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Statement No.: 1
Exhibits: [SS/1 - SS/44]
Dated: 02 August 2024

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SUSANNAH STOREY

I, Susannah Storey, will say as follows:

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Section 0: Preface

0.1. I am the Permanent Secretary at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). From August 2019 to 7 February 2023 I was the Director General of the Digital and Media Group within the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). Upon the implementation of machinery of government changes, which were announced on 7 February 2023, my role and the majority of the group for which I was responsible were transferred into the newly created Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

(DSIT). The formal transfer of responsibilities from DCMS to DSIT took place on 3 May 2023 pursuant to a transfer of functions order [SS/1, INQ000361212].

- 0.2. I undertook the role of Director General for Digital, Technology and Telecoms within DSIT until 11 July 2023, when I started in my new role as Permanent Secretary of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Emran Mian was recruited as my replacement and began his role on 17 July 2023.
- 0.3. This statement is provided in response to the request from the Chair of the Inquiry for a witness statement covering the issues raised in the Provisional Outline of Scope for Module 4 of the Covid-19 Inquiry. I understand that Module 4 is concerned with a range of issues relating to the development of Covid-19 vaccines and the implementation of the vaccine rollout programme in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- 0.4. As requested by the Chair of the Inquiry, this statement is focused on the period of time between 30 January 2020 and 28 June 2022. The contents of this statement relate primarily to matters that occurred within this date range, unless indicated otherwise.
- 0.5. Whilst I have some degree of personal recollection of some of the events or processes described in this witness statement, I have also co-ordinated and liaised with colleagues who have the relevant knowledge and experience across the Department. Their contributions have been used to respond to the questions in the Rule 9 request. My statement therefore relies upon those contributions to form the responses in this statement. I have also relied on document archive searches conducted by colleagues.

Section 1: The Counter Disinformation Unit

Introduction

- 1.1. In my role as Director General, both in DCMS and DSIT, I had oversight of a large team of numerous directorates including the Security and Online Harms directorate within which the Counter Disinformation Unit (**the CDU**) was based. In practice, this meant that I had responsibility for the following key staff who were overseeing the work of the CDU or working within it:
 - a) Director of Security and Online Harms (SCS2) who led the CDU and was responsible for the work of the team
 - b) Deputy Director of Security and International (SCS1)

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c) The Head of Digital National Security and Online Manipulation (Grade 6) a post which later became Head of the Counter Disinformation Unit (Grade 6)

d) CDU Operational Lead (Grade 7)

e) CDU Lead Analyst (Grade 7), from November 2021 onwards

- 1.2. In relation to the above roles it is important to note that not all of those staff would have focused the entirety of their time on countering disinformation. This is particularly the case for staff who were in Senior Civil Service grades, given the breadth of team and portfolio responsibilities generally held. The Inquiry should also note that a number of other staff, including policy advisors, analysts and senior staff (including those at Deputy Director level) were temporarily deployed within the CDU to deal with peaks in work. At the height of the surge, there were up to 15 additional staff involved on a short-term basis.
- 1.3. The DCMS Secretary of State during the majority of the pandemic was Oliver Dowden, who was in post from 13 February 2020 to 15 September 2021, when he was succeeded by Nadine Dorries. The junior minister who had responsibility and oversight of the CDU during the pandemic was Caroline Dinenage, who was in post from 13 February 2020 to 15 September 2021, when she was succeeded by Chris Philp.
- 1.4. During the period when the CDU was created, the Secretary of State was Sir Jeremy Wright KC, who was in post from 9 July 2018 to 24 July 2019, when he was replaced by Nicky Morgan (now Baroness Morgan of Cotes) who was in post from 24 July 2019 to 13 February 2020, until Oliver Dowden's appointment. During this period the relevant ministers were Margot James who was in post from 9 January 2018 to 18 July 2019 and Nigel Adams who was in post from 24 July 2019 to 13 February 2020.
- 1.5. Senior level governance of counter-disinformation policy aimed at UK audiences, and any action taken to counter mis- or disinformation which was identified, was provided by the government's Disinformation Board [SS/2, INQ000361180]. The board comprised approximately 12 people and was chaired by the DCMS Director of Security and Online Harms. This was regularly attended by directors and senior civil servants from the following departments and teams: Home Office (HO), Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), Cabinet Office (CO) (government security group, national security secretariat in the Cabinet Office, national security communications team, constitution group, internet harms team based in the Cabinet Office) and the UK Intelligence Community, primarily GCHQ. Additional DCMS staff who worked to support

the board meetings were the Deputy Director of Security and International, the Head of Digital National Security and Online Manipulation, the Head of Counter Online Manipulation and a number of junior policy advisers.

- 1.6. The work of the Director-level board was supported by a Deputy Director-level board chaired by the DCMS Deputy Director of Security and International. These were regularly attended by approximately 10-12 people from the teams and departments set out above and supported by additional DCMS staff from the team.

Terms explained

- 1.7. When this statement refers to mis- and disinformation, it is referring to the government definitions of these terms:

- a) Disinformation is defined as the deliberate creation and dissemination of false and/or manipulated information that is intended to deceive and mislead audiences, either for the purposes of causing harm, or for political, personal or financial gain
- b) Misinformation is defined as the inadvertent spreading of false information.

- 1.8. If the CDU came across a new narrative and needed to determine the veracity of content, then it used third party sources to establish whether that content could constitute mis or disinformation. This involved looking at trusted, publicly available, sources, including the latest NHS guidance for covid, credible journalistic sites such as the BBC, or using independent fact checking resources, such as Full Fact. Individual platforms' terms of service were often specific about the type of content that would constitute misinformation or fall within scope. Where CDU staff assessed that content was likely to breach a platform's terms of service, the CDU used its trusted flagger status (described at para 1.46) to refer that content to the platform. It would then be for the platform to decide how to treat that content, for example whether it should be removed, labelled etc.

Background to the creation of the CDU

- 1.9. A policy team leading on disinformation was first established in March 2018, following the Salisbury poisonings¹. Following the incident in Salisbury, there was an increase in Russian disinformation with the aim of denying Russian involvement in the incident.

¹ The use of the nerve agent Novichok in the attempted assassination of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in the UK city of Salisbury in March 2018.

