

Monday, 8 December 2025

(10.29 am)

LADY HALLETT: Good morning, Mr Wright.

MR WRIGHT: Good morning, my Lady. Can I confirm that you can both hear and see us in the hearing room?

LADY HALLETT: I can, thank you.

MR WRIGHT: Thank you.

Yes, the first witness is Alex Skinner, if he can be sworn or take the affirmation. Thank you.

MR ALEX SKINNER (affirmed)

Questions from RICHARD WRIGHT KC, LEAD COUNSEL TO THE INQUIRY for MODULE 9

MR WRIGHT: Good morning, Mr Skinner. You were formerly the director of local government funding at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government; is that right?

A. That's right.

Q. And you've provided a witness statement to the Inquiry, which is INQ000657743.

Now, in terms of your role as Director of Local Government Finance, just, first of all, to understand what that really involves, was it a role that arranged for funding to be provided to local authorities so that they could continue to function and perform their functions of delivering services locally?

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the local government finance system. We had what I would describe as the building blocks in place. We didn't have a plan in the sense of knowing exactly which of those building blocks we would deploy and at what time, and that reflected the uncertainty of the pandemic and the uncertainty of knowing in advance of a pandemic exactly which building block it would make sense to deploy and when.

Q. I see. And so was there an *ad hoc* element to how things developed as between the department and local authorities, within those parameters?

A. So I think there were questions about timing and exactly which levers we would pull. I think we had a very good understanding of broadly which levers we would pull and how we would support local government, because in essence you would be looking at income, expenditure, financial sustainability and anybody who needed exceptional financial support. And you would also need to have a method for understanding that, which were the monitoring forms that we issued.

Q. Yes, and we'll come on to look at monitoring, which I think was something that was well established before the pandemic; is that right?

A. You are right. So there is a whole plethora of monitoring which goes out to local government every

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A. That's correct.

Q. And so this is separate to the regime of business grant funding that the Inquiry has heard about; is that right? That's funds being allocated by local authorities or delivered?

A. That is correct. So local government finance was primarily responsible for ensuring the financial sustainability of councils. Business grants was about supporting the business sector.

Q. Okay, thank you.

Now, we will look at both of those things during the course of your evidence, but can we start by looking at that funding to local authorities so that they could provide their services locally.

And I'm going to ask, please, if the corporate statement of the department could be put up. This is INQ000652753, and paragraph 48.

And we read there:

"The Department did not have a ready-made pandemic plan with relation to local government finance."

And I just want to pick up on that. Should we therefore understand that there was no pre-existing pandemic finance plan?

A. So I think the best way to describe it was that we had done a significant amount of preparation for a shock to

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year. So they are done quarterly and annually.

I think the difference between what happened prior to the pandemic and what happened in the pandemic was we moved from that statutory quarterly and annual reporting to voluntary monthly reporting, and exactly what we asked for changed. So there were questions that were in the monitoring form that wouldn't have been in the statutory reporting.

Q. I see. We'll come back to monitoring as a subtopic.

Generally, the evidence that the Inquiry has received is of the broad view that the department, your department, engaged well with local government in terms of funding throughout the pandemic. Do you share that view?

A. Yes, I do share that view.

Q. And why in particular is that your view?

A. So I think that we had, for a long time, significant engagement with the sector. So again, all of the elements which proved to be successful in the pandemic had been established prior to the pandemic. I think the big difference is where -- one, was the intensity of the engagement. So, prior to the pandemic, we might have spoken to government, local government, maybe on a monthly or weekly basis. Under the pandemic, we were talking to them on a daily or even multiple times a day.

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1 And I think the other thing that happened was
 2 a conscious decision on both sides, I think, to create
 3 a real spirit of openness and trust which allowed us to
 4 discuss things with local government which I think we
 5 hadn't previously been able to do.

6 Q. Right. So, two key things: (1), the fact that there
 7 were these pre-existing relationships that provided the
 8 channel for communication; followed by (2), stepping up
 9 that communication and building true trust between the
 10 two partners --

11 A. Yes.

12 Q. -- as it were, in the delivery of support. Okay.
 13 Can you just explain to us from your perspective and
 14 experience why certainty of funding is an important
 15 thing for local authorities?

16 A. So, in normal circumstances, certainly funding is
 17 important, because local authorities have a duty to
 18 obviously deliver all the services that they do, but
 19 also to do it in a way which is -- represents value for
 20 money and is efficient and effective. So certainty
 21 allows them to plan ahead, for example, to engage and
 22 take out contracts with providers and plan ahead. That
 23 is important in normal circumstances.

24 In the pandemic, certainty of funding, I think, was
 25 more problematic, because I think there was a tension at

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1 officials reflected that: that we would support local
 2 government from a financial perspective through the
 3 pandemic.

4 One of the first things that we did in the pandemic
 5 was we provided cash flow support. That meant that no
 6 local authority had to worry that they wouldn't have
 7 enough money to provide the services. And then if you
 8 look at the sequence of support we then put in place,
 9 you had tranche 1 funding in March, that was
 10 1.6 billion, and then you had tranche 2 funding in April
 11 and the fact that we put the tranche 2 funding in so
 12 soon after tranche 1, I think, reflected the fact that
 13 what we were trying to do was to say to local
 14 government, "You should get on with delivering the
 15 services, you shouldn't be worrying about where the
 16 money would come from."

17 And the other part that ministers were very clear
 18 about was to say, "We will use the monitoring form so
 19 that we can review the state of local government
 20 finance, and if there are issues, then we will look at
 21 it and review it and consider the case for more
 22 funding."

23 Q. So first of all, guaranteed cash flow. So that
 24 provides, does it, a safety net, if you like, that every
 25 local authority knows that the department is going to

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1 the heart of the pandemic which was between value for
 2 money and the uncertainty about what would happen next
 3 in the pandemic. And the tension there was, for
 4 example, if we had given local government more
 5 certainty, then the risk would have been we would have
 6 given them more certainty on the basis of our
 7 understanding at the time we made the funding decisions
 8 that then turned out not to be true.

9 Q. Right. Can I just ask that we slow down slightly your
 10 answers.

11 A. I apologise.

12 Q. Don't worry about that. It's just that the stenographer
 13 needs to be able to keep up, and it's a natural thing to
 14 speak quickly. So just slow it down a little bit, thank
 15 you.

16 So in general times, normal times, certainty and
 17 clarity of funding you think is important, but the
 18 nature of the pandemic put stress on your ability to
 19 provide that clarity and certainty of funding; is that
 20 fair?

21 A. I think that is fair. I think within the constraints
 22 that we were operating within, I think we did pretty
 23 much as much as we could have done to provide local
 24 government with certainty. So right at the beginning of
 25 the pandemic I think ministers were very clear and we as

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1 stand behind it if they run into cash flow problems. So
 2 they don't need about disruption to services. Is that
 3 the point of guaranteeing cash flow?

4 A. So the immediate reason for providing the cash flow
 5 support was because very early in the pandemic, before
 6 the monitoring form, we were getting reports back from
 7 local government that they were concerned that the local
 8 government funding system, the lending between local
 9 authorities, was at risk of shutting down, because local
 10 authorities were concerned about ensuring they had
 11 sufficient funding so they wouldn't lend to each other.

12 Q. I see.

13 A. And over the course of a year local authorities will
 14 lend to each other, some will lend in one direction at
 15 the beginning of the year, others will lend in the
 16 other, and so the purpose of that was to ensure the
 17 liquidity of the system. There was enough cash in the
 18 system. What we did later was to ensure the
 19 sustainability and the solvency of the system which was
 20 about did they actually have enough resources longer
 21 term to be able to provide the support they need to?

22 Q. And you were trying to give them numbers early; is that
 23 the point?

24 A. Correct.

25 Q. So that they knew what was coming and they weren't

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1 having to delay taking action in terms of delivery of
2 service; they knew to a general degree what was coming
3 and the volume of funds?

4 **A.** Absolutely. And as you got towards the end of the
5 pandemic, if you look at tranche 5, for example, that
6 was first announced as part of the spending review in
7 November and that was funding for the first quarter of
8 the year '21/'22, so that was four months in advance.
9 So that was, I think, a very sensible thing to do and
10 provided the local government with the certainty they
11 needed.

12 **Q.** From the tone of your answers, it appears that you think
13 that worked well.

14 Looking ahead, would you do anything differently in
15 terms of certainty and clarity and providing that
16 certainty? Or do you think you took the measures that
17 you were able to take and they were the sort of measures
18 that should be taken in a future emergency?

19 **A.** So in broad terms, I think they were right. I think
20 what you could do is you could have been -- we could, if
21 you were looking at another pandemic situation, you
22 could provide greater clarity, and I think David
23 Phillips refers to this in his statement, to this idea
24 that you could have a set of principles and an approach
25 that you shared with local government. I think what you

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1 that also what you're asking for changed?

2 **A.** Yes, so there is statutory monitoring which has --
3 pre-existed the pandemic through a variety of forms.
4 The monitoring form then was a different document, had
5 some overlap with the statutory reporting and then was
6 initially monthly and then later, every two months.

7 **Q.** Okay. Now, English local authorities, therefore, were
8 used to an element of monitoring?

9 **A.** Correct.

10 **Q.** To what extent did this change in frequency and the
11 change in data you were requesting, in your view, add to
12 the administrative burden on local authorities at a time
13 when they were trying to deliver emergency services?

14 **A.** So I think we were acutely aware of the impact it would
15 have because in essence, every person you had filling
16 out a form was not a person, as you said, who would be
17 supporting delivery of services to the public.

18 I think we worked very hard with the Local
19 Government Association and with the sector in the design
20 and refinement of the form, and I think we were also
21 really clear why we thought it was important to have
22 a form. I think local government also understood the
23 value of the form, because of the explicit link that was
24 made between the monitoring form and the funding and the
25 scheme, schemes that were put in place to support local

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1 would need to do is you would need to ensure that when
2 you provided that, you also were clear about the fact
3 that the actual response would have to depend on the
4 circumstances of the time, but I think what that would
5 do is it would say to local government: this is how we
6 will think about your funding under a pandemic.

7 And in essence, I think we did that under the
8 pandemic, the Covid pandemic. I think if you were going
9 forward you could perhaps provide some people with just
10 a little bit more comfort by setting that out as a set
11 of principles.

12 **Q.** So set out principles that everyone can see, they're
13 accessible, they know the criteria by which you're
14 judging the situation, essentially?

15 **A.** Yes.

16 **Q.** All right. So can we come on to monitoring then, and
17 monitoring by the department of local authorities. And
18 we're talking here, aren't we, about local authorities
19 in England?

20 **A.** That's correct.

21 **Q.** And it's important to draw that distinction and I'd like
22 to pick up, during these questions, the comparison with
23 the position in Scotland. Now, you've told us there was
24 regular monitoring, quarterly, I think you said. And
25 that changed. The frequency changed, and is it right

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1 government under the pandemic.

2 So I think, while local government would have said
3 there was a burden, I think they would have recognised
4 that that was a burden that was worthwhile because of
5 the benefits that the monitoring form provided to MHCLG
6 but also to other government departments.

7 **Q.** So there was an inevitable trade-off in terms of
8 increased administrative burden, but that resulted in
9 you being able to deliver more effective support to the
10 local authorities, so it worked both ways? Is that the
11 point?

12 **A.** Yes.

13 **Q.** And was there any dialogue back and forth between you as
14 to whether it was too burdensome or did you tend to find
15 that you worked well in partnership with the Local
16 Government Association and that, generally speaking,
17 returns were made in a timely way and provided
18 information you needed?

19 **A.** So I think it's been set out elsewhere that the response
20 rate started at more or less 100%, and then even by the
21 very end we're still over 80%. So I think that reflects
22 the fact that local government understood why we were
23 asking for the information, and they were also prepared
24 to give the information.

25 I don't -- I can't over-emphasise how important the

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1 monitoring form was, and therefore, if anything, I would
2 have liked to have seen a larger proportion even through
3 to the end. But by the time we got to the very last
4 monitoring forms, the pandemic essentially was winding
5 down, and therefore I can understand why some local
6 authorities would have said, "Actually, we've got other
7 things that we need to prioritise now."

8 **Q.** I mean, providing data for the sake of it would be
9 burdensome without advantage, but can you give us an
10 example of how -- you say how important it was to have
11 this monitoring and how it assisted you in the
12 department to assist local authorities in return.

13 **A.** Mm.

14 **Q.** Can you give us a worked example of that, where it made
15 a real difference, or --

16 **A.** Well, so, the most obvious one was it allowed to us
17 understand broadly how much local government was
18 spending. So, as a rule of thumb at the beginning of
19 the pandemic, from the monitoring forms that we were
20 getting, we thought that local government was spending
21 broadly in the region of £500 million a month, so that
22 allowed us to think about how much funding we should
23 give, how frequently we should do it, and, therefore,
24 what the combination of those would be. So that would
25 be one example.

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1 **MR WRIGHT:** Yes, thank you, my Lady, I'm sure that will be
2 corrected in the stenography. It's "million" not
3 "billion".

4 **A.** Yes, it's definitely "million".

5 **Q.** Yes, thank you.

6 So there's obviously a balance to be struck, as
7 you've said. Do you think that, by and large, you
8 struck it well with English local authorities, in terms
9 of the level of monitoring that was requiring as against
10 the benefits of that monitoring?

11 **A.** Yes, I do. I think if I were looking to the future, one
12 thing that I would consider would be the number of
13 departments, the number of actors who were doing
14 monitoring. So could we, as government, take a more
15 joined-up approach and therefore streamline the amount
16 of monitoring we were doing by asking -- centralising it
17 more, and then just asking one set of questions?

18 That would obviously be more work -- the single
19 product would be more work for local government, but my
20 aim would be overall that it would reduce the burden on
21 local government overall. And potentially would also
22 then help central government, because you would have one
23 data source telling you what was happening.

24 **Q.** One interpretation of the data is that when you looked
25 at the funding that was in fact provided to local

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1 The other would be, at the very beginning of the
2 pandemic, and you can see this through the development
3 of the way the money was distributed, we had first
4 understood the pandemic as a shock that came through the
5 adult social care system. So the first funding that we
6 gave was primarily aimed towards adult social care.

7 What we then got back from the monitoring form was
8 actually the pressures on income. And so when you look
9 at the second tranche of money that we gave, that was
10 then much more weighted towards supporting people with
11 a loss of income. And then, as the pandemic developed,
12 we then changed from going through a purely
13 formula-based approach to one where we had
14 a formula-based approach for expenditure and then
15 a claim approach for income, so tax and for sales, fees
16 and charges.

17 **LADY HALLETT:** Can I interrupt? I'm sorry to interrupt.

18 I think you mentioned how much local government was
19 spending, "in the region of 500 million a month". It
20 was recorded as [draft] "billion". I just wanted to
21 check you said 500 "million" per month?

22 **A.** Yes, 500 million. And to be clear, that it was just for
23 the un-ringfenced funding that we were providing from
24 local government finance. Obviously other departments
25 and other actors were providing additional funding.

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1 authorities in England, there's an argument they were
2 overfunded --

3 **A.** Yes.

4 **Q.** -- during the pandemic, and I just wonder how that sits
5 with the proposition that the monitoring was effective
6 and assisted you to deliver the support?

7 **A.** So I think inevitably the difference between the
8 statutory monitoring and the monitoring form was the
9 monitoring form was done at pace on unverified data by
10 local authority finance directors providing their best
11 understanding at the time that it happened.

12 As you say, it then turned out there was
13 a discrepancy with the formal reporting.

14 I was never particularly bothered about that
15 because, consistent with the discussion that we had
16 earlier about certainty of funding, actually, providing
17 local government with more funding than it needed at any
18 point in time was not wasted funding, because, in
19 essence, local government funding is something that is
20 repeated every year. So I felt more comfortable,
21 personally, providing more money and recognising that
22 some local authorities were overfunded than the
23 opposite, which would have been they would have been
24 underfunded.

25 And there was a judgement to be made about, if you

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1 use a formula-based approach, inevitably some local
2 authorities will get too much and some local authorities
3 will not get enough. And it's about drawing that
4 balance. And inevitably, if you're trying to avoid one,
5 which is local authorities not having enough, you run
6 the risk of providing some with too many.

7 And we obviously had the Exceptional Financial
8 Support scheme, which was for local authorities that
9 didn't have enough, but it was -- the design of it was
10 that it was exceptional. It was not to be generalised.
11 And therefore it was important to ensure that there was
12 enough funding in the system.

13 **Q.** And in terms of overfunding, are you making the point
14 that there would then be another year of funding to
15 follow, and that overfunding would be, what, recouped or
16 balanced out over time? Is that the point you're
17 making?

18 **A.** Absolutely. So if you look at the un-ringfenced
19 reserves that local authorities had, they rose from
20 somewhere in the region of 25, 26 billion up to about
21 35 billion and have now returned to something like
22 30 billion. So effectively what happened was, as you
23 say, overfunding went in and then government actually
24 has provided significant funding after the pandemic, but
25 has been able to reflect the funding that was provided

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1 But where do you sit in terms of in a future
2 emergency, monitoring is a good thing, or light touch,
3 no monitoring, it can all be done by established
4 relationships?

5 **A.** I am very strongly of the view that monitoring was an
6 important part of the response. That isn't to say that
7 the other things that you've described, the informal
8 contact, the feedback from local government potentially
9 in a more qualitative sense was not important, but
10 I think the monitoring forms were absolutely essential.

11 **Q.** Okay. And I just want to pick up on that point, the
12 other thing I mentioned, because some of the local
13 government witnesses we heard from in the Inquiry last
14 week were keen to point out that yes, monitoring of
15 quantitative data is important for central government to
16 ensure engagement with local authorities, but that also
17 there needs to be engagement with local authorities in
18 the sense of what is actually happening on the ground.
19 So not just looking at data, but conversation and
20 communication.

21 And I just wonder, just for you to ponder on that,
22 how would you achieve that in a situation where there
23 are 317 local authorities in England, and it sounds like
24 a great idea, but what's your experience as to how that
25 could actually translate into reality?

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1 in the pandemic in the decisions that were made
2 subsequently about the levels of funding.

3 **Q.** If you didn't have the level of monitoring you did, how
4 would you have picked up on the overfunding that
5 subsequently transpired? Would it have been more
6 challenging if you'd have had a lighter touch level of
7 monitoring and returns?

8 **A.** So you would have -- eventually, you would have found
9 the overfunding would have appeared in the official
10 statistics. One, the official statistics are less
11 frequent and secondly, they come with a time lag. So
12 effectively, we would have been blind to the situation
13 until it had come up in the official statistics. And
14 the risk obviously then would have been not that there
15 was overfunding but there was underfunding and then we
16 wouldn't have known and then we would have put delivery
17 by local government at risk.

18 **Q.** And we know, in contrast to the position with English
19 local authorities, that in Scotland the Scottish
20 Government did not collect financial monitoring returns,
21 though COSLA did organise some of its own data
22 collections, and the justification was that it was too
23 onerous on local authorities, wanted them out delivering
24 services. You've seen the -- what happened in England
25 and how monitoring went.

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1 **A.** So I agree with you, having 300-plus local authorities
2 does make it a challenge to connect with each and every
3 one of them. I think it's recorded in the NOA's report
4 on local government finance under the pandemic that the
5 local government finance team, and MHCLG more broadly,
6 had contact with around a third of all local
7 authorities. But the way that we attempted to answer
8 that question is, from a local government finance
9 perspective, is we set up a group who were the
10 presidents of each of the different societies: so London
11 treasurers, metropolitan treasurers, county council
12 treasurers, district council treasurers, that group was
13 a pre-existing group. It had met probably every two or
14 three months prior to the pandemic. And then under the
15 pandemic we met weekly or, on occasions, daily.

16 That was very important in terms of getting feedback
17 from, if you like, a representative group of the sector.
18 It's also the case that, under the pandemic, we
19 continued the engagement that we had with local
20 government more broadly. So that was less -- if you
21 like, that was less systematic in the sense of we might
22 talk to one local authority one week and another
23 a different week.

24 So I think we struck the balance of having
25 a dedicated group that we worked with intensively, and

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1 then a much broader group who we had more occasional
2 contact with but who provided us with feedback.

3 I think the other thing that's worth saying is that
4 across the directorate, individual members of the
5 directorate would have had connections with local
6 government and we got an enormous amount of feedback
7 during the pandemic about what was working and what
8 wasn't working.

9 And also, we very actively worked with local
10 government in the design of the schemes that we were
11 implementing. So it wasn't just about feedback after
12 the implementation; it was also about how -- what we
13 were intending to do and how we could make sure that we
14 were designing it in a way that meant it worked for
15 local government.

16 **Q.** So as far as your department's concerned, it seems that
17 from your perspective, you're getting good data through
18 monitoring, you're using pre-existing frameworks that
19 tap into representatives at all different levels of
20 local government, and you're also having ad hoc
21 conversations as well --

22 **A.** Yep.

23 **Q.** -- as well as having, within the department, people who
24 have a long experience of dealing with local
25 authorities; is that right?

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1 months after the funding is or was announced.

2 I'm not asking you about the specifics of the
3 scheme, but taking that as an example, what sort of
4 challenge would that place on a local authority if they
5 get an announcement but they don't have the guidance at
6 the same time?

7 **A.** So I think they were -- I think they've been well
8 illustrated by the evidence that you've had, which is
9 that oftentimes people who were potential recipients
10 would say, "Well, I would really like the money so can
11 you tell me what it is and how I claim it?" And then
12 they would say, "Well, actually, I don't know because
13 I'm waiting for the guidance."

14 In respect of the CARF, there was actually a very
15 specific explanation. So I think that probably was the
16 most delayed of all of the guidance. And the reason for
17 that was because, at the time of the announcement of the
18 CARF, the government said that the issuing of guidance
19 would be dependent on the successful passage of the
20 Rating and Directors Disqualification Bill, because
21 essentially the CARF overlapped with the material change
22 in circumstances that businesses were making, and so the
23 government said: well, first of all, we need the
24 legislation to prevent the material change of
25 circumstances claims, and then we can issue the CARF.

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1 **A.** Correct, and in addition to the Local Government Finance
2 Team, who obviously would lead on finance, there were
3 other -- there were other parts of the department who,
4 for example, led on local government engagement or
5 resilience and emergencies, and then, as you went to the
6 permanent secretary, the director general, there were,
7 for example, the meetings of the regional nine. So
8 I think, as a whole, the department had a very strong
9 engagement with the local government sector under the
10 pandemic. And I think that provided us with an enormous
11 amount of feedback that we found very useful.

12 **Q.** Okay. I want to move on to a different topic now which
13 is, if you like, the delay that there sometimes was
14 between the announcement of funds and the guidance then
15 being issued that was relevant to how those funds should
16 be used. Now, I don't want to ask you questions about
17 topics that aren't within your remit, but we'll pick
18 this up as a general issue. You're aware, I think, of
19 the Covid Additional Relief Fund, CARF?

20 **A.** Yes.

21 **Q.** Is that right? And we understand, and I'm using this as
22 an example, it was announced in March of 2021, but the
23 guidance became significantly delayed, there were
24 various iterations of the guidance, and I think the
25 final version was dated December of 2021. So several

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1 So in that particular case, there were reasons why
2 it took so long.

3 But your broader point, which is: were there
4 negative impacts from a delay between announcement and
5 guidance? Yes, I think there were impacts.

6 **Q.** Why -- I mean, that's a specific example but in other
7 examples there are delays --

8 **A.** Yeah.

9 **Q.** -- between funds and guidance. Why was that happening?
10 Was that just because of the pace at which things were
11 moving? Was it that there wasn't time to work up the
12 guidance, it was more important to make the
13 announcement? Can you just give us your perspective.

14 **A.** I mean, if I think about the guidance that we issued, so
15 primarily that guidance was not binding, so we were
16 issuing non-ringfenced grants so, effectively, local
17 government could do what it wanted. So the guidance, if
18 you like, in those circumstances was not that material.

19 In the cases where the guidance was essential,
20 I think there was a tension between making the
21 announcement and the work that then needed to go in to
22 work through the details. And some of that, as you say,
23 was literally about the pace at which the work was
24 taking place. I think some of it was also about working
25 practices and who was able to input and work on guidance

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1 in advance of an announcement and where the announcement
2 had to happen first, and then people could really begin
3 to get to grips with producing the guidance.

4 **Q.** Can I just unpick that second part of your answer.
5 Working practices, do you mean working practices in the
6 department or in local authorities? Just expand on what
7 you mean, these working practices that caused that sort
8 of problem.

