

Witness Name: Rt Hon Sir Oliver Dowden KCB CBE MP

Statement No.: 2

Exhibits: [OD/1-OD/104]

Dated: 27 October 2025

## **UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

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### **WITNESS STATEMENT OF RT HON SIR OLIVER DOWDEN KCB CBE MP**

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I, Oliver Dowden, will say as follows:

#### **PART A – ROLE AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

##### **Introduction**

01. I make this statement in response to a Rule 9 request dated 5 September 2025 to address matters of relevance to my roles as the Secretary of State for the Department of Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (“DCMS” or “Department”) during the Relevant Period. This statement has been prepared with the assistance of lawyers at the Government Legal Department. I have previously given evidence to Module 1 of the Inquiry.
02. I would first like to acknowledge that I provide this statement with the caveat that I have limited access to my mailbox from the period in which I served as Secretary of State for DCMS (Secretary of State). I have therefore relied on emails and documents that have been obtained through the use of search words by my legal team. This has meant that I have had to rely, to a greater extent than I would have liked, on the documents provided to me by my legal team and on my independent recollection of events which took place over five years ago.
03. One of the principal means by which I communicated with my Private Office on all issues, and in doing so discharged my ministerial duties, was by receiving submissions under the cover of a box note containing advice from my Private Office and special advisers, and then providing box note readouts in response, both written and oral, and sometimes commissioning follow up meetings or calls. I haven't been provided with all of these box notes and therefore may

not be able to comment on all matters in intricate detail. Nevertheless I am able to respond to all questions in broad terms.

04. Given the volume, scale and rapidity of the crisis, and the elapse of time since then, my recollections are not perfect but I have attempted to give an answer subject to these limitations. The Inquiry is well aware that during this time, the government was operating in full-on crisis mode. I would have discussions regularly throughout the day, particularly with my private office, to whom I would issue instructions to gather information, and they would then feed back to me orally. In all of the meetings I had with my team, including daily morning and afternoon meetings with my private office and a weekly meeting with my Permanent Secretary, we would discuss matters on which I have been asked to comment by the Inquiry. There was a constant flow of information going each way within my team throughout the working week and weekend, which makes it very challenging to recall individual discussions and my statement should be read in this context. That said, I have gone to the greatest effort possible in the circumstances to assist the Inquiry by providing the following information.

#### Brief Career History

05. From 2010 until 2015 I served in Downing Street first as political adviser then as Deputy Chief of Staff. On 8 May 2015, I was elected to the House of Commons as the Conservative MP for Hertsmere, a seat I have held ever since. On 9 January 2018, I was appointed Parliamentary Secretary to the Cabinet Office (Minister for Implementation), serving in this role for 18 months. On 24 July 2019, I was promoted to become Minister for the Cabinet Office and HM Paymaster General, positions which I held until 13 February 2020.
06. On 13 February 2020, I was appointed Secretary of State for DCMS and held that position until 15 September 2021. In September 2021, I was appointed Chairman of the Conservative Party by the Prime Minister and served as Minister without Portfolio, Cabinet Office between 15 September 2021 and June 2022. In June 2022, I resigned from this position and returned to the backbenches. On 25 October 2022, I was appointed as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster by the Prime Minister and concurrently held the positions of Secretary of State in the Cabinet Office from 9 February 2023 and Deputy Prime Minister from 21 April 2023 until the General Election on 5 July 2024.
07. This statement principally concerns my tenure as Secretary of State. The Secretary of State has final responsibility for all policy decisions. Generally, decisions are based on advice from officials and some policy responsibilities are devolved to junior ministers (but these areas will

differ depending on who the Secretary of State is and priorities across government). Operational structures of DCMS are the responsibility of the Permanent Secretary and need to take into account the policy aims of the Secretary of State to ensure the Department can deliver them.

08. During the Relevant Period, I maintained overall strategic responsibility for the Department and Covid was almost always number one priority on which I was focusing. I led on overall strategy, major bailouts and reopening and the PM's high priorities, and I had very regular engagement with my excellent Junior ministerial team. The degree to which I delegated decisions to other ministers or would work with others, such as other colleagues, or officials, such as those in Number 10, would depend on the importance or urgency of the issue from the perspective of its impact on the country, relevant sectors and so on.
09. The pace and flow of work was constant. My typical day would start at around 6:00AM-6:30AM when I would get into my car, read box note papers and make phone calls on the way into my office. Once I arrived, I would have back-to-back meetings all day. I would then typically begin my journey home at around 6:00PM-8:00PM in my car. During the journey, I would make further phone calls. All of these actions were driving the decisions I made during the Relevant Period.
10. Throughout this time, my team and I sought to maximise what I could achieve for the relevant sectors falling within the scope of the Department, including by gathering information and data on the state of health of these sectors and advocating on their behalf, for example in relation to financial support and re-opening.
11. In my various discussions with the Chancellor and with others from Number 10, I was always cognisant of the fact that the government's agreed approach to, which I supported, was horizontal. Namely, we sought to apply the same measures and reliefs to all sectors and individuals in the same way. Ministers collectively agreed that horizontal schemes such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, Business Rates Relief, etc., would be the principal medium for supporting the whole economy. My first priority, therefore, was to ensure HMT's horizontal interventions applied to the sectors for which I was responsible. In this we largely succeeded. Examples include the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, which was widely used by theatres, museums, sports clubs, events, films, heritage sites and charities; 100 per cent business rates relief for retail, hospitality and leisure sectors, which applied to museums, galleries, visitor attractions, theatres and so on; VAT deferrals and reduced rate VAT were used by cultural attractions and tourism related venues; and equally, the Self-Employment

Income Support Scheme and CBILs, whilst not perfect as set out below, were still widely used by DCMS related sectors.

12. Beyond this, HMT was open to evidence that further interventions might be required if there were still groups in need of further support. However, the bar for further interventions was necessarily high. Where I believed further interventions were necessary, I would make the case for these vigorously. For example, we secured several sector specific packages of support, including for culture and for civil society, as well as other measures such as screen insurance schemes, whilst respecting HMT's default approach to horizontal interventions and its duty to represent value for money to taxpayers. It is also worth noting that my view and that of the Chancellor was the best way to achieve the sustainability of sectors covered by DCMS was to re-open them as soon as it was safe to do so. That is why we devoted a lot of time and effort, for example to agreeing the protocols for the safe playing of Premier League football behind closed doors or to film and TV reinsurance. A number of such interventions were world leading.

#### The DCMS Departmental Board

13. DCMS is supported by a Departmental Board (the "Board"), in previous years referred to as the Ministerial Board, which has an advisory rather than a decision-making role. The Board served a useful role during Covid in bringing together ministerial and civil service leaders with senior non-executives from outside of government to provide advice and challenge to DCMS and its ministers on strategic and operational issues. The Board is chaired by the Secretary of State.
14. The Board meets quarterly and I chaired 4 meetings during my tenure as Secretary of State . I exhibit copies of the agendas, minutes, and papers considered at these 4 meetings below:
- a. 20 July 2020 – Agenda [OD/01 - INQ000658535]; Minutes [OD/02 - INQ000658546]; Finance Review Paper [OD/03 - INQ000658536]; Lessons Learned Paper [OD/04 - INQ000658537]
  - b. 2 November 2020 – Agenda [OD/05 - INQ000658544]; Minutes [OD/06 - INQ000658556]; Finance Review [OD/07 - INQ000658547]; Lessons Learned Document [OD/08 - INQ000658548]
  - c. 1 February 2021 – Agenda [OD/09 - INQ000658555]; Minutes [OD/10 - INQ000658560]; Financial Review [OD/11 - INQ000658557]
  - d. 24 May 2021 – Agenda [OD/12 - INQ000658558]; Minutes [OD/13 - INQ000658561]; Review of Financial Performance [OD/14 - INQ000658559]

A meeting was held on 30 April 2020 but I was unable to attend. I believe this was due to a clash with an unplanned Cabinet meeting. There was also a meeting scheduled for 20 July 2021, however, that meeting was cancelled on the day before due to a clash with a meeting between myself, the Permanent Secretary and the Prime Minister [OD/15 - INQ000658562].

15. My role as Chair involved addressing matters relevant to the Department occurring since the last meeting of the Board. This might have included operational changes within the Department such as transitioning to a remote working model, or initiatives implemented by the Department such as the establishment of economic support packages. Additionally, I would typically challenge officials on proposals presented at the meetings, outline the Department's focus and priorities in the short to medium term and thank officials for their hard work.

#### Working Relationship with Various DCMS bodies

16. As the pandemic intensified, my Permanent Secretary and I were in complete agreement that the resources of the Department needed to be flexed and realigned to provide the necessary support to address this. My Permanent Secretary coordinated this work, kept me appraised of development and sought my agreement when necessary.
17. In the day-to-day management of the Covid-19 crisis, I drew principally from advice from my Permanent Secretary, Director Generals and Private Office alongside special advisers. These individuals would draw in expertise from across the bodies outlined below as was appropriate to the circumstances.
18. As I alluded to above, my principal means of engagement were advice notes provided by the relevant teams, usually cleared by a Director, Director General or Permanent Secretary, and then submitted to me in advice notes from Private Office, special advisers and, occasionally, additional notes from the Permanent Secretary. I would then read-out, usually in writing overnight, and sometimes follow up in the daily morning meetings (see below). Advice could either be provided in response to a request from me or because there was a desire from officials for me to be sighted to approve or to provide guidance. Meetings would similarly be coordinated by my Private Office or senior officials who would draw on relevant expertise from DCMS teams, again, either in response to a request from me or to follow up other advice I had received or because of their desire to receive further briefing on an issue. I would likewise receive either written and/or oral briefings for almost all meetings external to the department. Throughout the COVID period I drew heavily on the expertise of all the teams set out below to support me in forming our approach and would meet with officials from these teams a lot.

19. DCMS leads on government policy relating to the voluntary and community sector and volunteering through its Civil Society and Youth (CSY) directorate (this was known as the Office for Civil Society prior to 2021; I refer to the CSY directorate throughout this statement for clarity and consistency).