- 1.10. The actual development of government thinking on disinformation had begun before the incident in Salisbury with the production of the 2017 *Internet Safety Strategy Green Paper*. The government's response to that paper, published in May 2018, set out the intention to manage new and emerging issues, including disinformation [SS/3 INQ000102740] The focus was to prevent misleading information from being disseminated for political, personal and/or financial gain. In August 2018, cross-government discussions, led by the Cabinet Office (CO), were held on developing a counter disinformation strategy [SS/4 INQ000102749]
- 1.11. The increasing risks in this area, including concerns over how mis- and disinformation could impact UK elections, led the government to consider the creation of a Counter Disinformation Cell (CDC) in 2019.
- 1.12. DCMS identified key cross-government stakeholders - FCDO, CO and HO - with a view to forming what would become the CDC (and later the CDU). This structure was intended to provide the most comprehensive picture possible about the level, scope and impact of disinformation during times of heightened risk. An early official draft outlined the rationale for this and identified the key stakeholders and teams [SS/5, INQ000361183].
- 1.13. On 7 February 2019, DCMS chaired a disinformation roundtable with the relevant government stakeholders (identified in January 2019) to discuss the potential structure and make-up of the CDC [SS/6, INQ000102753] Due to government concern over the potential of mis- and disinformation to manipulate elections, at this meeting an illustrative general election scenario was used to test the CDC's proposed structure and establishing working relationships with social media platforms was also discussed. On 15 February 2019, a DCMS official chaired a second disinformation roundtable discussion, which focused on developing the cross-government response structure.
- 1.14. On 20 February 2019, the CDC put a submission to the DCMS Minister for Digital and Creative Industries setting out DCMS's proposed approach to the coordination of the CDC's response to disinformation, particularly in periods of heightened sensitivity [SS/7, INQ000102799] The aim of this was:
- "to strengthen Government capability in this area through three work streams:*
- a) cross-Whitehall coordination of operational capabilities*
 - b) cross-Whitehall collaboration with major social media platforms*
 - c) strengthening public resilience"*

- 1.15. On 25 February 2019, there was a third disinformation roundtable in which government stakeholders continued to discuss the CDC's structure.
- 1.16. DCMS formally established the CDC in March 2019 after Downing Street wrote to departments setting out the Prime Minister's position on ministerial responsibilities for countering disinformation [SS/8, INQ000102807]. While this strategy was a pan-government effort, the DCMS Secretary of State, who at the time was Jeremy Wright KC, was tasked with leading on overall counter disinformation policy:

"The Culture Secretary will formally lead on HMG's overall counter-disinformation policy in order to provide a single spokesperson to set out the Government's position and coordinate the delivery of the disinformation strategy. This role includes setting the direction, focus and principles of domestic policy; leading our engagement with social media companies and the media; working with partners to further the aims of the strategy and representing and promoting domestic activity amongst our international partners and the public. DCMS should consider the wider problem of online manipulation and will need to work closely with other departments in their respective policy areas, commissioning expert advice from them when necessary. In designating this responsibility, I hope this will facilitate a unified areas approach that aligns a range of cross-government activity."

- 1.17. Reflecting the direction from Downing Street, DCMS formed the CDC bringing together other key departments named at paragraph 1.12 above. The CDC was a cross-government team which was led by DCMS, working with the other named departments, and was designed to be stood up in specific circumstances. The CDC was not envisaged to be a permanent team and would be stood up, i.e operate, when there was heightened risk of significant disinformation being disseminated to cause harm to the UK, such as an election or other event. The CDC was the first formal structure designed to operationally manage disinformation impacting the UK. The structure was trialled during the European Parliamentary elections in April 2019 and stood up for the 2019 General Election, which took place on 12 December 2019.
- 1.18. DCMS subsequently worked with those key departments (at paragraph 1.12) to ensure that disinformation risks were accurately reflected in the National Security Risk

Assessment in 2019 and 2020². Further to this work, disinformation was included as a risk in the public National Risk Register for the first time in 2020 [SS/9, INQ000055874]

- 1.19. DCMS stood up the CDC again on 5 March 2020 in response to the acute mis- and disinformation risks emerging from the Covid-19 pandemic. The CDC drew on a range of cross-government teams, bringing together relevant expertise from CO, HO and FCDO. Where the CDC's work on disinformation included examples which could potentially be state sponsored disinformation it also engaged with the UK Intelligence Community, where required. At its peak the CDC as a whole, including staff from the other key departments referred to above, was formed of up to 50 staff. However, this figure is an estimate as the CDC was flexible in nature, with DCMS and other departments pulling on their wider resources (which may not have been solely focused on mis- and disinformation) as needed in order to reach common objectives. DCMS can only be certain in its figures for its own staff. In DCMS, core staffing levels within the CDC varied between 6-10 FTE. Additional staff (surge capacity) were brought in wherever needed, including for the pandemic response, when the DCMS staff in the CDC reached around 25 FTE at its peak. During the busiest period for the CDC (April-June 2020), it was operational seven days a week, with extended operating hours, resulting in DCMS core and surge staff working in a shift pattern.
- 1.20. Over the course of the pandemic response in 2020, the government moved away from having a temporary structure which was comprised of staff from various departments and the CDC evolved into the Counter Disinformation Unit (CDU), a permanent DCMS (subsequently DSIT) team. This did not mean that cross-government cooperation ceased: the CDU continued to work closely with colleagues from across government on a number of issues. For example, CDU staff were involved in the Defending Democracy Taskforce, which is an enduring joint CO and HO initiative. The CDU was different in makeup and intent from the CDC, the latter was a temporary virtual cross-government structure of which the DCMS disinformation team was a part, whereas the CDU was a permanent team based within a single department which collaborated with other departments cross-government as needed and determined by the content in question. As the government wound down its work on Covid-19, so too did the CDC and it transitioned to the smaller, permanent CDU. This coincided with the gradual ramp up of

² The National Security Risk Assessment (NSRA) is the main tool for assessing the most serious civil contingencies risks facing the UK. The NSRA assesses, compares and prioritises the top national level risks facing the UK, focusing on both likelihood of the risk occurring and the impact it would have, were it to happen. The NSRA is an internal government document, with the process run and owned by CO. A public version - the National Risk Register - is published after each refresh of the NSRA.

government focus on Russian activity, in the build up to its invasion of Ukraine, and then the significant increase in work to respond to the invasion and the information threats that this posed.

- 1.21. In the relevant period, the CDU worked with other government departments, serving as the government's lead for countering disinformation targeting domestic audiences. Staffing requirements were regularly reviewed to ensure appropriate levels of resourcing, including surge capacity as needed.

