

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

THE UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE CABINET OFFICE
FOR MODULE 9 (ECONOMIC RESPONSE)

Introduction

1. The Cabinet Office welcomes the opportunity to provide this opening statement for Module 9. The Cabinet Office, alongside the witnesses to whom it is providing support, would like to emphasise its continued commitment to assisting the Inquiry in its important work.
2. The Cabinet Office has disclosed extensive material to support the Inquiry's investigations in this module. The department has also provided two extensive corporate witness statements. The first, signed by Simon Ridley (a senior official in the COVID-19 Taskforce and now Second Permanent Secretary in the Home Office), gives a detailed summary of the role and structures of the department as relevant to Module 9 and how these evolved over the relevant period. The second, signed by Mark Cheeseman, Chief Executive of the Public Sector Fraud Authority (PSFA), sets out the structures for managing fraud and error risks faced by government and the changes made to improve performance in these areas during the course of the pandemic and since.
3. In addition to these corporate witness statements, the department has provided assistance to six individual witnesses who have provided detailed statements to the Inquiry in this module. Three witnesses supported by the Cabinet Office will provide oral evidence at the hearings: Robert Harrison, former Director General for Analysis in the COVID-19 Taskforce; Mark Cheeseman; and, Ben Warner, former Special Adviser, No.10.
4. This brief opening statement aims to help the Inquiry by explaining the Cabinet Office's role and its structures, and addressing issues relating to data analysis, anti-fraud measures, and consideration of the impacts on vulnerable groups.

5. The Cabinet Office has proactively made improvements, including by placing its data analysis capabilities on a permanent footing and creating the PSFA to strengthen the Government's response to public sector fraud. The Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill, currently (as of 10 November 2025) before Parliament, will give the PSFA new powers to investigate suspected fraud against public authorities, and will increase the time limit for bringing civil claims in COVID-19 related fraud. The Cabinet Office will continue to consider and reflect on the evidence as it emerges in this module, and looks forward to the Inquiry's recommendations in due course.

The role of the Cabinet Office

6. As the Inquiry knows from evidence in earlier modules, the Cabinet Office has a unique role at the centre of government. It fulfils a core coordination role – supporting and advising the Prime Minister and Cabinet Office ministers, and facilitating collective decision-making across government (on which further detail is provided in the Cabinet Manual¹). The Cabinet Office monitors the delivery priorities of other departments, seeking to ensure they remain on track, and brokers decisions between departments, which in turn have relationships with organisations in their respective sectors. Simon Ridley's corporate witness statement on behalf of the Cabinet Office sets out the range of roles it carried out during the pandemic, which included setting the overall strategic direction for the Government's response, in co-ordination with departments.
7. HM Treasury is the UK Government's economic and finance ministry. During the pandemic, HM Treasury led and was responsible for the policy work in relation to economic interventions and worked with other departments on the delivery of schemes to support businesses and individuals. As is usual practice, they were typically discussed and agreed bilaterally between the Chancellor and the Prime Minister.

Relevant Cabinet Office structures

8. The Inquiry heard in Module 2 about the Cabinet Office's role in establishing governance structures to facilitate collective decision-making during the pandemic – COBR, the Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIGs), and the COVID Strategy (COVID-S) and COVID Operations (COVID-O) committees. The Cabinet Office provided a detailed account of the evolution in structures in Simon Case's corporate

¹ INQ000086861

witness statement for Module 2.² While the economic interventions in response to the pandemic were discussed in these structures, they were not the primary forums for decision-making in relation to economic interventions.

- a. Until mid-March 2020, collective ministerial decisions about the response, as distinct from those decisions within the responsibility of a single department, were taken at ministerial COBR meetings. COBR was supported by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS), which also frequently convened cross-government officials meetings. As the pace and scale of the crisis increased, officials from the Economic and Domestic Secretariat (EDS) helped prepare material for COBR meetings to consider when and how to implement measures to mitigate the spread of the disease, given their wide social and economic impacts. The Chancellor and his Treasury officials developed a package of interventions that would be targeted at both businesses and individuals, to seek to mitigate the economic impact of the virus. This package was developed in consultation with, and agreed by, the Prime Minister, who was supported by officials in No.10 and the wider Cabinet Office.
- b. From mid-March to the end of May 2020, the overall central response to the pandemic was coordinated from within the Cabinet Office through the four Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIGs). The most relevant of the MIGs to Module 9 was the Economic and Business Response Ministerial Implementation Group (EBRIG), chaired by the Chancellor and supported by a Cabinet Office senior secretary. The EBRIG advised on business-related regional, sectoral and corporate-level issues relating to the pandemic but did not consider the development of new macro, fiscal or monetary policy measures – a matter reserved for HM Treasury. As is usual for ministerial meetings, they were typically preceded by an officials meeting (EBRIG (O)) chaired by a senior Cabinet Office official.
- c. At the end of May 2020 the four MIGs were stood down and the COVID-S and COVID-O committees were established. These new committees were supported by a new unit, the COVID-19 Taskforce, based in the Cabinet Office. The Taskforce brought together strategy, analysis and coordination with departments across Whitehall to drive delivery.

