemic was managing the different inputs into every decision, particularly the decisions around unlocking and locking down. These inputs included: the COVID-19 epidemiology; the impacts of the pandemic on non-COVID health outcomes; the economic consequences; and, the broader impacts on society and public services.
- 6.22. Striking that balance was a judgement for Ministers. As officials at the centre, we had to be clear with departments that we needed their best judgement of the risk of any particular decision or option that is under consideration, so that when Ministers came forward to a collective decision point, those risks were properly identified and fairly represented. As the pandemic went on, the Government continued to learn about balancing the different impacts, and the vaccine changed the calculation. The discussions around the Omicron wave in December 2021 - where Ministers chose ‘Get Boosted Now’ and not a lockdown - were enormous calls, but incorporated a wide range of views effectively.
- 6.23. To help Ministers to come together and balance the different impacts of COVID-19, we borrowed, as I said in Newcastle (2021), “an idea that originated with [the first Cabinet Secretary, Maurice] Hankey; one we also used to prepare for Brexit – namely the creation of a layered approach to Cabinet committees. First to take strategy decisions and then to drive through actions and operational outcomes. The principle at the heart

of this approach is actually very simple: make sure you have the right people in the room for the right discussion – to reach the most urgent decisions or remove the most critical barriers to real-world progress”.

- 6.24. “For our Brexit preparations, we ran two committees: XS, for Exit Strategy, and XO, for Exit Operations. A core of five ministers attended the Strategy meetings: their focus was to set the high-level direction and resolve strategic questions. By contrast, the cast list for the Operations meetings was a more eclectic affair. It changed by the day, depending on which pressing delivery problem was on the agenda and who was best placed to tackle it. And as well as having experienced officials at the table next to their ministers, we invited outside partners to contribute their expertise – including the devolved administrations, business leaders, local government and third sector organisations – all interested parties with frontline experience that would play a vital operational role”.
- 6.25. “This was the model we decided to mirror for the COVID response: COVID (Strategy) to handle high level strategy decisions; and COVID (Operations) to oversee operational delivery. Exactly the same principles applied. And this model of strategy committees and operational committees is one which the Prime Minister has now decided to repeat across the waterfront of government business”.
- 6.26. As well as getting ministerial structures right, we set up the COVID-19 Taskforce, as I cover in the next sub-section. In terms of managing risk, I have some further reflections on: risk appetite; communications; the interaction of different layers of government; and, learning from overseas.
- 6.27. I said in Newcastle (2021) that our system of government has a “cultural” danger that “in each conversation or policy debate, you go over every possible risk factor – who will be the winner, the loser: what are the upsides/the downsides – until you reach the lowest common denominator position. Which can be the enemy of radical solutions and reform”. As I said in Bristol (2023), there are times “when the risk is so great that our standard responses are simply inadequate and we must do new things to respond...during the pandemic we moved with a decisiveness and turn of speed that surprised many”. On procurement, for example - and as the Boardman reviews showed - there were mistakes, but also much that went well. Famously, the Government’s big bets paid off with vaccines - but the same approach on PPE has meant significant unused material was left over. That, in my view, is the nature of high risk/high reward decision-making and there should be a place in our system of government for it. This philosophy is behind the new Advanced Research and

Invention Agency. This is “an R&D funding agency designed to make bold bets that complement and amplify the UK’s world-class research ecosystem. [Its] mandate: create new capabilities that can benefit the UK and advance human progress”. Its mantra: “pushing the limits of the possible”⁶⁰.

6.28. The complex risk environment of the pandemic led to complex policy responses. Policy and communications played a vital role in translating complex scientific advice, which includes large ranges of uncertainty, into decisions that Ministers can make and communicate. But where these decisions hinged on public behaviours, confusion was the enemy of compliance. Unlocking with caution meant making many incremental changes to a huge range of complex rules and guidance which reached into every corner of the economy and society. It was instinctively tempting for politicians and officials used to persuading and negotiating to think that they could manage the virus and fine-tune the response. The Government had been clear that its plan depended “on continued widespread compliance”, but its rationale and logic were not always communicated clearly, and it found itself reaching for a high level of precision in its policymaking (such as ‘smart’ NPIs for example). This search for precision was both cause and consequence of the trade-offs inherent in the response.