CDU general ways of working and oversight

Ministerial oversight

- 1.22. The CDU, as part of the wider Security and Online Harms directorate within DSIT (and formerly DCMS) was overseen by and was accountable to its departmental ministers, as well as facing scrutiny from relevant parliamentary committees and parliamentarians submitting questions to the department. The CDU, like any team in a government department, complied with all applicable legal obligations including General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). For example, both DCMS and DSIT are answerable to the Information Commissioner's Office in the normal way. The CDU itself was not overseen by a specific regulator.
- 1.23. Officials regularly briefed and advised departmental ministers on the work of the CDU and any emerging mis- or disinformation trends. Departmental ministers reviewed the position and decided the areas on which the CDU should focus its efforts. Those areas were ones where there was content, or the potential for content, targeted at UK audiences which posed a risk of harm to:
- a) public health
 - b) public safety
 - c) national security
- 1.24. Where harm fell outside these three specific categories that was outside of the CDU's remit and did not form part of its monitoring work. Harm to the government's political agenda would not have been part of the CDU's remit. There may have been circumstances where there would be some overlap between the three areas of focus above and areas of political interest. However, the CDU focused solely on potentially harmful mis and disinformation narratives which fell within those three specific areas; its focus was not on social media posts or commentary which was critical of government

policy. The civil servants working within the CDU were also bound by the Civil Service Code, which requires civil servants to be politically neutral.

- 1.25. In addition processes were actively implemented to ensure that the CDU remained politically neutral and free from political interference when deciding, for example, whether a social media post within one of the three categories of harm and which should be referred to a platform, including an explicit ban on CDU staff referring content which had been posted by parliamentarians or journalists. This was designed to avoid capturing genuine political debate and is evidenced by the compliance policy referred to in paragraph 1.31 below.
- 1.26. Furthermore, when deciding whether to refer a piece of content to a platform, CDU staff would use the terms of service implemented by the individual platforms to decide whether it appeared a violation of those terms had taken place. If it appeared that those terms of service had not been breached, the content would not be referred,
- 1.27. The experience of the CDU team during the pandemic was that as the risk posed by a particular situation increased, so too would the frequency and volume of reporting that the CDU produced and, as such, the ministerial involvement and oversight, referred to in paragraph 1.23 above, in those processes. From April 2020 to February 2022, the CDU provided weekly updates to ministers in line with their desire to ensure that all opportunities to limit the risks of harm to UK audiences posed by disinformation during the pandemic were being adequately actioned with social media companies [SS/10, INQ000361175].

Overall purpose of the CDU and legal framework

- 1.28. The aim of the CDU was to reduce the potential impact of mis- and disinformation on the UK's democracy, society, and economic and national security interests in line with the UK's democratic values.
- 1.29. Ministers established the CDU so that the government could understand mis- and disinformation narrative trends online which have the potential to cause harm to UK audiences. This helped the government assess the potential risks and threats to the public and the UK's institutions. The areas on which the CDU focused, such as Covid-19 vaccines and the conflict in Ukraine, are agreed with ministers.
- 1.30. The CDU took active steps to operate in full compliance with all applicable legislation including, but not limited to: i) the Human Rights Act 1998, which incorporates the rights contained in the European Convention on Human Rights; ii) data protection legislation,

including the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the UK Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA); as well as iii) ensuring its work did not amount to surveillance as described in the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 (RIPA).

- 1.31. In order to comply with the CDU's legal obligations staff were aware of the applicable legislation and the consequences of failure to comply with any applicable legislation i.e. enforcement or other action, such as legal proceedings, being taken against DSIT, and previously DCMS. Additionally, the CDU had a series of processes and checks in place to ensure that legislation was complied with. For example, staff had to be satisfied that all data monitoring and analysis which they conducted was lawful, necessary and proportionate, and that they had the appropriate internal legal advice and senior approvals. This approach was codified in the CDU's compliance policy **[SS/11, INQ000361185]**. As part of its evolution into a permanent team, the CDU began the process of codifying the existing processes and policy into a single compliance policy in Autumn 2021, working with both external legal advisors and Government Legal Department. This policy was iterated over 2022 and the wording was finalised in March 2023. This version was circulated to all CDU staff on 4 April 2023. It was regularly reviewed and amended where needed and all new joiners were required to familiarise themselves with the content as part of their induction.
- 1.32. To understand the trends and activity in those agreed areas referred to in paragraph 1.22 above, the CDU, or its external contractor, carried out searches of open, online public spaces, predominantly across the major social media platforms, using key words and terms which were related to the three areas of focus referred to above in paragraph 1.23 and were further refined based on the most relevant risks at the time. Where, for example, the CDU used in-house tools to carry out searches, the key words and terms determined which data sources would be identified and reviewed, i.e. search results would only contain social media posts which contained those key words and terms. In order to remain within the scope agreed by ministers and its legal obligations, the CDU only used open source information i.e. information which is freely available and in the public domain. This focused approach means that the CDU did not seek out, nor aim to respond to, all incidents of mis- and disinformation. Its sole focus was on trends and narratives which appear online and it did not therefore carry out searches of individuals.
- 1.33. When the CDU monitored mis- and disinformation trends and narratives, sometimes personal data belonging to an individual, such as a social media user handle, was collected as a by-product of fulfilling its role. Where such data had been collected, the CDU anonymised it wherever possible. However, there are circumstances where it was

not possible to anonymise all personal data. For example, where a piece of content was harmful and in breach of a platform's terms of service, it was necessary to retain a link to the post, which could contain personal data such as the author's name or social media handle to facilitate a referral to the social media platform on which the content had been posted. Another example would be where the post contained disinformation about a third party, which was harmful and in breach of a platform's terms of service. In this circumstance the third party's details would be retained, again so that the content could be referred to the relevant platform if necessary.

- 1.34. The CDU published a privacy notice on Gov.uk which set out the legal basis on which the CDU handled any such personal data to comply with GDPR and DPA 2018 **[SS/12, INQ000361198]**. The CDU's policy was to keep such personal information for no longer than was necessary and in any event for no longer than two years. However, due to the need to preserve evidence for the Inquiry, it has been necessary to retain some personal data which would have normally been deleted. This will be retained until the Covid-19 Records Preservation and Retention Order has been lifted. It is anticipated that the Covid-19 Inquiry will continue until at least 2027 and therefore it is expected that the Order will not be lifted before then.
- 1.35. The CDU was committed to protecting freedom of expression in line with the UK's democratic values and did not seek to limit or impact political debate or opinion. This was not, and never had been, its role. The CDU continually developed and implemented solutions to the challenges of mis- and disinformation that were consistent with our principles and values, protecting freedom of expression and promoting a free, open and secure internet.
- 1.36. The CDU compliance policy contained specific measures which dealt with the issue of freedom of expression. For example, the policy stated that the CDU respects freedom of expression and did not seek to capture genuine political debate. For this reason, in accordance with the policy, the CDU did not escalate any online content to social media platforms which came from a parliamentarian or other elected official (of any party), journalist or established news outlet.
- 1.37. In order to ensure this right was protected, staff working in the CDU were provided with escalations guidance and principles **[SS/13, INQ000361184]**. These set out how to identify whether information is false or misleading and how to assess whether it was capable of causing harm. In addition, the guidance set out what staff should consider when looking at any potential impact on freedom of expression. In particular, it

recognised the need to balance the right to freedom of expression against the potential harm which the information could cause. In order to ensure that these principles were being applied correctly and to ensure that content was not referred to platforms erroneously, a second, more experienced or more senior, member of the CDU would review every recommendation to refer content to platforms. That member of staff would ensure that the escalations guidelines had been applied correctly and that it was appropriate for the content to be referred. Where a case was complex, for example where the question of whether a platform's terms of service had been violated was not straightforward or considered to be a borderline one, that decision would be reviewed by someone at SCS level.