20. Separately, DCMS's strategy functions in response to the pandemic comprised the Strategy, Policy and Fiscal Events team (SPFE), the Covid-19 Hub and the Economic Response Directorate (ERD). These teams worked together to support the needs of DCMS sectors.

#### *The Civil Society and Youth (CSY) Directorate*

21. The CSY directorate is responsible for policy relating to charities, volunteering, social action, social enterprises, voluntary and community sector organisations and a range of functions including charity law, dormant asset legislation and the local authority statutory duty for youth services.

22. The CSY directorate held regular meetings between CSY officials and civil society stakeholders as well as ministers engaging with stakeholders at an individual and group level. For example, my calls with VCSE leaders on 19 and 31 March which I go into further detail further below. In addition, the CSY directorate newsletter was used to disseminate information and share updates from DCMS and, where appropriate, other government departments. This continued during the pandemic and included public health messaging when relevant. For example, during the pandemic, DCMS would regularly share CO's stakeholder toolkit with DCMS sectors, using our existing engagement and communications channels, for sector stakeholders to further share with communities. These established and effective relationships proved critical during the pandemic, including in DCMS's support of the economic response.

23. The work of the CSY directorate would feed into the advice and submissions I received when relevant. This advice helped inform the decisions I took with respect to the sector, including engagement with HMT regarding the sector, as described above. Information or updates from me could be fed back to the sector via the newsletter other CSY engagement with stakeholders.

24. DCMS also sought to improve its engagement with the voluntary and community sector in relation to the crisis response. The primary mechanism for achieving this was the provision of

start-up funding for the National Emergencies Trust, which was launched in November 2019<sup>1</sup>. The National Emergencies Trust was set up as a charity to coordinate fundraising and distribution of funds in the event of a domestic disaster or emergency, including major terrorist incidents. In the event of such an incident, the National Emergencies Trust collaborates with charities and other bodies to raise and distribute money and support those affected. The National Emergencies Trust went on to launch the Coronavirus Appeal in March 2020. As referenced above the CSY directorate also maintained regular engagement with the voluntary and community sector via a newsletter. This also served as a way for VCSE sector organisations to make contact with DCMS, with many reaching out to request to feature in the newsletter, ask about its content, or begin dialogue with DCMS more broadly.

25. The CSY directorate was quick to recognise the financial strains that the pandemic would place on the voluntary and community sector, from both increased demand for services and reduced income as charity shops closed and fundraising events were cancelled. This impact led the directorate to pivot its attention to the economic support required by the sector. Subsequently, DCMS worked with His Majesty's Treasury (HMT) to make a £750 million package of support available in April 2020, covered in further detail in Part C of this statement.
26. The CSY directorate established the Civil Society Stakeholder Group at the start of the pandemic to provide the department with insight and perspectives from the sector<sup>2</sup>. This stakeholder group had a number of time-limited, focused subgroups that brought together expertise to provide input across a range of issues including funding, finance, young people and inclusion. During the pandemic, CSY directorate also established a volunteering guidance reference group to ensure guidance on safe and effective volunteering drew on expertise as well as the needs of volunteers involving organisations and the communities they serve. As highlighted above, a significant number of staff from within DCMS and from outside government, namely sector experts, were surged to support the delivery of the pandemic response from April 2020. As the pandemic developed, more and more of the time and resources from me, my private offices and other elements of the Department were pulled into the response. But by April 2020, we started establishing more 'business as usual' in handling of it by these reforms.

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<sup>1</sup>While the National Emergencies Trust remains a DCMS stakeholder, the Department has no current financial or contractual relationship with it.

<sup>2</sup>One of eight sectoral working groups established in May 2020 to support and work alongside the Cultural Renewal Taskforce (established to help in getting the country's recreation and leisure sector up and running again following the first national lockdown).

27. DCMS also has a number of frontline policy responsibilities that can be deployed directly in response to a pandemic. Volunteering is one such area, and the civil society sector was impressive in its response, with both voluntary and community organisations and individual citizens showing agility and altruism in providing for the changing needs of their neighbours and communities.

*The Strategy, Policy and Fiscal Events (SPFE) Team*

28. In March 2020, the SPFE team was already set up to deliver the upcoming Spending Review 2020 that was planned for an indicative date of May or June 2020, ahead of the Autumn Budget 2020. The team consisted of a strategic policy branch working on cross-cutting policy, a devolution and union branch and a fiscal events team delivering on the Spending Review.
29. The expertise of SPFE, which had established relationships with HMT and extensive experience in delivering fiscal events, enabled them to efficiently handle additional Covid-19-related responsibilities like delivering additional funding for DCMS sectors. At the start of the pandemic, the SPFE team was the central coordinating team for all Covid-19-related policy and commissions. The SPFE team provided a cross-cutting coordination function - they fed key information to central cross-cutting DCMS teams on the economic impacts of the lockdowns on DCMS sectors, as well as engaging with the design of HMT and cross-government economic support measures [OD/16 - INQ000658543]. Specifically, the SPFE team helped me and my senior team to design, secure and deliver the £1.57 billion Culture Recovery Fund (CRF), including by leading negotiations with Downing Street and HMT, and supported the £750 million Covid-19 fund for frontline charities, which I will discuss in further detail below [OD/17 - INQ000623631; OD/18 - INQ000623615].
30. The work of the SPFE team would be fed back to me via submissions, as described above. This would inform the wider discussions and approach taken with HMT and allowed me to request further information and provide strategic direction.
31. While the configuration of this team did not change during the pandemic, there was a shift in focus to Covid-19-related activity, as well as carrying out the key functions of a fiscal events team [OD/19 - INQ000623607]. At the start of the pandemic, the SPFE team was the central coordinating team for all Covid-19-related policy and commissions. The SPFE team had established relationships with HMT and extensive experience in delivering fiscal events such as Budgets, Spring Statements and Spending Reviews. This expertise enabled them to

efficiently handle additional Covid-19-related responsibilities such as our approach to funding for DCMS sectors.

32. The SPFE team provided a cross-cutting coordination function - they fed key information to central cross-cutting DCMS teams on the economic impacts of the lockdowns on DCMS sectors, as well as engaging with the design of HMT and cross-government economic support measures in line with ministerial steers [OD/16 - INQ000658543]. The SPFE team also led coordination of DCMS ministers' engagement with their sectors on Covid-19, working with Private Offices, the Covid-19 Hub and policy teams to organise a programme of roundtables to gather sectors' needs and share government messaging.

*The Economic Response Directorate (ERD)*

33. The Economic Response Directorate (ERD) was established in DCMS on 23 March 2020 to support the strategic economic response to the pandemic, as the scale of economic considerations grew beyond the scope of the central team and individual sector teams. As is detailed further below, this team was created through the surging of staff in other areas of the Department, as DCMS pivoted to focus on the pandemic response.
34. The Economic Response Directorate (ERD) was established in DCMS on 23 March 2020 as the scale of economic considerations grew. The Department took rapid and agile action to redistribute dedicated resource to areas of pressure. This included standing down or significantly reducing business-as-usual functions (such as in this case the Europe and International Directorate (EUI) because these were surplus to requirements in a pandemic where, e.g. people were unable to travel), and standing up new functions at pace, which involved redeploying 50-60 people at one time. Building on the generalist skillset of DCMS staff made adaptation easier, allowing staff to pivot from international work to domestic crisis work.
35. The ERD was set up to support DCMS policy teams in identifying and addressing the economic challenges faced by our sectors and specific businesses with significant issues and provided a focal point for our response to economic issues. It also sought to engage with pan-economy measures being led by HMT, working to ensure the specific characteristics and needs of DCMS sectors were considered by HMT officials. The ERD led on economic response advice and briefing to ministers within DCMS and acted as a single point of contact concerning the economic challenges faced by DCMS sectors for other government

departments. The ERD was also the single point of contact for businesses with significant issues, playing a crisis response function when initially set up.

36. The ERD sat within the Digital and Media Group and consisted of two deputy director-led teams with the following responsibilities.

37. The strategy and coordination team - led by deputy director Chris Heaton:

- a. provided strategic leadership and coordinated the work on the economic issues of Covid-19 impacting DCMS's sectors
- b. gave ministers situational awareness, including tracking key economic issues and commissions
- c. supported sector team engagement with their stakeholders
- d. led on briefing for parliamentary, ministerial and official level engagements on economic response issues
- e. identified upcoming issues that are likely to arise for DCMS sectors, mapping upcoming milestones

38. The economic policy team - led by deputy directors Nick Russell, Euan Macmillan and Duncan Parish:

- a. economic policy development - worked across government to develop policy responses to Covid-19 economic issues impacting DCMS sectors and ensure the post-Covid-19 business environment supported economic growth in DCMS sectors
- b. economic policy delivery - supported sector teams in helping their stakeholders access and implement government's suite of economic policies in response to Covid-19
- c. rapid response - provided assistance to key individual stakeholders in economic difficulty and identified appropriate measures to support them

39. I relied heavily on ERD expertise. The ERD was responsible for briefing me for meetings with other government department ministers, including the Chancellor, such as the Economic and Business Response Ministerial Implementation Group (EBRIG). The ERD also provided briefing for and attended the official-level Economic and Business Response Ministerial Implementation Group (EBRIG) meetings. I would receive information via submissions and this fed into my wider governmental discussions. I was able to feed back to the ERD via the box note readouts provided to my team. The ERD cleared all submissions on economic issues

before being put to ministers. I would also frequently meet with members of the team [OD/20 - INQ000623482].