9 **A.** So in a number of cases, and I think you've seen this in
10 evidence, the responsibility for the design and delivery
11 of a grant was split. So in some cases, for example,
12 the Treasury had responsibility for the design of the
13 policy, BEIS had responsible for the delivery, and MHCLG
14 provided expert input. And so in those circumstances,
15 then if, for example, the grant was part of a budget
16 process, then there may have been issues around who was
17 told what and when, because of budget protocols.

18 **Q.** And by budget process (sic) you mean the budget --

19 **A.** Yes.

20 **Q.** -- that the Chancellor of the Exchequer --

21 **A.** Correct.

22 **Q.** -- announces on the floor of the House of Commons.
23 That budget --

24 **A.** Yes.

25 **Q.** -- not local authority budgets.

25

1 if you were doing all this again, what could you do to
2 take some of those rough edges off? I mean, are there
3 streams of responsibility that could be looked at, or
4 aligning policy with the department that's actually
5 implementing? Or what would your suggestions be, having
6 been through this?

7 **A.** I mean, it is very hard because, you know, as you were
8 living the pandemic, we -- it literally felt that each
9 day was bringing new issues, and so people were working
10 at incredible pace. But my reflection would be that
11 if -- for example, as we discussed earlier, if there
12 were another pandemic and we had done more preparation
13 in advance, we would have a greater understanding of
14 which levers we would use and what grants we might use,
15 and therefore we would be able to do a lot of the work,
16 a lot more of the work, further in advance.

17 I then think there is a question, which I think as
18 government we should always ask ourselves, which is: are
19 we applying the right level of secrecy or
20 confidentiality? Are we being as open as we can be in
21 the production of the policy to ensure that we can bring
22 in people who can give us expertise and allow us to, as
23 you say, reduce the gap between announcement and
24 guidance?

25 Because if, for example, we had been brought in to

27

1 **A.** No.

2 **Q.** No, okay. So that's one example.

3 So where different departments were involved, one
4 driving policy, one perhaps delivery, one as an expert
5 adviser, that's where you tended to see this separation,
6 perhaps, of announcement from guidance and --

7 **A.** Yeah.

8 **Q.** -- the scheme actually going on?

9 **A.** So I think there are number of examples that you see in
10 the evidence, where issues were first brought to
11 departments, the department who would be responsible for
12 the guidance, potentially 24, 48, 72 hours before the
13 announcement, and so that limited the department's
14 ability to produce the guidance. So there was, for
15 example, in the case of the Hardship Fund for Council
16 Tax that we were responsible for at the beginning of the
17 pandemic, the proposal from the Treasury came on
18 10 March to the department, and the announcement was on
19 11 March at the budget. That 24 hours made it difficult
20 to get guidance out.

21 Now, under those circumstances, we did actually get
22 guidance out within a few days after the budget, but it
23 inevitably took us time to produce the guidance.

24 **Q.** Now, accepting all of the reasons for that,
25 confidentiality, speed of response, emerging situation,

26

1 some of those things earlier, that would have allowed us
2 to have reduced the gap between when the announcement
3 was made and when the guidance was finally produced.

4 **Q.** I will come back to this later on in questioning, but
5 just to pick up on some of that now, you talked earlier
6 about you having very good levels of trust and
7 openness --

8 **A.** Yeah.

9 **Q.** -- with local authorities as a department, that you had
10 pre-existing and developed even further during the
11 pandemic.

12 So if that was there already with your department,
13 was one of the difficulties really bridging the gap
14 between your department and those other government
15 departments? You had that relationship, but they
16 didn't, with local authorities?

17 **A.** Yes, so -- yes. So, ultimately, each local government
18 department -- sorry, each government department has
19 responsibility for the policy area that it looks after.
20 MHCLG had expertise in local government. And for the
21 areas that we were responsible for, I think we took
22 exactly the approach that you've just described.

23 We could then support other government departments
24 with the expertise that we had, and with the offer of
25 the connection to local government. And some

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1 departments had that at the beginning of the pandemic,
2 and some took some time to develop it and developed it
3 over the pandemic, but ultimately, that was a decision
4 for them.

5 So, I think, as you've seen in some of the other
6 evidence, for example on business grants, at the
7 beginning there wasn't such a close -- one, there was
8 a tension about how quickly the policy was developed,
9 but, secondly, the connection between the department and
10 local government was not as close, I think, as it was in
11 the case of MHCLG.

12 **Q.** I mean, generally speaking, did you tend to find that
13 local authorities and the people you were dealing with,
14 the representatives, these were reliable people who
15 could be trusted? They understood confidentiality?

16 **A.** Absolutely.

17 **Q.** Yes. And did you ever find it frustrating that you
18 wanted to bring them closer into the design of policy,
19 but other departments, that perhaps didn't have those
20 sort of relationships or experience, were reluctant to
21 do that?

22 **A.** Yes. But I think I recognise why that was the case:
23 because I think one of the advantages of the way that we
24 had worked prior to the pandemic is we had established
25 those relationships and that level of trust, and so that

29

1 Overarching question, are you on the agility side of
2 the pendulum or are you on the planning side of the
3 pendulum?

4 **A.** I mean, I think I would -- I think I would put myself
5 somewhere in the middle.

6 So I think there is a very sensible amount of
7 planning that you can do in advance. I think you can
8 over-engineer the planning. And you're absolutely
9 right, you need an agility to respond. So at the
10 beginning we talked a little bit about the component
11 parts and the building blocks. If I were responsible
12 now, I would want to understand the building blocks.
13 I would want to understand the levers I was going to
14 deploy. I would want to leave the question of which
15 lever when, by how much, with who, open but, if you
16 like, I would want to minimise the amount of ambiguity
17 and uncertainty going into a pandemic, so that, if you
18 like, I was then just left with the essential decisions
19 which could only be answered in the pandemic.

20 **Q.** And in fairness to Dr Leunig, I'm probably overstating
21 his position, because I think he did go on to say and
22 support the idea that you can plan your architecture --

23 **A.** Right.

24 **Q.** -- you can plan your relationship frameworks and so on
25 and so forth, but you leave the actual decisions to --

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1 naturally flowed into the work under the pandemic.
2 I think if you hadn't have had that, then I think there
3 may have been a natural caution on the part of
4 a government department to say: well, we don't know
5 these actors particularly well, there are risks about
6 being very open, there could be a leak, information
7 could get out that was market sensitive, and so we need
8 to be cautious about what we do.

9 So I think -- I think part of my answer to your
10 question would be to say there is probably only so much
11 you can do in the heat of the moment of the pandemic.
12 The work should be done prior to the pandemic in terms
13 of establishing the relationship, so they are all there
14 at the point that the pandemic happens.

15 **Q.** That neatly brings me on to the next topic, which is
16 essentially looking at emergency final -- financial
17 response frameworks, so how you might plan, now, to put
18 yourself in that better position to have a framework.

19 The first thing I'd like to ask you is a sort of
20 general question, picking up on the evidence we heard
21 from Dr Leunig, who was an economic adviser at the
22 Treasury, who favoured a sort of -- to an extent, an
23 anti-planning approach. In other words, intellectual
24 agility is what is required, you don't need a lot of
25 plans and framework; you need to react to the situation.

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1 reaction to what is happening on the ground. Is that
2 where you sit, really?

3 **A.** Yes. I think the only thing that I would add is I think
4 processing will only ever get you so far. So I would --
5 in addition to processes, I would also think about the
6 culture. So what are the ways of working? How do we
7 engage local government? What do we -- what is our
8 approach to openness? As you just described, what is
9 our approach to risk?

10 So I wouldn't just look at the "what", I would also
11 look at the "how".

12 **Q.** Right.

13 Now, the Inquiry understands that the department's
14 conducted lessons learned exercises, as you would
15 expect, and I will come on to some of those, but do you,
16 therefore, favour yourself having this emergency
17 framework that can be taken off the shelf in a future
18 emergency?

19 **A.** Yes, I do, but consistent with the point that I just
20 made, I don't think it's just about having a document.

21 **Q.** No.

22 **A.** It's about how do you make that -- how does that
23 document live? So, for me, I read the -- I wasn't
24 there, but I've read the documents. I think the
25 question that it leaves for me is: okay, but what's the

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1 engagement that you're having with local government now
2 in advance of the next pandemic? So that when you do
3 pull that book off the shelf, you not only have the
4 processes, but you also have the people and the
5 relationships in place to make a success of the
6 response.

7 **Q.** Now, I suspect I know, therefore, the answer to my next
8 question, but I'll ask it anyway.

9 How important is it to have the local government
10 association and local authorities involved at this
11 stage, looking ahead at those issues, understanding how
12 things might work, ensuring those relationships are
13 there?

14 **A.** I mean, I'm sure it's happening, but I would say it was
15 essential. I think that in order to prepare for the
16 next pandemic, you have to have the key actors in the
17 room.

18 **Q.** Moving on slightly to central government and sort of
19 joined-up working in central government, we've already
20 touched on, in your evidence, these strong relationships
21 you had with local authorities.

22 In a sense, your department is the voice of local
23 authorities in central government; do you agree with
24 that?

25 **A.** I do, yeah.

33

1 contacts for other government departments, for, for
2 example, transport, waste, and so on.
3 So I would say that we had good links in to other
4 government departments and good ways of working prior to
5 the pandemic.

6 **Q.** But if you would give yourselves marks out of 10 for how
7 you engaged with local authorities, did you see that
8 other departments were not receptive to engaging with
9 local authorities? Did it vary, department to
10 department, that some viewed them as trusted partners,
11 others didn't? What was your experience?

12 **A.** I think it's fair to say that different departments took
13 different views about their level and the nature and
14 engagement that they had with local government into and
15 during the pandemic. My personal view would be to
16 strongly encourage all government departments to develop
17 the strongest relationships possible with local
18 government.

19 **Q.** Now again, that sounds like a great idea. How does it
20 work in practice? We're talking about central
21 government, big machine. How structurally could you
22 make that work, other than just saying that everybody
23 should talk to local authorities and trust them? What
24 could you actually do?

25 **A.** So I don't think I have an exact parallel but where

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1 **Q.** You are the sponsoring department, if you like, who has
2 this 317 local authorities. They feed in to you, and
3 then you speak on their behalf to other central
4 government departments.

5 How did you find there was -- to what extent was
6 there joined-up thinking and working between your
7 department and the other big departments that were
8 players here?

9 **A.** Yeah, so the division of responsibility is that MHCLG,
10 as you say, is the sponsor department for local
11 government, but individual departments take
12 responsibilities for specific policy. So I know this
13 has been discussed before but, for example, the
14 Department of Health and Social Care has responsibility
15 for adult social care, the Department for Education has
16 responsible for children's social care, and so on and so
17 on.

18 Prior to the pandemic, we had very good
19 relationships with most departments. I would say that
20 the strength of the relationship was proportional to the
21 importance they played in the local government finance
22 system. So, for example, within the Local Government
23 Finance Directorate, we had a team that was specifically
24 responsible for supporting DHSC and DfE on adults' and
25 children's social care, and then we had nominated

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1 government feels a particular thing is particularly
2 important and worth pursuing, then they can either
3 legislate to make it happen or they can issue guidance
4 to government departments saying that their expectation
5 is that it should happen. So it is not a parallel, but
6 the family test exists, and that was a commitment from
7 a previous government that said the family is really
8 important, and now every government department, when you
9 formulate policy, you need to think about the impact
10 that it has on the family.

11 I'm not -- I wouldn't want to stretch that too far.
12 That is non-legislative, it's non-statutory. I think,
13 in essence, it's a "comply or explain" basis, but
14 effectively, what it does is it pushes consideration of
15 the family up the agenda in what can sometimes be a very
16 crowded space.

17 **Q.** And given your department is effectively the voice of
18 local authorities, I suppose would that give you a bit
19 more heft in terms of delivering their voice to other
20 departments, if you're able to say, "Look, you have
21 a requirement, an obligation to think about local
22 authorities and how" --

23 **A.** Yes, so there are number of examples, again, they're not
24 parallels, but there are a number of examples where the
25 department has exactly some leverage or some heft with

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1 other government departments. So, for example, the new
2 burdens process, that is a responsibility that sits
3 within MHCLG, and there is a process that needs to be
4 gone through. It is not perfect and it doesn't always
5 deliver the outcomes that you might want, but in broad
6 terms, that means that other government departments need
7 to consider the impact of a change in policy on local
8 government finances and their costs, and then needs them
9 to engage in that process.

10 So I think what we're talking about here, though, is
11 something broader. Because I think again, coming back
12 to my point, I would be nervous of just saying, "Well,
13 there's a new form that needs to get filled out and
14 therefore that is the answer." Ultimately, I think this
15 comes down to the individuals working in the area
16 understanding the value of engaging with local
17 government as we did in MHCLG, I think, under the
18 pandemic.

19 I think the process can be helpful, but it needs to
20 be complemented by, if you like, the approach of the
21 individuals concerned.

22 Q. So a lot of this comes down to building relationships,
23 changing attitudes, encouraging inclusivity with local
24 authorities when decisions are being made?

25 A. Yes.

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1 local people, places and the economy."

2 Just pausing there, those are all things that your
3 department knows very well already; do you agree?

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. And in terms of wider government and culture and
6 relationships, I mean, really, that's the message that
7 other departments could do with understanding; is that
8 fair?

9 A. I would support that, yeah.

10 Q. So that's just not an important lesson learned for your
11 department; it's an important lesson learned for all
12 government departments, how effective a partner local
13 authorities can be?

14 A. I would hope that any playbook from any government
15 department which touched on local authorities would have
16 similar text.

17 Q. Yes, and then if we can have the next section please:

18 "For any future emergency response MHCLG will have
19 a key role in emphasising to OGDs [other government
20 departments] the importance of early engagement and
21 co-design with local authorities, particularly where it
22 is possible that local authorities will lead or support
23 delivery."

24 Just pausing there, again, that sounds great, but
25 I mean, that's saying what you should do. It doesn't

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1 Q. Right. So there's a cultural element, a government
2 culture. Right. You're nodding but I think it needs to
3 be a "Yes" or a "No".

4 A. Sorry, yes, I agree with you. I think culture is
5 important.

6 Q. All right, okay.

7 Can we move on to playbooks that have been
8 developed, because I think this, again, is something
9 you've touched on and I want to pick up on it with you.
10 There are two playbooks, the MHCLG pandemic playbook,
11 and then the financial shocks playbook.

12 And I'm just going to ask that the part of the
13 pandemic playbook is put up. So this is INQ000625658,
14 pages 27 to 29, and it's the section entitled "Local
15 Engagement, Local Government (including Mayors)."

16 There we are. I'm just going to read part of this
17 into the record:

18 "As demonstrated during Covid-19, local authorities
19 played a critical role in responding to pandemics.

20 Their local leadership, knowledge of communities, and
21 ability to quickly adapt and design services to meet
22 local needs puts them at the forefront of response.

23 "From public health protection, to economic growth,
24 the expertise of local authorities is vast, meaning they
25 can help tackle the full range of potential impacts on

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1 actually tell you how you would do it, does it? I mean,
2 isn't it the "how" that's important?

3 A. I agree the "how" is important. I think if I was
4 being -- the other thing that I would pick out is
5 I would -- this is not about the actions that are taken
6 when the pandemic happens. I strongly believe these are
7 actions that need to be taken in advance and
8 considerably in advance, because culture is one of the
9 slowest things to change, ways of working, and so what
10 I would be suggesting -- and I'm sure that it is in
11 government now -- is that I would be taking this and
12 I would be making -- I would be doing this now, so that
13 when we got to the point of the next pandemic, all we
14 were doing is we were just strengthening and building on
15 relationships and ways of working and processes that we
16 already had. We were not creating new ones at the point
17 of the pandemic.

18 Q. So these should not be aspirations for what you do once
19 there is a crisis; this is what you should be getting on
20 with doing now to make sure that when a crisis occurs,
21 everything is in place?

22 A. Absolutely.

23 Q. Right. Can you think of any benefit to not including
24 local authorities in the design of this playbook, and
25 inviting them to contribute to writing a playbook like

40

1 this?

2 **A.** So there may be some sensitivities about some of the

3 information in the playbook but I think I would return

4 to the point that I made earlier, which is: we should

5 really challenge ourselves. Every time we say there's

6 a sensitivity, we should challenge ourselves to

7 understand whether it really is a sensitivity. My

8 personal preference would be to be open. It may be that

9 ultimately local government wouldn't see all parts of

10 every playbook, but I think your general point, which is

11 should local government be involved, and should it

12 understand in broad terms what the playbook is, I think

13 the answer is yes, because I think part of the success

14 would be to have a shared understanding going into

15 a pandemic of what was likely to happen, and I think

16 that's difficult if you don't share the playbook.

17 **Q.** Yes. I mean, you've stressed earlier in your evidence

18 how important having open and trusting relationships

19 with local authorities are, and one view is that not

20 engaging them in the design of a playbook for future

21 emergencies might tend to undermine a sense of openness

22 and trust. Do you agree with that as a general

23 proposition?

24 **A.** Yes, subject to my point about there may be very good

25 reasons on occasions not to share all of the playbook

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1 government and asked to be kept confidential did not

2 remain confidential. So I am confident that if you ask

3 local government to respect that confidentiality, they

4 would respect that confidentiality, because ultimately

5 this is to their benefit, and they know that if they

6 don't respect that confidentiality, then one of the

7 consequences will be they will not be involved in

8 activities like this, which are crucial to them.

9 **Q.** Thank you.

10 I'm going to move on from playbooks, only because

11 I want to cover some other ground with you.

12 **A.** Right.

13 **Q.** I think you've made, if I may say so, under that

14 playbook, the points that I was going to ask you about.

15 So let's move on a little to business grant schemes.

16 And I just want to really, through the prism of

17 business grant schemes, pick up this point a little

18 further about engagement, and engagement with

19 departments other than your own.

20 Now, the Inquiry has heard from the Local Government

21 Association and local authorities a more critical

22 analysis of the way that the Treasury and the department

23 of business engaged with them during the economic

24 response, as compared to your department. And we've

25 picked up this point that you're the voice of local

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1 because of particular sensitivities, yes, I agree with

2 that.

3 **Q.** And I don't want to overstate what you are saying, but

4 I apprehend you're making the point that you should, as

5 the department, challenge yourselves as to: is this

6 really sensitive? Is there actually a need to keep this

7 private and not involve our partners in local

8 authorities? Is that how you would approach decision

9 making: self-challenge, can we actually share this?

10 **A.** I mean, I personally find it a good way of working.

11 I think what it does is, I think sometimes we are overly

12 cautious as a government about what we share with other

13 people because we're nervous about the consequences.

14 And I'm not saying there are times when it is absolutely

15 right to be cautious and we can't share information, but

16 I would encourage local -- I would encourage sharing

17 information with local government. And I think the

18 other thing, returning to the point that we discussed

19 earlier, is under the pandemic, we demonstrated that we

20 could work with local government in a very open and

21 transparent way, and they respected that

22 confidentiality.

23 So under the -- in the entirety of the pandemic, we

24 did not have a single occasion in local government

25 finance, where stuff that we had discussed with local

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1 authorities in central government.

2 Were you doing your part to try to persuade those

3 other departments that they really needed to engage

4 during the emergency, or was it not really working like

5 that because things were happening so quickly there

6 wasn't the time?

7 **A.** So, where we knew about something, we would have made

8 the point about the value of engage -- well, I think

9 there are two things.

10 One is, under any circumstances, we would have taken

11 the knowledge that we had of local government and

12 represented local government and made the points about,

13 for example, the potential design implications of

14 a particular proposal and whether it would or wouldn't

15 work in local government. So we would have done that

16 under all circumstances.

17 It's also the case that we would have, as a matter

18 of course, encouraged another government department to

19 engage with local government.

20 I think you're right, I wasn't personally involved

21 in the business grants in great detail, but having read

22 the evidence, it's clear that there was enormous time

23 pressure and that at some points information was shared

24 with BEIS at a very late stage, which then made them

25 engaging with local government more difficult than it

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1 otherwise would have been.

2 **Q.** Is there any element here of a sort of pecking order of
3 departments? That the Treasury is an extremely powerful
4 department, and your department, in comparison, wasn't
5 as powerful, and therefore there's a sense in which it
6 has to be subservient to the Treasury? It isn't, sort
7 of, willing to stand up for itself? Is that your
8 experience?

9 **A.** No, no. I think where we had engagement with the
10 Treasury, and I know that we did, and where we that
11 concerns and where we knew about them and shared them
12 with the Treasury -- we would have shared them with the
13 Treasury. There were circumstances where those concerns
14 were acknowledged but were not actioned. But I think
15 they -- I think we were always effective in representing
16 local government under the pandemic. But ultimately,
17 the decision about the design of a scheme or the
18 implementation of a scheme would have sat with the
19 relevant department.

20 **Q.** I just want to pick up a specific example of -- really
21 linked to this point. And I preface this with I don't
22 think you're on this email chain, but I just want to use
23 it to illustrate the point.

24 Could we have INQ000661243. And this is an extract
25 from an email:

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1 typical or not?

2 **A.** I mean, if I remember rightly -- so, in this specific
3 case, as you say, this was a Treasury policy. So this
4 would have been subject to Treasury protocols and ways
5 of working. This was in the run-up to the budget, so it
6 would have been covered by budget processes. We had
7 a long-established way of working with the Treasury on
8 that, which is effectively we provided them with, if you
9 like, expertise but we did not -- we did that on
10 a closed list. So we were not at liberty to engage
11 local authorities.

12 I think it's also the case that 7 March 2020 was
13 a Saturday, and this was for the budget on the following
14 Wednesday. But your general point, which is, would
15 injecting -- so I think, remembering the other things on
16 this list, I think what you did see is that officials
17 from MHCLG did share what they thought the impact on
18 local government would have been. So the first role
19 I talked about.

20 **Q.** Yes.

21 **A.** The bit that I think you are saying is: well, were local
22 government involved?

23 I think in this case they were not.

24 In principle, do I think it is good to involve local
25 government in the development of policy? Yes.

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1 "My initial thinking was also that this would be
2 easier if we gave LAs more discretion. But perhaps with
3 some guidelines about what kind of criteria we think
4 they should use.

5 "Any thoughts about how we could be more specific
6 about what we think LAs might be able to do/achieve?
7 Whether they would welcome the funding, or criticise us
8 for expecting them to do the impossible? Do you know if
9 we did anything like this in the past ..."

10 And then, underneath, can we see there at 5.12
11 there's a reply:

12 "... 'I think it's hard to call how they [local
13 authorities] would react. I think the more cumbersome
14 you make it and the more pressure you put on LAs to do
15 it quickly the harder it will be. New burdens funding
16 might grease the wheels' ..."

17 If you were being critical of that conversation, you
18 might say: well, rather than wondering how they might
19 react, or wondering how they might find it, just ask
20 them.

21 And I just wonder, do you think sometimes that there
22 wasn't an approach whereby this rich resource of
23 experience was tapped into? There was a sort of an
24 assumption, "Well, we'll make the decision and see how
25 it lands", rather than just asking them. Is that

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1 In this specific case, would it have been possible
2 and appropriate?

3 Without getting into the details of the particular
4 case, I wouldn't want to say, because, as I say, this
5 was done in the run-up to a budget; I don't know what
6 else was being discussed and therefore how appropriate
7 it would have been.

8 But I think, looking ahead, if you like, one measure
9 of success would be that we didn't have an email like
10 this in the next pandemic, because we would broadly
11 understand the systems, the levers that we would be
12 using, and therefore we wouldn't need to be having
13 a discussion like this.

14 **Q.** Putting it bluntly, I might ask you: do you think that
15 sometimes process got in the way of common sense? The
16 need to follow government process and procedure got in
17 the way of the common sense of just picking up the phone
18 and asking the question?

19 **A.** So I would hesitate to say that. I think what I would
20 say is my principal position is that the involvement of
21 local government is a good thing and will improve the
22 quality of the policies that we are making.

23 So, I would -- in principle, I would always say that
24 local government should be involved. Taking that
25 circumstance by circumstance, you need to understand

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1 precisely what was happening at the time.

2 **LADY HALLETT:** And presumably, Mr Skinner, you would say HMT
3 are likely to say it wasn't just process; there are good
4 reasons why you have a tight circulation list when it
5 comes to a budget and the impact on markets and the
6 like?

7 **A.** Yes, that's absolutely true but, for example, prior to
8 the pandemic, the Treasury had been considering reform
9 of the business rate system and they had established
10 a working group in a run-up to a fiscal event which
11 involved certainly representatives of the sector,
12 I can't remember exactly which local authorities or
13 which representatives they were, but they had
14 established that.