Working with other government departments

- 1.38. The CDU (and the CDC before it) worked with a range of partners including other government departments (for example the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and the Home Office), social media platforms, academia, civil society and external monitoring partners (who are referred to in more detail at paragraphs 1.48 to 1.52 below) to produce a comprehensive picture of the mis- and disinformation landscape for government, including the identification of harmful content which may then be flagged to social media platforms. This meant that the CDU's role within government was one of information gathering and understanding the information landscape within its agreed remit and priorities (as described at paragraph 1.22). It then collated and shared its findings with other government departments, so that they were aware of instances of mis- and disinformation in their policy areas and could make decisions about the public messaging required to tackle mis- and disinformation. It was for that department to decide whether it was necessary to take steps to counter that content, and not the CDU.
- 1.39. For example, throughout 2019, the CDC worked directly with the CO National Security Communications Team (NSCT) which ran the 'Don't Feed the Beast' campaign. This was a public campaign which intended to build resilience to mis- and disinformation among UK domestic audiences. The campaign created the 'SHARE checklist' [SS/14, INQ000361203], which provided the public with five easy steps to identify false content, encouraging users to stop and think before they share content online [SS/15, INQ000361170]. It was aimed at 18-34 year olds and encouraged them to think critically about information before sharing online, running in two waves in Autumn 2019 and Spring/Summer 2020.

Rapid Response Unit

- 1.40. The Rapid Response Unit (RRU) was created in early 2018 as a central team in the Government Communications Service in the CO. As it was based in the CO, it was completely separate to DCMS. The RRU shared a daily media summary with departments across government, including DCMS, using information taken from publicly available sources, such as TV and radio news bulletins and press articles. The purpose of the briefings was to keep teams across government updated on what was being said in the media on key topics. Neither the RRU nor its briefings were focused on mis- or disinformation.
- 1.41. The RRU was one of a number of teams across government who were involved in discussions around the early cross-government structure, as set out in paragraphs 1.11-1.16. Although its remit was not focused on mis- or disinformation, the RRU did occasionally identify examples of misleading posts gaining traction on public social media platforms. Where RRU identified such content, this was shared with the CDC (and later the CDU) and other teams to enhance understanding of online narratives. Neither the CDC nor the CDU were involved in determining or shaping the scope of RRU reporting, as the RRU was not based within DCMS. The RRU's role was limited to sharing information across government, therefore engagement with platforms did not form part of its remit. The RRU was disbanded in August 2022.

Working with social media platforms

- 1.42. The CDU worked with social media platforms (predominantly Meta (formerly known as Facebook), X (formerly known as Twitter), Google, YouTube and TikTok) to understand their terms of service, encourage their consistent application and share insights into how narratives and trends were developing in the information space. Sometimes the CDU also acted as the liaison between other government departments and social media platforms to encourage authoritative sources to be actively promoted on their sites, for example, as part of public campaigns such as those described in paragraph 1.39 above.
- 1.43. Where developments in technology or harmful behaviours from particular groups (e.g. malign states or state-linked activity) emerged that platforms' terms of service were not immediately designed to counter, the CDU worked with platforms to encourage these to be developed and/or for other measures, such as promoting authentic content, to be deployed. The strong relationships developed with the major social media platforms during the pandemic enabled the CDU to respond more quickly and effectively to acute

disinformation risks both during the pandemic and subsequently. In order to illustrate this, I have set out two examples below.

- 1.44. The first example took place in early 2020 when disinformation narratives linking 5G and Covid-19 were amplified widely online. This resulted in real-world damage to mobile phone cell towers. The CDC worked closely with social media platforms to ensure their policies regarding this content were updated in light of this narrative. A dedicated Gov.uk page was created, linking to the World Health Organization (WHO) and a fact-checking organisation's content on the narrative **[SS/16, INQ000361200]**. A link to this page was then served up from X (formerly known as Twitter) under a 'know the facts' header when users searched for 5G and covid/coronavirus within the platform. This represented a significant piece of work for the CDC working with the DCMS communications team, which was requested and closely monitored by ministers who were concerned that damage to the telecommunications network could cause harm to the public, e.g. people being unable to contact the emergency services.
- 1.45. The second example is from March 2022 when the Russian Embassy to the UK tweeted that reported casualties following the Russian attack on a maternity hospital in Mariupol were fake. The Russian Embassy alleged that images of injured pregnant women had been staged using actors. After informing ministers of the situation, the CDU flagged the tweet to X (formerly known as Twitter) for breaching terms of service on content that denies mass casualty events and alleges that victims are 'actors' and it was removed. Following ministerial steers, the CDU worked across government to identify a growing body of content via Russian Embassy accounts on major social media platforms which violated terms of service but which might not immediately have been picked up by existing search functions across platforms themselves owing to the new context and increased content being generated.
- 1.46. If content was identified which had the potential to cause harm under one of the categories highlighted in paragraph 1.22 and appeared to violate a platform's terms of service, the CDU could notify the relevant platform. The CDU had what is known as 'trusted flagger' status (an individual or entity, including civil society groups or academics, considered by a hosting service provider to have particular expertise and responsibilities for the purposes of tackling harmful content online) with the major platforms. This means that the CDU was swiftly able to highlight any potentially harmful content and that the referral was prioritised by those platforms.

- 1.47. Although the CDU had 'trusted flagger' status, it was then up to the platform to decide whether or not to take action against that content, based on their own assessment of the content against their terms of service. The CDU did not have the power to force the platform to remove that, or indeed any, content nor did it have any influence over its decision.