40. Alongside work being done in February 2020 to reconcentrate workloads, responsibilities and priorities on the pandemic, including contingency planning by DCMS's sports and broadcasting teams to consider how sporting fixtures might continue behind closed doors, intense planning began in March 2020 to establish a team to coordinate DCMS's economic response to the pandemic. This involved senior civil servants (largely deputy directors) from teams within the corporate strategy directorate [OD/21 - INQ000623476]. The drivers for establishing a dedicated ERD were threefold:

- a. the recognition of the scale of the ask in this area - that DCMS sectors would be some of the most impacted by lockdown measures and experience the first wave of economic impact
- b. it could draw on resourcing from the DCMS international team, recognising that international work was going to pause as a result of lockdowns and therefore could surge to urgent Covid-related work - a deputy director-led skeleton international team continued to operate, drawing on 25 to 30% of the original international resource with the remainder surged to ERD
- c. a combination of skills and experience, with Rhys Bowen appointed to head up ERD with experience of working in economic policy in HMT and Emma Squire bringing sectoral knowledge to the role.

41. A paper setting out details of the proposed structure and purpose of ERD was submitted to the Permanent Secretary on 24 March 2020 [OD/22 - INQ000623478]. On 30 March detailed information on the ERD was circulated across DCMS [OD/20 - INQ000623482]. This set out the following:

- a. the purpose of the ERD
- b. roles and responsibilities within the directorate including sector team leads/points of specific contact
- c. ways of working with the ERD including:
  - i. a direction for teams to add significant new economic issues affecting their sectors into the appropriate 'trackers'
  - ii. the requirement for teams to notify ERD of any requests/plans for meetings with HMT, BEIS, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) on economic issues, as well as wider discussions with other government departments or other stakeholders

- iii. clearing all advice on economic issues with senior ERD officials before submitting to ministers.

42. Proposed cross-departmental communications were shared with the Executive Board on 25 March which articulated that, where appropriate, the ERD would undertake more detailed policy development and provide a rapid response function to support companies in distress, linking in with other governmental departments as required. This paper set out the senior leadership, responsibilities and key products of ERD and showed a workflow process indicating that sector/policy teams would input into ERD **[OD/23 - INQ000623584]**.

43. Also in March 2020, a cross-government 'explainer' on the ERD was created and shared with other government departments **[OD/24 - INQ000623472]**. This document set out the purpose, responsibilities and structure of the ERD, and the operational approach other government departments should take when engaging with DCMS on economic issues relating to the pandemic.

44. The ERD coordinated conversations at official level on economic response issues with other government departments, particularly HMT, BEIS and DWP, working with the DCMS Covid-19 Hub where appropriate. The aim was to ensure that cross-government conversations were aligned to implement ministerial decisions and to inform policy development in a way that reflected DCMS's sector interests **[OD/25 - INQ000623581]**. The ERD was represented at director level at the Economic Response Working Group with chairing rotated between HMT, CO and BEIS. These meetings were held weekly at the beginning of the pandemic. DCMS used the Economic Response Working Group to highlight concerns about economic policy proposals and shape the development of economic measures.

45. From 3 April 2020 until late June 2020, the ERD circulated daily updates to sector teams including information on cross-cutting issues, details of cross-government meetings, relevant government announcements, analysis, and emerging issues **[OD/26 - INQ000623489; OD/27 - INQ000623583]**. In addition, ERD circulated a Covid-19 Economic Response Sector Engagement Bulletin - this was an internal bulletin to DCMS sector teams **[OD/28 - INQ000623501; OD/29 - INQ000623514; OD/30 - INQ000623521]**. The ERD was stood down on 19 July 2020 when the responsibilities transferred back to sector teams and the Covid-19 Hub.

### *The Covid-19 Hub*

46. When the Covid-19 Hub was established in March 2020, the Hub team - which consisted of staff across the Department who had been surged into the roles - took on the cross-cutting coordination function. SPFE then focused on economic policy and the upcoming SR, and worked closely with the Covid-19 Hub on economic priorities and particularly the crossover between fiscal events and broader Covid-19 economic priorities.
47. The Covid-19 Hub was stood up on 9 March 2020 to provide coordination on cross-cutting issues, including the production of guidance throughout the pandemic. The Covid-19 Hub also played a role in supporting the Department's economic response, working with strategy and finance teams.
48. In addition to engaging with HMT for economic interventions to support DCMS sectors, the Covid-19 Hub worked directly with sector teams on some DCMS led funding packages. For example, the Hub worked with the CSY directorate and the SPFE team regarding the £750 million VCSE package and subsequently to oversee the star chamber bidding process for the £163 million other government department element of the VCSE support package, to which the role of junior DCMS ministers was key. I would receive updates and relevant information via submissions and was able to use the information to inform discussions with HMT and stakeholders and to feed back to the Hub via my box-note readouts.
49. I engaged regularly and intensively with the Covid-19 Hub team in driving our approach to the crisis. They were central to all the meetings and advice I took on key issues around guidance and reopening, including for example, the events research programme.
50. In March 2020, in line with my steers, the Hub engaged with HMT for economic interventions to support DCMS sectors and identified the impacts the pandemic was having on these sectors [OD/31 - INQ000658563]
51. In line with ministerial steers, the Covid-19 Hub also advocated for the economic impact on DCMS sectors to be considered in the wider pandemic response, including providing evidence of the economic impact on its sectors of the difference between two-metre and one-metre social distancing [OD/32 - INQ000182251]. The Hub later provided advice to the CO on the economic impact of October 2020 lockdowns and restrictions on DCMS sectors [OD/33 - INQ000623600].

Monitoring, assessing and preparing for the initial impact of Covid

52. Planning DCMS's economic response to the anticipated impact of Covid-19 was one of my top priorities when I became Secretary of State. I requested advice on the impact of the response from officials in my department. I sought to ensure that impact was properly understood across government. This included DCMS officials engaging with relevant other departments and me doing the same with Ministerial colleagues including at fora such as Cabinet and other Ministerial meetings. Likewise my special advisers engaged with other departments at a political level. I had constant interaction with MPs and senior figures in different sectors about the impacts and what response was needed.
53. There was a whole-of-government effort consisting of high level cross-departmental meetings taking place from early on in the Relevant Period to both monitor and assess, and prepare strategies to respond to, the impact that Covid-19 was anticipated to have on the British and indeed world economy. As described above, the ERD and Covid-19 Hub were stood up, and the SPFE realigned its focus from the Spending Review, to sufficiently arm the Department with the necessary resources to tackle an economic event of the magnitude that Covid-19 was predicted to amount to. This bolstering of the Department allowed DCMS to deliver essential packages to targeted areas of the economy hit hardest during Covid-19, such as the VCSE sector, which I will describe in greater detail below.
54. It is important to note that during the early stages of the pandemic, we were driving with only the benefit of a rear-view mirror. Around the world, understanding of the disease and the scale of response required was evolving by the hour which made it very hard for the Department to prepare the grounds for the next steps and for us to issue meaningful forward guidance. Having experienced the pandemic and the measures the government needed to take to deal with it, we would now be better placed to have a proper playbook that we could share with relevant stakeholders. This is particularly relevant for DCMS given the huge array of stakeholders it dealt with, and still deals with, across arts, sports, culture, heritage, the charitable sector and wider civil society.
55. Additionally, the Department was suddenly asked to play a very different role towards the sectors it faced. In some places, it was able to do it better than others. This is partly about the strength of the sector teams within DCMS, but also the sectors themselves. For example, we got very good data from the tourism industry and the sports sector, but it was more challenging for the culture and civic society.

56. We had less visibility of some DCMS business areas or organisations. This often reflected the fact government as a whole had rare direct engagement with those stakeholders in normal times. To take some specific examples, DCMS was suddenly required to consider the financial health of organisations such as soft-play centres and professional rugby clubs, or the health implications of allowing people to sing in choirs; issues it had, understandably never considered before. This meant that as Covid started to break out, DCMS was attempting to respond without having the full picture. In the future, it would be worth ensuring that more direct engagement with stakeholders takes place as part of resilience planning - though there is inevitably a limit to how far this can be taken given the breadth and diversity of sectors DCMS covers.

57. However, crucially, I must stress that incomplete health information about the virus presented a major challenge to preparation. Around the time when the initial impacts of Covid-19 were beginning to be felt, we were still in the dark about the length of incubation, how the virus was spread, who was at risk, the extent of measures we would need in order to lower the curve, the relative spread risk in different sorts of settings and so on. We were therefore not able to put out any guidance to our sectors, nor were we able to evaluate the relative risks of certain activities that businesses in our sectors are involved in because the health information was simply not available from PHE initially. From memory, I recall that it was many months before we received the risk analysis from PHE.

## **PART B – COOPERATION AND JOINT WORKING**

### **Working Relationship with the Chancellor and HMT**

58. DCMS generally engaged directly with HMT through official and ministerial meetings. I also sent a number of letters to the Chancellor and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to discuss additional sector support measures [OD/34 - INQ000623565].

59. My principal engagement with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury was at other ministerial meetings. I had bilateral meetings with the Chief Secretary, but they were typically about the Spending Review, rather than the UK Government's economic response to Covid-19. For instance, we met on 25 June 2020 to discuss delivery and reprioritisation within DCMS in response to a letter sent to me by the Chief Secretary on 1 June 2020 to request information from DCMS about these issues [see OD/35 - INQ000658533]. We also met on 29 October 2020 to discuss elements of Spending Review negotiations [OD/36 - INQ000658545].

60. Decisions regarding the design and delivery of the pan-economy schemes were taken by HMT. DCMS took a co-designing role in shaping the development and refinement of measures through the provision of sectoral insight and data. I was regularly engaging with HMT and Number 10 both directly and indirectly via officials acting at my direction. Pan economy measures fell within the remit of HMT, but as the evidence later shows, I was intimately involved in decisions about the design and delivery of sector support packages. I would reinforce that involvement informally with the Chancellor, Prime Minister and senior Downing Street staff when I saw them, for example at Cabinet or other Ministerial meetings.

#### Working Relationship with Others

61. During my tenure as Secretary of State, I maintained a working relationship, both directly and indirectly, with a broad spectrum of individuals ranging from other senior members of Cabinet to various stakeholder groups. I prioritised direct engagement with the most senior level stakeholders and sectors, and did a lot of this via meetings with CEOs, etc. Naturally, there was then a lot of working level contact delegated to officials. For example, on the support for culture, I engaged personally with a wide range of leading figures with the industry to help keep them updated and share a DCMS response.