15 So I think my point would be consistent with my
16 point about we should challenge ourselves about exactly
17 when and where we say it cannot be discussed, do we
18 genuinely mean that? And sometimes there is a trade-off
19 to be made. I am confident in them respecting the
20 confidentiality. I think then the question is: well,
21 what is the benefit in involving local government? And
22 I think we're saying they can bring a lot to the table.

23 **MR WRIGHT:** You mentioned earlier in your evidence a panel
24 that already existed that representatives from different
25 types of local authority.

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1 tended to land much better where policy and design was
2 brought together. So that's what you were trying to do.
3 Where it was in your gift to bring local authorities
4 closely into the delivery of policy, you did. Is that
5 the position?

6 **A.** Absolutely.

7 **Q.** Right. Can I move on to another topic, which is league
8 tables. Now, this was April 2020. Data being published
9 by central government regarding the proportion of
10 allocated funds that had been paid out to business by
11 local authorities. It became known to some as a league
12 table, if you like.

13 Mr Jenrick, in his statement, INQ000661484, at
14 paragraph 80, says:

15 "My view is that a league table was both appropriate
16 and helpful. The grant schemes were of little use if
17 they did not find their way quickly to the business
18 which needed their support. As above, there was a real
19 risk that without support, businesses would simply
20 disappear from local communities ..."

21 He goes on:

22 "That would have been disastrous for those directly
23 involved, and if at sufficient scale for LAs as well."

24 Now it may be that you agree completely with the
25 balance of that paragraph, but do you agree with the

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1 **A.** Yes.

2 **Q.** I mean, accepting you can't speak to 317 local
3 authorities, is there a role for that sort of panel in
4 a much more reactive way? So when a policy is being
5 worked up, that that panel can come in and provide
6 advice and guidance and help you in terms of how it
7 might land?

8 **A.** So that is exactly what we did, in the directorate
9 that I was responsible for, that's exactly what we did.
10 So the monitoring form, a lot of co-production. As we
11 thought through the tranches and the various sales, fees
12 and charges scheme, the local tax guarantee scheme, the
13 exceptional financial support scheme, that is exactly
14 what we did.

15 I think one of the advantages for us in those
16 circumstances was we were responsible both for the
17 design of the policy and the implementation of the
18 policy, so we brought those two things together. So, if
19 you like, we internalised some of those rough edges that
20 you talked about previously.

21 **Q.** We've heard in another context that where Treasury and
22 HMRC, for example, were responsible for policy and
23 delivery --

24 **A.** Yes.

25 **Q.** -- so they could bring those two things together, things

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1 first line of it: that league tables were appropriate
2 and helpful in achieving that which followed? Or
3 preventing that which followed?

4 **A.** So I think that the way the information presented was
5 subject to significant discussion, and a lot of that
6 discussion was to avoid it being seen as a league table.
7 I think -- I understand why the table was produced. In
8 fact, people who worked for me did the calling to find
9 out the answer. I think, as I said in my statement,
10 while the intent is entirely understandable, which is to
11 bring transparency, to understand the performance of
12 different local authorities, the important thing is then
13 to match that with the understanding of why different
14 local authorities were paying out the money at different
15 rates.

16 So there were reasons that some local authorities
17 were quicker than others. So first of all, it was based
18 on an estimate, it depended on the proportion of
19 businesses that you had the data for. It depended on
20 the degree of checking that you were doing in advance.
21 So I think my addition to this would be to say:
22 I understand why there was a league table, I understand
23 the benefits it could deliver. I think in having --
24 sorry, not a league table, in having a publication of
25 the information, the important thing is to match that

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1 with the data and the explanation of why that is the
 2 case, because otherwise I think the risk is that, for
 3 each local authority that you correctly identify has or
 4 hasn't paid out grants, you have another one for whom
 5 there are very good reasons that they perhaps haven't,
 6 and that explains why they are taking longer, or
 7 vice versa.
 8 **Q.** Well, we heard some evidence from Leicestershire council
 9 about the diverse nature of business in their area, the
 10 number of businesses --
 11 **A.** Yeah.
 12 **Q.** -- and so on and so forth, and that it was never going
 13 to be fair to compare their delivery of support to
 14 a neighbouring council that might have a fraction of the
 15 businesses and a much more straightforward set of
 16 businesses.
 17 So is this the danger of unintended consequences,
 18 really: it looks like a league table and people are
 19 being rated and criticised for not coming higher up the
 20 league, and that's not necessarily going to be fair?
 21 **A.** Yes, and I think, at the time, local government was
 22 trying to do a lot of things and so, was the -- I think
 23 the question is: was the benefit of the publication of
 24 this information without the explanation which then led
 25 to a criticism of local government, some of it

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1 data was helpful, but there was the unintended
 2 consequence of how it was presented, essentially?
 3 **A.** (Witness nodded)
 4 **Q.** Is that fair?
 5 **A.** I think it -- I think what I would say is the -- having
 6 the information was helpful, making sure that you did
 7 not just rely on the raw data, but you also understood
 8 the drivers behind the performance was important to have
 9 a full understanding of what was going on with
 10 individual local authorities.
 11 **Q.** If you looked ahead to the delivery of grants that the
 12 Department of Business and Trade was, as it now is,
 13 would be responsible for, their forward-looking lessons
 14 learned and their playbook acknowledges that local
 15 authorities are going to remain a critical delivery
 16 partner, and encourages engagement, but again, can you
 17 give us any insight as to how, it sounds great, how that
 18 should actually happen, in terms of how they should be
 19 engaged by other departments?
 20 **A.** I mean, on the specifics of pandemic preparedness,
 21 I think it would be valuable -- and I know this is
 22 happening -- to run exercises about a potential pandemic
 23 that involve local government, to make sure that they
 24 are involved.

But, as I say, I think processes only get you so

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1 justified, some of it not, do I think that there were
 2 costs to that? Yes. Do I think that could have been
 3 helped by taking an approach where more information was
 4 provided alongside the numbers, which explained why
 5 local authorities were doing it? Yes, I think it would
 6 have done.
 7 **Q.** I mean, the danger, presumably, is that people who
 8 really are doing their best in difficult circumstances
 9 feel demoralised and feel that their efforts are being
 10 misrepresented by the crude statistic?
 11 **A.** Yes.
 12 **Q.** Right. Which presumably isn't a very good thing for
 13 this spirit of openness and trust that's so important to
 14 exist between the department and those delivering?
 15 **A.** Yes, but at the same time, I would say that the value of
 16 this publication is it did allow us to then marry this
 17 information together in -- within the department, and
 18 then I think that did help us, because we could talk to
 19 individual local authorities and understand what the
 20 challenges and opportunities were, whether they could
 21 get the funding out more quickly. And I think overall,
 22 the intent was to get the money out as quickly as
 23 possible, and so actually, having that understanding was
 24 helpful.
 25 **Q.** So the data was helpful, the purpose of gathering the

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1 far. It's then building the relationships and having
 2 the relationships with local government that means that
 3 you then really understand both the world of local
 4 government, and you appreciate the value that they can
 5 add.
 6 **Q.** Right. I'm going to move on now to sort of general
 7 lessons learned and reflections for the future in the
 8 time we have available, because I want to give you an
 9 opportunity to share any particular reflections you
 10 have, and best learning, having managed these
 11 relationships, been closely involved in them.
 12 But just picking up on that last point, I was going
 13 to ask you about the experience we've heard in Wales.
 14 Now, obviously there are less local authorities, but we
 15 understand that, in Wales, there is something called the
 16 Finance Sub Group of the Partnership Council for Wales,
 17 which is a regular forum for engagement on finance. It
 18 existed before the pandemic, chaired by a minister, nine
 19 council leaders sitting on the group, nominated by the
 20 Welsh Local Government Association.
 21 And if you look at reported surveys -- I'll just ask
 22 if this is put up. INQ000653255, thank you.
 23 Paragraph -- there we are.
 24 "Almost three-quarters of English local
 25 authorities ... thought that central government engaged

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1 not very or not at all well with local government in the
2 design and implementation of business support schemes.
3 By contrast, 86% of Welsh authorities felt that [the
4 Welsh Government] engaged very or fairly well with
5 them."

6 Now, accepting there's a scale difference here,
7 significant scale difference, in terms of the numbers of
8 local authorities, is there learning that you can draw
9 from that experience, in terms of having a pre-existing
10 engagement group? Or would you say, "Well, we've got
11 a pre-existing engagement group but we're just dealing
12 with a lot more local authorities"? Or how do you
13 bridge that gap?

14 **A.** So I think the Partnership Council and the Finance Sub
15 Group were ministerial, and political, so they were
16 ministers and local politicians. We do -- we do not --
17 as far as I'm aware, we do not have or at least we did
18 not have the same statutory equivalent in England. That
19 does not mean that local -- that local government and
20 ministers didn't speak frequently. They did. But
21 I think your scale point is very important, because, in
22 essence, you could fit the whole of Welsh local -- you
23 could have every leader of a Welsh local government --
24 you could have a Welsh council in a large table. If you
25 wanted to have the English equivalent, you would need to

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1 that was consistent with the timescales that you were
2 working to.
3 So on a number of occasions I had to have relatively
4 brief conversations with individual representatives of
5 the sector because it was a Sunday morning and the
6 policy that was being discussed needed to be ready for
7 Monday. I think that added value. And I don't -- what
8 that meant is I couldn't have done a full consultation
9 as we would have done in times that were out of the
10 pandemic, but I think it added a lot of value
11 nevertheless.

12 **MR WRIGHT:** Thank you very much.

13 My Lady, those are my questions. I don't think
14 there are any other questions.

15 **LADY HALLETT:** There aren't.

16 Mr Skinner, you talk about consultation adding
17 value, your evidence has added value. Thank you very
18 much indeed. You've been extremely helpful and I'm very
19 grateful to you and of course also to you and your
20 colleagues for what you did during the pandemic. So
21 thank you very much indeed for your help.

22 **THE WITNESS:** Thank you.

23 **LADY HALLETT:** I shall take the break now and return at
24 midday.

25 **MR WRIGHT:** Thank you, my Lady.

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1 hire a conference centre. So, by definition, I think
2 that does make it more difficult. And as we've
3 described, at an official level, I think we just had to
4 have engagement with a selection -- or a sample of,
5 rather than the population of.

6 But this, I'm afraid I don't -- I wouldn't want to
7 speculate on this, because I wasn't involved in business
8 grants, as you know. So I wouldn't want to comment on
9 the details of why these numbers were these numbers.

10 **Q.** All right, thank you.

11 So, Mr Skinner, thank you. Those are the things
12 I wanted to cover. Do you have any additional
13 reflections or learning that you wanted to share with
14 the Inquiry that we haven't -- (overspeaking) --

15 **A.** I think we've touched on a lot of it. I think one thing
16 that came up last week was this tension between
17 consultation and speed of delivery, and I wanted to
18 reflect on the fact that it comes back to a point that
19 we have discussed, which is, yes, in a literal sense
20 there is a tension, because if you're having some
21 consultation, then, however long that consultation
22 lasts, means that you can't do it.

23 But in practice, do I think that meant that
24 consultation was not possible? I do not. I think that
25 the key question was to design the consultation in a way

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1 (11.45 am)

2 (A short break)

3 (12.00 noon)

4 **LADY HALLETT:** Mr Wright.

5 **MR WRIGHT:** My Lady, can I check again that you can see and
6 hear us in the hearing room?

7 **LADY HALLETT:** I can, thank you.

8 **MR WRIGHT:** Thank you. Then I call Sir Charles Roxburgh,
9 please.

10 **SIR CHARLES ROXBURGH (affirmed)**

11 **Questions from RICHARD WRIGHT KC, LEAD COUNSEL TO THE
12 INQUIRY for MODULE 9**

13 **MR WRIGHT:** Sir Charles, you are the former Second Permanent
14 Secretary to His Majesty's Treasury; is that right?

15 **A.** Correct.

16 **Q.** And you've provided a statement to the Inquiry and I'll
17 give the reference, INQ000659746.

18 We understand, Sir Charles, that you joined the
19 Treasury as Director General of Financial Services
20 in 2013, before becoming Second Permanent Secretary in
21 July of 2016, a position you held until June of 2022; is
22 that right?

23 **A.** Correct.

24 **Q.** And as Second Permanent Secretary, you were the
25 second-most senior official in the Treasury during the

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1 pandemic; is that right?

2 **A.** That is correct.

3 **Q.** The First Permanent Secretary at the time was

4 Sir Tom Scholar, but your obligations and duties were to

5 oversee the department alongside Sir Tom Scholar; is

6 that right?

7 **A.** That is correct.

8 **Q.** And you were a member of the Treasury's Executive

9 Management Board, sometimes abbreviated to the EMB,

10 which set the strategic direction of the department; do

11 you agree?

12 **A.** Correct.

13 **Q.** You had oversight of various functions within the

14 Treasury in addition to that; is that right?

15 **A.** Yes, I should clarify that my policy responsibilities

16 focused on what are called the economics ministry

17 functions within Treasury. That comprised five

18 directorates, two of which were focused on financial

19 services, and three of which were focused on the

20 enterprise and growth agenda for the Treasury. So that

21 was five of the 15 policy directorates were the ones

22 that I was involved with in terms of policy development

23 and advice to ministers.

24 **Q.** Thank you.

25 And you, in your capacity as Second Permanent

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1 to the ability of the Treasury to be transparent even if

2 it wanted to be. All right? So I take that as a given.

3 But notwithstanding that, the Inquiry has received

4 evidence about concerns that the Treasury did not engage

5 as widely as it could have done at times, and sometimes

6 was not particularly open, and the Inquiry's expert,

7 Dr Tetlow, in her report has described the Treasury as

8 often being guarded in the way it shares information and

9 intelligence with other departments and the wider world.

10 Now, just pausing there, did you accept that

11 description that the Treasury is guarded in that way?

12 And if you do, is that for the reasons that I've

13 prefaced at the start of the questions, or for other

14 reasons?

15 **A.** Well, having spent most of my career outside the

16 Treasury and now having left over three years ago,

17 I think I can bring a degree of objectivity and

18 detachment in my perspective on this issue. And I can

19 talk with most conviction and with specific evidence in

20 relation to those areas in which I had direct personal

21 involvement. And based on that evidence, I believe that

22 Treasury worked very well with other departments and we

23 were not guarded and we were not secretive. We actively

24 sought out to work collaboratively with other

25 departments.

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1 Secretary, worked closely with all of the Treasury's

2 director generals; is that fair to say?

3 **A.** In management terms, yes, but not in policy terms.

4 **Q.** Yes. Management, not policy.

5 And the Treasury generally, whilst it is a powerful

6 department in government, it's actually a relatively

7 small department; is that right? Quite close knit?

8 **A.** Correct, it's about 1,700 people, and at all times

9 I found it a very collaborative and inclusive group, and

10 we were a very strong and unified senior team throughout

11 all my time there but particularly through this

12 difficult years of the crisis.

13 **Q.** Indeed, you set out in your statement how, in your view,

14 officials worked effectively and constructively as

15 a close team?

16 **A.** Absolutely.

17 **Q.** Right.

18 The first topic I'd like to ask you some questions

19 about, Sir Charles, please, is transparency and

20 engagement. And I preface these questions by accepting,

21 or the questions accept, that there are circumstances in

22 which the Treasury needs to be guarded in terms of

23 information it will share. That's either because of

24 market sensitivity, because there may be a budget or

25 another fiscal event. So there are certain limitations

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1 We reached out for expert input from across

2 government and outside of government and I'm happy to

3 give you multiple examples of how we worked

4 constructively with other departments, with other

5 arm's-length bodies, and with our delivery partners such

6 as the British Business Bank and the Bank of England.

7 And I think we worked very collaboratively with all

8 those, and I was very pleased to read in their witness

9 statements that my colleagues in those other departments

10 and arm's-length bodies also said that their

11 relationships with the Treasury were generally open and

12 productive.

13 Now, inevitably, there were some times where in the

14 urgency of a crisis, some information wasn't shared as

15 quickly as some of our colleagues in other departments

16 might have wanted, but this was a crisis where things

17 happened at rapid speed and Chancellor was making

18 decisions very rapidly.

19 So there were some times when people felt that they

20 weren't fully in the loop, but that was never

21 deliberate, it was never our intention, and my overall

22 conviction is that from my experience, the Treasury

23 worked collaboratively with all our colleagues across

24 government and in arm's-length bodies.

25 **Q.** So from your perspective, if others have formed the view

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1 that the Treasury is guarded in its engagement with
 2 others, that isn't a view that you share; if it's an
 3 impression that's created, it's not one that you meant
 4 to create?
 5 **A.** I cannot argue about what other people may have
 6 perceived. That is their perceptions. What I would say
 7 is that I would not accept a general description of the
 8 Treasury as being secretive and guarded because in my
 9 direct personal experience that was not how
 10 I experienced and not how my colleagues elsewhere in
 11 government experienced working with me and my teams on
 12 many issues, and many of my other colleagues.

13 And I think there are multiple examples of really
 14 great collaboration across government and with delivery
 15 partners.

16 In fact, Dr Tetlow, in another report she did for
 17 the Institute for Government, called out how well the
 18 Treasury worked with delivery partners such as HMRC and
 19 the British Business Bank.

20 **Q.** And indeed, we'll look at some of those relationships,
 21 and the Inquiry has heard evidence that, in particular,
 22 in terms of the policy partnership that existed between
 23 HMRC and the Treasury, there was a very constructive
 24 working relationship. So please don't proceed on the
 25 basis that we're not picking up the good examples of

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1 economic history, is the Chancellor of the Exchequer
 2 working closely with the Prime Minister of the day to
 3 implement the government's economic policy.

4 **Q.** And really, I think you've answered the next question,
 5 which is that if there is a sense in which economic
 6 policy is closed off, that it sits with the Chancellor,
 7 that's because that's where it sits as a matter of fact?
 8 The Chancellor is responsible for setting economic
 9 policy, ultimately; is that right?

10 **A.** That is how our British system of government works, yes.

11 **Q.** Exactly. So if that's the perception, it's correct --

12 **A.** But I wouldn't want you to think that we developed
 13 policy in isolation of other departments. There were
 14 many major policy issues that I worked on where the
 15 advice went to the Chancellor and was included in, for
 16 instance, a budget statement, where we had developed
 17 that advice working collaboratively with the Bank of
 18 England, with the British Business Bank, or with the
 19 Department of Business or Department of Transport,
 20 depending on what the policy was. We worked very
 21 closely with other colleagues to develop the policies,
 22 although the decision maker on those economic policies
 23 was the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

24 **Q.** Now, Sir Charles, we know that during the pandemic, and
 25 for many years, you kept a personal diary, intended to

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1 close working.

2 **A.** Could I just mention that the policy partnership is
 3 a very specific relationship between HMRC and the
 4 Treasury. That is not the only example of where we had
 5 really good working relationships with the Bank, with
 6 the British Business Bank, with UK Export Finance, with
 7 UK Government Investments, and with multiple government
 8 departments. So I would not accept that you need to
 9 have a policy partnership in order to have a good
 10 collaborative relationship, because we had many such
 11 good, collaborative relationships with multiple
 12 departments and multiple arm's-length bodies.

13 **Q.** When it comes to economic policy, do you accept the
 14 proposition that the Treasury, is, in terms of setting
 15 economic policy, closed off?

16 **A.** It is a longstanding principle of the British Government
 17 dating from the days of Gladstone, that the Chancellor
 18 of the Exchequer is the key cabinet minister with
 19 responsibility for economic policy making. Now, on many
 20 specific issues around economic policy, which is a very
 21 broad topic, advice would go to the Chancellor from
 22 Treasury officials having worked very closely with
 23 colleagues in other departments. But the ultimate
 24 decision maker on the government's overall economic
 25 policy, and this has been true throughout modern British

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1 be entirely private, of course, but you have properly
 2 shared it and extracts with the Inquiry. It is a typed
 3 document. But I just want to put up one of those
 4 extracts which goes to this point because I think it
 5 makes probably the point you've just made.

6 So this is INQ000549339, page 97.

7 And we see there, in that paragraph -- this is from
 8 4 June 2020:

9 "Everyone wants to contribute to economic policy
 10 making but the reality is that [the Chancellor of the
 11 Exchequer] controls it -- that's why it's fun to be in
 12 the Treasury and if you want to do economic policy
 13 making, that's the only place to be."

14 **A.** Well, I'm happy to answer your question on this, but if
 15 I could just maybe go back to your opening statement
 16 about my private diary and put that in context?

17 **Q.** Of course.

18 **A.** I did keep a personal diary during this period. It was
 19 intended to be an entirely private document. I had not
 20 shared it with anyone until I started preparing my
 21 witness statement for this appearance. I had no
 22 intention of publishing my diary. It was, I had hoped,
 23 an entirely confidential document written by myself and
 24 no one else.

25 As I wrote in my witness statement, these entries

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were written late at night, often after long and stressful days. They lack perspective, distance, and balance and have never been checked or verified. They reflect my views in real time. Many of those judgements now look mistaken or poorly informed.

And when we return to future extracts from my diary, I may well return to that statement because, as I say, it's a private document and I put in my witness statement I do not consider it a reliable source of evidence for this, but that is for the Inquiry to decide.

Now, going to this specific question, yes, this comment here reflects, I think, two things: one, it was an enormous privilege to work at the Treasury throughout my whole time there. It was incredible to be able to work with the Chancellor of the day in providing advice to shape British economic policy. It was an extraordinary privilege. And yes, if you want to do that, you should be in the Treasury. Just as if you want to advise on foreign policy, you should be in the Foreign Office. Or if you want to advise on transport policy, you should be in the Department for Transport.

So, at one level, this is a statement of the obvious: that the Chancellor of the Exchequer is the ultimate decision maker on economic policy, and if you

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information for those sorts of reasons?

A. Well, if I could pick up one of your points about whether having market-sensitive information meant that we couldn't share it with other departments, in fact that is not the case. I dealt with some extremely market-sensitive information concerning specific companies that were facing financial distress, and we worked on those very confidential cases, collaboratively with the relevant department, the Department for Transport, Department for Business, or the Ministry of Defence, and we had insider lists covering those departments with people who could have access to the information. And in those cases, most of my colleagues on EMB did not have access to that highly confidential information.

So that is an example of where we absolutely did share confidential information with colleagues across government, because they needed to know. I did not share it with colleagues in Treasury who did not need to know. So I think that illustrates that we really did work across governmental boundaries in departments when we needed to.

To your point as to are there specific areas where we could have communicated better, it is always an easy conclusion to say we could have communicated better.

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want to advise the Chancellor, you should be in the Treasury.

Q. Well, the reason, Sir Charles, I'm drawing attention to this entry and have asked you questions about the economic policy and the Chancellor's function, is really to allow you to make the point that you just have: that the Chancellor is, as a matter of our constitutional settlement, responsible for setting economic policy, and therefore, as you have made clear, if there is a sense in which it's closed off and the Treasury makes policy, that's because that's what it's there to do, that's what the Chancellor's responsibility is. Is that the position?

A. I wouldn't accept your "closed off" point, but I would accept the point that the Chancellor is the ultimate decision maker on economic policy.

Q. And as I've said, there may be very good reasons why, from time to time, the Treasury can't share information, examples might be risks of market abuse, risks of leaks, other reasons of constitutional significance.

But do you agree that there were times when there was area for improvement in the sense that the Treasury colleagues could have communicated better the direction of travel and what the Treasury was doing, and, second part, explain from time to time why you couldn't share

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When I think of the loan programmes that we worked on very closely with the Department for Business and the British Business Bank, I think we communicated very well. In the early days, things were moving incredibly fast. To illustrate that, the Chancellor made the decision to launch the first loan product. He made that decision on the evening of Sunday, March 8, and it was announced in the budget of Wednesday, March 11.

I immediately confirmed to my colleagues in the British Business Bank and BEIS that the Chancellor wanted to make this announcement. So it was a very tight timetable. And maybe some people in those departments felt that we could have told them sooner, but we didn't have a decision until Sunday evening before the budget.

So could we have done better? Possibly. I cannot think of specific instances where I felt we really dropped the ball on these programmes that I was working on.

Q. The reason I ask the question, Sir Charles, is because you've dealt with it in your statement at paragraph 11.5, when you identified yourself areas for improvement, and said that senior colleagues in the Treasury could have done a better job of communicating with senior colleagues in other departments.

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1 And also you said -- and explained why there were
2 limits in your ability to share information more widely,
3 and you gave the example of the risk of market abuse --

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. -- from sharing material price-sensitive information, or
6 breaking confidences ahead of a major announcement.