CDU's relationship with third party suppliers

- 1.48. In April 2020 the CDC began to use external suppliers to assist with the monitoring of mis- and disinformation, as a direct consequence of the pandemic. DCMS signed contracts with three external monitoring suppliers as part of the CDC's response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Two of these suppliers, Global Disinformation Index and Digitalis, were selected through direct awards due to reasons of extreme urgency. The direct award process was conducted in line with Procurement Policy Note 01/20: Responding to Covid-19 [SS/17, INQ000361205].
- 1.49. The contract with Global Disinformation Index ran from 23 April 2020 to 22 October 2020. The aim was to assist the CDC to identify disinformation narratives related to Covid-19 and understand how these were spreading on platforms which the CDC did not have any engagement with. The total contract value for this period was £114,274. DCMS did not extend or renew this contract upon its expiry.
- 1.50. The contract with Digitalis was a short-term contract which ran from 4 May to 3 June 2020. The aim of this contract was to provide the CDC with insights on online search terms related to Covid-19. This was so the CDC could understand the extent to which UK audiences were being exposed to mis- and disinformation. The total contract value for this period was £18,900. Again, DCMS did not extend or renew this contract upon its expiry.
- 1.51. In December 2020 the CDC ran an accelerated open procurement exercise. The purpose of the exercise was to identify an external supplier who could enhance the CDC's understanding of mis- and disinformation which posed a risk to UK audiences, by monitoring and analysing Covid-19 mis- and disinformation online. The Logically Ltd (**Logically**) was chosen to provide this service via the procurement exercise. The parties entered into a contract for the period 1 January - 31 March 2021. This was extended twice, in line with the agreed contractual terms, to cover the period 1 April - 30 June and 1 July - 31 August 2021 while a further tendering process was underway. The total value of this contract was £454,400.

- 1.52. Logically was successful in two subsequent open procurement exercises. One was for the period 1 September 2021 - 30 June 2022 at a total value of £691,200. The other was a contract covering the period 1 July 2022 - 31 March 2023, which was subsequently extended until 31 August 2023, at a total value of £783,055. This contract was not renewed or extended when it came to an end and DCMS subsequently entered into a new contract with a different supplier.
- 1.53. During those contracts Logically used proprietary open-source tools and AI technology to provide monitoring of online mis- and disinformation narratives. The compliance policy described at paragraphs 1.31 and the policies and practices which pre-date it are reflected in the contractual obligations which DCMS required of such suppliers. Therefore, both DCMS and Logically were required to take all steps to minimise the collection of any personal data and anonymise where possible any unavoidably collected personal data. Furthermore, the contractual obligations prevented Logically from monitoring individuals. The monitoring from Logically provided CDU analysts with insights needed to identify and assess harmful content online, for example content which appeared online following the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

CDC and CDU operational response to Covid-19 mis- and disinformation

Pre-pandemic work on vaccine misinformation

- 1.54. During the first half of 2019, at the request of DHSC and in response to their concerns about the link between falsehoods online and a broad decline in vaccination uptake, working-level discussions were held with DCMS policy officials to discuss DCMS's approach to mis- and disinformation. The Director General who had responsibility for the CDU at that time would have been Matthew Gould. Following this engagement, DHSC and DCMS began a dialogue around the inclusion of disinformation in the *Online Harms White Paper*, and how anti-vaccine content fitted within that regulatory framework³. DHSC was subsequently invited in the first half of 2019 to join the cross-government counter disinformation working group - an informal group created to forge links between relevant departments and to build a wider counter disinformation community.
- 1.55. Collaboration between DCMS and DHSC in tackling vaccine misinformation was noted in 'England's Vaccine Strategy to 2030: protecting everyone, everywhere against vaccine-preventable disease' which stated: "We will continue to work with social media

³ The Online Harms White Paper sets out the government's plans for a package of measures to keep UK users safe online

companies to agree what joint action is needed for tackling misinformation on vaccination and hold a summit, in partnership with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, to discuss these issues further". We held a series of events with social media companies, explored in more detail at paragraph 1.61-1.63.

CDC operational response to the pandemic

1.56. The CDC was the principal way in which DCMS approached the threat of mis- and disinformation during the pandemic (see the public messaging section for how DCMS also promoted central government messaging). DCMS stood up the CDC on 5 March 2020 in response to the emergence of Covid-19 and its remit was focused on risks to public health, public order or safety, the targeting of minority or vulnerable groups and disinformation targeting the UK's reputation. Its role included the following key areas:

- a) Monitoring and analysis of potentially harmful online narratives, working closely with analytical teams across government and external monitoring partners
- b) Sharing insights into the range of false and misleading narratives identified with other relevant teams across government, including teams in DHSC who led on vaccine related communications campaigns **[SS/18, INQ000361168]**
- c) Engagement with social media platforms on the promotion of mis- and disinformation relating to Covid-19 vaccines in line with platform terms and conditions, and to promote authoritative sources of information. The CDC was given 'trusted flagger' status by X (formerly known as Twitter), YouTube, Meta and TikTok to enable the CDC to swiftly flag content to platforms which was deemed likely to violate their terms of service

1.57. The CDC observed an increasing number of anti-vaccination narratives between March and July 2020. The CDC carried out pre-emptive work to explore measures to address the risk of vaccine hesitancy resulting from false and misleading information ahead of the deployment of a potential Covid-19 vaccine. Advice sent to Ministers in July 2020 **[SS/19, INQ000361167]** identified monitoring and analysis of potentially harmful vaccine-related narratives online; and social media platform engagement as key to help mitigate the impact of vaccine mis- and disinformation.

1.58. As stated in paragraphs 1.48-1.52, the CDC worked with external partners during the pandemic in order to enhance and increase its understanding of vaccine misinformation and disinformation online. This work focused primarily on the mainstream platforms mentioned above and complemented the open-source monitoring conducted by other

analytical teams (such as those in the CO, HO, FCDO and the UK Covid Vaccine Security (UKCVS)). In addition to mainstream platforms, misleading narratives about vaccines also emerged from smaller, fringe platforms, blogs and financially motivated “junk news” websites [SS/20, INQ000361196]. A number of key narrative themes were identified by the CDC in relation to vaccines, such as:

- a) medical misinformation around vaccines which could undermine vaccine confidence, e.g. claims that vaccines genetically modify human DNA or contain harmful, mercury-based chemicals
- b) online narratives falsely connecting Covid-19 and vaccines to 5G technology which could lead to physical violence or abuse
- c) conspiratorial claims which incorporated vaccine mis- and disinformation into pre-existing narratives, e.g. claims that Covid-19 vaccines contained “nanobots” and were intended as a deliberate form of population control
- d) mis- and disinformation targeting minority or vulnerable groups such as claims that a particular ethnic group would be used as “guinea pigs” to test the vaccine

Some of these themes were set out in a paper in September 2020 [SS/18 INQ000361168].