#### *Challenges*

62. There was a recognition that DCMS had a broad remit in terms of scale and scope of the impact of economic policies on departmental stakeholders and sectors, but also in terms of the volume of stakeholders. This posed a challenge in terms of communicating and engaging with such a large number of businesses, including small and medium enterprises in particular which were numerous, especially as existing communications channels were relied upon in the initial response. The impact of economic policies varied from ensuring community theatres remained viable to ensuring telecoms infrastructure remained secure. Alongside the Department's broad remit, there was a related challenge of requesting and challenging advice I was being given, while also ensuring the strategy teams were bringing the right issues to my attention to ensure that priority issues were being managed. In this regard, I would like to put on record my gratitude for the exemplary support that I received from my private office and officials across the Department. They were totally devoted to dealing with a once in a lifetime crisis that threatened the very existence of many of the sectors that DCMS represented. They worked tirelessly to support me, analyse issues and engage creatively with those affected. Likewise I was fortunate to have a strong and experienced Ministerial team. I sought to draw

on my experience on how the top of government works and my passion for the sectors we represented to get them the best deal we could.

63. DCMS's engagement with other government departments during the pandemic was effective and benefited from this regular engagement, such as through the Economic Response Working Group. The Department did not encounter any specific challenges in this engagement. Similarly, DCMS did not experience challenges relating to the economic response in working with the devolved administrations.

#### Decision-making Committees, Groups and Forums

64. I attended meetings of the following decision-making bodies, committees, groups, or forums dealing with the UK government's economic response to Covid-19. In respect of all these fora, my role was twofold. First, as a full cabinet minister I was helping to determine and agree the UK's response to the pandemic on a collective basis. Second, I represented the impact of the pandemic on the sectors for which DCMS was responsible and sought to secure their interests. Almost all DCMS sectors were profoundly affected by the pandemic and many had a role to play in the national response, ranging from tech, telecoms, sport and civil society. I took very seriously my role in ensuring that their voices were heard, opportunities were seized, adverse impacts mitigated and necessary support provided.

65. When the pandemic began, meetings generally dealt with how to implement the lockdown. They then evolved to discussing compensation, then the new rules on, for example, social distancing. For each meeting detailed below, in the context of these evolving priorities, my role was to: i) inform in respect of the cross-governmental societal decisions I was involved in as a member of cabinet; and ii) engage with the many and varied sectors within DCMS and act ensure their interests were properly represented.

#### *Cabinet Meetings*

66. **Cabinet:** I was a member of the Cabinet during the Relevant Period. Generally, Cabinet meetings were held weekly throughout the pandemic. Amongst other business, the agenda for Cabinet meetings during this period often focused on the evolving pandemic. The Cabinet was kept updated by the Prime Minister and relevant experts as to the status of the pandemic and the government's response to these developments, and took collective decisions in relation to our response.

67. Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (**COBR**) refers to a cabinet committee convened to handle matters of national emergency or major disruption. I was a member of two COBR committees during the pandemic, detailed below.

68. **COBR(M)**: COBR(M) was the principal forum for the Prime Minister, the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales and the First and Deputy Minister of Northern Ireland to meet and make decisions. The health ministers and chief medical officers for each country also attended. My fellow ministers and I would discuss and respond to the pandemic and make collective cross-government decisions.

69. **Project DEFEND**: This ministerial small group, chaired by the First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab), was established by the Prime Minister in response to Covid-19 to analyse non-food critical supply chains and had two main aims:

- a. to identify critical points of vulnerability, and
- b. to create a paradigm for identifying options to strengthen resilience [OD/37 - INQ000494138]

My recollection is that this group's work related to supply chain security going forward, given some of the issues that had been exposed by Covid, and that it was not specifically a Covid decision-making body.

#### *Covid-19 Updates*

70. **COVID-O**: Covid-O was a Covid-19 Operations Committee. The Committee was formed of the Prime Minister, Secretaries of State and other government advisors and experts, and I believe met at twice a week, sometimes more frequently, to share submissions about the operational measures taken by the government in response to the pandemic. My role in these meetings was to discuss these developments, to represent the impact of them on DCMS sectors and to agree an operational approach in response.

71. **COVID-S**: Covid-S was a Covid-19 Strategy Committee. The Committee was formed of the Prime Minister, Secretaries of State and other government advisors. The committee was a forum for strategic discussion amongst ministers about the Government's longer term plan against Covid. My role in the Committee consisted of discussing the evolution of the virus including its impact and our understanding of it, and to agree a strategic approach to combat it. Again, I represented the impact of decisions on DCMS sectors.

72. **COVID-19 Daily Meeting**: As Secretary of State, I received daily updates from members of my team pertaining to the live issues DCMS was engaged with throughout the pandemic.

Without access to my diaries, I cannot recall exactly the attendees but from memory these included relevant director-generals and leaders of the ERG and other Covid-19 hub groups, my Principal Private Secretary, my Deputy Principal Private Secretary and the Permanent Secretary. Policy officials with responsibility for particular sectors would also occasionally join these meetings to speed up discussion and decision making.

**73. Private Office Update.** At the beginning and end of the day and usually once a day at weekends during holidays, I would meet with my Principal Private Secretary, my Deputy Principal Private Secretary and special advisers. In the morning, we discussed emergency overnight issues and matters for the day ahead. In the afternoon, we would discuss the emergent issues of the day and overnight issues and respond to them. I would typically reflect on overnight box notes and calls and meetings that we had had during the day. My department would relay any actions arising from these meetings. Inevitably throughout this period, their main focus was COVID response

**74. Covid-19 Twice weekly update:** I received updates twice a week from my Junior Ministers. My role in these meetings was to seek updates in order to assist me in running DCMS and to provide directions to Junior Ministers as well as seeking their input and advice on matters relevant to their briefs and the department's wider response

**75. Weekly meeting with my Permanent Secretary:** In addition to the daily meetings referred to above, I met weekly with my Permanent Secretary. Typically, such meetings would be to cover all issues arising in the Department but during the pandemic these became mostly devoted to issues arising directly from the pandemic.

**76. Weekly meeting with Director Generals:** I also met the DCMS Director Generals each week. As with my meetings with the Permanent Secretary, during the Relevant Period these meetings became devoted to issues arising from the pandemic. The Permanent Secretary would usually also attend this meeting.

**77. DCMS Departmental Board:** As I have already detailed above, these meetings dealt primarily with the running and operation of DCMS, for example DCMS' annual report and financial position, in addition to focusing on DCMS' response to the pandemic and the lessons learned from this response. As Secretary of State, I acted as chair.

#### *Implementation Groups*

78. I was a member of three of the government's four Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIG). Sometimes, I would delegate, as appropriate, to other relevant Junior Ministers to take these meetings. The MIGs fed into the Covid-19 daily meeting detailed above. These were:
79. **Healthcare MIG:** Chaired by the Health Secretary to focus on the preparedness of the NHS, notably ensuring capacity in the critical care system for those worst affected.
80. **General Public Sector MIG:** Chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to look at preparedness across the rest of the public and critical national infrastructure, excluding the NHS.
81. **Economic and Business MIG (EBRIG):** I was a core member of this group [OD/38 - INQ000595582] It was chaired by the Chancellor, with the Business Secretary as deputy chair, and considered the impact on business and the economy of the Covid-19 pandemic, and responses to that economic and business impact, including supply chain resilience. It also coordinated roundtables with key sectors to be chaired by relevant Secretaries of State. As far as I can recall, EBRIG meetings took place once a week between March and July 2020.
82. As with other groups, I was involved in these groups both as a cabinet minister collectively engaged in the cross-governmental societal decisions in relation to the areas that these groups dealt with, and I was the voice of the sectors for which I was responsible, which were many and varied.

#### Conclusion

83. We were making decisions at a fast pace with necessarily incomplete information as the pandemic evolved. Within these constraints we drew on a wide range of expertise and deep engagement with our sectors, remaining agile so we could respond to the changing circumstances.

### **PART C – ECONOMIC SUPPORT FOR THE VOLUNTARY, COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE (“VCSE”) SECTOR**

#### VSCE Package - Initial Proposal

84. On 18 March 2020, I received a submission from the Office for Civil Society recommending to request from HMT a £2billion spending package, with the first billion to go to the UK

Community Mobilisation Fund (Mobilisation Fund) and the remainder to the Stabilisation Fund [OD/39 - INQ000623471]. After receiving this submission, I returned via my Private Secretary to the Office for Civil Society to request further detail on what the first billion would actually be spent on; and what would be the proposed mechanism for spending the second billion [OD/40 - INQ000658506]. I also felt that we needed an urgent view on what charities/voluntary organisations were most vulnerable to going under due to funding problems [OD/41 - INQ000658509]. This was because I had concerns on the submission – the department and indeed the sector's own understanding of about how much we grasped the scale of the problem was still evolving rapidly – and I wanted to make sure we got effective value for money.

85. Regarding the Mobilisation Fund, I was advised that the £1billion will go towards covering the costs of mobilising and coordinating the wide-scale voluntary response [OD/42 - INQ000658508] with a focus on ensuring mission critical parts of the voluntary sector are able to respond to the emergency [OD/43 - INQ000658510]. The initial assessment of £1 billion of funding took into account issues such as likely financial damage from the pandemic for VCSE organisations and increased levels of demand for their services. Part of that assessment was based on engagement with VCSE sector representatives and the Chief Medical Officer on 13 March 2020. This assessment was presented as an annex [OD/44 - INQ000652355] to the advice dated 18 March 2020 exhibited above and informed ministerial decision making about the size and scale of the funding [OD/45 - INQ000623483].

86. As regarding the proposed mechanism for spending the £1billion to go to the Stabilisation Fund, I was advised there were ongoing discussions taking place, but that it would likely go through one of the existing large-scale funders such as the UK Community Foundations or National Lottery Community Fund [OD/46 - INQ000658507]. The Stabilisation Fund package was intended to prevent large scale closures of charities that provide direct support for the most vulnerable people in our communities, such as hospices [OD/47 - INQ000658513]. DCMS then endorsed these proposals to the Chancellor. As I do not have access to my contemporaneous notes relating to the fund stored by DCMS, I cannot recall the specifics of who I discussed this advice with nor my actions at the time as this was one of many measures taken in the pandemic to offer support for DCMS sectors.