6.28.1. As an example of the challenges of fine-tuning the measures and the messaging, I provide at [Exhibit SC/179 - INQ000137217](#) and [Exhibit SC/180 - INQ000137218](#) an exchange with CMO and GCSA about groups meeting outside, including the importance of visitors going through a house only to reach and exit a garden.

6.28.2. On 25 July 2020, I wrote to colleagues on the back of the latest polling evaluation, expressing my serious concerns about compliance (my email is [Exhibit SC/181 - INQ000137244](#)); the polling is [Exhibit SC/182 - INQ000137245](#)). “We instinctively know what is wrong: 1) our guidance is complex and confusing; 2) our comms are confused (as least as far as media is considered - our advertising and social media still seems to be clear); and 3) people don’t understand how to calculate risks to them/those around them”. The reply from my colleagues in communications is [Exhibit SC/183 - INQ000137246](#). Their assessment was that the ‘Stay Alert’ message had “been undermined by the complexity of guidance, competing

⁶⁰ For further detail, see the Advanced Research + Invention Agency: <https://www.aria.org.uk/> ([Exhibit SC/184 - INQ000137287](#))

messages - go out and enjoy yourself - and the near impossibility of acting as the government recommends”.

6.28.3. The Scottish ‘FACTS’ slogan was similarly criticised for being hard to follow (face coverings, avoid crowded places, clean your hands regularly, two-metre social distance, self-isolate and book a test if you have symptoms). Following this, the UK Government went for the simpler, ‘Hands, Face, Space’.

6.29. The complexity of the rules was also symptomatic of how the response to the pandemic had strained the balance and interaction between UK, devolved and local government. As I said in Newcastle (2021), “we still need to talk more; work more; across different layers of government”.

6.29.1. In some areas of the COVID-19 response - a truly national emergency - these interactions were very strong: the shielding programme is a good example of interaction between central and local government.

6.29.2. When the UK government decided that the simple “stay at home” message would be replaced by a more nuanced “stay alert” message, all three devolved administrations disagreed and retained the original. Over time, the COVID-19 response began to fragment (and get more complicated) across the UK: on the policy on masks in schools, for example. While a huge amount of official and ministerial coordination between the four nations continued throughout, and the Union brought tremendous benefits for example on vaccine procurement, the divergence in approach across the UK added to the confusion the public faced.

6.29.3. The tiering system which divided England into different levels of alert and varying restrictions, and which saw local opposition rise and compliance fall, was not effective in managing the virus. It was always going to be a challenge to manage a virus, which transmits through human contact, with a local system, based on where people live. The complexity of the local rules added to the challenges that the public health machinery was facing (with its limited resources on the ground) and the tensions with the UK’s model of policing by consent⁶¹. The

⁶¹ The challenges the police were facing were brought home to me in a roundtable with police chief constables on 2 September 2020. The briefing to the Prime Minister is at [Exhibit SC/185 - INQ000137253](#);

i. My notes in this meeting are at Exhibit (to follow). The actions for the Taskforce

impact of gradualist or incremental approaches like tiering always took time to show up in the data, which made them harder to operate effectively. And perhaps most fundamentally, protracted and difficult negotiations with decision makers in local government showed they did not face the same set of trade-offs that the national government was confronted with.

- 6.30. When managing risks, weighing impacts and designing policies, there are limits to what the data and the science can tell you - and it is here that international comparisons can be very helpful. Despite all the challenges in 2020, once lockdowns had been lifted across most of the world and comparable measurement of excess deaths had improved, it became clear that the UK's overall record was about average⁶². But with every country having taken a slightly different approach, we gained a huge amount of real-time learning about what worked and what did not. In the past, my belief is that governments in the UK had not been sufficiently open to looking at what other countries were doing or genuinely humble about how our approaches can learn from them. The International Comparators Joint Unit (ICJU) helped change that: my corporate statement provides further detail. Going forward, international comparisons must be integrated into all levels of ministerial decision-making.

Fifth test: do we have the right people in the right places?