- 1.59. As noted above in paragraph 1.7, the key distinction between misinformation and disinformation is intent. Given the challenge of accurately understanding the intent behind an individual piece of content, the CDC’s approach broadly covered both misinformation and disinformation. In the context of a novel disease and rapidly spreading global pandemic, there was an understandable level of apprehension and thirst for information which was certainly a factor in the spread of misinformation online. As noted above, there was also evidence of financially motivated vaccine disinformation, in addition to state-sponsored disinformation. The latter often focused on denigrating the effectiveness of vaccines produced by Western countries, such as the “disinformation laundromat” campaign originating in Russia which was removed by Meta (formerly known as Facebook) in 2021 [SS/21, INQ000361195]. This consisted of a network of 65 Meta and 243 Instagram accounts which sought to discredit the AstraZeneca and Pfizer/BioNTech Covid-19 vaccines.
- 1.60. From March 2020 to February 2022, the CDC worked closely with a number of teams and departments on understanding and responding to vaccine misinformation and disinformation, including:

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- a) Analytical teams within CO, HO and FCDO to enhance our understanding of vaccine related narratives within the information environment
- b) The UK Covid Vaccine Security (UKCVS) team, created in January 2021, who hosted a working group on Covid-19 mis- and disinformation which CDC attended alongside a number of other departments
- c) DHSC vaccine policy and communications teams with whom CDC shared emerging insights on vaccine narratives to help shape and inform public communications campaigns - this included feeding into work within the vaccine deployment workstream, created in 2020 as part of the joint DHSC/Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) Vaccine Taskforce
- d) Teams focused on national security within CO and HO in relation to state-sponsored disinformation targeting the UK

1.61. As part of CDC efforts to ensure its work on vaccine mis- and disinformation was transparent and understood, joint DCMS/DHSC briefings for parliamentarians were held on 26 November 2020 and 12 January 2021 to explain the work of both departments to tackle anti-vaccination content [SS/22, INQ000361172, SS/23, INQ000361173]. Following the 26 November 2020 roundtable, DCMS and DHSC co-issued a letter to MPs setting out the government's commitment to tackling Covid-19 mis- and disinformation [SS/24 INQ000361171].

1.62. The CDC remit was limited to online mis- and disinformation. As noted above, however, from January 2021 to February 2022 it worked closely with UKCVS whose remit included offline sources e.g. offline distribution of leaflets or posters spreading vaccine disinformation. Where such content was posted online, the CDC may then have taken action e.g. flagging to a social media platform if the content breached its terms of service. Offline sources also served to highlight any emerging harmful narratives which would help inform the CDC's open-source monitoring.

Work with the devolved administrations

1.63. Mis- and disinformation is a devolved policy matter. As such, neither the CDC nor the CDU were in contact with devolved administrations in a formal way, meaning that there were no regular meetings or joint work programmes during the relevant period. There were occasional, ad hoc interactions with the devolved administrations, where updates on work and approaches were shared during the relevant period, such as through the mis- and disinformation analyst working group led by UK Covid Vaccine Security

(UKCVS) with DCMS participation. UKCVS were the overall lead on vaccine security and part of their work focused on barriers to vaccine uptake, including mis/disinformation. These meetings did not explicitly seek to understand how mis- and disinformation on Covid-19 vaccines differed across England and the devolved administrations. These minutes are owned by DHSC. If they are required, DHSC should be approached.

Engagement with social media platforms

- 1.64. The CDC worked with social media platforms to support the introduction of systems and processes that promote authoritative sources of information and to help them identify and counter incorrect claims about Covid-19 vaccines that could endanger people's health, in line with platform terms and conditions or to mitigate particular gaps in terms of service that evolving content exposed. This was in addition to the work which DHSC did with platforms on what that information should look like. Platforms acted on a case-by-case basis with action taken ranging from labelling, downranking or demonetising content to removal of posts where there was a serious risk of harm. For example, when content referred to Covid-19 and vaccinations, some platforms introduced a prompt signposting users to official Gov.uk information.
- 1.65. While engaging with social media platforms about specific content was not the primary aim of the CDC, insofar as it was necessary to do so, the CDC used its 'trusted flagger' status with X (formerly known as Twitter), YouTube, Meta (formerly known as Facebook) and TikTok to flag harmful content including vaccine mis-and disinformation content that:
- a) posed a demonstrable risk to public health and safety
 - b) was assessed as in breach of the platform's terms of service
- 1.66. On 3 November 2020, the DCMS Secretary of State hosted a joint roundtable with the DHSC Secretary of State [SS/25 INQ000361169, SS/26 INQ000361189] and invited major social media platforms, civil society and health experts to address the specific issue of harmful and misleading narratives, particularly around Covid-19 vaccines. Social media companies agreed to continue to work with public health bodies to ensure that authoritative messages about vaccine safety reached as many people as possible, to commit to swifter responses to flagged content and to commit to the principle that no user or company should directly profit from Covid-19 vaccine mis- and disinformation.

Counter-Disinformation Policy Forum

1.67. At the agreement of the joint roundtable (as detailed in paragraph 1.63), DCMS established the Counter-Disinformation Policy Forum. This brought together representatives from the social media companies, academics, fact-checkers and researchers with the aim to improve understanding of the information environment; develop and improve the responses to mis- and disinformation; and further explore future approaches and policy recommendations. A copy of the forum's terms of reference are attached at [SS/27, INQ000361181]. The Counter-Disinformation Policy Forum met five times from 2 December 2020 to 10 June 2021 to discuss shared approaches to countering Covid-19 mis- and disinformation, with a particular focus on anti-vaccination narratives.

1.68. In the context of the pandemic, the Counter-Disinformation Policy Forum demonstrated the value of a whole-of-society approach to mis- and disinformation, facilitating the sharing of trends and research updates relating to Covid-19 and vaccines between platforms, civil society, academia and government. Stakeholder engagement following the conclusion of the forum demonstrated that the early sharing of research was more efficient, inspired follow-up research and helped inform longer-term understanding of disinformation ecosystems and response effects. Several academics reshaped aspects of their current projects based on presentations from other members.