7 Do you stand by that part of your statement and
8 accept that, for what are good reasons, you could not
9 always share information, and do you stand by that part
10 of your statement --

11 A. Yes, and in fact when we --

12 Q. Can I just finish the question?

13 A. Sorry.

14 Q. Do you stand by that part of your statement that also
15 says you could have done better at explaining to other
16 departments why there might be reasons not for sharing
17 information in those sorts of circumstances?

18 A. Yes, I said I can -- it's always possible to communicate
19 better. And when we talk later about the working group,
20 the Economic and Business Strategy Review Group for
21 permanent secretaries, that group we should not share
22 information with, because it was not on a need-to-know
23 basis, it was not relevant to them.

24 So, yes, I stand by that, and I'm sure we could
25 always communicate better. What I found, though, with

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1 of April. At that stage -- and this was about -- a few
2 weeks into the crisis -- the Cabinet Office set up
3 three groups. One was a ministerial decision-making
4 group, the Economic Business Response Implementation
5 Group, EBRIG, and that group was supported by a group of
6 officials who prepared the papers for that group. And
7 separately, they created a permanent secretaries forum,
8 which was called the Economic and Business Response
9 Strategy Group (Permanent Secretaries), and that was set
10 up by the Cabinet Office and they asked me to chair it.

11 It was intended to be a forum for permanent
12 secretaries of -- with responsibilities for different
13 sectors of the economy, and it was the idea to meet in
14 an informal setting to share information and
15 intelligence about what they were seeing in the economy.

16 It was not a policy formulation group; it had no
17 defined outputs; it did not make any recommendations; it
18 did not link into the ministerial decision-making group,
19 EBRIG as it was called; it did not review and approve
20 advice to ministers. It was simply an opportunity for
21 senior colleagues to share views as to what they were
22 seeing in the economy.

23 Q. And I think you say in your statement that you found it
24 was not a particularly effective forum, and attendance
25 petered off, really, over the summer of 2020, and the

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1 the departments that we worked really closely with:
2 Department for Business, Department for Transport, in
3 particular in this crisis, they fully understood those
4 constraints, because they were working with us on
5 a number of areas. But I think more broadly, for
6 colleagues who weren't working with us on these issues,
7 that's probably where we could have done better.

8 Q. So there might be a department that had a particular
9 interest in a particular company, to take an example.
10 It would know about this sensitive information, you
11 would work closely together, information would be
12 shared. But there might be other departments that
13 wouldn't have that sort of close relationship and you
14 might have, in those sort of circumstances, been able to
15 explain better why there was sensitivity; is that fair?

16 A. Yes. And if someone had asked me, I would have
17 explained.

18 Q. Yes.

19 Now, can we pick up, then, the Business Economic
20 Response Strategy Group, which you did establish; is
21 that right? And it consisted of permanent secretaries
22 from other departments. Could you just explain why it
23 was established, what its purpose was?

24 A. I did not establish it. It was established by the
25 Cabinet Office and it was established at the beginning

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1 group was stood down; is that right?

2 A. Correct.

3 Q. And I am just keen to explore why it wasn't
4 a particularly effective forum. Is your view really
5 that having meetings where you simply share information,
6 just leads to meetings for the sake of meetings rather
7 than decisions actually being made and things being
8 progressed?

9 A. Well, early on I think it was helpful, and I was keen to
10 make it a success, and to make good use of my senior
11 colleagues' time, and I think some of the early
12 discussions were helpful. But over time, the usefulness
13 did decline, and I think that was because just
14 information sharing is quite an expensive way to spend
15 time, and there are other fora for information sharing,
16 Wednesday Morning Colleagues, and the cabinet secretary
17 meetings as well.

18 So the lessons that I drew out from that, similar to
19 yours, were that meetings to share information have
20 a limited usefulness and should not be duplicated, and
21 we had multiple meetings to share information by this
22 stage.

23 And secondly, if you want to get senior people
24 together, they need to have an output: something they
25 need to work on together and have a deliverable. This

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1 meeting did not have that.

2 And third, in a crisis, it's good to set up new
3 structures but it's also good to shut them down when
4 they finish their purpose. And so I do not see it as
5 a problem that this meeting finished its usefulness and
6 we didn't restart it. That's just the way things work
7 in a crisis.

8 **Q.** So it's good to test whether a new structure can add
9 value, new fora can add value, but if it doesn't, it's
10 right to shut it down because it's a drain on your time
11 and resource, really?

12 **A.** Yes, and my senior colleagues had made that decision
13 themselves because they stopped attending in person and
14 started to send delegates.

15 **Q.** Yes, because they're picking up the information that was
16 being shared through other fora that they're attending
17 or have delegates attending in any event. Was that what
18 you were finding?

19 **A.** Yes, permanent secretaries are extraordinarily busy
20 people at any time, particularly this time, and
21 appropriately were prioritising how they spend their
22 time.

23 **Q.** Now, you said earlier that obviously you can't speak for
24 others, and their perception of how the Treasury
25 operates. We've heard evidence that the perception of

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1 which are valuable in good times, but in a crisis, are
2 absolutely invaluable.

3 And so to give you an example of where I think
4 I could have done better at building those networks was
5 with the devolved administrations, which I know is an
6 area that you are interested in. And that although we
7 had some formal meetings with officials from the
8 devolved administrations, and in fact together with the
9 permanent secretary at BEIS, we held two briefing
10 sessions for senior officials from the devolved
11 administrations, and in early '21, I held a round table
12 for Scottish CEOs. What I didn't have in either the
13 Scottish or the Welsh civil services were any senior
14 colleagues that I knew personally that I could pick up
15 the phone to.

16 I did, in Northern Ireland with Sue Gray, who was
17 the permanent secretary of the economics ministry there.
18 And so when Sue faced a problem, she could pick up the
19 phone and I could link her to the right team in the
20 Treasury to get it fixed. I never had a call like that
21 from Scottish civil servants or from Welsh civil
22 service. So is the answer to that more formal
23 structures, more coordinating committees? I think not.
24 In retrospect, I should have spent more time in building
25 relationships with senior civil servants in Scotland and

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1 some others is it wasn't particularly open and

2 collaborative; you disagree with that strongly. There
3 we are.

4 But let's look at this the other way: it's very easy
5 for people to say you need to be more open and
6 collaborative, sounds like a great idea. I'm more
7 interested in whether you have any reflections about
8 going forwards, whether there were other forums that
9 could have been established, other means of
10 communication that weren't tried and tested, or do you
11 think you went through different iterations of groups
12 and setting up foras and then closing them down again,
13 and -- where do you sit with that?

14 **A.** Well, I, in a long career in the public and the private
15 sector, I have learned that what's really effective in
16 organisations is not the formal structures, the formal
17 mandates to force cooperation, the documents to say
18 department X should cooperate with department B, what
19 really matters is personal relationships. And
20 therefore, what I tried to do with my teamwork teams at
21 the Treasury, and they were really good at this, was to
22 encourage them to build broad external networks outside
23 of the Treasury, across Whitehall, or in industry,
24 depending on what the focus of their policy area was,
25 and to build those personal networks of relationships

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1 in Wales.

2 **Q.** We heard this morning some evidence from Alex Skinner,
3 who was at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and
4 Local Government, about, in his view yes, it was
5 important to have, if you like, off-the-shelf schemes
6 and systems for a future emergency, but he also stressed
7 that relationships are key, and that having
8 relationships, good relationships in place are
9 important. And that seems to be what you found; where
10 you had a pre-existing relationship, that enabled
11 communication. You gave the example of Sue Gray, is
12 that --

13 **A.** Correct. In Northern Ireland.

14 **Q.** And I think you give that example in your statement:
15 there was a particular issue that arose, Sue Gray was
16 able to contact you directly, because you had that
17 pre-existing working relationship, but it was the
18 working relationship that had pre-existed that enabled
19 that sort of interface between you; is that fair?

20 **A.** Correct.

21 **Q.** Just looking at that critically, it might be said that
22 the danger of that is it's so personality dependent, you
23 know, if you've got somebody who's been in a job for a
24 long time, worked in the public and private sector as
25 you have, has made these connections, then you're in

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1 a good place to have those sort of relationships, but
 2 what if you don't?
 3 A. Well, there's a certain level of serendipity about it
 4 sometimes, yes, but you can work on it. And I can give
 5 you two examples of how we worked on it. With the Bank
 6 of England -- I put this in my statement -- when I
 7 joined in 2013, relationships between officials at the
 8 Bank and at the Treasury were not particularly good.
 9 The relationship between the governor and the then
 10 Chancellor were very good, but the officials had
 11 a slightly more difficult relationship. But the two
 12 senior teams, from 2013 onwards, made an explicit effort
 13 to build and strengthen those personal relationships
 14 when Governor Carney was the governor, and then later,
 15 when Andrew Bailey became the governor, Andrew Bailey --
 16 and this was during the Covid crisis -- had a taskforce
 17 of Treasury officials and bank officials work on how we
 18 could strengthen it still further.

19 So although it did depend on the personal
 20 relationships we had at multiple levels between the
 21 Treasury and the Bank, you can work on those
 22 relationships and you can invest in them. And if they
 23 are not good, it's the responsibility of senior
 24 management, as the Treasury leadership and the Bank
 25 leadership decided to do, to strengthen them.

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1 Q. -- from the top that this is what you need to be doing?
 2 A. Yes, and you do that -- the tone at the top is vitally
 3 important both ways. And when Alex Chisholm became
 4 Permanent Secretary at BEIS, which was almost at exactly
 5 the same time as I became Second Permanent Secretary,
 6 I remember going over to his office and we sat down and
 7 we said: look, these two departments have not had
 8 a great relationship under the coalition government. We
 9 need to set a new tone.

10 And we both agreed that we would, from the top, set
 11 a new tone, that we would not speak disparagingly of the
 12 other department, we would not, you know, deliberately
 13 say anything that was sleightful of them, but instead
 14 would try to really emphasise to our respective teams
 15 the importance of working together.

16 And Alex and I did that in 2016, and that stood us
 17 in good stead, because, by 2020, I think the
 18 relationship between BEIS and Treasury at multiple
 19 levels was very strong.

20 Q. Looking ahead, it might sound like a recommendation that
 21 everyone should just be nice to each other and get along
 22 very well, which obviously wouldn't actually land or be
 23 possible to enact, but is it about also seeing, when you
 24 build those relationships, the positives that can be
 25 drawn from them, and remembering that, in terms of

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1 So it's not pure happenstance, you can work on it
 2 but you work on it in ways that allow people to form the
 3 personal relationships rather than just leaving them to
 4 happen to chance.
 5 Q. And you appear to be envisaging there relationships not
 6 just at permanent secretary, second permanent secretary
 7 level, but throughout the organisation, so that people
 8 have relationships with their relevant counterparts at
 9 whatever level they find themselves in the organisation;
 10 is that how you envisage it?

11 A. Yes, and with our major partners, whether it's the Bank
 12 of England or a big department like BEIS, and it be true
 13 for other colleagues who had the relationships at HMRC
 14 or with DWP. We would think about all of the relevant
 15 officials, who was their point person? Who was their
 16 opposite number in the bank or in the Department for
 17 Business? And it was part of their job to get to know
 18 them, build relationships with them, both on policy
 19 content but also to build some personal rapport with
 20 them. And that was very important.

21 Q. But the direction of travel, in terms of the importance
 22 of building those relationships, has got to come from
 23 the top of the organisation, hasn't it? It's got to be
 24 trickled down --

25 A. Yes.

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1 corporate memory, that where you build these
 2 relationships, this is how it actually improves
 3 delivery --

4 A. Yes.

5 Q. -- therefore that's why they need to be maintained?

6 A. It's not about being just polite and nice to each other.
 7 I had some very robust policy debates with colleagues at
 8 the Bank of England. Very robust. Because we were
 9 different organisations with different objectives. But
 10 they were always respectful, always fact based, and
 11 always driven by our desire to get the right outcome
 12 against our objectives and ultimately the right outcome
 13 for the country.

14 And it's actually often through those difficult
 15 discussions, where you are approaching a common problem
 16 with a different perspective, that you form a really
 17 deep trust-based relationship. So it's not just about
 18 being nice; it's about working constructively and
 19 positively, solving problems together.

20 Now, in terms of what's the recommendation, as
 21 I say, I instinctively do not like lots of structural
 22 recommendations with committees and mandates, because
 23 that isn't how you drive organisational change. What
 24 I tried to do in my time as a senior civil servant, and
 25 I saw other people doing this too, is it's about

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coaching and encouraging the next generation of civil servants to develop that external orientation: the ability to get out of their office and go and build relationships across Whitehall, in industry, with arm's-length bodies.

And that requires coaching, it requires you giving them feedback when they're doing it well or not, and it becomes part of a senior civil servant's job to be externally focused and to build these external relationships.

Q. To what extent, in your experience, was the tone set not from the Civil Service, but from the politicians that sat above that? I don't want to get into political issues, but if there is a difficult political relationship, did, in your experience, that put strain on the ability of officials to communicate?

A. It did in respect of the Scottish Government, to be candid. And it was a difficult time, in the political history of this nation in the years following the Scottish referendum, the Scottish Government was still committed to independence, the civil servants working for the government were duty bound to serve their government, and so that did put a strain on it.

In more normal times, in Whitehall, there might well be difficult relations between two secretaries of state

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the really company-specific information. And we could not share that widely but we had to keep the Prime Minister informed of it.

So what we agreed with Number 10 is that there would be one person in Number 10, Eddie, now Lord Lister, and one official, who were in the loop, and they would brief the Prime Minister, and no one else in Number 10 could have access to that information. And like that, that meant that we really limited -- equally we had exactly the same type -- it wasn't a comment on Number 10; we had exactly the same restrictions on who could know that in Treasury.

Q. The Treasury side?

A. And so the Chancellor knew, but other ministers did not know. Just because this was such sensitive information, we had to keep it on a very tight restriction.

So that's quite easy to manage because you can, with that market sense of information, wrap it in very tight secrecy, necessarily.

The more difficult leaks are the ones where people leak information that just undermines trust. And some of those leaks happened, they were deeply regrettable, but that's a fact of life in government and I wish they hadn't happened.

Q. And again, this may be one of those areas where it is

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or between the Chancellor and another secretary of state. That happens in almost every government, to my experience. And the job of the Civil Service is to work through those difficulties, and not to let any political disagreements get in the way of effective cooperation.

Q. You discussed sharing information with other departments, including sensitive information, and you spoke of information not being leaked. But it's also right, isn't it, that sometimes information was leaked, and you were concerned about that?

A. Yes.

Q. What effect did that have on the willingness of yourself and colleagues to share information going forwards?

A. Well, leaks -- as I put in my statement, leaks are an endemic problem in government, and it's been true in all the governments that I've served in my nine and a half years at the Treasury, and I'm sure it's still true today. And it does cause problems. Leaks undermine trust. And -- but they are part of life in government, so there's no point wishing them away.

The practical consequence of it was that we became extremely careful about how we shared information and how we managed the information protocols around it. So in my statement I talk about a process that we called Project Birch, or Special Situations, which was handling

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easy to identify a problem, but totally impractical to come up with a solution for how you stop leaking or briefing in government, I would imagine, Sir Charles?

A. I have no idea how you would solve that problem.

Q. All right.

Can I move on to the topic of experts. And I don't mean experts in the Inquiry, but I mean engagement with experts by the Treasury.

Now, one suggestion that Dr Tetlow has made is that the Treasury could explore more formal or establishing more formal expert networks, so that the Treasury has access to a panel of experts. But would you say that those already exist or existed, or do you accept that that could be developed?

A. Well, why don't I tell you what we did, and then I'll tell you why I don't think Dr Tetlow's recommendation adds a lot of value to what we were doing.

So the teams that I were working with reached out extensively to experts elsewhere in government and outside of government. And to give you specific examples, we reached out to experts in small business lending, in the British Business Bank, in UK Finance, in the lending institutions, in the Bank of England, a whole range of external experts on small business lending.

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In credit risk management, we reached out to external firms like McKinsey, who provided expert analysis on credit risk, but we also created a whole new panel of experts on credit risk called the Advisory Credit Committee, where we found the people in government who had deep expertise on credit, having served in investment and commercial banks, and formed a credit committee to advise the Chancellor on some very complex, difficult issues.

So we created that for this, we formed it in a couple of weeks, and it was extremely powerful. And then we stood it down when its time was finished.

And we reached out to other experts in other very specialised forms of finance, preferred equity, collateralised loan obligations, or speciality lines insurance for the event scheme and TV and movie production restart.

And so what we found was that we could get access to the experts we needed, when we needed them, with couple of phone calls. And if we needed them for a one-off bit of expertise, that was fine. And if we needed to create a standing committee, as we did for the Advisory Credit Committee, we could do that.

And I've done that throughout my career at the Treasury: I created similar panels of experts for

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in, rather than having a sort of standing committee --

A. Correct.

Q. -- that may not actually possess the skills that you needed?

A. Correct, because sometimes, if you've got a specific policy issue, as I explained on those policy reviews, or this credit risk issue, you create what you need with the expertise you need for that issue.

What I struggle with is how we could define even one expert panel for each policy directorate. There are 15 policy directorates. You can't define one panel for each of them, because take financial services, you'd need a different panel for banking. And within that, you'd need a different panel for retail banking versus investment banking, a different panel for wholesale insurance versus retail insurance versus life insurance. You'd end up with a plethora of panels, and each one takes work. You have to recruit people, you have to screen them, you have to clear their conflicts. And then if they don't get used very much, they get frustrated.

So I think this is a lot of work which would have added no value in this crisis and you can solve it by identifying where you need the expertise and for how long, and creating the structures that you need for that

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reviews that I led on financial regulation in fixed income, on patient capital, on infrastructure finance. We created expert panels to review on those specific policy people.

So I actually don't accept this view that the Treasury doesn't reach out to experts, because I spent my nine and a half years doing exactly that, as did many of my colleagues.

And the reason that I don't support Dr Tetlow's recommendation is first, I think it's unnecessary, because we were doing it, and did it repeatedly throughout my time at the Treasury and in this crisis, and I think it's unhelpful. First of all, you never know the precise expertise you are going to need. I had no idea that we would need an Advisory Credit Committee, because we were taking on £100 billion of single-named credit risk. I had no idea we would ever need that.

Q. Just pausing there, I mean, you may be underlining why you go to experts, which is there's a particular area that is outside your everyday experience and so you bring in that expertise.

And are you saying, Sir Charles, really, that you needed to be flexible about this and to have an *ad hoc* approach. If a particularly complicated issue arose that needed that external expertise, you would bring it

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policy problem.

Q. And is there any need for those structures to be in any sense pre-existing? Is there any merit in having at least a pool of people identified in advance, or is it very much: see what the problem is, and go to the people who are current in the expertise at the time you need it?

A. I would leave that to the policy leads for the particular area. So if one policy lead said: "Look, we have repeated need for expertise in this defined area of economics", which is a highly variegated expertise, so there are lots of different sorts of economics, "but we need expertise on this particular bit of economics on a regular basis", I'd have no problem with having a permanent committee of that type of expert if the policy lead said: "We need that permanently."

In the areas for which I was responsible for, we needed a lot of external expertise, but the need changed, and we didn't have the need for a standing committee of experts and couldn't actually have maintained it.

Q. No. And was there a risk, in your view, that a standing committee could become stagnant, effectively, not actually providing you with the particular advice you needed, there'd be a danger you'd go to your standing

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1 committee, and it may not actually have all of the
 2 strands of expertise that were required?
 3 **A.** One of the things about expertise these days is how
 4 incredibly narrow it is.
 5 **Q.** Yeah.
 6 **A.** So if you had -- for instance, when we worked with The
 7 Department for Culture, Media and Sport on restarting
 8 the events business in the UK through an insurance
 9 scheme, you're not looking for an insurance expert,
 10 you're not looking for a specialty lines expert; you're
 11 looking for the one or two people in the market who
 12 underwrite events insurance. There's no way you're
 13 going to have that expertise on a standing panel.
 14 So I completely agree that the Treasury needs to be
 15 outward looking, it needs to build -- senior officials
 16 need to build their networks so they can get to the
 17 experts in one or two phone calls. And there may be
 18 some areas of expertise where it's useful to have more
 19 people involved for longer periods, but I think a very
 20 rigid structure of panels and a roster of approved
 21 experts would have been highly constraining in this
 22 crisis, and we'd have ignored it. We'd have gone round
 23 it to the people we needed to talk to.
 24 **Q.** So you accept, I think, that you need to do some
 25 thinking about this in advance, because, as you say, you

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1 will be able to draw on the full suite of interventions
 2 that now exist and which need to be kept up to date and
 3 fit for purpose."
 4 And sets that out as background, and it's important,
 5 Sir Charles, to acknowledge that you and your colleagues
 6 were faced with an unprecedented situation, there were
 7 no off-the-shelf schemes of the sort talked about there,
 8 that there was no playbook, for example, of what a job
 9 retention scheme might look like, how it might be
 10 delivered, and this was an economic crisis unlike any
 11 that had been experienced before.
 12 So we take all of that as a given in these
 13 questions.
 14 We also, I suppose, add into that that Mr Sunak had
 15 become Chancellor of the Exchequer only on
 16 13 February 2020, so was newly in that post, and asked
 17 for advice at that stage as to the likely or anticipated
 18 impact of the pandemic that I think was given on
 19 26 February. And at that stage, the advice was focusing
 20 on two competing scenarios that were being postulated as
 21 potential scenarios. One was that this outbreak of
 22 Covid-19 would be largely contained in China, and so it
 23 wouldn't really be a problem that reached the
 24 United Kingdom, or, at that stage, that we were looking
 25 at potentially a four-month long pandemic, affecting

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1 don't want to be, modern day, getting out the Yellow
 2 Pages and looking through to see who you could call, but
 3 you don't want to have pre-existing panels, rosters,
 4 people pre-approved? It's a balance of flexibility
 5 depending on the --
 6 **A.** Well, I'm not at the Treasury now so that would be
 7 a decision for the current leadership of the Treasury.
 8 All I can do is comment on my experience on when I was
 9 in the leadership of the Treasury, and it would not have
 10 been helpful to me then.
 11 **Q.** Can I move on to a new topic, which is the initial
 12 response to the pandemic, so this very early response.
 13 And I'm going to start questioning where Module 1 of the
 14 Inquiry left, with this conclusion in the Treasury's
 15 corporate statement that:
 16 "... [the] Treasury accepts the Inquiry's
 17 recommendation in Module 1 around the government needing
 18 to assess a wider range of scenarios around national
 19 risks and the need to consider the economic impacts of
 20 emergencies and responses on the population.
 21 It goes on:
 22 "Had we prepared for a wider range of scenarios
 23 during the period 2017-2019, then we might have had
 24 a more well developed set of responses 'on the shelf'.
 25 I hope that in a future crisis, future HMT officials

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1 25-50% of the workforce, in which it could be predicted
 2 that there'd be two weeks off work per worker. And that
 3 was all based on the reasonable worst-case scenario that
 4 SAGE was advocating at the time.
 5 And therefore, at that stage, based on that
 6 advice -- in fact we'll have this put up on the screen,
 7 I think.
 8 It's INQ000625746. I'd like, please, paragraph 23,
 9 which is on page 5.
 10 Yes, there we are. The sentence in bold, but after
 11 that:
 12 "For Budget, we have resisted creating a fund for
 13 Covid-19 related activities as this sets a bad
 14 precedent, and while departments are raising risks to
 15 their spending teams, but have so far not put a figure
 16 on pressures, and, in addition, while the scenarios and
 17 any response are still very uncertain, we expect --
 18 subject to scale -- situations like these would be
 19 addressed from the 2020-21 Reserve in the first
 20 instance."
 21 And so that was the initial position in February,
 22 and policy options were discussed in this paper,
 23 including, really, pre-existing routes of support at
 24 that time were being envisaged. So HMRC's Time to Pay
 25 arrangements, and arrangements like that, that already

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1 existed.

2 These were, would you agree, based on the SAGE
3 estimates at the time, and the predicted worst-case
4 scenario, that these were policy options that were never
5 going to stand up to what in fact emerged in the
6 pandemic?

7 A. Well, yes, that is a statement, looking back, with what
8 I think you called in your opening statement "artificial
9 perfect hindsight".

10 I think the test is what could people be expected to
11 be thinking at the end of February, based on the best
12 advice we were getting from SAGE? And based on that
13 advice, and that realistic worst-case scenario at the
14 end of February, where there were still only 19 cases in
15 the United Kingdom, and we were being advised by the
16 health experts that containment would work and would be
17 the strategy to pursue, based on that, the economic
18 analysis was suggesting a relatively modest economic
19 shock, where GDP would fall between 0.6 and 1.3% of GDP.