87. On 25 March 2020, I was advised by the Office of Civil Society that at this time the Chancellor had decided against announcing support for the voluntary sector as we had proposed. It was recommended that funding should be sought for a smaller package [OD/48 - INQ000623559]. I understood the Chancellor's decision to be based on his belief that the evidence we had was

evolving, which was understandable given the speed at which we had to put together something unprecedented and the uncertainty of the health impacts. The Chancellor was focused on pan-economy schemes, which I had agreed with him would benefit the charity sector and involve a significantly larger sum than any targeted support package.

88. It is easy to forget that we had no idea how lengthy lockdowns would be and whether it was responsible to set up extra schemes with taxpayers' money, which would have been slower and much more bureaucratic and may have favoured those used to dealing with government that could apply for funds. Generally, a pan economy approach was more sensible.

89. As was my approach with all support from HMT, one of my key priorities was firstly to ensure eligibility for pan-economy support measures was extended to the charity sector. Once that was secured, DCMS could shift focus to looking at any necessary targeted extra support.

#### VSCE Leader Meetings

90. On 19 March 2020, I attended a meeting with key sector stakeholders regarding the response to Covid-19 [OD/49 - INQ000623606]. In that meeting, I received an update from the Senior Medical Advisor as to the progress of the Covid-19 virus and the interventions the government was taking, and received feedback from stakeholders from various charities as to the challenges facing the voluntary sector. I addressed stakeholder questions and asked for further details to be provided to officials with regards to regulatory or governance barriers that might be flexed to support charities [OD/50 - INQ000658564]

91. On 31 March 2020, Scott McPherson chaired a Civil Society Covid-19 Conference call [OD/51 - INQ000623487]. I attended this call for the first 20 minutes [OD/45 - INQ000623483]. The objective of the meeting was to hear from the civil society sector, share the latest government advice and discuss how there could be better collaboration in responding to Covid-19. I provided an update from my perspective as to what DCMS and the government as a whole was doing in response to Covid-19 and I asked key stakeholders for an update on their work.

#### Mayor of London Letter

92. The Inquiry has drawn my attention to a number of letters sent to me by various stakeholders and representatives from the sectors within DCMS' remit. Such letters provided a useful insight into the impact of government measures and helped to build an evidence base in respect of DCMS' work with HMT and across the wider government.

93. The Department's handling of correspondence was poor in the initial stages of the pandemic, but I made it a priority for it to be improved and my Private Office worked to ensure that that happened. Generally, my Private Office would have drawn my attention to correspondence they believed to be relevant to me – for example because they would feed into the government's collective response to the pandemic or because they assisted me in my role as ambassador for the sectors DCMS represented. Where letters were not drawn to my personal attention, they were directed to the relevant junior minister's office or official. If an issue arose in engaging with such correspondence, this would be directed to me and I would address it via the mechanisms described above, such as through my daily box notes.
94. On 2 April 2020, the Mayor of London wrote to the Chancellor and copied me to the letter. The letter stated that '*more must be done to ensure that the charitable sector has access to the same amount of financial support as the business sector*' [OD/52 - INQ000104991]. I note that I was copied into the letter rather than it being addressed to me so I suspect I would have had the letter boxed to me for reference and that in turn it would have been shared with relevant teams and helped inform our approach. As stated above, my preferred approach was likewise that all sectors had full access to horizontal interventions.

#### VCSE Package Announcement and Implementation and Monitoring

95. Following the Chancellor's decision to reject the initial proposal, DCMS began revising an updated submission on the funding package for the VCSE sector. In the updated submission, quantum had been substantially revised down from the earlier bid (£10m to the National Emergencies Trust (NET) and £500m to the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF)). This was based on a more thorough analysis of the charities that were most in need of support [OD/53 - INQ000658512]. Treasury's primary focus on pan-economy measures, as I have described above, was also factored into this revised submission.
96. I should stress that the inclusion of the voluntary sector in pan economy measures was not initially a given, and the support was many multiples more beneficial for charities than a pure bailout package, so it was vital to secure their inclusion first.
97. I have been made aware of a document which I understand is dated 3 April 2020 [OD/54 - INQ000623557]. The document includes the following quote: '*DCMS Secretary of State feels that a minimum credible package for the sector is around £700m from HMG.*' I do not recall with certainty how I reached that conclusion and regrettably, neither DCMS nor my legal team have been able to find any documents which may assist my recollection. As I have already described, this was when pan-economy measures were still being worked up by HMT, so my

belief is that we got the net figure once we had worked out what the impact of the pan-economy measures would be. It would have been based on official advice about the scale of the need, and discussions with relevant officials and ministers about what was feasible in the short term, given the pressing need to provide support. Again, it should be noted that at this stage the progress of the disease and the length of restrictions was unclear so it may well have been that I accepted that this sum would suffice initially.

98. On 8 April 2020, the Chancellor announced an emergency funding package worth £750 million to support the VCSE sector [OD/55 - INQ000578225]. The final figure of £750million was reached through negotiation between DCMS, DHSC and HMT [See OD/53 - INQ000658512 OD/54 - INQ000623557; OD/56 - INQ000658519 OD/57 - INQ000658515 and OD/58 - INQ000658518]. Of the £750million support package, £310million was planned for the Coronavirus Community Support Fund [OD/59 - INQ000658520].

99. Usually, outside of the pandemic, a £750 million package would be the culmination of weeks or months of work where the package was my main priority. However, during this period we were bouncing from one emergency to the next and this was just one item that I dealt with amongst so many other vital measures. In this context, it is very difficult for me to recall the specifics of what worked well and what did not without reference to my box notes and other relevant contemporaneous documentation.

100. Overall, we were warned about the scale of the challenge in submissions. There was a real possibility of very significant loss. For example, local and national newspapers, League football clubs, charities and community theatre were all in danger of disappearing. However, the outcome of the pandemic was that there was no such irreversible loss. This was thanks to the strong schemes and engagements from DCMS at crunch moments which enabled the sector to reopen at the earliest opportunity.

101. DCMS and partners worked at unprecedented pace to design and deliver the funding. We deliberately took a varied approach to allow the money to reach different parts of the sector. Namely by distributing money through a variety of programmes, including one run by the National Lotteries Community Fund, a match funding programme and funds distributed by others departments.

102. The National Audit Office have explored the design and delivery of this funding in detail in their *Investigation into government funding to charities during the COVID-19 pandemic* (Report) [OD/60 - INQ000578204].

103. The key findings of the Report were that:

- a. DCMS allocated the £513 million of funding across a range of schemes and a network of at least 198 partners.
- b. DCMS set objectives for each scheme, including funding charities supporting vulnerable people and relieving pressure on public services during the pandemic.
- c. DCMS received applications for support worth £277 million from government departments, £117 million more than it had available.
- d. DCMS allocated £164 million to the Government Departments Scheme to support 21 projects.
- e. DCMS initially allocated £130 million to TNLCF (a non-departmental public body of the Department) to distribute to charities but later reduced this to £199 million.
- f. Using funds that were initially planned for TNLCF, DCMS allocated £85 million to 20 philanthropic, foundation and grant-making organisations for onward distribution.
- g. DCMS held back £20 million to distribute over winter.
- h. DCMS' decisions mean that at least £306 million of the package was to be awarded to charities through an open competition, and £95 million without competition.
- i. DCMS reviewed all TNLCF's proposed awards worth £10,000 or more prior to TNLCF finalising its award decisions.
- j. As at 19 February 2021, £454 million (92%) of the £494 million available to charities had been disbursed.
- k. DCMS required partners and charities to regularly submit data on the speed of disbursements, and the types of services it is supporting.

104. Whilst the report highlights challenges, such as a number of fraudulent applications, ultimately, the way that civil society organisations benefiting from the funding were able to support the public during the pandemic, and then recover, suggests it was successful.

Coronavirus Community Support Fund

105. I decided that initially, £200million of the £310million allocated to the Coronavirus Community Support Fund should be distributed by the NLCF [OD/61 - INQ000623525]. My reasoning was that by refraining from allocating all of the monies at once, DCMS would be able to learn lessons about how best to address any unmet need before committing the remaining £110million [OD/62 - INQ000658527]. I also wanted the fund to be released in phases, with the freedom to change distributor or criteria, or to reprioritise funding, and I felt there should be more commercial experience on the panel [OD/63 - INQ000658522]. I was advised there was no significant negative response to the approach DCMS ultimately took [OD/62 - INQ000658527] as ultimately, we were able to use the £110million for a much more targeted set of interventions, including match funding of £85million. In this way we were able to secure greater value for money.

#### Voluntary and Community Sector Emergencies (VCSE) Partnership

106. On 1 July 2020, DCMS awarded £4.8million to the VCSE Partnership to be distributed by the British Red Cross [OD/64 - INQ000623550]. The VCSE Partnership is led by the British Red Cross and was established in 2017 to provide a more joined-up, cross-sector response to emergencies. During the course of the initial stages of the pandemic, the VCSE Partnership developed rapidly in response to the Covid-19 crisis and worked closely with DCMS on its new delivery plan [OD/65 - INQ000658523]. As a consequence, a £5million grant was requested in May 2020 in order to set up and operate a national system to support the deployment of trained volunteers and deliver a coordinated emergency response to better understand needs and deliver a more effective voluntary and community response to Covid-19 [OD/66 - INQ000658531] (I cannot recall the reason for the discrepancy between the £5million requested and the £4.8million awarded). I was keen to approve funding being used for this as a strategic intervention which would help the sector to coordinate its response and develop its capacity for the future, including the ongoing impacts of the pandemic, which at that point were unclear.

#### Loneliness Fund

107. Around 10 November 2020, there was a cross-government initiative, led by the Cabinet Office, to reduce the disproportionate impact of Covid-19. Departments were asked to submit relevant policy proposals and seek to fund proposals from underspends where possible [OD/67 - INQ000658550].