Action taken by social media platforms

1.69. As set out in paragraphs 1.64-1.66, the CDC engaged regularly with social media platforms during this period to encourage them to implement adequate steps to respond to the threat posed by Covid-19 mis- and disinformation. In response, many implemented policies and procedures to counter the spread of harmful and misleading narratives related to Covid-19 vaccines. These included:

- a) Meta (formerly known as Facebook) announcing in December 2020 that they would remove content featuring harmful, false or misleading narratives about Covid-19 vaccinations where it had been debunked by health experts, as well as directing users to authoritative sources such as the NHS website. Meta also displayed warnings on Facebook on more than 190 million pieces of Covid-19 -related content that its fact-checking partners rated as false, partly false, altered or missing context. In September 2021, Meta reported that it had removed more than 20 million pieces of false Covid-19 and vaccine content

- b) X (formerly known as Twitter) announcing in December 2020 that they would remove tweets making false or misleading claims about Covid-19 vaccinations. In December 2021, X reported that it had removed over 65,000 pieces of content and suspended over 3,000 accounts globally for violations of its Covid-19 guidance
- c) YouTube introducing information panels on its videos containing links to accurate information about Covid-19, including from the NHS, and banning content that contradicted expert consensus from health authorities such as the NHS or WHO. In September 2021, YouTube reported that it had removed over 130,000 videos for violating its Covid-19 vaccine policies
- d) TikTok prohibiting content which was inaccurate or false and which caused harm to individuals, the platform's community or the larger public. From April to June 2021, TikTok removed 26,000 videos for Covid-19 mis- and disinformation. TikTok also introduced a Covid-19 Information Hub where its users could find answers to questions about the virus and vaccines from authoritative sources which was viewed 921 million times globally between April and June 2021

1.70. Where the CDC assessed content as violating platform terms of service but not engaging the explicit blanket ban set out at para 1.25, this was flagged to the relevant platform who then decided on the appropriate response, in line with the policies outlined above at paragraphs 1.46-1.47. This work helped to alert platforms to activity where enforcement of their own policies needed to be improved. Content flagged by the CDC was vastly outnumbered by the overall volume of content moderated by platforms, as referenced in paragraph 1.69 above. The wider engagement with platforms that the CDC and others undertook during the pandemic was the more significant element of this relationship, ensuring risks from mis- and disinformation were mitigated as far as possible.

1.71. The CDC observed that platforms took a significant number of positive steps to respond to the challenge of mis- and disinformation during the pandemic. Their approach evolved over time to adapt to the changing nature of the mis- and disinformation content on their platforms. During the pandemic, DCMS (through the work of the CDC), and other departments across government, engaged with the platforms at both official and ministerial level to encourage platforms to take a number of steps, including to:

- a) continue to develop their technological capabilities for detecting and removing disinformation as well as other harmful content

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- b) ensure that their users were fully informed of the risks of mis- and disinformation on their platforms and the steps they could take to protect themselves
- c) provide greater transparency on the actions that platforms were taking to tackle this kind of content, including improving access for researchers to better understand the scale, scope and impact of mis- and disinformation

1.72. There was no regulatory regime in operation during the pandemic which governed online mis- and disinformation on social media platforms. It was an area that required significant collaboration between government and social media platforms, including negotiation with individual platforms about their specific approach to similar circumstances. The Online Safety Act 2023 (“the Act”) introduces duties on social media platforms to address certain kinds of mis- and disinformation online.

1.73. Insights from the CDC’s monitoring and analysis of mis- and disinformation narratives were shared with relevant teams across government, including with communications teams working in DHSC to help inform and shape any reactive or proactive public health communications interventions.

Current ways of working

1.74. I understand that the remit of the CDU changed in October 2023 and that it is now called the National Security and Online Information Team (**NSOIT**) to better reflect its National Security remit. This will be explained in more detail in the statement of Emran Mian of DSIT. I understand that iterations of the enduring compliance policies and procedures set out in the legal framework section above (from paragraph 1.28 onwards) remain in place, as is confirmed in Emran Mian’s witness evidence.

Section 2: Public communications in DCMS

2.1. This section of the statement focuses on the wider role of DCMS as a whole, rather than the work of the CDU. Where something in this section is CDU specific, this will be made clear.

Public messaging

2.2. During the pandemic, DHSC retained overall responsibility for the deployment and communication of the vaccination programme. The CO led the cross-government team responsible for all Covid-19 marketing and communications. DCMS helped coordinate efforts across government to fight misinformation about Covid-19 vaccines and promote DHSC’s messaging.

- 2.3. DCMS's remit during the pandemic was not to lead on public messaging in relation to the government's Covid-19 response as DHSC was best placed to do so. DCMS also did not provide advice or briefings to ministers or other government departments on how to identify causes of vaccine hesitancy or influence public perception on particular issues relating to Covid-19 or the vaccine rollout.
- 2.4. In its role to fight mis- and disinformation during the pandemic, the DCMS communications team worked closely with Downing Street, CO, Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), DHSC, NHS England (NHSE) and Public Health England (PHE) to ensure that central government Covid-19 messaging was included in DCMS communications issued across press and digital channels **[SS/28 INQ000361174]**. The process map can be seen at **[SS/29 INQ000361166]**. Insights from the CDU on vaccine mis- and disinformation narratives were also shared with communications teams across government through weekly reporting and CDU attendance at cross-government strategic communications meetings.
- 2.5. Through press releases, social media, briefings to journalists, as well as ministerial op-eds, broadcast interviews and speeches, the DCMS communications team sought to publicise the work of the department to build the public's resilience to Covid-19 mis- and disinformation and promote authoritative sources of information. This was part of the wider public information campaign by the government to provide people with facts and advice about the vaccine programme.
- 2.6. Throughout the pandemic, the DCMS communications team issued proactive communications to the media on efforts by DCMS ministers to increase collaboration with tech companies in order to tackle the spread of Covid-19 disinformation. For example, on 30 March 2020 an op-ed was placed in The Telegraph from the then Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden warning that mis- and disinformation about Covid-19 on social media could cost lives and explaining the work of the government's Rapid Response Unit to rebut and remove false claims encouraging people to ignore professional health advice **[SS/30, INQ000361209]**. Furthermore, on 8 April 2020 the DCMS communications team verbally briefed news media regarding Oliver Dowden meeting with Meta (formerly known as Facebook), X (formerly known as Twitter), Google and Reddit in which they agreed to intensify collaboration on addressing issues of disinformation and fake news. In November 2020, the team publicised to the media the agreements the DCMS and DHSC made with social media companies (see paragraph 1.63).