20 That type of economic downturn is well within the
21 Treasury's normal range of ability to respond to.

22 Now, what we did not know was that from the end of
23 February we were about to enter the most sudden and
24 dramatic health crisis and economic crisis which
25 unfolded over two to three weeks, when we went into

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1 A. Yes.

2 Q. "... asks me to convene a meeting of HMT seniors as [the
3 Chancellor of the Exchequer] is worried that we are not
4 reacting with enough urgency on Coronavirus. Call
5 a meeting for 4 pm."

6 We don't need the name.

7 Now, "HMT Seniors", is this people of your sort of
8 level, permanent secretary level, director general
9 level?

10 A. Well, there are two of us at my level. It would have
11 been the director generals and the directors.

12 Q. Yes.

13 And so this is coming from the Chancellor asking you
14 to convene this meeting really to step the response to
15 the pandemic up --

16 A. Yes.

17 Q. -- the agenda, essentially?

18 A. Correct. I mean, to put this in context, the Chancellor
19 had the previous afternoon, on Thursday, the 27th, he
20 had commissioned advice from the Treasury. This request
21 went out at 2 pm. He had commissioned advice for
22 a comprehensive budget package to respond to the crisis
23 covering health spending, Statutory Sick Pay, business
24 support, and financial services. He had asked for that
25 advice by end of day. The Treasury was working

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1 lockdown on March 23rd. That was an extraordinary
2 period where we received, every day, more and more
3 negative surprises on the health side and on the
4 economic side, and yes, policy responses developed in
5 one week were overtaken by events within days, which was
6 why we had to respond so fast, and constantly raise our
7 standards set by the Chancellor for ever larger
8 interventions to respond.

9 Q. And your interventions were increasing incrementally as
10 the health conditions worsened, and as worst-case
11 scenario got worse. So there was a constant need to
12 reconsider and react to events that were going on around
13 the world; is that the position?

14 A. Yes, well, the first announcement was in the budget of
15 March 11, which at the time seemed quite a comprehensive
16 response, but within days was overtaken by events.

17 Q. Can we just go back a little before that. You mention
18 this in your statement, that -- you put it as the
19 Treasury "moved decisively into action" on 28 February.

20 A. Yes.

21 Q. And I'm just going to ask that -- this is an entry from
22 your diary of that date, which I think refers to
23 a meeting you were asked to convene. So it's
24 28 February 2020. There we are.

25 "Dan Y-S" -- that's Mr York-Smith; is that right?

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1 intensely to prepare that advice, which went to him the
2 Friday afternoon. So I wouldn't want anyone to take
3 away from that clip from my diary any sense that we were
4 not working at pace. The Treasury was working at
5 intense pace in response to the Chancellor's commission
6 of the previous day.

7 Q. But can we take from that, and from what you've just
8 said, that although he'd only been in post since
9 13 February, on a personal level, the Chancellor quickly
10 got to grips with the issue and was driving requirements
11 from the Treasury as to advice, as to standing up
12 schemes, and so on and so forth?

13 A. Absolutely. The Chancellor was fully in the saddle, as
14 they say. As Chancellor, the morning after his
15 appointment, there was not a single change of pace, and
16 he became -- slipped straight into being Chancellor and
17 the Treasury systems lined up there, and it really made
18 no difference whatsoever to our speed of response.

19 What he had done was to completely clear the slate
20 of his predecessor's draft budget, and we went back to
21 square one to develop a new budget for the May --
22 March 11th, and many of the issues that we had been
23 working on for Chancellor Javid's budget were stood
24 down.

25 Q. And again, to put this into context, there was due to be

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1 a budget regardless of the pandemic; is that right?

2 **A.** Yes, March 11th was going to have been

3 Chancellor Javid's first budget, but when he resigned in

4 the reshuffle of February, the budget date was there, we

5 had to have a budget on that date, and so the Chancellor

6 was preparing "the budget", but decided to include,

7 within the budget, a coronavirus response package.

8 **Q.** When we look at the pressures that everybody was under,

9 the pandemic did not arrive after a budget, after that

10 annual fiscal event had taken place. The budget was

11 coming anyway, a lot of work to be done on that, and the

12 pandemic alongside it?

13 **A.** It --

14 **Q.** Just so we can understand the -- (overspeaking) --

15 **A.** It was an extraordinarily busy time, but then this was

16 an incredibly busy and stressful time for almost

17 everyone in the country, and we were just having to work

18 hard. And however hard we were working, and however

19 much stress we were under, it was as nothing compared to

20 frontline health workers at this time.

21 **Q.** And I know it's difficult to comment on other people's

22 reflections, but having acknowledged it's difficult, I'm

23 going to ask you to do it, because I just want your view

24 about this. There was a Corporate Memory Project that

25 the Treasury conducted and Philippa Davies, who was

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1 I think on these issues? I find it hard to believe that

2 we could have started much earlier than when we did.

3 You know, you could argue two or three days, maybe, but

4 that would have made no material difference, because we

5 would still have been working towards a deadline of

6 March 11, because that was the budget, and that would be

7 the date that the Chancellor was going to announce

8 anything we worked on. So we might have had two or

9 three days more to prepare the budget package than we

10 did, and I think that would have made no difference to

11 the proposals and measures that were introduced in the

12 budget.

13 I find it impossible to understand how we could have

14 started work on the crisis response at the beginning of

15 February, as I argued in my statement. That would have

16 given us a month, but I just don't see how we could have

17 done that. There was no health advice that we were

18 facing a major problem at that point.

19 I think, my personal view, is that from February 28

20 onwards, we stepped up dramatically and then we

21 continued to step up further and further as more and

22 more teams got brought into the work.

23 The work for the budget was focused on a relatively

24 small number of interventions, of which the loan scheme

25 was on. So for me and some of the colleagues working

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1 Director of Public Spending (sic), spoke to it -- I'm

2 going to ask for INQ000652953. She said, "In

3 retrospect" -- let me just find that. There we are:

4 "In retrospect, I think we were quite slow, as with

5 the whole of government and outside of government, to

6 recognise it was more than just an annoying health

7 issue. I probably tried, three, four, five times,

8 before it necessarily resonated with my Directors at the

9 time, or DGs to get some resource in for coordinating

10 stuff. We were getting loads of stuff through ..."

11 It goes on.

12 "So in that initial stage, we should have jumped on

13 it quicker, and across the SCS we should have listened

14 more."

15 Do you accept that observation that there perhaps

16 wasn't -- and this isn't a criticism of the Treasury,

17 this is just an observation as to how quickly the

18 pandemic was developing -- there wasn't an appreciation

19 of the need to centrally coordinate from the outset and

20 to move more quickly?

21 **A.** I don't feel I can comment much on Philippa's statement.

22 I have huge respect for Philippa, she was an incredibly

23 valued colleague. I don't know quite what time period

24 she's referring to here, whether it's from February 28

25 or before February 28, but why don't I tell you what

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1 with me, that was an intensely busy period because we

2 had one of the major budget announcements to work on.

3 Other teams did not. But those other teams like the

4 personal tax and welfare policy team, then got brought

5 in to do what became known as furlough, and that team

6 worked incredibly hard, incredibly productive, but they

7 started a bit later.

8 So my personal view is that we responded well and

9 geared up rapidly from February 28 onwards.

10 **Q.** We know that the SPB effectively became the coordinating

11 force under Dan York-Smith in the early stages, and then

12 that developed again, but was that identified as the

13 correct coordinating force in the Treasury, or did that

14 just emerge organically, really, because they'd been

15 working on the budget, that it became the natural

16 successor to that work?

17 **A.** It's the natural place to have this type of effort run

18 from, for two reasons: first of all, the initial

19 response was a budget package. So it made sense to run

20 it through this group, strategy and project directorate,

21 SPD. But it was also the group in the Treasury that was

22 very good at coordinating processes and project

23 management and flexible resourcing. So it had

24 a flexible resourcing pool within it.

25 **Q.** Yes.

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1 A. And so -- and it wasn't a policy directorate in its own
 2 right. So it wasn't doing its own policy. So it was
 3 both the obvious one, but it was also the right one to
 4 have as the coordinating body for this.
 5 Now, in time, structures got built up and it became
 6 a -- more of a sort of standing army on the Covid
 7 response. But SPB -- and they did a very good job, they
 8 were the right people to respond and to coordinate the
 9 initial response.
 10 MR WRIGHT: Thank you very much, Sir Charles. We need to
 11 take our break for lunch now, I think, my Lady.
 12 LADY HALLETT: Certainly. I shall return at 2.05. Thank
 13 you very much.
 14 Sir Charles, I hope you were warned that we wouldn't
 15 finish you this morning, but I promise you we will
 16 finish you this afternoon.
 17 THE WITNESS: No, thank you very much, I'm expecting to be
 18 here for much or all of the afternoon.
 19 LADY HALLETT: Well, I hope you're being looked after.
 20 THE WITNESS: Yes, very well. Thank you.
 21 LADY HALLETT: Thank you.
 22 (1.03 pm)
 23 (The Short Adjournment)
 24 (2.05 pm)
 25 MR WRIGHT: Thank you, my Lady. Can I check again that you

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1 in that budget.
 2 But five days after the budget, so we're coming
 3 forward, now, to 16 March --
 4 A. Sorry, and CBILS was announced in the budget too.
 5 Q. Yes, sorry, and CBILS.
 6 Five days later, the Prime Minister made an
 7 announcement that people should stop non-essential
 8 contact with others and stop all unnecessary travel. So
 9 the health position was moving rapidly. And did it
 10 feel, in the Treasury, that, five days later, the budget
 11 was already consigned to history, out of date, given the
 12 pace at which things were moving in the country
 13 generally?
 14 A. It felt exactly as you described: that the health
 15 situation was deteriorating so rapidly that it became
 16 clear that we needed further interventions, and it was
 17 actually the weekend after the budget, the weekend of
 18 March 14th and 15th, that Andrew Bailey and I started
 19 designing the Coronavirus Corporate Financing Facility,
 20 which was one of the big interventions which was
 21 announced in the next wave.
 22 So, yes, it was clear within 24, 48 hours of the
 23 budget, that we would need to have new and larger
 24 interventions to scope with the scale of economic
 25 impact, given the rapid deterioration in the health

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1 can see and hear us in the hearing room?
 2 LADY HALLETT: I can. Thank you, Mr Wright.
 3 MR WRIGHT: Thank you.
 4 Sir Charles, before we broke for lunch, we'd been --
 5 or you'd been telling us about the period leading up to
 6 the budget on 11 March. We'd just been dealing with the
 7 role of the SPB and the initial response. And I think
 8 you said in your evidence this morning that, yes, there
 9 could have been two or three days earlier that
 10 the Treasury could have moved, but ultimately, with the
 11 budget coming on 11 March, nothing would have been
 12 accelerated from that date anyway. And so, in practical
 13 terms, even if those two or three days had been
 14 utilised, it might have taken a bit of pressure off you
 15 perhaps, but it wouldn't have changed where things
 16 landed on 11 March; is that right?
 17 A. Correct. That's my belief.
 18 Q. Yes. And just to have some context about the 11 March
 19 budget, on that date the Chancellor announced a package
 20 of measures, £12 billion, rules for Statutory Sick Pay
 21 were changed, the Small Business Grant Fund was
 22 established offering support to small businesses, there
 23 was £500 million of new grant funding for local
 24 authorities in England and Wales. So that was the
 25 package of measures, a very high-level summary, on -- or

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1 situation.
 2 Q. And your candid reaction, captured in your diary, on
 3 16 March -- I won't put it up, I'll just read it out to
 4 you, this little part of it -- was, you said, having
 5 heard the Prime Minister's announcement about
 6 non-essential contact and unnecessary travel:
 7 "We can expect a total meltdown in large parts of
 8 the economy."
 9 Was your immediate reaction to hearing that
 10 announcement, as captured in your diary.
 11 A. Yes, it was clear that the health measures, the
 12 necessary health measures, were going to have an
 13 extremely severe consequence on the economy, and that
 14 economy would both have a financial cost and a human
 15 cost, as we shut down large swathes of the economy and
 16 put people's jobs at risk and put businesses at risk of
 17 failure. And that was what we had to prevent. We had
 18 to ensure that the necessary health measures didn't
 19 trigger this economic meltdown which would cause lasting
 20 damage. We had to prevent that lasting damage.
 21 Q. Now, you've just told us that you and the Chancellor had
 22 met that weekend and you were discussing the CCFF; is
 23 that --
 24 A. I hadn't met with the Chancellor.
 25 Q. But you were discussing it?

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1 A. I had been discussing it --
 2 Q. Sorry, not the Chancellor, the governor?
 3 A. Yes, the governor and I had been exchanging messages
 4 over that weekend, and I spoke with the Chancellor on
 5 the morning of the Sunday to get his permission to
 6 develop the scheme at pace, and we developed it -- and
 7 Andrew texted me on Saturday morning and I spoke to the
 8 Chancellor Sunday morning, and we developed it through
 9 a series of exchanges and phone conversations during the
 10 day Monday, and we shared term sheets Monday and
 11 Tuesday, and the CCFF was announced that week, on
 12 17 March.

13 Q. Yes. That demonstrates that you certainly, and the
 14 governor, were not simply proceeding on the basis that
 15 the budget had been announced and that was the end of
 16 the work; this was other work going on before the
 17 Prime Minister's announcement on the 16th.

18 But I just want to go back to the announcement. Did
 19 the announcement and the extent of it, what was being
 20 announced, non-essential contact, non-essential travel
 21 to stop, did that come as a surprise to you and
 22 colleagues in the Treasury that things were moving that
 23 quickly?

24 A. That period was such an intense period of both work and
 25 extraordinary developments in the health situation

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1 health response was going to be much, much more
 2 significant, therefore the economic response had to be
 3 much, much more significant; is that fair?
 4 A. Completely fair, and I think it was that week -- I mean,
 5 it was an extraordinary week, the week of the 16th --
 6 which started with this announcement, but it was clear
 7 that this virus was now rapidly spiralling and the
 8 infection rate was dramatically increasing, and that we
 9 were looking at an extraordinarily dangerous and
 10 damaging situation, both in health terms and in economic
 11 terms.

12 Q. And I am going to ask that this extract from 17 March is
 13 put up please, it's page 23 to 24 from your diary.
 14 You'd been into work, there'd been a meeting at
 15 Number 11 with those who weren't working from home. You
 16 say:

17 "... a lot of the seniors have come in to work on
 18 this package."

19 And you describe the Chancellor in this way:

20 "[The Chancellor of the Exchequer] looks pretty
 21 somber. He knows he has to pull a rabbit out of the
 22 hat -- and doesn't have long to do it. We go over the
 23 possible list of options. Concentrate down on the
 24 lending options -- the Bank facility now looks it will
 25 be up and running next week (Bank and EGU have done

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1 that I honestly can't quite pin down which hour of which
 2 day I knew what. I think we had got some indication
 3 that there was a major announcement coming from the
 4 Prime Minister but I don't remember what we knew in
 5 advance of that. But I completely understand that our
 6 colleagues in Number 10 preparing the Prime Minister and
 7 working with the health experts, they had to get that
 8 announcement done. They didn't have time to communicate
 9 everything to everyone in government ahead of it.
 10 I could well understand why the Prime Minister would
 11 want to preserve confidences over the announcement ahead
 12 of time.

13 So I didn't feel blindsided by it. I just accepted
 14 that this was how it was in a crisis, that things got
 15 announced and we had to react.

16 Q. But looking back generally, I'm not asking you to
 17 pinpoint which moment or which announcement or precisely
 18 which day, but around this time of the 15th, 16th, 17th,
 19 there is at least the impression from your diary and
 20 from events that that was the period at which it became
 21 clear that the idea of this being a three- to four-month
 22 virus, and that the -- they would land the peak in the
 23 summer, and that would be the end of it, return to
 24 normal in the autumn, that that was not how this was
 25 going to develop. This was the realisation that the

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1 a great job at getting this underway. [Chancellor]
 2 wants it to be very big, but not clear that it will be.
 3 The Bank are talking about a few, maybe, tens of
 4 billions. We increase the Business Interruption Loan to
 5 5 [million], accepting that this blows through State Aid
 6 rules. We'll have to hope the Commission waves them for
 7 us ..."

8 Is that the European Commission?

9 A. Correct.

10 Q. "... seem to have done so for everyone else ... the good
 11 suggestion that [Chancellor] should take a power in the
 12 Covid bill to make loans, guarantees, equity investments
 13 in any industry without constraints (so a wider power
 14 than we have under [existing] Acts. Good suggestion.
 15 [Chancellor] likes it, shows action 'taking a power'."

16 Then:

17 "Long discussion about employment support. Some
 18 good options to make [Universal Credit] more generous,
 19 but we can't do anything on employment support as our
 20 welfare systems don't work the same way as in Europe."

21 And that description of the Chancellor looking
 22 pretty sombre, knowing he has to pull a rabbit out of
 23 the hat, what were you encapsulating in that phrase,
 24 that -- (overspeaking) -- to be considered.

25 A. Well, that is a sort of real-time image of what it was

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1 like at this point in the crisis. We were working in
2 a very purposeful and determined way in the Chancellor's
3 rooms at Number 11. We all realised that we were facing
4 an extremely grave situation. The Chancellor was right
5 to look sombre. We all looked sombre. We all felt very
6 concerned at the situation.

7 What the Chancellor wanted to do, and I give him
8 enormous credit for his leadership in the crisis
9 overall, but this was, I think, one of his most
10 impactful interventions, was he realised that he had to
11 make a statement to the nation that would reassure the
12 nation that, however bad the health crisis was, the
13 Chancellor would do whatever it takes to protect the
14 economy.

15 And he and the Prime Minister decided that that
16 needed to have a large number attached to it. And the
17 officials, including me, couldn't put a large number on
18 it because, at that stage, we hadn't designed all the
19 packages that would end up costing, well, north of
20 300 billion, and so, as we thought about it bottom-up,
21 looking at the individual packages we had at that
22 stage -- and we did not have furlough by this stage and
23 we did not have the self-employed scheme, and we did not
24 have Bounce Back Loans, so when we added up from the
25 bottom, we didn't get a very big number.

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1 developed at pace and without any precedent?

2 **A.** Well, I wouldn't over-interpret the 'rabbit' point.
3 What is true, though, is that we were indeed developing
4 the schemes and the interventions at remarkable pace.
5 I mean, this was a week that the teams were working
6 already on the furlough, we had a series of big
7 announcements to come later in the week, and it was an
8 extraordinary period of remarkably rapid policy
9 development across the Treasury as teams developed the
10 policies that would then become famous and very
11 impactful. But they were all developed at high speed in
12 this period.

13 **Q.** And is it right that, as well as having to develop new
14 schemes, that you were having to accept that what you
15 had hoped would be an approach that would get you
16 through a much shorter crisis, would have to change
17 radically? So it required a complete recalibration as
18 well, in terms of what was required?

19 **A.** Completely, both in scale and breadth of the crisis.
20 Because had it been a short two to three months slowdown
21 in the economy, then the Treasury can handle that with
22 the existing measures. And even the ones announced in
23 the budget would have been helpful for that sort of
24 slowdown. But what we were looking at now were whole
25 sectors of the economy, and literally millions of

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1 But the Chancellor correctly felt that to be
2 credible, he needed to announce a number that would
3 reassure the British public. So what I'm referring to
4 there is that he needed a powerful statement that
5 the Treasury, the government, would be there to protect
6 the economy, and the small schemes that we had at that
7 stage weren't it.

8 Now, he resolved that dilemma, and I was not in the
9 room with him at Number 10 when they go from having our
10 "whatever it takes" unlimited funds into what he
11 announced, which was 330 billion. And I assume he got
12 there by a top-down estimate. And it turns out to have
13 been a pretty accurate top-down estimate, because that's
14 not far short of what it cost. It's about 15% of GDP.
15 And it did signal very effectively that the Chancellor
16 was going to put money behind his statement to do
17 whatever it takes, and I think that was a critical
18 point, a point of real leadership by the Chancellor to
19 reassure the nation that he would protect the economy.

20 **Q.** And in terms of pulling a rabbit out of the hat, I mean,
21 at that time, as you've said, you were still working up
22 schemes at speed. There was no playbook for this, there
23 were no schemes on the shelf that could be dusted off
24 and put into action. Is that in part what that phrase
25 is encapsulating: that all of this is having to be

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1 businesses would be looking at zero revenues. As we saw
2 in your very powerful impact video, the shock to
3 a business owner to know that they've suddenly got to
4 shut and they're going to have zero revenues, that is
5 a whole new scale of crisis.

6 But it wasn't just small businesses, it was large
7 businesses. So at this time you start seeing in my
8 diary references to the airlines, because the airlines
9 were suddenly looking at zero revenues too. And large
10 manufacturing companies like Rolls-Royce, whose revenues
11 for their critical aviation division depended on
12 aircraft flying, they were looking at a precipitous fall
13 in revenues.

14 So the lockdown not only increased the severity of
15 the crisis; it opened up a whole new area where we were
16 going to need to find solutions to solving the problem
17 for small businesses and some of Britain's largest and
18 most iconic companies that were now facing a calamitous
19 fall in revenues. And that's what we had to do.

20 **Q.** In a time of what you might call an "ordinary" economic
21 crisis -- so this was a health crisis, primarily, that
22 had economic consequence, but in the time of an economic
23 crisis, there might be companies that you would consider
24 would be fine in any circumstance because they're well
25 run, they've got good liquidity, good reserves, they'll

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1 be fine. But is it the position here that even the best
 2 run, most productive companies were all at risk because
 3 revenue was simply stopped?
 4 **A.** Well, it varied, and that's what made this so difficult,
 5 because some companies did absolutely fine through this
 6 period. Professional service companies, law firms
 7 consultancies, accountancies, they switched very quickly
 8 to remote working and they traded through just fine.
 9 Retailers who were shut did not do so fine. Retailers
 10 who stayed open, they did do reasonably well.

11 So it's very different. And the sectors of the
 12 economy, some of them, like the hospitality industry,
 13 a critically important source of employment, because of
 14 the shutdown that was clearly going to face incredibly
 15 difficult circumstances.

16 Aviation, airlines, also very difficult.
 17 Automotive, people couldn't buy cars so car production
 18 lines stopped. So we saw precipitous falls in revenues
 19 for our car manufacturers. But it wasn't across the
 20 board, and that's what made the response so difficult to
 21 judge, because you had to work out where you could go
 22 across the board, as we did with small businesses, and
 23 where we had to target support for the large companies
 24 as to where it was most needed.

25 And so, at this point you're talking about,

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1 intervention that we ended up needing.
 2 **Q.** Okay. And as you've explained, over a very short period
 3 of time, you were working up significant schemes. We
 4 had the extension of CBILS initially extended on
 5 17 March.
 6 **A.** Mm.
 7 **Q.** The job retention scheme announced on 20 March, changes
 8 to welfare support schemes, alongside a myriad of other
 9 measures. And these were, take them in isolation, many
 10 of them, schemes that in ordinary times would take
 11 months if not years to work up. Is that reasonable?
 12 **A.** Well, certainly months. I mean the Treasury is
 13 a productive department and does policy development, you
 14 know, quite productively. And you'd normally expect to
 15 take three to six months on a very major policy,
 16 including the research, the consultation, you know, all
 17 the work that goes into a major policy announcement. We
 18 were doing that in days.
 19 **Q.** And over a breadth of major policy announcements --
 20 **A.** Yes.
 21 **Q.** -- not just one. Yeah.

22 And I just want to really drill down into the
 23 positives here about how it was that the Treasury was
 24 able to react in that way in the matter of days, and
 25 stand up those policies across the breadth of

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1 March 16th, it was both an extraordinarily worrying
 2 time, but we were facing some really difficult policy
 3 challenges which we needed to find a way through. We
 4 did find a way through it, but some of the darkest days
 5 of this crisis were around this period.

6 **Q.** Had it remained what had initially been expected,
 7 a relatively short period of restrictions and
 8 constriction of the economy, the strategy for that would
 9 have remained one of essentially loans and guarantees
 10 that would have got you through a shorter period; is
 11 that fair?

12 **A.** Yes. I can't speak for the labour market policies,
 13 because I can't -- it wasn't my area. I don't know what
 14 they might have done in a different scenario, short of
 15 full lockdown. But certainly on the business support
 16 areas, if it had been, for instance, like the SARS
 17 epidemic in Singapore, the banks kept on lending,
 18 airlines kept on flying. There were social restrictions
 19 and there was quarantining but Singapore did not have
 20 a full lockdown. So yes, you know, the airlines
 21 suffered a drop in revenues but they didn't have a total
 22 fall in revenues.