- 6.31. This test is about the workforce we need to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow, staying relevant and effective over the passage of time. As I said in Newcastle (2021), "it is my great privilege to be building on the hugely energetic efforts of my predecessors, who were also focused on getting the right people, working in the right places, spurred on by the right incentives."
- 6.32. Historically, and certainly in recent times, the role of the Cabinet Office has always been to support the Prime Minister and Cabinet, and there is a constant cross-current of ideas and interactions between officials and special advisers (temporary civil servants appointed directly by Ministers who can, in addition to other roles, provide political support) based in No.10 and the Cabinet Office. People tend to have influence

arising from this meeting and a follow-up conversation I had with colleagues about simplifying the guidance, are at [Exhibit SC/187 - INQ000218344](#)

⁶² Source: ONS and Government Office for Science - Comparing different international measures of excess mortality - 20 December 2022. The report says: "The UK placed around the middle of the rankings, regardless of which excess mortality measure used". Available here: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/comparingdifferentinternationalmeasuresofexcessmortality/2022-12-20#what-do-the-results-show-us>

([Exhibit SC/188 - INQ000137272](#))

and participate in discussions on the basis of their expertise and contribution, not their grade.

6.33. As I have described earlier in this statement, the immense pressures of the early phases of COVID-19 did strain the relationships within and between No.10 and the Cabinet Office. Particularly in regards to working in and with No.10 in the early phases, I recognised from personal experience many of the concerns and frustrations about behaviour that were identified by Helen MacNamara’s review (paragraph 3.6). The pressures the pandemic put on No.10 were amplified by some counter-productive ways of working. These behaviours sometimes made for a negative workplace culture, distracted attention onto internal matters and deterred some people from working in the centre. With the benefit of hindsight and distance from the extraordinary pressures of the time, I think it took too long to address some negative aspects of the culture. But over time, enabled in particular by some changes in personnel at No.10 and the Taskforce settling into its role, there was much greater join-up at the centre and a renewed sense of teamwork and collaboration. Henry Cook was the highly effective lead special adviser for COVID-19 in No.10 for the majority of the relevant period. He and other special advisers were fully integrated into the response to COVID-19 and worked very closely and productively with officials, attending all of the key meetings and generally copied into key correspondence.

6.34. The idea of a Taskforce which reaches across institutional boundaries to bring together the right people in one team, helping to break down silos and enable greater collaboration between departments, continues to help us tackle other challenges. As I said in Newcastle (2021), “the pandemic revealed that the effective policy official of today must be an expert orchestrator: part of a multidisciplinary team that brings the right skills – be they in finance, data analysis, science and engineering and more – to bear on any challenge”. More recently and as an example, the Elective Recovery Taskforce was launched in December 2022 and brings together government departments with a broad range of organisations, including representatives from across the National Health Service, independent service providers, and patient representatives⁶³.

6.35. I said in Bristol that “we are getting better at joining up thinking across departments, professions and functions – but we do need to do more of it, and faster, because the problems we are tackling don’t fit neatly under any one department. But we must work

⁶³ For further detail on the Elective Recovery Taskforce; see here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/elective-recovery-taskforce> (Exhibit SC/189 - INQ000137284)

more across institutional boundaries too – we can always achieve more by working together. We need to break down barriers. Make things easier by simplifying processes. Collaborate more; complicate less”.

6.36. An example of where the Government is challenging itself in this way is the Crisis Capabilities Review by Matthew Rycroft and Dominic Wilson of February 2022.

6.36.1. I now quote from the Review at Exhibit SC/190 - INQ000056240
Drawing on lessons learned from recent crises, including the COVID response, it “is the most far-reaching examination of central government’s approach to crisis response in over a decade”.

6.36.2. One of the key steps arising from this Review - albeit one too recent to assess in terms of impact - was the replacement in summer 2022 of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat with the COBR Unit, which leads the government’s response to acute emergencies, and the Resilience Directorate, which is dedicated to strengthening the UK’s underlying resilience.

6.37. More broadly, it is vital we create an environment in which a wide range of skills can develop and flourish across the Civil Service, so that people are equipped to do the great jobs they want to do every day for the people of this country, and so that we have the talents and viewpoints needed to find innovative solutions for the most pressing issues.