- 2.7. For the period it had responsibility for mis- and disinformation and digital policy, up until 7 February 2023, the DCMS communications team worked alongside the CO to increase individuals' online resilience to dis- and misinformation. Government departments are empowered to tackle mis- and disinformation relating to their policy areas through the CO's RESIST toolkit **[SS/31, INQ000361188]**.
- 2.8. On 30 March 2020, the DCMS communications team announced that in the fight against mis- and disinformation online, specialist units across government were working at pace to combat false and misleading narratives about Covid-19 **[SS/32, INQ000361187]**. The press notice also announced that the 'Don't Feed The Beast' campaign was due to relaunch the following week.
- 2.9. As referenced at paragraph 1.39, The 'Don't Feed the Beast' campaign sought to increase audience resilience by educating and empowering users who see or inadvertently share false and misleading information. The campaign promotes the 'SHARE checklist', providing the public with five easy steps to identify false information and actions to consider prior to sharing content online.
- 2.10. In April 2020, DCMS published guidance on Covid-19 Online Safety on Gov.uk, which focused on how to keep children and young people safe online and build their ability to spot harmful false narratives online **[SS/33, INQ000361191]**. The then Minister for Digital and Culture Caroline Dinenage hosted a roundtable **[SS/34 INQ000361199, SS/35 INQ000361207]** with children's charities to coincide with the launch of the guidance, with a press release issued to the media about it. In October 2020 DCMS announced the launch of a new internet game, 'Go Viral', developed between DCMS, CO and the University of Cambridge, aimed at helping young people build their resilience to the spread of mis- and disinformation online. Also in April 2020, Oliver Dowden wrote to the top 100 brands to flag that some advertisers were choosing not to advertise on web pages related to Covid-19. The letter identified the potential risk this posed to news publishers at a time when there was a clear public interest in people having access to reliable content on Covid-19 **[SS/36 INQ000361206]**.
- 2.11. Following reports of telecommunications equipment being vandalised as a result of 5G mis- and disinformation, the DCMS communications team made a series of proactive interventions in the national media. This included issuing rebuttals of a link between 5G and the spread of Covid-19 on DCMS social media accounts that was also publicly rebutted in the live daily Downing Street press conference that ran during the height of the pandemic. DCMS communications team arranged a number of TV and radio

interviews for the then Digital Infrastructure Minister Matt Warman on the subject as well as placing op-eds from him in national news outlets. In May 2020, in partnership with X (formerly known as Twitter), DCMS publicly announced an on-service search prompt that directed X users in the UK to a Gov.uk page with credible, factual and verified information in relation to 5G, with public messaging that the government has seen no link between 5G and Covid-19 **[SS/16, INQ000361200]**. DCMS also publicly supported (for example through ministerial quotes in press releases and on social media) communications by organisations such as Google and NewsGuard on their efforts to tackle Covid-19 mis- and disinformation. In August 2020, the DCMS communications team secured media coverage in trade publications of a '5G plain English guide' which the department created for local councils to use in rebutting disinformation or tackling concerns around the health implications of 5G **[SS/37, INQ000361210]**.

- 2.12. DCMS also advised its Secretary of State **[SS/38, INQ000361176]** on how DCMS could respond to increasing concerns in the media that disinformation in relation to the vaccine was circulating amongst specific groups. In March 2021, the CDU commissioned Logically to produce a report on vaccine misinformation and diaspora communities **[SS/39, INQ000361179]**.
- 2.13. DCMS worked with community leaders in target audiences including Black African, Black Caribbean and South Asian communities and the over 55s to produce a digital toolkit **[SS/40, INQ000361177]** to increase audience resilience to mis- and disinformation. The toolkit was tailored for these audiences and contained a set of assets fronted by trusted community members to be shared on WhatsApp, Instagram, Meta (formerly known as Facebook), and X (formerly known as Twitter). The toolkit was based on the principles of DCMS's 'SHARE checklist' **[SS/14, INQ000361203]**, which aims to increase audience resilience by educating and empowering those who see, inadvertently share and are affected by misinformation online. All communications signposted to the NHS as the most accurate source of information about the vaccine.
- 2.14. The toolkit was shared with community organisations, councils, relevant government departments and NHS hubs to reach target audiences. Organisations pushed assets and key messaging out through their social media channels including X (formerly known as Twitter), Instagram and Meta (formerly known as Facebook) and through community newsletters and daily bulletins and within community forums and webinars.

- 2.15. In addition, working with the National Resilience Hub (within the Cabinet Office), the DCMS communications team developed a social media and stakeholder campaign centred around the toolkit which launched on 11 March 2021 **[SS/41, INQ000361193, SS/42, INQ000361190]** to increase resilience amongst these specific groups. It was believed the mis- and disinformation was being shared on social media and through in-person communication, which is why this communications approach was taken. In line with the RESIST framework, targeted communications via civil society and community leaders performed a crucial role in maintaining a healthy information environment.
- 2.16. The DCMS communications team worked closely with the Local Government Association (LGA), which promoted the toolkit to its members, including via a webinar (460 attendees), its daily newsletter (5,000 recipients) its Chief Executive Bulletin (1,146 subscribers) and CommsNet Bulletin (2,962 subscribers) during the launch period (March-April 2021). The department also worked with local NHS Clinical Commissioning Groups so that the toolkit could be shared across its channels, as well as the Government Communications Service and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (formerly Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG)) Community Champions and numerous local charitable organisations to promote and share messaging. DCMS monitored the reach of the social media toolkit and at the last evaluated point it had had a reach of over 7 million people.
- 2.17. To ensure all DCMS social media content which channelled central government Covid-19 messaging was accessible and inclusive, the department made use of the software available at the time. This included using alternative text on images and closed caption subtitling on videos and graphics when required, to describe what was on screen.
- 2.18. DCMS did not have a role in formally analysing the success of public messaging relating to Covid-19 vaccines. However, DCMS did use a range of social media monitoring tools available at the time to measure the reach and engagement of public messaging, including native analytics within our main channels (X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Meta (formerly Facebook) and LinkedIn) alongside Google Analytics for content published on Gov.uk. DCMS also used contracted third party software to monitor social media including Pulsar and Newswhip. Press monitoring was done by a third party contractor, Gorkana. The software was used to track mentions of key topics across national and regional print media to monitor and track media coverage of DCMS's work during the pandemic.

2.19. The DCMS communications team did also respond to requests to provide CO and DHSC with access to our network of Arms Length Bodies (ALBs) and partners in the sporting and cultural worlds. We made introductions to these organisations and specific requests for support were made from other government departments to the organisations and talent directly to help amplify messaging to support the public health response. These introductions resulted in fruitful connections between other government departments and DCMS sectors including the gaming industry who carried Covid-19 public health messaging in-game [SS/43, INQ000361194].

Community Champions Scheme

2.20. The Community Champions scheme was a programme led by DLUHC and Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) that aimed to increase numbers of community champions that worked with groups that were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. They were also known as 'health champions' and were community members who volunteered to promote health and wellbeing or improve conditions in their local community, including raising awareness of the Covid-19 vaccination programme. DCMS, by way of their communications team, attended cross-government meetings that discussed the management of the Community Champions programme, offering advice and insights about the voluntary, community, and social enterprise (VCSE) sector where appropriate and shared toolkit materials with 'Check Before You Share' messaging for them to disseminate. The most significant action for DCMS, as the lead department for civil society, was to promote the programme to VCSE stakeholders who had expertise in, or direct delivery of, Community Champions type activity and were representing those who were disproportionately impacted by Covid-19 [SS/44 INQ000361178]. DCMS did this by convening and chairing a meeting with VCSE stakeholders at which DLUHC presented an overview of the programme. This included promoting the NHS Future Collaboration workspace.

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:



Date: 02 August 2024