23 So we would probably have been able to survive
 24 a much more constrained crisis with guarantees and loans
 25 on the business side, and without the scale of

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1 interventions. What enabled the Treasury to do that?
 2 **A.** Well, I think a few things. As I put in my witness
 3 statement, I give great credit to Rishi Sunak for his
 4 leadership of the Treasury during this period. He was,
 5 as he should have been, very demanding and set very high
 6 standards for us and made us aim high, but he provided
 7 inspirational leadership, incredible workload that he
 8 carried through, incredible detail that he took on, and
 9 so I give credit to him as the leader of this effort.

10 It's also a reflection of the very high quality of
 11 staff at the Treasury. I mean, I'd worked in the
 12 private sector, I'd worked with some of the top
 13 professional services firms in the world. I was always
 14 impressed by the quality of staff that the Treasury
 15 attracted, and so we were able to mobilise teams of
 16 really able, highly motivated people to work on these
 17 policy initiatives, and they were willing to innovate
 18 and think differently to come up with these very radical
 19 policies at short notice. So I give huge credit to all
 20 levels of the Treasury who made this happen.

21 The Treasury has a very flat structure. It's not
 22 hierarchical, it's not bureaucratic. We concentrate on
 23 the outcomes, not the process and the inputs. We
 24 concentrate on impact and outcomes, and I think that
 25 culture of being innovative, entrepreneurial, flexible,

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1 non-hierarchical, and very supportive -- I mean, this
 2 was a very, very demanding period and a lot of people
 3 were going through a lot stress in their personal lives,
 4 a lot of people were getting sick. It was very
 5 difficult but the Treasury held together, very strong
 6 mutual support. And again, for that I give Tom Scholar
 7 a lot of the credit for keeping the top team together
 8 and making us mutually supportive of one another through
 9 what was a very tough time.

10 **Q.** Was there also, was it necessary to land all these
 11 schemes, to have a different attitude to risk than you
 12 would have in ordinary times? And I don't mean that as
 13 a negative, necessarily, I mean in terms of you had to
 14 modify your approach?

15 **A.** Yes, but I think it's important to realise that the
 16 biggest risk here was not acting fast. We had
 17 compelling evidence that the business community was
 18 rapidly facing acute cash flow crisis. There's an
 19 email, you'll see it in my evidence, from Adam Marshall,
 20 the head of British Chambers of Commerce, and he's
 21 saying that businesses are within weeks of running out
 22 of cash. So once the lockdown happens, we knew that
 23 businesses were facing imminent disaster.

24 And again, you heard that on your impact video.

25 So the biggest risk was not to act. Therefore, by

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1 launch schemes that had imperfections, glitches, things
 2 that would need to be ironed out? That was a necessary
 3 evil; is that fair?

4 **A.** Yes. I say that in my witness statement and yes, that's
 5 what we had to do. We had to get these schemes to
 6 market and fix them as we got real-time feedback on
 7 them.

8 **Q.** And you give some examples in your statement of things
 9 that you launched and then fixed. So you asked the
 10 British Business Bank to upgrade its operational
 11 processes for CBILS but you needed to launch the
 12 schemes?

13 **A.** Yes, well with CBILS, which was this first of the
 14 business loan programmes, what surprised us was the
 15 extraordinary surge in volumes, because CBILS was
 16 designed in that period before the budget, when the
 17 Chancellor announced a £1 billion programme, and that
 18 turned out, given the lockdown, to be completely
 19 insufficient. So we had far higher volumes than we
 20 expected.

21 We also learnt with CBILS that once it came into
 22 contact with real customers, we got a lot of feedback.
 23 And these were feedback on things that, even with better
 24 planning, I don't think we would have spotted. There
 25 were some very complicated issues around who was and who

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1 comparison, the risks that we were prepared to take
 2 -- and, of course, these were decisions by the
 3 Chancellor -- officials simply make recommendations, all
 4 the decisions were the Chancellor's. And so he decided
 5 to accept one set of risks to avoid an even bigger set
 6 of risks of causing lasting damage to the economy.

7 **Q.** And so risk needs to be viewed in that way here: as
 8 a trade-off between -- it's the risk of doing nothing,
 9 as against the risk of launching a scheme that's not
 10 perfect, and correcting it later, versus what would
 11 happen if you did nothing?

12 **A.** Yes, and I think two points on risk. One, it's the risk
 13 of inaction is often higher. And in a crisis the risk
 14 of inaction can be a lot higher than the risk of action.

15 The other point which I will come back to again is
 16 that you can't consider risk in isolation of impact. So
 17 when people say some of these schemes were risky, that
 18 may well be true. But they also had very high impact.
 19 And you cannot judge risk without assessing the impact
 20 of the scheme.

21 And so yes, we were prepared to accept risk on some
 22 of these schemes, but that was because we were confident
 23 that they would have impact against the objectives that
 24 we had been set.

25 **Q.** And so the consequence was, at times, that you had to

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1 was not eligible for CBILS and, put simply, whether
 2 someone who didn't need a CBILS guarantee should get
 3 one. Because one of the principles of government loan
 4 schemes is that you don't give them to people who don't
 5 need them.

6 Well, in this crisis, it became impossible to tell
 7 whether someone did or didn't need a loan guarantee
 8 product; could they get credit without it? That became
 9 impossible to tell. So that had to be changed once we
 10 came into contact with real customers and real feedback.
 11 But that alone increased volume demand by tenfold, is
 12 one estimate.

13 So, yes, the British Business Bank and the
 14 participating lenders had to really work hard to improve
 15 their operational processing speed, and it was difficult
 16 at first, and we got very negative feedback, but the
 17 British Business Bank and the banks and the non-banks
 18 who were making these loans did a fantastic job at
 19 fixing that quickly, and I give them huge credit for the
 20 way they fixed it quickly, but it was a very difficult
 21 period.

22 **Q.** I'm just interested in the alternative. The alternative
 23 would have been to say: we're not going to launch it
 24 until you've sorted out these operational issues. But
 25 presumably, by the time you'd done that, the companies

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1 that needed the money would have fallen over and there'd
 2 be no point having fixed them?
 3 **A.** Absolutely. And that was very much the trade-off that
 4 the Chancellor faced with the Bounce Back Loans
 5 decision, which we'll get to, at the beginning of May.
 6 **Q.** Yes.
 7 **A.** That was very clearly the decision where you go with
 8 some known flaws, which you fix as fast as you can, to
 9 the extent that you can, or wait, and let hundreds of
 10 thousands of businesses fail. That was the choice.
 11 I think the Chancellor made absolutely the right choice.
 12 **Q.** Okay. Well, we will come on to look at CBILS and how it
 13 developed, and how the Bounce Back Loan Scheme came to
 14 be launched. But if there was the impression that there
 15 was this very difficult period in March, and then
 16 decisions became easy thereafter, would you agree with
 17 that, or dispel that, as a proposition? Were there
 18 difficult decisions continuing throughout 2020?
 19 **A.** Yes, and the nature of the decisions changed. I mean,
 20 the intense urgency of the crisis in that first wave was
 21 probably March through April and into May. And by then,
 22 most of the schemes had been launched. Different
 23 colleagues would have had different experience of what
 24 the difficult moments were.
 25 For me, from May, June and July is when we were
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1 briefly, if I can at this stage, because you've touched
 2 on it.
 3 Did the difficult decisions for the Chancellor, from
 4 your perspective, really shift from -- initially it was
 5 "What does he do?" And then it became a question of,
 6 "Should he withdraw the support when he had originally
 7 planned to withdraw it?"
 8 In other words, a lot of this support was due to end
 9 in the autumn, and it became a challenge as to whether
 10 it should end as planned or be extended?
 11 **A.** Well, these were excruciatingly difficult decisions, and
 12 they were difficult both on the balance of were the --
 13 what was the health situation? How much would extend?
 14 Would the second wave go on? How bad would it be? So
 15 there's a difficult health context. But also the fiscal
 16 cost was mounting and also the economic cost of having
 17 businesses shut down and people sitting at home not at
 18 work -- on furlough, but not in the workforce.
 19 And so those decisions got harder and harder for the
 20 Chancellor, as this crisis went on. I wasn't involved
 21 in them, I wasn't in the room with him. I have enormous
 22 sympathy for the difficulties that he had, as he had to
 23 trade off the case for extending them versus the growing
 24 fiscal costs of them. And that's a difficult trade-off,
 25 and I wouldn't presume to have a view as to how to make
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1 handling some extremely difficult and high stakes
 2 individual company discussions, of individual large
 3 iconic companies that were facing serious difficulties,
 4 and those were ones that were also very stressful and
 5 very difficult, both when we said yes, as we do in
 6 a handful of cases, but mainly when we said no.
 7 And I'll come later to this point. The decisions
 8 not to do things in a crisis are often as important and
 9 as difficult as the decisions to do things.
 10 So for my workload, I had a very difficult set of
 11 those company-specific issues over the summer. It then
 12 eased up over the summer because we were out of
 13 lockdown, but then the second wave came, and that
 14 brought with it a whole series of difficult decisions.
 15 Those fell more to the labour market interventions where
 16 the Chancellor had to face decisions over whether, when
 17 and how to extend the furlough, which is not my area.
 18 On the loan programmes, he did make decisions to
 19 extend them, but those are actually quite
 20 straightforward because you just keep the closing date,
 21 you move the closing date. We didn't have to change the
 22 loan schemes in substance, because they were working
 23 very well by then.
 24 **Q.** And I know it's not your area, the labour market
 25 interventions, but I just want to pick up on that
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1 it.
 2 **Q.** But that second part of the trade-off, in terms of
 3 whether to extend, does that, in a sense, become more
 4 like the Chancellor doing not the job he does in normal
 5 times, which is looking after the public finances and
 6 the business of usual -- of assessing the cost of these
 7 interventions, the fiscal costs that are racking up?
 8 **A.** Well, it -- I don't think this period was like being
 9 Chancellor in normal times at any point, but Mr Sunak
 10 will no doubt have a better perspective on that than me.
 11 Early on in the crisis, in the sort of first set of
 12 interventions, the mindset was very clearly, "Whatever
 13 it takes". And that was absolutely the right signal to
 14 send early on to reassure the country that we would
 15 protect the economy.
 16 Later on, it becomes a more difficult trade-off as
 17 to -- not just on the fiscal cost, but the economic cost
 18 of people not being in the workforce, of businesses
 19 being shut. The risk of permanent scarring goes up the
 20 longer people stay out of the workforce. So it wasn't
 21 just the fiscal costs; it was the fact that the economy
 22 was being shut down, and the longer it shut down, the
 23 more risk of permanent damage there is to it, both in
 24 terms of businesses and the workforce.
 25 **Q.** And Sir Charles, did you have a sense that the
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1 Chancellor was also having to balance political
 2 pressures with support for some sectors? And I give an
 3 example, the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme.
 4 There was quite a vocal sector -- I think you reference
 5 that in one of your diary entries -- in favour of
 6 support for that sector, and there were decisions
 7 therefore that weren't purely economic, but also had
 8 a political element to them that the Chancellor was
 9 having to take?

10 A. Well, we -- the Chancellor would be better placed to
 11 answer that than me. We did get a lot of incoming
 12 lobbying from all sorts of angles. Frankly, in my
 13 experience, in this crisis, it was all perfectly
 14 reasonable. And the fact that the airlines were calling
 15 me and saying, "We've got a problem, can the government
 16 help?", was a perfectly proper thing for them to do.
 17 And I think the Chancellor had to weigh up all sorts of
 18 different demands on him.

19 I felt his decision making was rational, economic,
 20 objective, but I'll leave him to talk about some of the
 21 trade-offs he faced.

22 Q. All right. Can we then move on from that initial period
 23 and some of the pressures on decision making that you've
 24 described, to look at the CBILS scheme in particular,
 25 please.

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1 many cases, to weather the storm.

2 And we thought that would be a useful support for
 3 businesses.

4 Q. And this was a guaranteed product, in the sense that the
 5 government stood behind a proportion of the lending.
 6 Why was a guaranteed product chosen?

7 A. Well, guarantees are very effective in a number of ways,
 8 and one of the lessons learned from this was just how
 9 effective guarantees proved, whether it was a £50,000
 10 CBILS loan, or a £3 billion UK export guarantee loan,
 11 which we also did in Covid. They prove very effective.

12 Guarantees provide support to the banking industry
 13 but they keep the banking industry very much focused on
 14 the risk because the banks have got, as you'll have read
 15 in Mr Sunak's statement, they've still got skin in the
 16 game. So they're going to make sure that the credit is
 17 good, even though they've only got 20% of it you run the
 18 normal credit processes, the normal checks and
 19 verifications, so you maintain those types of lending
 20 disciplines whilst the government takes 80% of the risk,
 21 which makes it easier for the banks to lend, and it also
 22 means the government can provide the support without
 23 having to actually borrow the money on the gilts markets
 24 unless the loan goes wrong. So the guarantees are
 25 very -- they don't put any strain on the government

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1 So this was the first Covid-19 loan guarantee
 2 product, the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan
 3 Scheme, CBILS, as it became known. Now, that was, as
 4 you've corrected me, that was announced at the budget on
 5 11 March. So this was one of the early schemes that
 6 stayed the course, as it were.

7 What was the primary objective of the schemes, from
 8 your perspective?

9 A. Well, the origins of this had lain in our preparation
 10 for a no-deal Brexit, ie, leaving the European Union
 11 without a trade deal, where we thought that businesses
 12 might face a sudden drop in demand caused by some of the
 13 economic supply constraints that we'd face in that
 14 scenario. And that scenario actually mapped quite well
 15 on to what we thought we might experience here with
 16 a drop-off in demand. Different causes, obviously, but
 17 we thought that businesses would face a temporary
 18 shortfall in revenues, and therefore face cash flow
 19 problems, but that they would bounce back after the
 20 restrictions, and so, in effect, bridging finance to
 21 give them a loan and to give them more working capital
 22 to get through two to three months of slow trading would
 23 enable them to weather the storm, and then when they
 24 came out on the other side they'd be able to pay back
 25 the loan over a period of six years or so, five years in

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1 financing needs.

2 Now, other programmes were putting a big strain on
 3 the financing needs, because that was real money out of
 4 the door that the government had to borrow from the
 5 gilts market. The guarantees didn't require any funding
 6 upfront, so only when the loan goes bad -- if it goes
 7 bad that it requires funding person pun.

8 So guarantees are a very effective tool in a crisis
 9 like this.

10 Q. But you acknowledge in your statement that nonetheless
 11 the launch of this scheme was, in your words, very
 12 difficult. And I'll come back to why that was and we'll
 13 explore the difficulties that you faced, but just to
 14 move forward and look ahead and understand what then
 15 happened, is this fair: that the reason that ultimately
 16 the Bounce Back Loan Scheme was launched, which offered
 17 100% guarantee, so it took the commercial bank's skin
 18 out of the game, the reason that that scheme had to be
 19 stood up and launched was because of the difficulty in
 20 getting the lending moving through CBILS, in part?

21 A. I think that's part of the reason. I think one of the
 22 things that we learnt is that, in a crisis like this,
 23 you need a full suite of product guarantee -- loan
 24 guarantee products. And the CBILS, we learned, was
 25 actually a really effective product for larger

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small businesses and small mid-sized businesses. The average loan size was about 250,000 on a CBILS loan, whereas the average loan size on a Bounce Back Loan was around 30,000.

So CBILS actually proved to be an incredibly powerful product, but for larger small businesses and smaller mid ones.

Just to bring into focus -- because we'll talk about the difficulties, but we should do that in the context of how successful it proved. It extended 25 billion of loan support to these larger small businesses, 100,000 businesses benefited. It's had much lower loan losses than expected. And contrary to what some people say, it's had very low fraud experience.

Fraud is currently running at less than one quarter of 1% on CBILS. So the CBILS product, for that target market, has been extremely successful.

What it was not effective at was getting money very quickly with simple application forms to much smaller businesses. And that's why we realised, the Chancellor realised, by mid-April, that we had a gap and we had a serious gap to fill at the businesses that were too small for CBILS. Even though CBILS was also quite difficult and slow, we had a bigger gap at the smaller -- smaller end.

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banking industry, through UK Finance, who I know you'll be hearing from, the input they gave to us was that this would be a good product to use because they understood it, they had the processes, and my view is it was the right product to use.

Q. Yes, it existed, it worked, it was tested --

A. Yeah.

Q. -- and lenders were in place and registered and --

A. Correct.

Q. -- so on and so forth. But, and you've referred to it as the volume problem, it faced or ran up against the volume problem which, is this right, the sheer volume of applications was such --

A. Yes.

Q. -- that it could -- the existing architecture could not -- (overspeaking) --

A. There were a number of problems. One was that sheer surge in volumes. Secondly, the British Business Bank had 40 accredited lenders, but in order to expand access and make sure that every person who wanted a Bounce Back Loan could get one through their current bank or non-bank lender, they expanded entry to over 100, and it just takes time to onboard new lenders -- and it should take time, it's a complicated process to check their processes, check they've got the capabilities, bring

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Q. I appreciate, Sir Charles, it can seem that we're focusing on the negative all the time. But that's because we're trying to identify where things, if they did go wrong, how things could be changed for the future. So I appreciate all of those points that you've made quite properly.

But concentrating on why CBILS did what you said it did very well, but didn't do those other things as well.

A. Yeah, yeah.

Q. I think, is it right that CBILS was essentially built on a pre-existing platform, if you like, the Enterprise Finance Guarantee scheme platform?

A. Correct.

Q. So that was a pre-existing platform operated by the British Business Bank since 2009?

A. Correct, correct.

Q. And the reason you took that existing architecture and built on it was because, putting it bluntly, there was not time to build the thing from scratch. Is that fair?

A. There wasn't time to build something from scratch, but also, other than this issue of the volumes --

Q. Yes.

A. -- it's an effective product, and we also had input from the banking industry, who understood it. Forty people were already accredited for this product. So the

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them on board.

And so people who didn't bank with one of the 40 lenders were frustrated that their lender wasn't yet accredited. That was another problem.

Q. Sorry, can I just jump in there just to pick up on that. Why would it matter who lent you the money? If you've got 40 lenders, and they've got enough cash to lend, why would it matter that you can only go to 40, and why would you want to expand it?

A. Well, because it's quite complicated opening a new business bank account. And that takes time. If you have opened a business bank account recently, it can take a bit of time to go through the verification -- I mean, banks have, appropriately, to do a lot of checks. And you have to prove who you are, you have to get your utility bills, and all those -- it's different now, but back in 2020 you had to prove all those things. So telling people, "You can only get it but from one of these lenders" would have meant further delay whilst they tried to open a new bank account and not all those banks were open to new business accounts because they were having --

Q. No -- precisely. If these are obvious questions to you, I'm asking them so that everybody watching your evidence can follow these problems.

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1 A. Yes.

2 Q. So it's not as simple as just saying: well, you can
3 apply to Barclays if you bank with Lloyds. It's more
4 a question of if you don't have an existing
5 relationship, you don't have an account, that bank would
6 need to make checks, that would take time --

7 A. Yeah.

8 Q. -- and by the time all that's been done, your business
9 might have failed?

10 A. Yeah, and in the end, we had over 100 lenders, British
11 Business Bank did an outstanding job at accrediting
12 a very, very wide range of bank and non-bank lenders,
13 traditional lenders and new challenger banks and new
14 innovative business models. So CBILS was the most
15 widely available of all the loan schemes.

16 Q. Again, why is it important that there should be a range
17 of lenders from the perspective of the banks? So
18 leaving aside the customers, if they're not a customer
19 of that particular bank, they need to open an account,
20 that takes time. But from a banking sector perspective,
21 is there an importance in having different lenders
22 having access to this marketplace --

23 A. Well, we had a very clear policy objective, which long
24 pre-dated Covid. It had been part of the Treasury's
25 policy objectives under successive chancellors since

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1 promptly, and that was one of the things that then
2 helped speed up this process. So the British Business
3 Bank and the participating lenders deserve huge credit
4 for how they responded to these challenges, because we
5 did get these problems fixed, and then, by the summer,
6 these loans were taking five to six weeks, which is an
7 appropriate amount for a product of this complexity and
8 scale, and once we got these problems fixed, CBILS, the
9 noise dropped away and it became a very successful
10 product.

11 Q. Was it appreciated, when you decided to, effectively,
12 build this product on the Enterprise Finance Guarantee
13 scheme, that these problems would rise?

14 So was anybody thinking about this at the outset and
15 saying, "Well, if we use this platform we're going to
16 run into a volume problem. We're going to run into an
17 operational processing problem at the BBB, we're going
18 to run into the problem of there only being 40 lenders",
19 or did that emerge as learning from standing it up on
20 that platform?

21 A. Well, the -- when we were talking about launching it,
22 because we didn't know we were going to have lockdown
23 and this sudden surge, I can't sit here and say we had
24 thought about the volume problem at the time of the
25 budget. Once it hit us, it was a very intense period.

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1 I joined in 2013, which was to increase banking
2 competition.

3 So it was a very clear objective of this Chancellor,
4 as previous chancellors, to make sure that small
5 businesses had a choice of who their bank was and that
6 they weren't constrained to a small number of banks.
7 That was one factor.

8 The other factor was we wanted to make sure that
9 these loans could be distributed throughout the United
10 Kingdom. I know some banks that, like Danske Bank, only
11 operates in Northern Ireland. So we wanted to make sure
12 that there was very broad access and that we weren't
13 constraining bank competition.

14 Q. Yes. In terms of the British Business Bank accrediting
15 lenders who wanted to lend thorough this facility, that
16 was an operational challenge for the British Business
17 Bank, was it, as far as you were concerned?

18 A. Well, your witnesses from the British Business Bank
19 would be better placed to judge it, but it just takes
20 time to onboard a new banking relationship. They have
21 to go through checks, and all the processes have to be
22 validated to make sure that they have the skills and
23 capabilities to issue these guarantees.

24 The British Business Bank redesigned their processes
25 at speed to accelerate that process. And they did that

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1 As you may even remember, the operational processes on
2 CBILS was a regular feature every morning on the Today
3 Business Programme segment, and the press were very
4 active on it. So we were getting very real-life
5 feedback on the problems around this launch.

6 And so our intense focus, and where the British
7 Business Bank and the lenders did a great job was on
8 fixing the problems once they became apparent.

9 Q. So to remind ourselves, this was announced 11 March. So
10 before the lockdown was announced, before the no
11 non-essential travel, no non-essential social contacts
12 announcement on the 16th.

13 A. Correct.

14 Q. So the decision to use the existing infrastructure of
15 the Enterprise Finance Guarantee scheme had been taken
16 before those developments in the health picture?

