

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

Covid Corporate Memory
Interview with Philippa Davies

Date: 12th July 2020; 14:00; MS Teams call

Attendees: Philippa Davies (Director, Public Spending); Simon Girdlestone, NR (Covid Corporate Memory team)

PART 1: Intro (15 mins)

Thank you for agreeing to have this interview as part of the Covid Corporate Memory project. This project has been set up to document and summarise HMT's response to the pandemic. We have gone out to all Groups in the Department, reviewed ~900 documents, and are in the process of developing a written summary of what happened. This interview supplements our document review and is intended to help us learn more about how we responded.

Today we will ask you some general questions about how HMT responded to the pandemic (resourcing and governance) and also some specific questions tailored to you and your role. We don't expect to cover all questions provided below; these are shared to help steer the conversation and make a good use of time.

Information provided to us will be treated sensitively. If you have any concerns about this please just let us know. After this interview we will write up notes from our call and share these with you for your approval.

How did HMT resource our response to the pandemic?

- How did we move internal resource to respond to the situation?
- What was the impact of homeworking, how did it impact our ability to give the CX and other ministers the service they needed?
- It has been said that HMT used lessons learned from previous crises in managing our response. Was this your experience? What lessons do you think we learned / put into practice?

So, in the very early stages, for example when we first heard about COVID, when we were bringing UK nationals back from China, around late February time, it was sort of all being dealt with through one person in my team. We were pushing some of the spending stuff out to others where we could, for example the HO spending team if it was borders or FCDO spending on planes to bring people home. But I had one Range D working on it. In retrospect I think we were quite slow, as with the whole of government and outside of government, to recognise it was more than just an annoying health issue. I probably tried three, four, five times before it necessarily resonated with my Directors at the time or DGs to get some resource in for coordinating stuff. We were getting loads of stuff through from CCS on it and the one Range D leading on it naturally was very anxious. So in that initial stage we should have jumped on it quicker, and across the SCS we should have listened more.

Then when we all recognised what it was, and that bit before Budget when the CX started to be interested, I think we were better. It was still ad hoc, I got multiple new people into my team, some

from Public Services, not all of them officially/permanently, but we got people and a lot of that was reprioritisation across the Group. I think we should have moved quicker at that point to have a central COVID team. It needed coordination. I remember sitting in meetings with Directors and DGs and there was no coordinating force. We should have realized sooner that SPB needed to be that coordinating function.

And then pandemic proper, April-May say, my team grew by 10 or 15 people, so about 60% growth. That is a big deal. HMT did move people, we got people from SPB, from the wider Group, which had an impact elsewhere if I'm honest, and we benefited from having 'health' in the name. What I struggled with at that stage was the lack of ability to keep people – SPB would move people in and out, for example my testing team didn't have permanent staff until September. We were taking up time running big recruitment campaigns, struggling to get decent long-term resource from SPB, and I know SPB resource isn't intended to be long-term, but you can't do it with people moving in and out every two or three weeks. So my major reflection would be permanency – you should have people in for 6 months or so.

Q: There was the HMT wide reallocation process - did that help?

I think I had two people from the reallocation which was really good. But again they were forced to return to their home groups around August. And we were preparing for the SR, we had only just got them up to speed on spending issues, but then we lost them before the SR. And I think, perhaps because of ministerial views, we acted as though COVID was over, and the people who had lent me staff were in the idea of getting them back in September, and that led to some difficult conversations.

Q: How was reprioritisation done within the team?

In my team we stopped literally all BAU work. In March, April, May, June we did no BAU and I moved the people who did capital onto ventilators and PPE, the people who did spending control onto testing. I did it by allocating sort of by strengths, but also who was around. I put a coordination function in within the team because there were so many briefing requests. We did no proactive policy for around 6 months, and I think that put us back a bit for the SR. Across the group, Will Garton and JC Gray the Directors at the time prioritised Health and Local Government which meant taking people out of Home and Legal, Education, Housing Planning and Cities, to sit in Health and Local Government. That meant actively not doing stuff in those other teams. So we genuinely stopped all of our proactive policy work. I have loads of emails at the time about delivering Supplementary Estimates, Main Estimates, because we had to, but that was it. We did the highest priority business cases, of which there were two, but we didn't do any policy work on for example social care or public health.

Q: What was the impact of the move to working from home?

I think it was better than I would've expected. It had a marked wellbeing impact on the team, but that comes alongside the massive uncertainty of COVID anyway and the fear people felt in their private lives. It's hard to unpick that. I did have people living on their own and before you could bubble were very literally on their own. So it was a wellbeing impact rather than a productivity impact. Home schooling wasn't such an impact – in a team of 32 I had maybe 2 parents. Neither of whom had the majority childcare role. I think working from home made us a better team in a lot of ways. We went from one team meeting a week and informal chats about how people are doing to a team meeting every morning for half an hour, our team-working improved substantially, I met our management