108. After considering the relevant advice, I enquired, among other things, about what the other underspend priorities were. I also requested more information about young people, who had been worst hit by Covid [OD/68 - INQ000658570]. In response, my team worked up a revised set of options which included an option to increase the Loneliness Fund, albeit by

£800k [OD/69 - INQ000658552] Not feeling this was sufficient, on 18 March 2020 I instructed policy officials to explore the possibility of spending the remainder of the £24m available for this initiative (£20m from the Charities Package and £4m in underspend) on the Loneliness Fund, amounting to £7.5m [OD/70 - INQ000658553 and OD/71 - INQ000623568]. Following this, in the week commencing 23 November 2020, a Delivery Update was circulated confirming '*[t]he unallocated £20m (plus £4m additional charities package underspend) will be used for the Youth Recovery Fund and Loneliness*' [OD/72 - INQ000658554] and the policy was subsequently implemented.

## **PART D – ENGAGEMENT WITH AND FEEDBACK ON PAN-ECONOMY MEASURES**

### Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme

109. On 27 March 2020, I received advice from the ERD on HMG's economic support schemes. It was noted that stakeholders had raised '*a number of potential issues*' that could cause '*particularly acute problems for our sectors*'. There were several '*unresolved*' issues relating to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme [OD/73 - INQ000623481].

110. Broadly speaking, I understood these issues to be:

- a. that in some sectors within DCMS' remit the average income for the self-employed is higher than the national average and therefore a higher number of people would miss out as a result of the £50,000 profit cap - in particular in the digital sector;
- b. new businesses were not covered by the scheme;
- c. the scheme did not cover owner-managers of their companies who were paying themselves through a dividend; and
- d. the grant was not to be dispersed until June.

111. Two specific issues were identified as unresolved. I understood these to be:

- a. a provision for zero hours workers who were not on PAYE payroll; and
- b. clarity as to the arrangements for employers not able to cease trading or close down their services but who were operating with reduced revenues and cash

flow (e.g. tourism companies reducing the hours of their workers but not furloughing them completely).

112. In response, I requested further advice on the furlough scheme as it applied to charities with examples of the impact on specific charities [OD/74 - INQ000658569]. I also tirelessly made the case for both getting more resources to freelancers and reopening as quickly as possible. Further, from my recollection, I asked the culture recovery fund to prioritize support where freelancers would benefit. The Department and I continued to engage on all these issues as the economic impact became clearer.

113. I recognise there were some limitations of the schemes as they applied to DCMS sectors, but the pan economy nature of the interventions made it very hard to create specific carve outs. Ultimately, HMT and the wider government chose to take broad based measures; whilst I strongly represented the needs of DCMS sectors in cross-government discussions and secured a number of changes and specific packages of support to supplement pan-economy measures, I also had to respect this overall approach. The department's response should therefore be understood within this broader context

114. On 20 May 2020, I received a letter from the Mayor of the West Midlands requesting "*more flexibility in the job retention scheme*" [OD/75 - / INQ000116271]. Nigel Huddleston MP responded to this letter in or around August 2020 [OD/76 - INQ000658541]. I suspect this would have been boxed for my information and directed to his office for reply.

115. On 4 June 2020, I received a letter from the Head of Bectu who raised concerns that "*changes to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme will result in mass redundancies*" [OD/77 - / INQ000612708]. Caroline Dinenage MP responded to this letter in or around June 2020 [OD/78 - INQ000658532]. Again, I suspect this would have been boxed for my information and directed to her office for reply.

116. I was, of course, sympathetic to the points above. DCMS were able to ensure HMT understood the limitations of these schemes and advocate for DCMS sectors and workers within them. Ultimately, the collectively agreed approach was to take broad measures. In

future resilience planning should develop a more detailed understanding within sectors of employment types so we have a clearer view at the outset.

#### Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme

117. On 3 April 2020, I was briefed by the ERD on the impact of HMT's changes to the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme (CBILS) on DCMS sectors [OD/79 - INQ000182272]. On 7 April 2020, I received further information on DCMS sector organisations whose mixed-income business models prevented them from accessing the scheme [OD/80 - INQ000182280].
118. On review of the advice, I requested further information from the ERD as to the wider issues raised in the submission [OD/81 - INQ000658516]. I received an updated briefing on 7 April 2020 that provided further information on DCMS sector organisations whose mixed-income business models prevent them accessing the scheme [OD/82 - INQ000661469]. In response to this update advice, I agreed we should continue to engage at an official level but that my special advisers and I would continue to keep a tight focus on the issue [OD/83 - INQ000658566].
119. On 1 May 2020, I was advised by the ERD that there were still "*a number of existing access issues with the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme*" [OD/84 - INQ000623503]. I understood these issues to be that:
- a. many charities judged the loan finance element scheme to be incompatible with their operating model;
  - b. banks were often refusing charity loan applications as they were unfamiliar with charity operating models; and
  - c. lenders continued to prioritise commercial loans over HMT backed schemes or imposed unreasonable terms.
120. Negotiation and discussion with HMT took place at a departmental level. Following DCMS engagement, HMT also prohibited lenders requiring personal guarantees on loans of less than £250,000 and capped personal guarantees at 20% of the outstanding balance on loans of more than £250,000. DCMS also engaged with HMT to ensure the relaxation for registered charities of an initial requirement for eligible businesses to earn 50% of their income

through trading. This was a significant achievement as it enabled charities to take advantage of the scheme, opening them up to vital funding which for many was their lifeline.

#### Business Rates Relief

121. On 9 April 2020, I was advised that DCMS sectors had “*reported challenges when accessing the recently introduced Expanded Retail Discount (a Business Rates Relief measure)*” [OD/85 - INQ000658565]. I was advised that challenges were primarily due to a lack of understanding among DCMS stakeholders of the scope of the scheme, omission of specific businesses from the guidance and cases of inconsistent application of the scheme by local authorities. Following engagement from DCMS, live music venues, tour operators and art galleries (where art is for sale/hire) were expressly listed in subsequent guidance from MHCLG and the Local Government Association.
122. In response to the briefing, I requested an analysis of how much all of DCMS’ sectors might benefit from the various HMT support measures in order that I could feed this back to the select committee. I encouraged DCMS to engage with HMT and MHCLG on these issues and as a result live music venues, markets and art galleries (where art is for sale or hire) were expressly listed as eligible for business rates relief in subsequent guidance from MHCLG and the Local Government Association.

#### Self-Employment Income Support Scheme

123. On 16 April 2020, I was advised by the ERD that concerns had been raised by DCMS stakeholders “*regarding the Government’s economic support packages for self-employed workers*” [OD/86 - INQ000623495]. Unfortunately, despite our best efforts, my team and I have been unable to locate the box note attached to this submission so I am not able to say precisely when or from whom I sought advice, or when this advice was received, beyond what is detailed in OD/86.
124. Broadly speaking, these concerns raised in OD/86 were:
- a. that freelancers whose jobs had been terminated when the original job retention scheme was initially announced or who were already looking for their next contract before the extension to the furloughing scheme cut off date would not be assisted by the proposals;

- b. that limits imposed on the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme (SEISS) meant that the large minority (10%) of self-employed people who had become self-employed within the past 12 months would not be eligible for SEISS;
- c. no allowances had been made for freelancers suffering reduced income as a result of maternity/ paternity leave;
- d. the scheme did not cover people who were owner-managers of their companies and paying themselves through dividends; and
- e. SEISS is capped at an annual profit of £50,000 which created an inequality with the Job Retention Scheme.

125. I was aware of all of the above issues and directed my team to engage with the Treasury where gaps were being identified. DCMS continued to engage with HMT regarding the SEISS particularly concerning freelancer workers in the creative industries and a further update to me dated 28 April 2020 noted the significant effect that stopping SEISS would have on DCMS sectors [OD/87 - INQ000623502]. One of the reasons that I was such a passionate advocate for re-opening as soon as it was safe to do so was that I appreciated that this would at least create some income opportunities for freelancers.

126. On 19 June 2020, I was advised by the ERD that *“we have probably achieved as much as we can with tailoring the existing schemes for the benefit of DCMS sectors, and we should now focus our resource on reopening and the longer term recovery”* [OD/88 - INQ000658571]

127. In response, I directed DCMS to differentiate the approach taken between sectors that were able to re-open and those that were not. For the former, I instructed that HMT should be engaged to facilitate opening and for the latter I directed that DCMS continued to push HMT for support for those sectors. I also noted that my language had shifted to put the priority on reopening. My preference was to reopen as much as possible as quickly as we could in line with control of the disease. In my view, this was the best and main route to helping DCMS sectors recover and to bring enjoyment back to the public. I made this point at all the fora discussed above.

128. It was a significant achievement that we were amongst the first in the world to reopen sports and DCMS worked intensively to do that. I established the Sports Technology and Innovation Group where medical experts from leading sports met in a group with the deputy CMP, Jonathan Van-Tam to thresh out a plan to get elite and grassroots sports back open as safely as possible, using their scientific and sports expertise. Connecting sector experts with

a medical background with PHE was very effective in determining what was possible to open with a lower risk. I think that would be the model to follow in the event of a future pandemic.

129. In addition to that, we got studios back open earlier than most of the rival studios abroad by agreeing safe working and reopening practices for them. DCMS also worked with the Treasury to agree the Film and TV Production Restart Scheme. We got drafted tailored advice for almost every sector and lobbied for PHE approval to open things back up safely. We sought to do the same for culture. However, indoor gatherings were much more problematic for PHE as health experts learnt more about the spread of the disease. Throughout I consistently pressed on what was the most we could get open safely and saw my job as to challenge public health advisers on this. So, for example we looked at outdoor opportunities since the disease spread less easily given the greater ventilation.

130. Given how much time has passed, I am unable to recall in more detail the discussions that took place with HMT in 2021 regarding the extension of these schemes. As set out above, my approach with HMT was to ensure all DCMS sectors could benefit from horizontal intervention before seeking to advocate for any support beyond these measures.