6.38. First, recruitment. As I said in Newcastle (2021), we are “making sure that the Civil Service as a whole reflects the country we serve. In other words, making sure that we are valuing in the Civil Service – alongside gender and ethnic diversity; and people with all types of disabilities – a profound commitment to diversity of thought. And we achieve this by employing a broad range of people from a wide range of backgrounds, so avoiding an echo chamber of like-minded people talking to themselves about subjects on which they are inherently likely to agree...We will be recruiting from the communities where the decisions made by our people will have the most immediate impact. And we will also be opening a network of hubs across the country to give people more places to work from...[so that there is] no longer any need to move lock, stock and barrel to the south-east to have a successful Civil Service career”.

6.39. I updated on this in Bristol (2023): “by 2030 we will have shifted 22,000 roles out of

London and the South East. Over 8,000 of those jobs have already moved”. A number of departments have opened offices outside of London: the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury have second headquarters in Glasgow and Darlington respectively.

- 6.40. As I said in Newcastle (2021), we also “want it to be natural for people who have built a career in business, industry, academia or the third sector to serve, even for a relatively brief time – just as it will be as valuable for those presently in public service to experience life in another organisation. That is why a new secondments unit has been established in the Cabinet Office to increase the two-way traffic at a senior level; for the long-term national good. All done, of course, within a clear and rigorous propriety framework”.
- 6.41. Second, investment in our people. As I said in Bristol (2023), we are “overhauling our training development programmes, and casting our talent net far and wide. Our priorities are to develop our digital and data capabilities; grow our science and engineering expertise; and build our project and operational delivery skills”.
- 6.42. “Over the last year, we have made great strides with the Government Skills and Curriculum Unit. We have a new government Campus for learning which is now operating in three physical locations as well as online. We have a revamped programme for our directors in the Civil Service that is preparing the next generation of leaders for tomorrow’s challenges. It will strengthen and equip them with skills to succeed at the most senior levels”.
- 6.43. “More immediately, we are working with the Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering to bring in mid-career science and engineering experts in the shorter term. We saw in the pandemic that when we bring in people mid-career from these disciplines, they can make a huge difference to our policy thinking and the delivery of our services”.
- 6.44. “At one of the entry levels of our workforce, we are making three fundamental changes to our Fast Stream programme”.
 - 6.44.1. “Half of the next cohort will be STEM graduates: not just in a science and technology specialism, but in our generalist Fast Stream – half will be STEM graduates. So we will bring in the brightest and best scientists, engineers, technologists and mathematicians from across the country into the heart of all the policymaking and design work around public service. Not ‘making science and technology,

engineering and mathematics a specialism' and treating it that way, but putting those skills at the heart of everything we're doing".

6.44.2. "We are also piloting regional schemes in Darlington and Yorkshire".

6.44.3. "We are changing the make-up of the training for our recruits, so that they concentrate on foundational skills in digital, finance, and commercial".

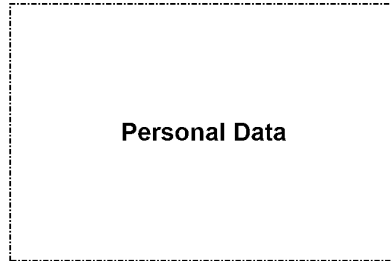
6.45. "Our data training is not just for specialists or graduates. All civil servants – half a million of them, from apprentices right up to Permanent Secretaries – will this year complete at least one day of dedicated data training...The reality is that every civil servant needs to be better equipped to use data in how they solve problems; and design and deliver public services."

6.46. Third, all this needs to be underpinned by world-class HR systems and processes. As I said in Bristol: "our new Chief People Officer, NR .wants to bring down barriers: so that we can recruit more quickly, offer the brilliant training our staff deserve, provide them with better development opportunities and make it easier to collaborate across departments".

6.47. Finally, COVID-19 directly affected the daily lives of those making and supporting decisions about it like no issue I have ever worked on in government. The pressure on civil servants (as for other public servants) was phenomenal. The pandemic showed us that the Civil Service must always be a compassionate employer and support the mental health of its employees.

Statement of Truth

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



Signed: _____

Dated: 9 June 2023