17 A. Correct.

18 Q. So therefore at that time you weren't thinking about
19 those developments --

20 A. We weren't thinking about the scale that we would face.

21 Q. Do you think, looking back, that there was -- you've
22 talked about this featuring on the Today Programme, and
23 the government was getting a lot of political pressure
24 about this, do you think there was a gap between
25 people's expectations of what the scheme could deliver

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1 and reality, and that was a communication problem about
 2 what the scheme could or couldn't do?
 3 A. Well, one of the things I've learned from multiple
 4 crises is that when you look back at them, you always
 5 reflect that you could have communicated better. And at
 6 the start of a new crisis, you think: we're really going
 7 to work hard on communications because we'll have to do
 8 it really well. And in the end you say: oh, we did work
 9 hard, but we didn't do as well as we should.
 10 It's one of the things I've learned over the years.
 11 This crisis was no different. CBILS was actually
 12 a very complicated product. I mean, these are big
 13 loans, up to 5 million. They have conditions, they're
 14 complicated, they require underwriting. And in
 15 a crisis, political leaders need to give simple messages
 16 clearly, without lots of conditions and subclauses and
 17 small print. They need to give a simple, clear message.
 18 And therefore, it would have been impossible to convey
 19 some of the complex conditions that did apply to CBILS
 20 appropriately in a simple statement in the
 21 House of Commons or in, you know, the evening news
 22 announcements from Number 10.
 23 So people may have got unrealistic expectations
 24 about how easy it would be to get this product, and
 25 I think a lot of the negative feedback we got were
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1 and 3 billion of valuers agreed. But against a market
 2 of 1.5 million small business that we, in the end, ended
 3 up having to help, this was a small intervention. And
 4 that is why it became essential to develop a new
 5 intervention to target the much broader market that
 6 CBILS wasn't reaching.
 7 Q. I'm going to put up -- ask for another entry from your
 8 diary to be put up.
 9 25 March 2020, please, pages 34-35.
 10 And I'm going to put this on the screen and really
 11 ask you whether -- ask you about communication with the
 12 public, but also whether there were some internal
 13 communication issues about how CBILS should operate.
 14 So this is 25 March 2020, and you say:
 15 "Very difficult call with the [Chancellor] on the
 16 CBILS product. He is getting lots of incoming about
 17 personal guarantees. He said no personal guarantees.
 18 The team -- and me -- interpreted that as no personal
 19 guarantees on personal homes, which is the really toxic
 20 type of personal guarantee. When someone's business
 21 goes bust, the bank then also takes their home. The
 22 team had said No Personal Guarantees on homes. In the
 23 rush there wasn't enough clarity on our advice, and we
 24 were silent on personal guarantees on things other than
 25 your home. The [Chancellor] is furious (though mainly
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1 because small businesspeople understandably were
 2 frustrated that these products were taking time to be
 3 accessible.
 4 That did influence the design of the Bounce Back
 5 Loans, where the Chancellor was very clear that this had
 6 to be very simple, very easy to apply for, and very
 7 quick to disburse the funds.
 8 And as you heard from Matthew in the video, that's
 9 exactly how that product felt to its target market in
 10 a way that CBILS did not.
 11 Q. And I don't mean that this was done deliberately, but
 12 was there a sense in which, therefore, people might have
 13 felt that the CBILS had been oversold to them? The way
 14 it was announced, simply, they found that it didn't
 15 actually enable them to access the money as easily as
 16 they thought they'd be able to?
 17 A. Well, I think I used the word "oversold" in my diary.
 18 I regret using that word and I don't think it was
 19 oversold; I just think it was a very complex product.
 20 And at a time when people were understandably and
 21 appropriately looking to the government to deliver
 22 support quickly, this product was not moving fast
 23 enough.
 24 Now, that -- it wasn't doing nothing. I mean, in
 25 the first six weeks, 11,000 loans or so were disbursed
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1 at the banks, not us....). Demands that we get it
 2 fixed. Then we discuss the rest of the problem of the
 3 gap. [Chancellor] wants us to do a CBILS Plus for
 4 bigger loans, and he is interested in some platform idea
 5 for preferred equity. And we'll have a lot of special
 6 situations. He tells us to fix the guarantee problem
 7 within hours.
 8 "Call the team, and do a download. They get the
 9 message and head off to sort out the problem. Hope they
 10 can fix it."
 11 Can you just expand on that?
 12 A. Sure, well, this, as you say, March 25th, this is the
 13 second day of the lockdown, and this is policy making in
 14 the thick of a crisis. The Chancellor had been very
 15 clear: he said no personal guarantees. And I and the
 16 team thought he meant no personal guarantees on
 17 principal private residences, which was a feature of the
 18 loan of the EFG. And what we hadn't realised -- in
 19 retrospect maybe we should, but we hadn't realised he
 20 meant no personal guarantees on any other form of
 21 security.
 22 And as you can see from some of the witness
 23 statements from the British Business Bank, those other
 24 forms of security were an important risk mitigant for
 25 these loans, because banks often take personal
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1 guarantees on things other than your principal home.
 2 You might have a second home, you might have a large art
 3 collection, you might have a yacht, you might have
 4 a large financial portfolio of assets. And the banks,
 5 not unreasonably, thought those they might be things
 6 they could secure the loan on.

7 So -- but we -- it was just a miscommunication,
 8 a misunderstanding, which is what happens in the thick
 9 of a crisis.

10 The Chancellor was very clear, and we got it fixed.
 11 And we had to work with the British Business Bank and
 12 the lenders. This confusion over personal guarantees
 13 was another one of the problems we had in the market,
 14 because some banks interpreted it differently. And so
 15 there was confusion in the market. But in the end, the
 16 resolution was to, in effect, draw the line at £250,000
 17 loan, and, below that, no personal guarantees on
 18 anything. And then on, the bigger loans, the banks
 19 could negotiate some security on those loans.

20 Q. I'm going to ask in a moment a couple more of your
 21 entries are put up relating to this, to CBILS. But
 22 before I put them up to illustrate the point, do you
 23 agree that Chancellor was frustrated with the banks, and
 24 the Chancellor felt that the banks were not taking their
 25 share of the risk, and not processing applications

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1 been that if the business could get credit without
 2 a government guarantee, ie, it didn't need a government
 3 guarantee, then it shouldn't get a government guarantee.
 4 A perfectly sensible policy. And it meant that
 5 government guarantees, up to and including this first
 6 variant of CBILS, was intended to support those
 7 businesses who couldn't otherwise get credit. Otherwise
 8 you get what's called deadweight of handing out
 9 government guarantees to people who don't need it.

10 The problem here was that, in this crisis, it was
 11 extremely difficult to determine whether a business was
 12 or wasn't viable, with or without a credit, and whether
 13 they could or couldn't have got one on their own merits
 14 outside of this crisis.

15 It just became an incredibly difficult thing for the
 16 banks to judge, so we had to lift that, but that
 17 resulted in a huge increase in demand from businesses
 18 who may not have needed one of these CBILS loans but now
 19 wanted to get one because they were more attractively
 20 priced than regular credit.

21 Q. Yes.

22 A. Can I just make a point on the Chancellor? I mean, I
 23 should put this in two points of context. First of all,
 24 throughout this crisis, Rishi Sunak was unfailingly
 25 polite and courteous and respectful of teams, incredibly

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1 quickly enough?

2 A. I'd like to put that in broader context. That's what
 3 some of my diary entries say. The Chancellor --

4 Q. Well, in fairness to you, I'll put them up on the
 5 screen.

6 A. Okay, fine.

7 Q. Then you can explain rather than --

8 A. Yep, yep.

9 Q. Let's have 30 March 2020, first of all, page 39.

10 "Frustrating day. Calls on the CBILS SME loan which
 11 is in bad shape. The [Chancellor] is totally bent out
 12 of shape on this -- lashing out at the banks (better
 13 than lashing out at us officials). We are conceding on
 14 the issue of guarantees and will have to concede on the
 15 issue of 'reverse discrimination'. CBILS was intended
 16 for SMEs who could not get credit but it is so
 17 attractively priced that businesses who can get credit
 18 want it too. The position is just not sustainable. We
 19 are going to have to concede, but it will be expensive."

20 Just pausing there, that point about "businesses who
 21 can get credit want it too", is this really
 22 a competition point? The businesses --

23 A. No, this is the -- it's this phrase "reverse
 24 discrimination". The basic principle behind any
 25 government-guaranteed product up until this point had

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1 appreciative of the work that officials were doing. He
 2 never lost his temper with us once. He was an extremely
 3 courteous man, as you all know from having seen him in
 4 public life. And I have absolutely no complaints about
 5 how he treated us. In fact, I think it was remarkable
 6 how calm and courteous he was, given the enormous load
 7 he was carrying.

8 I also know that he was deeply appreciative of the
 9 incredible work that the banks and non-bank lenders did
 10 in delivering these products, and both he and John Glen,
 11 the Economic Secretary, went out of their way to thank
 12 the banks for the work and their staff did for the work
 13 they did and their staff in delivering these products.
 14 Now, if I have recorded some, you know, in-the-moments
 15 comments where he was expressing frustration, I really
 16 would not take that out of context. I know he was
 17 deeply grateful to the banking industry for how they
 18 stepped up and delivered these products.

19 Q. Thank you for that clarification, Sir Charles, and so
 20 you understand, I'm not going to these entries because
 21 of how you describe individuals or a conversation you've
 22 had with them, but really because they're making the
 23 point that was live at the time.

24 A. Yes, okay.

25 Q. So let's just pick this up on the 14 April, page 58,

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1 please. 14 April.
 2 A. Yep.
 3 Q. There we are:
 4 "CBILS getting terrible press again ..."
 5 And pausing there, Sir Charles, taking your last
 6 point on board:
 7 "... [Chancellor] on [the] war path. My view is
 8 that the banks are getting the flak (partly fairly,
 9 partly unfairly), but let's leave it there for now.
 10 Only the banks can get us out of this mess by processing
 11 more loan applications."
 12 So explain, "partly fairly, partly unfairly", why
 13 the banks were getting the flak and what part of that
 14 was fair and what part of that was unfair?
 15 A. Well, now we're just starting -- we're just after the
 16 Easter break and we're starting the second three weeks
 17 of the lockdown, any hope of an Easter re-set has faded.
 18 We're now settling in for a long and difficult period,
 19 and frankly, by this stage, everyone was pretty tired
 20 and I, for one, hadn't had a day off since the beginning
 21 of this crisis. So I really wouldn't pay much attention
 22 to my somewhat short-tempered comments here.
 23 I don't blame the Chancellor for being demanding on
 24 us fixing these problems. They needed to be fixed. The
 25 banks were working incredibly hard to upgrade their

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1 A. Yes.
 2 Q. Right. "Banks who are going slow". In the context of
 3 the other entries I've taken you to, were the banks slow
 4 to get the money out of the door, really, is what
 5 I am -- or did you think they were at the time?
 6 A. I would place very low weight on my perspective, because
 7 I didn't have the full story as to -- I'd been sitting
 8 at home by myself working on 12-hour Teams meetings
 9 through this period, so I didn't have the full facts as
 10 to what was causing the delays in the -- getting the
 11 loans out.
 12 What I did know was that we were getting a lot of
 13 negative feedback that these loans were slow to be
 14 processed and that new lenders were being slow to be
 15 authorised. My judgement as to where that blame lies is
 16 wholly unreliable and I would not place much emphasis
 17 assist on it.
 18 Q. But if you're the Treasury, if it's not the banks and
 19 the British Business Bank, and there is a delay in
 20 lending, I mean you must have known where that delay was
 21 in the pipeline, surely?
 22 A. Well, it's a case of are we looking to assign blame, or
 23 are we looking to fix the problem?
 24 Q. That's why I'm asking these questions, Sir Charles, to
 25 find out: if something was going wrong, what was it?

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1 operational processes, and rather selfishly, it was, you
 2 know -- they were getting the flak rather than us
 3 Treasury officials but the flak could have been
 4 perfectly fairly shared around. What mattered was to
 5 get the problem fixed and, as I say, by this stage of
 6 the crisis people were already tired and certainly, in
 7 my case, we were a little bit frazzled at the edges so I
 8 really wouldn't place much emphasis on this.
 9 What mattered was to get this problem fixed -- which
 10 it soon was. In fact, this was a turning point and the
 11 processing started to pick up from this point onwards.
 12 Q. I'm going to push you a little bit on this, because I
 13 just am interested in what part of this criticism is
 14 fair on the banks.
 15 I'm going to 13 April, page 57, please.
 16 It's just that last part there:
 17 "It's the banks who are going slow."
 18 A. I think I didn't appreciate just how --
 19 Q. Sorry, let me just deal within the question.
 20 "It's the banks who are going slow. And the BBB is
 21 taking ages to authorise new participants."
 22 Now, there are two points there.
 23 A. Yes.
 24 Q. The BBB taking ages to authorise new participants, this
 25 is the additional lenders, is it?

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1 A. The problems, as I understand it, were twofold. One,
 2 that the processes for the EFG had been largely manual
 3 and worked fine at low volumes but didn't work fine at
 4 high volumes, and therefore both the BBB and the lending
 5 institutions needed to be reengineering their processes
 6 to get them to operate at higher volume. And that just
 7 takes time.
 8 Secondly, on authorising new participants, which was
 9 normally a process which would appropriately take -- and
 10 the BBB will have these numbers -- you know, two or
 11 three months, but not have the exact numbers, they were
 12 having to redesign that process to do it much faster.
 13 Sitting where I was sitting, with a poor perspective
 14 on those operational challenges, I didn't see how much
 15 was happening to fix the problem. But the problem was
 16 being fixed, and from this day onwards things really
 17 started to accelerate.
 18 I think over the next ten days, 11,000 loans were
 19 approved. So things really started to accelerate over
 20 this. It was just that the first three weeks had been
 21 slow.
 22 Q. And the scheme in fact had been modified on 3 April,
 23 I think, and had been widened; is that right?
 24 A. Yes.
 25 Q. So there had been changes -- it was an iterative

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1 process --

2 **A.** Yes.

3 **Q.** -- in terms of this scheme, as it went.

4 But without looking at whether anybody was to blame,
5 or, if there was blame, where it lies, if we were here
6 again, CBILS you've described as a product that, for
7 those who it was really designed to help, worked very
8 well.

9 **A.** Mm.

10 **Q.** But it had these issues with launch, that then
11 necessitated the need to bring in the Bounce Back Loan
12 Scheme. We'll come on to that.

13 **A.** Mm.

14 **Q.** If we were back in this position again, what is the
15 learning here? Presumably you'd have a wider pool of
16 lenders at the outset, would you?

17 **A.** Well, the learnings, I would say, first of all -- and my
18 understanding is that this is now in place. I mean,
19 before I left the Treasury, three and a half years ago,
20 we were working on lessons learned on all these loan
21 schemes. I know the British Business Bank has done
22 a lot of work with this. And because I haven't been
23 there for three and half years, I'm not the best person
24 to say where it stands now, but I believe that this
25 is -- where -- what exists now, is that you would want

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1 different products.

2 And then for CLBILS, which was the most complicated
3 £200 million loan, you only had four lenders because you
4 needed to have extra credit skills and extra validation
5 of your credit models to lend that amount of money. So
6 the right number would depend on the level of the loan
7 guarantee.

8 **Q.** I see. So it's not just a question of just get as many
9 people as you can registered on the platform, it all
10 depends on what the platform is doing --

11 **A.** Well, we very explicitly limited CLBILS, the upper tier,
12 the 50-200 million tier. Because we were so concerned
13 about the credit risk there, we explicitly limited that
14 to those banks that had had their credit risk models
15 approved by the PRA, which was a very narrow set of
16 lenders, and that was a good proxy for us to convince us
17 that they had the credit skills to lend that amount of
18 money with a government guarantee on it.

19 **Q.** Because you're talking about very large sums of money
20 and the government's skin in the game in those loans is
21 increasing and increasing --

22 **A.** Well, £180 million, on a big CLBILS loan.

23 **Q.** Yes. And as you have said, although you are not having
24 to raise the money in advance, if it's defaulted upon,
25 then there is a need to raise the money.

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1 to have a scheme like this. In fact in my witness
2 statement you'd want to have a suite of products
3 covering small businesses to the very large businesses,
4 where you are confident that you've got scalable
5 operational infrastructure that can handle a very
6 unpredictable level of volume, and can do that in line
7 with the latest fraud checks and the latest financial
8 payments infrastructure, so that it's ready to go.

9 You can't leave it on the shelf and let dust
10 accumulate, because IT systems need to be kept
11 constantly up to date. And you'd want to have that
12 package on the shelf and ready to go to work at multiple
13 levels. And I believe that is the case.

14 In terms of the optimal number of participating
15 lenders, that's an interesting question. Is it as many
16 as 100? Is it 40? I think that's something that you
17 would think about as you go into this crisis. I'll
18 leave it to others to judge what the optimal number is
19 to have on the shelf. It was very useful to have
20 40 ready to go on this product.

21 With Bounce Back Loans, because it didn't exist,
22 there was nobody to begin with, and then there were
23 23 lenders at launch, I think, or maybe 20 at launch,
24 and then a few more, and that proved the right number
25 for that product launch. So it was different for the

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1 **A.** Yes.

2 **MR WRIGHT:** My Lady, it's a little before the break but I'm
3 going to move on to a new topic so I'm entirely in your
4 hands. It may be an appropriate time to take the break
5 now.

6 **LADY HALLETT:** Certainly. You made me drop my pen,
7 Mr Wright. I shall return at 3.30.

8 **MR WRIGHT:** Thank you, my Lady.

9 (3.14 pm)

(A short break)

11 (3.30 pm)

12 **LADY HALLETT:** Mr Wright.

13 **MR WRIGHT:** Thank you, my Lady.

14 Can I check, please, that you can see and hear us
15 again?

16 **LADY HALLETT:** I can. Thank you.

17 **MR WRIGHT:** Thank you very much.

18 Sir Charles, can we move, then, to Bounce Back
19 Loans. And accepting that this was not your area of
20 policy, but of course you remained a member of the
21 Executive Management Board --

22 **A.** Yes.

23 **Q.** -- and had oversight, and so it's in that spirit that
24 I'm asking these questions.

25 Advice was given to the Chancellor, we understand,

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1 on 21 April 2020. And the Bounce Back Loan Scheme, as
2 it came to be known, was a 100% guarantee scheme which
3 was intended to see a rapid dispersal of loans within
4 24 hours of application.

5 I don't think you were involved in giving that
6 advice yourself to the Chancellor; is that right?

7 **A.** Correct, but I did see it and I've studied it since
8 then, while I was preparing for this Inquiry.

9 **Q.** Yes. You've talked about improvements that were made to
10 CBILS and things got better over time. First question,
11 really, if things were improving in CBILS, and the
12 number of lenders, for example, was increased, why would
13 you need a Bounce Back Loan Scheme at all?

14 **A.** Well, I think for two reasons. One, it was not
15 effective for smaller loans. And particularly loans
16 below £25,000 had additional checks that needed to be
17 performed under the Consumer Credit Act, which the
18 lending institutions couldn't not do, it was the law
19 that they had to do them, and so CBILS was never going
20 to be effective for the smaller, below 25,000 loan area.

21 And then for larger loans, above 25,000 to 50,000,
22 the sheer demand of, as we found out, the number of
23 small businesses who needed them was far in excess of
24 the capacity of CBILS. I mean, CBILS at the end, when
25 it was all operating smoothly and very efficiently, made

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1 disburse.

2 CBILS was quite complicated to apply for, it was
3 a large loan, whereas Bounce Back Loans, as you heard
4 from Matthew in the impact video, was very easy to apply
5 for, and that was a key part of its success.

6 **Q.** Why was it necessary to make it 100% guaranteed, given
7 that that, we'll come on to, was one of the biggest
8 risks in the scheme? Why do that? Why not just make it
9 quick but still 80%?

10 **A.** Well, because the banks wouldn't have taken on that risk
11 on a loan that they didn't have any control over
12 underwriting.

13 **Q.** So, ultimately, even the Treasury can only do so much,
14 and the banks, as commercial institutions, can still
15 insist on doing their checks and assessing risk. You
16 can't force them to take a risk?

17 **A.** No, they're -- you know, they're free market
18 institutions, and they were incredibly responsible in
19 this crisis and they really stepped up and did a very
20 valuable job in processing the CBILS loans, where they
21 did have credit risk, but also the operational
22 challenges of Bounce Back Loans and the fraud collection
23 responsibilities that they continued to have. The banks
24 had to do a lot to make Bounce Back Loans a success, but
25 it was unreasonable to expect them to take credit risk

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1 100,000 loans. We had 1.5 million loans to small
2 businesses under Bounce Back Loans.

3 So CBILS was not reaching the market where there was
4 acute need, and it was clear by mid-April we were having
5 this input from all the small business lobbies, the
6 Federation of Small Businesses, the Chambers of
7 Commerce, and others, that hundreds of thousands of
8 small businesses were facing acute cash flow problems
9 and we needed to act, and act fast.

10 And the Chancellor was determined to have a product
11 that would be easy to apply for, swift to distribute the
12 funds, and would reach that large target market, and
13 CBILS could never do that.

14 **Q.** Right. So far as the Consumer Credit Act requirements
15 were concerned, it would have been feasible, presumably,
16 to pass an act or regulation to remove those
17 requirements?

18 **A.** Well, that's what we ended up doing for the Bounce Back
19 Loans. But even so, the CBILS loan was a complicated
20 product. It required underwriting and checks. And so
21 it was always going to take five to six weeks to approve
22 it. So that complicated underwritten product was never
23 going to meet the Chancellor's need, and a very clear
24 message from the small business community, that they
25 needed something that was easy to apply for and quick to

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1 on a loan that they could not underwrite.

2 **Q.** Now, we know that the Bounce Back Loan Scheme was stood
3 up very quickly, under pressure. You talked about the
4 lobbying that was going on of government by CBI, other
5 organisations. But there were significant risks that
6 went with action, weren't there, in terms of fraud and
7 error?

8 **A.** Well, the Bounce Back Loan Scheme is a high-risk scheme,
9 but it's a high-impact scheme, and it's always important
10 to lay those against each other.

11 I would absolutely want to clarify that the risks
12 were known in advance. They were not as a result of
13 developing this product at speed. These risks were very
14 well documented and identified and the Chancellor
15 received very good advice.

16 I've read the Treasury advice which reflected input
17 from the British Business Bank and UK Finance and BEIS.
18 It's very good advice that does what excellent Civil
19 Service advice should do: it takes the objective the
20 Chancellor has set, sets out the options for delivering
21 it, the risks and the costs, and then makes
22 a recommendation. That advice stands up very well
23 five years later.

24 And the estimates of the cost actually are pretty
25 much spot on in that early advice. So I think it was

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1 really impressive that the Treasury team, with support
 2 from the British Business Bank experts, gave the
 3 Chancellor the advice he needed to understand the costs
 4 of this scheme, which he appropriately balanced against
 5 the very high impact of this scheme.

6 **Q.** Just to put that into context, so far as costs were
 7 concerned, CBILS, 9.51% of guarantees were paid out,
 8 and, as you said, 0.25% flagged as suspected fraud.
 9 Bounce Back Loan Scheme, 25.77% of guarantees paid out,
 10 and 4% flagged to --

11 **A.** Yes, I believe that 4% is part of that first number.

12 **Q.** Yes.

13 **A.** And the advice to the Chancellor that went up said that
 14 this scheme would cost between 30-50% of the face value,
 15 and I think the figure is 14 billion over six years.

16 Now, I would also put that in context by thinking
 17 about the impact, and there are two ways to think about
 18 the impact. The first is a very rigorous and
 19 analytically robust analysis done for the British
 20 Business Bank by London Economics, and they have
 21 identified the value added of this scheme in economic
 22 terms, which is £15-£36 billion of value added. So that
 23 needs to be set against the cost.

24 They also estimated the number of businesses who
 25 would have failed if we had not done Bounce Back Loans.

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1 I think some of them you've touched on yourself, and the
 2 first is that there was a gap that was known about at
 3 the time of this scheme that could have been closed
 4 previously by government, wasn't there, in terms of
 5 a vulnerability and the lack of verification processes
 6 at Companies House at the time?

7 **A.** Well -- well, yes, there was a gap that was known about,
 8 and yes, it was a gap that colleagues and I in the
 9 Treasury and the Home Office, working together
 10 collaboratively on a joint effort on economic crime,
 11 with expert input from outside experts on economic
 12 crime, we had put together the Economic Crime Plan of
 13 2019 which had identified -- it was well known but we
 14 brought this as a formal recommendation to fix that
 15 vulnerability.

16 Now, unfortunately, fixing that vulnerability
 17 required primary legislation. And to get that primary
 18 legislation passed, from the time we made that
 19 recommendation in 2019, you may remember there was
 20 certain political turbulence in 2019, and then a general
 21 election at the end of 2019, and then the Covid crisis.
 22 So there was no way that that legislation could have
 23 been passed in time. The legislation was eventually
 24 passed in 2023, and it is only now that Companies House
 25 is putting in place those checks.

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1 And in rather precise numbers they say 153-642,000
 2 businesses. So let's just say hundreds of thousands of
 3 businesses would have failed. That's one way to think
 4 about it.

5 The other way to think about it is to go back to
 6 Matthew in your impact statement about how he explained
 7 this was easy to apply for, he got the monies quickly,
 8 and it gave him security and a safety net, and peace of
 9 mind. And so multiply Matthew by 1.5 million small
 10 business owners across the UK, that gives you the impact
 11 of this scheme.

12 So yes, it was high risk, but it was very high
 13 impact.

14 **Q.** No one wants businesses to fail, Sir Charles, I'm sure.
 15 Equally, I wouldn't have thought any right-thinking
 16 person would want public money to be wasted by going to
 17 fraudsters or being given out erroneously. And so
 18 really, what I'm interested to explore with you is
 19 whether there was a way, or in a future emergency would
 20 be a better way, of ensuring that businesses didn't
 21 fail, so having a high-volume, easy-access scheme that,
 22 at the same time, did not have such high levels of fraud
 23 and error.

24 **A.** Yes.

25 **Q.** And I just want to pick up on some of the things.

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1 So yes, that vulnerability was known about. We had
 2 flagged it in 2019. But there was no way possible to
 3 pass a legislation and close the gap during the lifetime
 4 of this scheme.

5 **Q.** No, but as I say, looking ahead, legislation has now
 6 been passed.

7 **A.** Yes.