131. On 3 February 2021, I wrote to the Chancellor in respect of the economic support schemes [See OD/34 - INQ000623565; and OD/89 - INQ000658568 box note]. My legal team have been unable to locate any response received. It may be that we had subsequent direct conversations, for example in ministerial meetings, which meant that HMT felt that he had already responded in person to these concerns.

#### Changes to Insolvency Rules

132. On 17 April 2020, I received a submission from the ERD [OD/90 - INQ000658567]. The submission focused on government insolvency measures regarding DCMS sectors and sought my agreement that the measures should be extended to include Charitable Incorporated Organisations and that DCMS should work with BEIS to achieve this outcome.

133. I responded by way of letter dated 21 April 2020 in which I agreed to the proposals subject to the condition that Charitable Incorporated Organisations were covered by the new measures [OD/91 - INQ000658521]. This letter had been prepared by my team. I discussed the issue with my Private Secretary on 21 April 2020. It was explained to me that the letter included the agreed line with BEIS and that BEIS were content for me to write on this on the

basis that they support the objective but need to work through the policy. I provided my clearance for the letter to be sent following that discussion.

## **PART E – SUPPORT FOR THE CULTURAL AND LEISURE SECTORS**

### Cultural Renewal Taskforce

134. On 20 May 2020, I announced I had established the Cultural Renewal Taskforce (the “Taskforce”) [OD/92 - INQ000658525]. The Taskforce was one of five ministerial-led taskforces made up of experts from the cultural, supporting and tech worlds. In line with the structure set out above, the work of the Taskforce helped frame my approach and fed into my wider discussions with government and HMT. I pushed for this to be created to better understand the impact on the sector and what its response should be. I also selected the participants and saw it as a key initiative.
135. The Taskforce was established on 22 May 2020 and continued until January 2021. It was convened to ensure that Covid-19 secure guidelines were developed in line with the latest public health and scientific advice and to provide advice and challenge in support of the renewal of DCMS sectors [OD/93 - INQ000658528]. I was chair of the Taskforce. Membership of the Taskforce developed over time but as of January 2021, it included:
- a. Tamara Rojo (English National Ballet)
  - b. Alex Scott (former England international and Arsenal footballer and now a Sports Broadcaster)
  - c. Sir Nicholas Serota (Arts Council England Chair)
  - d. Edward Mellors (Mellors Group Events)
  - e. Neil Mendoza (Commissioner for Cultural Recovery and Renewal, Entrepreneur, publisher and philanthropist)
  - f. Lord (Michael) Grade of Yarmouth (TV executive and former Chair of BBC and ITV)
  - g. Baroness (Martha) Lane-Fox of Soho (Founder of LastMinute.com)
  - h. Mark Cornell (Ambassador Theatre Group)
  - i. Simon Vincent OBE (President for Europe, the Middle East and Africa at Hilton Worldwide)
  - j. Paul Nowak (Deputy Secretary General, Trades Union Congress)

136. The Taskforce helped me and DCMS to coordinate support for the cultural and creative industries by providing oversight for new guidance developed regarding the safe reopening of recreation and leisure settings and activity [OD/93 - INQ000658528] The Taskforce initially met once a week. The lead responsible civil servant was Sam Lister [OD/94 - INQ000658526] The dates of meetings and topics discussed at each meeting are publicly available can be found annexed to this statement. My legal team have been unable to locate more detailed minutes of each meeting.
137. As the pandemic developed and the relevant sectors began to reopen, the Taskforce reduced its weekly meetings. As far as we can establish, between 15 July 2020 and 27 January 2021 the Taskforce only met three times. I found every taskforce meeting to be a useful conversation which framed the approach I took and fed into my wider discussions with HMT and other relevant parties. The taskforce was helpful for setting the strategy and direction, but the scale and complexity of the reopening challenge meant it wasn't the right body to grapple with the detail. That's why it was used less over time, as the Department, led by me, took more responsibility for this.

#### *Working Groups*

138. The Taskforce was supported by eight working groups convened on 22 May 2020 which I instructed were to be chaired by DCMS ministers, and included representatives from around 150 key sector bodies and organisations [OD/94 - INQ000658526] These working groups were:
- a. **Broadcasting, Film and Production (led by Minister for Media and Data):** Television production; film production; music production; advertising, video games and audio production
  - b. **Entertainment and Events (led by Minister for Digital and Culture):** Ticketed (and non-ticketed) entertainment and events (indoor and outdoor), including cinemas, theatres, music venues, festivals, concerts and esports gatherings.
  - c. **Heritage (led by Minister for Sport, Tourism and Heritage):** Heritage institutions and attractions, including indoor and outdoor activities; hired venues.
  - d. **Library Services (led by Minister for Digital and Culture):** Library services including those delivered to the home; supervised computer/internet/business advice access on an individual basis; loan services (e.g. click and collect); mobile library services; library buildings.

- e. **Museums and Galleries (led by Minister for Digital and Culture):** museums and galleries.
- f. **Sport (led by Minister for Sport, Tourism and Heritage):** Professional and elite sport; non professional sport and physical activity including gyms, sports grounds, leisure centres, ice rinks, bowling alleys and swimming pools.
- g. **Visitor Economy (led by Minister for Sport, Tourism and Heritage):** Tourism accommodation; business tourism, including conferences; visitor attractions, amusement parks/ funfairs, arcades, zoos, bingo and casinos.
- h. **Youth (Minister for Civil Society):** a range of youth service provision, including youth clubs and youth organisations such as the Scouts and Guides; as well as targeted youth work interventions for vulnerable young people.

139. The aims of the working groups were to:
- a. Provide a forum for sector specialist and other experts to help develop guidance;
  - b. Identify and resolve practical, sector-specific guidance-related issues
  - c. Develop a sector-wide plan for disseminating and implementing guidance;
  - d. Discuss actions and updates arising from the Cultural Renewal Taskforce; and
  - e. Give stakeholders the opportunity to put questions and suggestions to Ministers.
140. The working groups allowed sector specialists and other experts to help develop, disseminate and implement guidance, as well as identify and resolve practical, sector-specific issues related to guidance via the working groups. The groups also discussed actions and updates arising from the Cultural Renewal Taskforce.
141. Both the taskforce and the working groups allowed us to bring our sectors more fully into conversations and access valuable evidence and opinions to inform our engagement with policy decisions across government.

Letter from the Local Government Association

142. On 1 June 2020, I received a letter from the Local Government Association Culture Tourism and Sport Board which asked me to “*establish a plan for recovery for the cultural and creative sectors*” [OD/95 - INQ000547029]. As explained above, letters were redirected to the relevant minister with my input only sought as required. Given the scale of the engagement,

we delegated this to Nigel Huddleston, the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary for DCMS [OD/96 - INQ000658540] but received regular updates.

#### Culture and Heritage Covid-19 Package

143. On 10 June 2020, I received advice on options for alternative finance for the culture and heritage Covid-19 Recovery Package [OD/97 - INQ000623530]. I provided my comments on the package and these fed into updated advice [OD/98 - INQ000658538] I then established the Cultural Recovery Board to provide governance and oversight of the package on my behalf [OD/99 - INQ000658539] The Cultural Recovery Board had its first meeting on 7 September 2020 [OD/100 - INQ000658542]

#### Culture Recovery Fund

144. I was acutely aware from the beginning of the pandemic that many of the sectors DCMS was responsible for were in danger of collapse as a result of the catastrophic effect of lockdown. This was at the top of my mind in every discussion I held with the permanent secretary downwards. As stated, my priority was to ensure that the horizontal, pan-society measures were applied to all DCMS sectors and to then understand from the work of the various groups and forums DCMS was involved in what additional support might be required and make the case for such support to HMT.
145. On 5 July 2020, I announced the £1.57billion Cultural Recovery Fund (CRF) support package [OD/17 - INQ000623631]. The CRF was the branding for a package of measures, which included core items (such as the grants, loans, and capital grants schemes), as well as items announced as part of the “branding” but managed separately. I engaged directly with Chancellor of the Exchequer and Number 10, extensively on this, including with the Prime Minister's head of policy, Munira Mirza, who played a pivotal role in it. I still regard this is one of my proudest moments in my time as a minister. I believe it is the largest single programme of arts and culture support in this country's history and one of the largest in the world. I am still in contact with many institutions for which the package marked the difference between survival and collapse.
146. The purpose of the fund evolved over the course of the three rounds in response to the changing needs of the sector, transitioning from an initial focus on survival, towards reopening and recovery, and a combination of these aims. An evaluation found the CRF met its overall objectives, was efficiently implemented and demonstrated value for money [OD/101 INQ000596101] It strengthened the financial health of organisations awarded funding,

improved their resilience, and raised their future survival prospects to a degree that could not have been achieved by just relying on the broader package of government support.

147. In my view, the size of the fund was in excess of sector expectations. External evaluation found the fund to have been generally well designed and effective in distributing money quickly; as was recognised by a wide range of leaders in the sector itself at the time. Whilst inevitably we could not support every organisation, ultimately the funding and other measures were successful in helping to ensure that the nightmare predictions of mass closure did not come to fruition.

#### National Leisure and Sporting Infrastructure

148. On 10 July 2020, the Local Government Association Culture, Tourism and Sport Board wrote to me to discuss support for the national leisure and sporting infrastructure [OD/102 - INQ000547032]. The letter was dealt with by my team. No written response was provided but representatives from DCMS met with the Local Government Association in March 2021 to discuss this and other letters from the Board. I believe that this was at my request.

#### PART F – HMT COLLABORATION

149. It is important to remember that there are many departments across government which make the case for additional funding. This was particularly the case during COVID. DCMS is one such department. As set out above I made the case for DCMS and the sectors it represents with vigour and instructed my officials to do the same. While all departments must ensure value for money for the taxpayers, there is only one department, HMT, whose sole job is to balance spending demands against protecting the overall state of the public finances. This necessarily creates a tension between departmental demands and the imperatives of the Treasury.