² INQ000092893

Consideration of vulnerable groups

9. As the Inquiry has heard in previous modules, consideration of vulnerable groups, and how to mitigate disparities in the impacts of the pandemic, formed part of the Cabinet Office's overall approach to the COVID-19 response, including through the structures described above. This included consideration of how vulnerable groups would potentially be disproportionately affected by restrictive measures and less able to access those measures designed to relieve burdens or mitigate harms. The COVID-19 Taskforce Disproportionately Impacted Groups (DIG) Sub-group, for example, was set up to examine, consider, and advise upon the impact of various interventions (including economic interventions) on vulnerable groups. The Equality Hub provided weekly updates to the Taskforce assessing both the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 across different groups.

Data and analysis

10. A key part of the Cabinet Office's role in facilitating decision-making during the pandemic – and helping Ministers to balance the impacts of the pandemic on health, the economy and society – was working to ensure that decision-making was supported by relevant data, analysis and expert advice. The Inquiry has heard across all modules about the importance of this work and how it evolved over time. In relation to Module 9, the Cabinet Office's corporate evidence explains how:
 - a. At the start of the relevant period, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat circulated a Commonly Recognised Information Picture (CRIP) from 24 January 2020, followed by a daily cross-department Situation Report (SitRep) from 4 February 2020. The SitRep included information on domestic and international situations and response, the latest scientific advice and communications. The SitRep was shared across government. From mid-March 2020, the SitRep and CRIP were replaced by a COVID-19 Dashboard – initially operated by the Civil Contingencies Secretariat and later by the COVID-19 Taskforce.
 - b. From early June 2020, officials from the Cabinet Office and HM Treasury attended regular economy-focused discussions with the Prime Minister, supported by a dashboard containing key economic indicators. Data for this 'Economy Dashboard' - distinct from the COVID-19 Dashboard - was regularly updated to reflect key changes to the UK economy, with input from

across the Cabinet Office and other departments, coordinated by the Economic and Domestic Secretariat (EDS) from within the Cabinet Office.

- c. From the summer and autumn of 2020, the analytical capacity in the Cabinet Office grew substantially with thematic teams within the COVID-19 Taskforce covering a range of areas, including economy and business. One of the key ways in which this analytical capability came together was through the COVID-19 Dashboard but it also fed into a wide range of other products to provide data and analytical support to the overall response and which informed the strategic direction of the response to the pandemic.

11. Witnesses supported by the Cabinet Office are well placed to assist the Inquiry on the role of data, including the changes that have already been made in the department's approach. For example, in his witness statement for Module 9, Robert Harrison explains work undertaken within the Cabinet Office to put the analytical capacity developed within the department during the response to the pandemic onto a standing footing and the creation of the Joint Data and Analysis Centre (JDAC). In addition, the National Situation Centre was established in 2021. It provides situational awareness for crisis response, bringing together data, analysis and critical expertise.³

Counter Fraud

12. The COVID-19 pandemic changed the nature of the fraud landscape. The central team of the Government Counter Fraud Function (based in the Cabinet Office) worked to advise departments on how to mitigate fraud and error risks, and how to conduct post-event assurance in relation to the economic schemes which they were responsible for administering.⁴

13. Heightened risk of fraud, including fraud associated with the economic schemes and interventions introduced during the pandemic, prompted efforts to strengthen the Government's response to public sector fraud and, in March 2022, the Chancellor announced funding for the creation of the PSFA.

14. The PSFA now acts as the Government's centre of expertise for the management of fraud against the public sector. The PSFA has identified a number of lessons from the management of fraud risk in the pandemic. These have been integrated into the

³ INQ000656298

⁴ Post-event assurance was the checking, post payment, of economic support to help ensure the funds ended up where they were intended to and in line with the policy intent of the scheme.

work plans of the PSFA, and work across government, and are described in the corporate witness statement of Mark Cheeseman.⁵

15. The Government has also appointed a Covid Counter-Fraud Commissioner to provide assurance that everything possible has been done to recover public funds lost to fraud in Covid schemes. In addition, the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Bill is currently (as of 10 November 2025) before Parliament. The Bill will allow the PSFA to investigate suspected fraud against public authorities where there is limited investigatory provision. The Bill will also increase the time limit for bringing civil claims in COVID-19 related fraud from 6 to 12 years, thus giving the PSFA more time to investigate complex cases and apply its new powers retrospectively.

Conclusion

16. In its response to the pandemic the then Government made in its view unprecedented interventions in the economy to support jobs and businesses through the crisis and seek to mitigate its wide-ranging impacts. HM Treasury led the policy work in relation to economic interventions and worked with other departments on the delivery of schemes. The central team of the Government's Counter-Fraud Function worked to advise departments on how to mitigate fraud and error risks, and how to conduct post-payment assurance. More broadly, the Cabinet Office played a central role in the strategic coordination and analytical underpinning of the COVID-19 response.
17. The Cabinet Office looks forward to the evidence in the forthcoming hearings and the Inquiry's report for this module. It is committed to learning lessons about how to protect lives and livelihoods and reduce fraud in future emergencies.

⁵ INQ000657728