8 **Q.** Therefore, that gap, one would hope, has been plugged --

9 **A.** Yes, and I'd put the gaps into three categories. The
 10 first category is those vulnerabilities that are just
 11 unavoidable given the nature of this scheme. There will
 12 always be some irreducible level of fraud in a scheme
 13 that is built on self-certification. That is just an
 14 unfortunate fact of life, and that any future Chancellor
 15 who launches a scheme with some element of
 16 self-certification will have to judge that cost against
 17 the benefit.

18 There's a second category of vulnerabilities that in
 19 this time, were unavoidable, like Companies House, but
 20 are now being fixed and should be fixed ahead of any
 21 future scheme. So we won't get those ones again.

22 And the third type, the vulnerabilities that we knew
 23 about at launch, and the British Business Bank fixed
 24 very quickly or as quickly as possible after launch.
 25 And a good example of that is the duplicate loans issue,

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1 where they built a system from scratch to connect the
2 20-something lenders together to make sure that they
3 exchanged information, and they did that in eight weeks.
4 And anybody who knows anything about developing IT
5 systems in financial services would recognise that eight
6 weeks for a complex system to connect multiple financial
7 institutions is a very impressive achievement.

8 So they did that, in my view, as fast as you could
9 reasonably expect.

10 Going forwards, as I put in my witness statement,
11 I am confident that a Bounce Back Loan Scheme could be
12 implemented with much higher fraud protections, partly
13 because of all the things that have been fixed now, like
14 Companies House, like the level of financial crime
15 protection in the banks, like this duplicate loan
16 scheme, but also, future advances in AI and all those
17 other modern techniques for fraud detection have moved
18 on dramatically in the last five years.

19 So I would expect, if there was a similar 100% loan
20 guarantee scheme in a future crisis, this fraud issue
21 would be much reduced but it would not be eliminated.

22 Q. But a 100% loan guarantee scheme generally, do you view
23 that as a scheme of last resort, in true emergency?
24 It's suboptimal in all circumstances?

25 A. Yes, and that's what I called it in my witness

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1 A. Absolutely. That will be for the Chancellor of the day
2 to judge. And looking back at this, I think Rishi Sunak
3 actually made the right call. It was a high-risk
4 intervention, it was a high-impact intervention, and the
5 people who say he should have delayed it for two months
6 to fix these problems, they would have to answer for the
7 hundreds of thousands of small businesses who failed.
8 I think the Chancellor made exactly the right
9 prioritisation to protect those hundreds of thousands of
10 small businesses.

11 When you think about the impact of our collective
12 interventions in preventing avoidable firm failure, the
13 rate of firm failure during 2020, the deepest, economic
14 crisis we had ever failed (sic), was the same as it was
15 in 2019. That demonstrates how effective these
16 interventions were.

17 Q. Can I pick up one other issue, and you've touched on
18 part of it. This was a policy being driven very much
19 from the Treasury?

20 A. Correct, the Chancellor.

21 Q. Yes, the --

22 A. The Chancellor is the decision maker. We advise. But
23 yes, the Chancellor.

24 Q. Yes. Who sits in the Treasury, but yes.

25 A. Yes.

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1 statement. I think it should be in our toolkit for
2 a crisis response. It has huge benefits of speed of
3 distribution and speed of ease of access. But it will
4 always have high costs, particularly -- putting aside
5 the fraud risk, which is four points of this cost,
6 20 points at the moment, and likely to go higher, is
7 from loan losses. Unsecured lending to small businesses
8 over six years, or in some cases ten years, this is an
9 inherently risky form of lending.

10 So any future Chancellor who takes on 100% of the
11 credit risk, even if you've eliminated the fraud risk
12 down to a very small irreducible level, they will still
13 be looking at probably 25, maybe more, per cent of loan
14 losses on these. Because small businesses just fail.
15 That's the natural part of a healthy economy, that
16 businesses form and fail.

17 So this will always be a very expensive
18 intervention.

19 Q. Right. And ultimately, would you say it's all
20 a question of assessing the nature of the shock that
21 you're facing, the extent of the crisis, and it's going
22 to be a very expensive intervention, you need to go into
23 it with your eyes open to that, but you say that there
24 are certain circumstances where it may still be
25 appropriate?

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1 Q. The Chancellor is driving policy. British Business
2 Bank's dealing with delivery?

3 A. Mm.

4 Q. BEIS is the accounting officer -- or the accounting
5 officer for the British Business Bank sits in BEIS?

6 A. Yes.

7 Q. That was suboptimal, wasn't it, in terms of the
8 organisation there, that policy's coming from one area,
9 the accounting officer is in a different department,
10 implementations being done by the British Business Bank?

11 A. I am -- put in my witness statement that I felt a lot of
12 sympathy for my colleagues, and there were three at this
13 time: Alex Chisholm, and then Sam Beckett interim, and
14 then Sarah Munby, as the new permanent secretary at
15 BEIS. I did feel sympathy for them having to take
16 personal accountability to Parliament.

17 Being an accounting officer is a serious obligation.
18 You take personal accountability for the propriety,
19 regularity, feasibility, and value for money for
20 a policy decision, and I felt this put them in
21 a difficult position, where they were having to take
22 that personal accountability for decisions that had been
23 taken in another department on advice from another set
24 of officials.

25 That said, it didn't make a lot of difference. The

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1 policies were implemented, the policies were effective.
 2 They would not have been different in any way had, for
 3 instance, I been the accounting officer for these
 4 policies.

5 Now, we had done another policy two years earlier,
 6 where all the decisions had been taken by the Chancellor
 7 of the day based by advice from the Treasury, a policy
 8 initiative that I led called the British Patient Capital
 9 review, a policy driven entirely by the Chancellor and
 10 the Treasury, implemented by the British Business Bank.
 11 And that worked fine. We had more time, it's been
 12 a very successful policy, and -- that worked fine.

13 So, my personal view is that, in a crisis, we should
 14 have the flexibility to be able to adjust where the
 15 accounting officer responsibility sits. I would have
 16 been happy to take that on for the design decisions
 17 here. Once we moved into delivery, then I think that
 18 falls more naturally to BEIS.

19 And I would not -- going back to your opening
 20 statement, I would not look at structural change to
 21 address this issue. Structural change in government, as
 22 in the private sector, is often overused as a tool to
 23 effect organisational change. There is a long history
 24 of machinery of government changes, as they are known in
 25 government, which have been implemented with much higher

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1 citizen, that would be a lot simpler than moving
 2 responsibility for the British Business Bank.

3 **Q.** Yes, in ordinary, steady-state times.

4 **A.** Yes.

5 **Q.** But can I just pick up a second part of what you said
 6 and that's about delivery, because if the policy is
 7 being driven by the Chancellor, doesn't the fact that
 8 the British Business Bank is sitting in a different
 9 department separate policy from delivery, whereas if the
 10 bank had been supervised by the Treasury, they would
 11 have had that easier access to the Chancellor, direct
 12 lines of communication, and you would be putting
 13 together delivery with policy?

14 **A.** I don't think it makes any difference. We worked very
 15 closely with the British Business Bank on delivering
 16 these loans, and on delivering British Patient Capital.
 17 I had a very close relationship with Keith Morgan, the
 18 chief executive and his successor, Catherine Lewis
 19 La Torre. We talked to them ahead of our advice to the
 20 Chancellor. I don't think there was a problem there.
 21 And where there were challenges of delivery, as we
 22 talked about at length, with CBILS, those were not
 23 because Keith Morgan or one of his top team had not been
 24 in the room with the Chancellor. They were because
 25 there were difficult issues that, faced with the

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1 costs, much more delay, much more disruption than
 2 expected, and far fewer benefits.

3 So I would not recommend a machinery of government
 4 change for the British Business Bank. It has to work
 5 well with both the Treasury and with BEIS, and it does.
 6 And if we need a small fix to adjust the accounting
 7 officer responsibilities to where the decision making
 8 is, I'll leave it to today's leadership with the Civil
 9 Service to work out how to do that. But that's a much
 10 simpler fix than moving responsibility for the British
 11 Business Bank.

12 **Q.** Accepting all of that, you wouldn't have been against
 13 a proposition that temporarily, accounting officer
 14 responsibility could have shifted to the Treasury for
 15 this scheme?

16 **A.** Not at all.

17 **Q.** No. So that could be done on an *ad hoc* basis, if
 18 required. From a Parliamentary democracy perspective it
 19 gives accountability where it lies, doesn't it, in terms
 20 of policy?

21 **A.** Yes, although on these issues, as I'm now no longer
 22 a civil servant, that would be for, actually, the
 23 permanent secretary of the Treasury and the chair of the
 24 Public Accounts Committee would probably need to agree
 25 that sort of change, but in my view as now a private

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1 extraordinary crisis, emerged.

2 So I don't think that separation is an issue.

3 **Q.** All right. Can I move on, then, to the Covid Corporate
 4 Financing Facility, CCFF, and I just want to pick this
 5 up reasonably briefly. This was a facility for the
 6 large firms, provided via the Bank of England. It's
 7 what you, I think, were discussing with the governor on
 8 the weekend of the 15th, is that, of March; is that
 9 right?

10 **A.** March 14, 15, yes.

11 **Q.** It provided almost £38 billion of support to more than
 12 100 of the United Kingdom's largest firms and employers,
 13 no losses on the programme, we understand. It may
 14 therefore be unsurprising that you consider that to have
 15 been a very successful scheme. Can you just briefly
 16 explain why you view it as being such a successful
 17 scheme and what it did?

18 **A.** The scheme started out, and it was very successful
 19 against its objective, it started out to prevent what we
 20 were deeply concerned about in mid-March, which was
 21 a drain of liquidity from the banking system. We were
 22 getting intelligence that large companies were perfectly
 23 appropriately and rationally contacting their banks to
 24 draw down on their multi-billion-pound credit
 25 facilities. Those companies were seeing this crisis

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1 coming and wanted to build their cash reserves. So it
2 made sense individually for them to do that.

3 However, if all large companies simultaneously draw
4 on their large credit facilities at the bank, we could
5 have had a very unhelpful drain of liquidity out of the
6 banking system. So the purpose of this was a monetary
7 policy intervention to prevent that drain of liquidity
8 and provide an alternative source for large companies
9 that might need liquidity.

10 So the actual value of this scheme came from both
11 the money that was drawn, but also the undrawn
12 facilities. So there was 100 billion in total, of which
13 only 38 was drawn. And this scheme worked extremely
14 effectively in preventing that drain of liquidity out of
15 the banking system when it was introduced.

16 Now, that concern passed because the financial
17 markets settled down as we moved into April and May. So
18 that immediate concern had passed. And then the scheme
19 evolved into something slightly different, which was
20 a source of credit to large companies that needed
21 support to trade through.

22 And as that need evolved, we also faced growing
23 public pressure on transparency and conditionality. Who
24 was borrowing this money, and what conditions were we
25 imposing on them? And the Chancellor felt that

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1 employing 10,000 people, to trade through what would
2 have been a very serious threat to their financial
3 stability.

4 So the Advisory Credit Committee made that
5 recommendation to the Chancellor, and this was extending
6 800 million to a retailer that was not currently
7 trading. So this was a bold credit decision. Made the
8 decision, the company traded to, very successful, the
9 money was entirely paid back. Those 10,000 jobs were
10 not threatened.

11 So this was a really important scheme.

12 We also used it to provide support to some of our
13 largest iconic companies, and it was a very important
14 support of continuing credit and backstop facilities
15 through the rest of the crisis.

16 Q. Okay, thank you.

17 Can I just ask you about one issue just to get you
18 reflection on this. This comes from the governor.
19 Mr Bailey has suggested in his statement, and so I ask
20 you for your view, given you worked closely with him to
21 develop the scheme, whether, for a future scheme, if
22 there was a future scheme, consideration should be given
23 to public disclosure of usage from the outset? He
24 supports that.

25 A. Yes, well, what I put in my witness statement is I think

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1 strongly, and he felt it was appropriate, at this point,
2 to introduce new conditions on the scheme so that we
3 were transparent about who was using it, but also some
4 members of the scheme wanted to be transparent, because
5 they wanted to reassure their other lenders that they
6 had access to liquidity.

7 And so we changed the scheme under the direction of
8 the Chancellor with the agreement of the governor and
9 the Monetary Policy Committee to introduce transparency
10 and introduce restrictions on dividends and introduce
11 restrictions on executive pay. We'd changed the rules
12 of the scheme halfway through. Therefore, it was only
13 fair -- in fact it was probably only legal -- to give
14 people a chance to repay their money and leave the
15 scheme if they didn't want to participate on the new
16 rules, which some lenders did.

17 But if I could just illustrate the value of this
18 scheme, with a couple of confidential unnamed examples.
19 There was one really important retailer, employing
20 10,000 people. Their auditors would not sign their
21 going concern statement. They had already drawn
22 600 million from this facility, and the auditors would
23 still not sign their going concern statement. We had to
24 advise the Chancellor on whether to extend another
25 200 million of credit to help this important retailer,

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1 next time the Chancellor of the day should think about
2 the two variants of this scheme. This scheme started,
3 as I explained, as a monetary policy intervention,
4 funded with central bank reserves, which means that we
5 didn't even have to borrow the money on the gilts
6 market, because it was intended to prevent a drain on
7 liquidity. And as the governor also says in his
8 statement, it's a tenet of central bank interventions
9 that they are anonymous.

10 So that's one version of the scheme.

11 Another version of the scheme might be one that is
12 transparent and with conditionality, and all the
13 disclosure requirements that the Chancellor of the day
14 wants to put on it. But that might not qualify as
15 a monetary policy scheme and might need to be funded
16 with public money. So I think that's the sort of choice
17 that people should go through, and it would not be for
18 me to say to a future Chancellor what they should choose
19 to do, but my personal view is they should think about
20 both, because both types of scheme could have a role.
21 They are different.

22 We started with one and we evolved to the other, and
23 I think that shows flexibility and nimbleness in
24 a crisis. But next time, if you wanted to disclose the
25 names upfront, the Monetary Policy Committee of the day

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1 and the governor of the day would need to be comfortable
2 about doing that with a monetary policy intervention.
3 **Q.** Okay, thank you.
4 Sir Charles, then can I finally, in terms of my
5 questions, come on to your reflections. And accepting
6 all of the caveats you've put in place about your diary,
7 and accepting that I'm sure it must be slightly
8 uncomfortable to hear thoughts captured late at night
9 repeated in the hearing room, you have made it clear in
10 your diary in a number of entries how well you felt the
11 Treasury was being led by the Chancellor, describing him
12 as smart, engaged, quick, courteous and appreciative in
13 one entry, for example.

14 **A.** Mm.

15 **Q.** And you've also made it clear in your evidence today
16 that you were impressed -- hugely impressed, is how you
17 put it -- with the leadership shown by the Chancellor.
18 So you've given your reflections on leadership in the
19 Treasury. And also, we've picked up on how hard
20 everybody worked to stand all these schemes up under
21 intense pressure, short period of time, very quickly.

22 But looking ahead, so acknowledging all those things
23 that went well, and that people stood up to the
24 challenge, what would be your reflections, having lived
25 through this in the Treasury as number 2, as to how we

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1 multi-billion pound request for loan support. It was
2 a difficult call. It was the right call, because we
3 knew they actually didn't need it and would survive
4 without billions of pounds of government support. And
5 why did we know that? We knew that because we had
6 a really rigorous process called Project Birch, which we
7 haven't talked about, which I commend to the Inquiry.

8 This was a process involving colleagues across
9 Whitehall to evaluate all the requests we got from large
10 companies for government support. It was analytically
11 rigorous, objective, evidence based, free of any
12 political interference, and allowed us to turn down
13 billions of pounds of requests of support from companies
14 that, in the end, didn't need it.

15 That was a real success and we can learn from what
16 we did not do.

17 As an aside, we did one loan of that which saved
18 a Welsh steelmaker which employed 1,800 people. So that
19 was a success there.

20 And then the third area that we can learn lessons
21 from is, as we've discussed today, is what didn't go so
22 well. So, absolutely, we should learn lessons from
23 that. I tried in my witness statement to be very candid
24 about what didn't go so well, and I'm highly confident
25 that in the now nearly four years since this crisis

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1 could be better prepared for a future economic response?

2 **A.** Well, I think it's important to put the lessons learned
3 into three categories. And I think the first is to
4 learn lessons from what worked well. And I know the
5 British obsession is always with what didn't work so
6 well, but there were a lot of very successful schemes --
7 yes, including furlough, but not only furlough -- many
8 of which we haven't talked about today at all, that were
9 very successful, and which saved large businesses: the
10 Culture Recovery Fund we haven't talked about; the
11 events insurance scheme to restart the creative
12 industries we haven't talked about; CLBILS, very
13 successful scheme. There's a long list of very
14 successful schemes which delivered impact.

15 So I think we can learn lessons from those schemes
16 and make sure they are ready for use again, because they
17 were very successful.

18 We should also learn lessons from what we did not
19 do. And again, we haven't talked today about what we
20 did not do. Some of the most difficult decisions were
21 decisions not to provide support.

22 And I'll give you one example of that without naming
23 names, you'll have seen it in my diary, I had to call
24 the chief executive of one of our most iconic companies,
25 and tell him that we were turning down his

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1 began to wind down, the Treasury has done a lot of work
2 on that.

3 It started before I left, and so yes, we should have
4 a full suite of loan guarantee products on the shelf
5 ready to go with appropriate controls and appropriate
6 fraud protections in place. I'm confident that the
7 Treasury and the British Business Bank and BEIS have
8 that in place.

9 Yes, I think we could work on the communications
10 around those products, because they're complicated to
11 announce in a crisis.

12 Where I am less convinced of changes is to focus on
13 some of the minutiae of Whitehall process. And I think
14 the thing I'd like to leave the Inquiry with is that
15 what really matters in a crisis is to focus on outcomes
16 and impact. It's not always a pretty process, working
17 in a crisis. We didn't get everything right. It was
18 not perfect. But perfection is not a relevant standard
19 in a crisis. Impact is. And so, as you think about
20 what would make a material difference to a future
21 crisis, my view is it will be a few, small big things.
22 These big schemes, either those that worked well, that
23 stopped us doing things that we didn't need to do, or
24 that had impact and could be better next time. A few
25 big things focused on impact and outcomes and not the

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1 minutiae of Whitehall process.

2 And I think if that's where we get to, I think a lot
3 of that has already been done by the Treasury, but then
4 I'm confident that my successors -- I hope they never
5 that have to live through something like this, but if
6 they do, I'm confident they will handle it extremely
7 well. Thank you for the time today.

8 **MR WRIGHT:** Thank you very much, Sir Charles. Those are my
9 questions.

10 There are, I think, my Lady, some Rule 10 questions.

11 **LADY HALLETT:** There are. Thank you.

12 Ms Beattie.

13 Ms Beattie will just be to your right.

14 **Questions from MS BEATTIE**

15 **MS BEATTIE:** Thank you, my Lady.

16 I ask questions on behalf of National Disabled
17 People's Organisations.

18 You said at the outset of your evidence,
19 Sir Charles, that you're a member of the Executive
20 Management Board --

21 **A.** Yes.

22 **Q.** -- which set the strategic direction of the Treasury,
23 and you tell us in your statement that that considered
24 issues of equalities and vulnerable people.

25 **A.** Mm.

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1 the Treasury. So the loan schemes which we've been
2 talking about today, those evaluations, those equality
3 impact assessments were done by the department of
4 business. They did those evaluations, we can talk about
5 those in a minute.

6 So EMB's responsibilities were managerial, to make
7 sure that the teams had the responsibilities to fulfil
8 their duty and give the Chancellor or the relevant
9 minister the advice that included the appropriate
10 equalities assessment.

11 **Q.** Right, just to be clear, so when you say were a
12 particularly encouraged in your -- that the EMB
13 discussions of the Covid crisis considered those issues,
14 it was about, as you say, making sure that the team had
15 those tools --

16 **A.** Yes.

17 **Q.** -- rather than any discussion by the board itself; is
18 that correct?

19 **A.** Well, what we did, we didn't get into -- EMB never sat
20 down and, as it were, critiqued the furlough policy or
21 critiqued the loan policy. But we were keen to make
22 sure that these policies -- we wanted updates on the
23 policies, and so in those discussions, for instance
24 I remember, you know, it was reassuring to know that the
25 loan programmes had been equally distributed around the

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1 **Q.** What sources of information and data were made available
2 to the Executive Management Board and did the board in
3 fact refer to and assess in its discussions about
4 equalities and vulnerable people and in particular the
5 impact of the pandemic on disabled people?

6 **A.** Well, I think it's important to remember that EMB was
7 a management board. We didn't do policy formulation.
8 So our responsibility was to ensure that our colleagues
9 across the Treasury had the capabilities, skills and
10 training in order to formulate policy and deliver
11 against our collective obligation, to consider
12 equalities under the Public Sector Equality Duty.

13 And so our job, which we took seriously, was to make
14 sure that we had the processes and training in place for
15 those pieces of advice. And ordinarily, any piece of
16 advice going to the Chancellor would have considered the
17 impact on individual groups.

18 So we had different toolkits to support them doing
19 that. We had different checklists. We provided tools
20 for them to make sure that our teams had the skills to
21 do that. And on the Covid Response Board, we had a
22 subcommittee of that which looked at the impact on
23 vulnerable people.

24 EMB did not look across the board across all these
25 policy areas, because not all of them were evaluated by

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1 whole of the geographic regions of the UK and that 6% of
2 the businesses were in Scotland and they got 6% of
3 loans. But I don't remember the formal management
4 information system that would have reported the impact
5 on different segments of people. That would have been
6 looked at more by other parts of the Treasury in terms
7 of thinking about the impact of specific policies.

8 **Q.** And dealing with those business support schemes, in your
9 statement you say that the department did take
10 significant care to ensure that socially and
11 economically vulnerable groups, including those with
12 protected characteristics, were accounted for and
13 protected during the pandemic, but that your work on
14 those business support schemes saw less targeted
15 consideration of vulnerable and protected groups. Why
16 did that work on business support schemes see less
17 targeted consideration of protected groups in, in
18 particular disabled people?

19 **A.** Well, we were focused on the schemes I've been talking
20 about today on preventing avoidable business failure.
21 And our thinking there, in respect of disabled and
22 vulnerable people, was that it's a very sad truth that
23 if a disabled person becomes unemployed, it's much
24 harder for them to re-enter the workforce. And
25 therefore by preventing avoidable business failure and

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preventing unnecessary job losses for those disabled and vulnerable people in employment, we were doing, through these loan schemes, the best possible thing we could do for those disabled people in work, which was to keep their business afloat and to keep their job safe.

And that meant that for these loan schemes, by doing that, we were avoiding the terrible scourge of unemployment, which is awful for everybody, but the cost of which falls particularly harshly on disabled and vulnerable people who find it harder to re-enter the workforce. So that's why we focused on protecting the companies and through that, we, I think, protected disabled people in work.

Q. So it was through that general approach rather than a targeted consideration or intervention, specifically directed, for example, at disabled people who faced that greater risk of economic scarring that you mentioned?

A. Well, because we were -- these schemes -- and this is only part of what the Treasury were doing. Other colleagues were working on other interventions that were more focused on the labour market and they'll be better placed to talk about those interventions, but the firm-specific interventions, we could not provide a different loan to a business that did or didn't employ more disabled people because we didn't have that

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So I'm really grateful to you and I'm sorry it's been such a long day for you.

THE WITNESS: No, I'm very happy to have been of help. Thank you for the opportunity.

LADY HALLETT: Not at all.

Very well, I think that completes today's hearing, I think, Mr Wright?

MR WRIGHT: It does, my Lady. That completes the evidence for today.

LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much. 10.00 tomorrow, please.

(4.12 pm)

(The hearing adjourned until 10.00 am the following day)

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information, and it was important to provide support to the businesses quickly and efficiently.

But because disabled people in the workforce -- and almost one in seven people in the workforce have a disability, we were saving hundreds of thousands of jobs, and therefore tens of thousands of disabled and vulnerable people benefited from that. But we weren't targeting it to one type of business versus another due to the proportion of disabled or vulnerable people in that business.

MS BEATTIE: Thank you, my Lady.

LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much, Ms Beattie.

That completes our questions for you, Sir Charles. I'm really grateful.

Obviously it was a really tough time for you and your colleagues and you've obviously given a great deal of thought not only to what you were doing at the time but also to helping this Inquiry, so I'm very grateful. And obviously if any former colleagues of yours have helped in preparing your witness statement.

You've mentioned a number of times that we haven't covered something. Please rest assured that just because we haven't dealt with it in oral evidence does not mean the Inquiry will ignore it. We take into account the whole mass of evidence that we've gathered.

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