150. Subject to this context I found the Treasury to be open to engagement but demanding rigour in the evidence produced to support spending demands. In this respect I benefitted from the calibre of my officials who were able to provide this. I know that the Chancellor appreciated the rigour of evidence provided and that it helped our case considerably, for example in relation to the Culture Recovery Fund. All additional support packages were a product of an

iterative process where evidence had to be reviewed and reworked to satisfy officials and Ministers that there was a genuine need for further intervention beyond existing measures

151. I found the Chancellor to be sympathetic to the needs of the sectors that we represented. However, he required a compelling case to be made for deviating from horizontal pan economy measures for fear of the precedent that this could set thereby intensify public spending pressures. This was evidenced by the very limited number of bespoke support packages agreed by the Treasury, despite other vocal campaigns such as from the airline industry.

152. Whilst my team and I did not succeed in every public spending argument with the Treasury as set out above, engagement was cordial and respectful. There was understandable frustration from the Treasury if departments were perceived as making their case through the media or public lobbying instead of through governmental channels of engagement. We were always careful not to do so.

## **PART G – INEQUALITIES, IMPACT ASSESSMENTS AND VULNERABLE GROUPS**

153. As a public authority,<sup>3</sup> I was subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) contained within Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 while serving as Secretary of State. This means I was bound to consider, in the execution of my functions as a Minister, how my decisions would affect people with protected characteristics under the 2010 Act.

154. I had due regard for the PSED in all key decisions and actions I took during the pandemic. To ensure I fulfilled the requirements placed on me by the PSED, DCMS officials were required to conduct formal PSED analyses on the potential impact on individuals possessing protected characteristics of all policy submissions to my office **[for examples, see OD/103 - INQ000623570; OD/104 - INQ000623544].**

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<sup>3</sup> As defined under Schedule 19, Equality Act 2010.

155. In addition to formal PSED analyses conducted by DCMS officials, I would often instruct my private office and special advisors to look further into inequalities issues and how policy submissions stood to impact vulnerable groups. For example, as I mentioned above in this statement, there was a cross-government initiative around 10 November 2020 to reduce the disproportionate impact of Covid-19. In response to the original submission, I raised with my special advisor that young people were one of the hardest hit groups by Covid and instructed them to do more to build them into DCMS's policy proposals [OD/67 -

INQ000658550

## **PART H – ANALYSIS AND REFLECTIONS**

156. My overall reflection is that DCMS as a department stepped up well in the face of an unprecedented pandemic, the response to which potentially posed an existential threat to many of the sectors covered by the Department. At the start of the pandemic, I was being warned that across arts, culture, heritage and sports the measures we were taking to control the pandemic threatened the survival of such loved institutions. Looking back, these predictions did not materialise and to the best of my knowledge very few, if any, sports clubs, theatres, cinemas, heritage or cultural institutions closed as a direct result of Covid-19. Of course, we did not get everything right but in my view, this, along with how these sectors are now thriving again, are measures of the success of the work that DCMS did to support these sectors through the pandemic.

157. The Department showed strength in shifting towards home working whilst at the same time delivering a crisis response. We were able to adapt to a working from home structure almost overnight, which allowed permanent remote working at scale. In addition, areas of business as usual activity were largely paused with the Department performing a completely new function while also shifting wholesale how it worked. This pivoting of existing teams and the creation of new teams demonstrated decisive action and working in an agile way early on. Building on the generalist skillset of DCMS staff made adaptation easier, allowing staff to pivot from international work to domestic crisis work. Working in this flexible way meant that officials were able to pivot effectively in order to prioritise critical Covid-19-related tasks, including those related to the economic response.

158. Working with the Treasury we secured unprecedented levels of financial support for the sectors affected. This was principally achieved through the Treasury's pan economy interventions which we ensured applied equally to DCMS sectors albeit with some notable challenges such as freelancers. We also achieved groundbreaking specific interventions such as the Cultural Recovery Fund and the Sports Recovery Fund which were pivotal to the survival of so many institutions. In this, DCMS was unusual in winning sector specific packages for its sectors.

159. As a result of the pandemic, DCMS realised that for some sectors, data was not sufficiently accessible for the hugely complex and fast-paced discussions happening across government. Covid-19 analysis, such as considering the pandemic's impact on DCMS sectors, became one of the biggest demands on DCMS analysts and, in response, DCMS formally centralised resources to create the Covid-19 Analytical Hub, led by a deputy director, in November 2020. This made it easier to rapidly resource and undertake cross-cutting analysis in support of the complex policy work being done across the Department. This is also an example of success with DCMS' ongoing review as to how to improve functions and responsiveness and resilience to future emergencies.

160. A challenge faced by DCMS was communicating and engaging with the large number of businesses that fell within DCMS' remit. This was particularly acute where existing communications channels were relied upon in the initial response. The impact of economic policies varied from ensuring community theatres remained viable to ensuring telecoms infrastructure remained secure. It was also a challenge for my team to ensure the right issues were brought to my attention so that priority issues were being managed.

161. There was also a challenge around DCMS being alive to the impact of the pandemic on niche policy/sectoral areas under the Department's remit and capturing these during the policy design and implementation process. An example of this was ensuring telecoms engineers were captured in the key workers lists and understanding the impact on areas like soft play.

162. Our work on prioritising the reopening of sectors was pivotal. We agreed protocols for safe working. We conducted an Events Research Programme to test and evaluate re-opening

which enabled live events to take place. We provided the reassurance for Film and TV production and live events to restart through agreeing an indemnity scheme with the Treasury. Such measures enabled vital and globally renowned parts of cultural and sporting life to restart earlier than in other countries, giving them a competitive advantage that lasts to this day.

163. Finally, I would like to restate my gratitude to the steadfast and tireless work of large numbers of civil servants, external experts, sector representatives and indeed my ministerial team who worked together in a spirit of pure public service during this highly challenging time.

#### **PART I – REQUEST FOR DOCUMENTS**

164. I have exhibited documents where relevant throughout the statement above.

## **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:**

**Personal Data**

**Dated:** 27/10/2025

## ANNEX - A

### CULTURAL TASKFORCE MEETINGS (SEE [here](#)<sup>4</sup> )

#### 22 May 2020

- Overarching discussion on the steps needed for sectors to be ready for reopening, and for guidance to be developed to support this.
- Agreed the Taskforce's role as the oversight body providing challenge and insight to support the development of guidance for Covid-secure reopening of recreation and leisure sectors.
- Agreed that the production of detailed guidance would be taken forward by eight sectoral Working Groups reporting to the Taskforce, each chaired by a DCMS Minister.

#### 27 May 2020

- Discussed key issues for sectors to reopen, particularly on potential regulatory easements, and agreed a range of proposals to be analysed and explored as possible solutions.
- Carried out a deep dive on issues affecting the Visitor Economy sector to provide the necessary detail for businesses and the public.

#### 3 June 2020

- Reviewed the progress made on producing guidance to aid preparations for the reopening of recreation and leisure sectors by July, with advanced drafts being developed and scrutinised by experts representing the interests of the sectors and its employees, alongside Public Health England, the Health and Safety Executive, the DCMS Chief Scientific Adviser and trade unions.
- Discussed the importance of cultural support across the whole country.
- Discussed the potential for collaboration between the tech sector and arts and culture sectors.

#### 10 June 2020

- Discussed the challenges of providing guidance for audience based settings for events and venues.
- Considered industry standards/kitemarking and endorsement work that DCMS tested through the Visitor Economy Working Group.

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<sup>4</sup><https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/cultural-renewal-taskforce-and-supporting-working-groups#cultural-renewal-taskforce-members>

- Acknowledged the importance of building consumer confidence and discussed ways to support this.

#### **17 June 2020**

- Oversaw completion of drafts of all guidance for recreation and leisure sectors in readiness for the potential reopening of a range of settings in early July.
- Discussed Government work for a Comms campaign to increase consumer confidence in returning to recreation settings once reopened.
- Discussed addressing challenges for recreation sectors and settings in preparing for reopening

#### **25 June 2020**

- Discussed the Prime Minister's statement of 23rd June on the sectors that would be permitted to reopen on 4 July.
- Supported development of the 'Enjoy Summer Safely' campaign, which aimed to increase consumer confidence in safely returning to settings that could be reopened in the coming weeks.

#### **1 July 2020**

- Discussed issues around insurance for settings such as theatres and live music venues.
- Discussed the Test and Trace programme and the ways in which the Taskforce's sectors may be able to raise awareness of the availability of tests and support collection of customer/visitor data in reopened settings.
- Discussed the package of support that government could invest in protecting culture, arts and heritage institutions.

#### **15 July 2020**

- Considered further interventions (non-pharmaceutical) that could help to reduce transmission risk in recreation and leisure settings.
- Discussed work to ensure other areas of sectors, such as gyms and dance studios could reopen in the coming weeks, including further guidance being produced to support this.

#### **7 October 2020**

- Discussion on work conducted over the summer focusing on safe reopening of sectors. Acknowledging that the rises in cases had required tightening of restrictions, but that the lessons learned and data gathered could be used in future planning once reopening became viable.

- Discussion on the pressures placed upon sectors by the increased restrictions, but recognition that these were in place as a result of scientific evidence that rapid rises in infections were driven by social mixing.

#### **4 November 2020**

- Review of the restrictions coming into force on 5 November 2020
- Discussion on mass testing in Liverpool, and whether this model can be expanded to support the reopening of DCMS sectors eg: sporting events.
- Discussion on the financial implications of the new restrictions, and the need to transparency and clarity as restrictions are eased. This will enable sectors to plan effectively.

#### **27 January 2021**

- Dido Harding presented an update on the progress of Test and Trace and provided detail of the importance of long term testing in enabling the identification and control of new variants.
- Vaccine rollout was discussed, with the expectation that those within the first four groups identified for vaccines would have received their first dose by Mid-February. Further work is being undertaken to understand transmissibility of the virus in those vaccinated, and the duration of immunisation.
- Discussion on the Prime Minister's announcement of the publication of a plan for taking the country out of lockdown in the week beginning 22 February 2021, and how Taskforce members can contribute to the development of strategy.