

SIXTH WRITTEN STATEMENT OF BORIS JOHNSON

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**COVID INQUIRY**

**WRITTEN STATEMENT OF BORIS JOHNSON  
FOR MODULE 9**

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# SIXTH WRITTEN STATEMENT OF BORIS JOHNSON

## **Introduction**

1. I provide this statement to the Covid Inquiry in response to a 'Rule 9' Request (issued pursuant to the Inquiry Rules 2006) dated 1 August 2025.

## **Opening Comments**

2. As with the statements prepared for other modules of this Inquiry, I have prepared this statement with assistance from my legal advisers and having refreshed my memory from the documents I have exhibited. As I have said in my previous written statements, it is now several years since the pandemic and it is hard to recall the sequence of events. In giving my oral and written evidence to the Inquiry, across five previous modules, I have seen a large volume of contemporaneous documents, some of which I would not have seen at the time, as well as hearing other people's later recollections and commentary. The inevitable effect of this, I continue to fear, is that my memory has gradually become based on written materials and later interpretations, rather than the original experience of events. Once more, I have done my best to answer the questions put to me and due to the passage of time, perhaps more than in any other module so far, I have relied much more heavily on the documents than on my own recollection. Where I do still have meaningful memories of events, I have sought to verify those recollections from the contemporaneous documents.
3. In making this statement, and in order to aid my recollection, I have checked such records and relevant correspondence as are available to me, but it remains the case that I do not have full access to all the materials that are before the Inquiry.

## **Role, function and responsibilities**

4. During the pandemic, I served as Prime Minister (from 24 July 2019 until 6 September 2022). In the two years before, I was Foreign Secretary until 9 July 2018. I was elected leader of the Conservative party in 2019. Annex E of my first statement (Module 2) sets out my career in fuller detail.
5. In terms of the formulation of economic policy objectives, I had overall control of fiscal policy, skills and investment into the UK. My overall objective was levelling up the country through better skills, better infrastructure and regulatory reform. A lot of this was blown off course by the pandemic.

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6. As Prime Minister, I oversaw the ultimate decision-making body in the UK Government, the Cabinet. I determined the membership of the Cabinet, regulated its procedures and decided where and when meetings took place. Cabinet meetings would be chaired by me and attended by the whole of Cabinet and the Cabinet Secretary. As Chair, I was responsible for leading Cabinet discussions and decision-making. This applied as much to economic decision-making as other types of decisions.

### **Decision-Making meetings**

7. There were numerous channels through which I was kept informed of and held discussions about the economy in this period. I routinely met with my key Ministers. These meetings enabled me to hold key Ministers to account and explore topics related to their portfolios in depth with them to inform ongoing policy development. Most importantly where the economy was concerned, I would meet with the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss Covid-19 implications for the economy and the UK Government response – I have described some of our bilaterals and other meetings in detail below. The exact pattern of these meetings varied and took place at a high frequency with the relevant Ministers involved in delivering the Covid-19 response.
8. In addition, I had countless strategy meetings with the Chief Scientific Adviser ('CSA'), the Chief Medical Officer ('CMO'), the Covid-19 Taskforce, and Officials from No.10. as we approached core key decision-making junctures or when the data indicated that immediate action was required. I also attended scheduled No.10 roundtable meetings and seminars to bring relevant external individuals – such as local authority leaders, experts and business leaders – together to focus on particular issues.
9. I have been asked about the various decision-making committees, fora or forums dealing with the UK Government's economic response to Covid which I attended. The formal ones of these – as described in my Module 2 witness statement – which tackled the economic response were:
  - a. **Cabinet:** During the pandemic, Cabinet meetings were held on a weekly basis, and the Cabinet took numerous key decisions in response to Covid-19. I was clear that any major decisions on the Covid response would be discussed and agreed at full Cabinet. I would be briefed ahead of each Cabinet meeting – usually the evening before –

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and an Agenda would be circulated in advance. Minutes would be taken by the Secretariat.

- b. **Cabinet Update Calls:** these are less formal meetings of Cabinet, usually held by conference call and at relatively short notice in order to update Cabinet Ministers about pressing issues, certain decisions or evolving situations. They do not usually have formal updates or agendas but notes of the call would be taken.
- c. **COBR:** COBR is shorthand for the Civil Contingencies Committee which is convened to handle matters of national emergency or major disruption. COBR coordinates different government departments and agencies as well as the Devolved Administrations ('DAs'). The first COBR to consider Covid-19 was held on 24 January 2020. These meetings were designed to respond to major incidents or catastrophic emergencies requiring intervention from the UK Government where collective ministerial decisions are required, rather than decisions to be made by a single department. The Cabinet Manual states, *'in general the chair will be taken by the secretary of state of the government department with lead responsibility for the particular issue being considered'*. Accordingly, in the early days of Covid-19, COBR meetings were chaired by the Health Secretary (DHSC having lead responsibility for infectious diseases). Initially, I would receive an update from officials on the key issues discussed at the meeting, or orally at my daily morning meeting. As the seriousness of the situation became clear, I took over the role of Chair for many of the meetings from 2 March 2020 onwards. During the early stages of the pandemic, these meetings provided the focal point for our initial emergency response, as well as being an authoritative source of advice for me, my Ministers and Officials, local responders, and relevant Departments and agencies. The First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and their respective Health Ministers and CMOs were invited to all Ministerial COBR meetings on Covid-19. While Ministerial COBR meetings continued to review overall progress and make important decisions, we also introduced Ministerial Implementation Groups ('MIGs') described below. I would be briefed ahead of each COBR meeting that I chaired - again usually the evening before - and an Agenda would be circulated in advance. Minutes would be taken by the

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Secretariat. Where I did not attend, I would be updated on what had been discussed and decided.

- d. **MIGs:** On 16 March 2020, the Cabinet Office announced the introduction of four Ministerial Implementation Groups or 'MIGs' to lead the Government's key lines of operation and support decision-making in response to Covid-19. There were formal structures which I did not generally chair or attend. These Implementation Groups had the status of Cabinet Committees and took collective decisions. Of the four MIGs, the Economic and Business Ministerial Implementation Group ('EBRMIG') was relevant to the economy, and was chaired by Rishi Sunak, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Deputy Chair was Alok Sharma, the Secretary of State for Business. EBRMIG's focus was on economic and business impact and response, including supply chain resilience. As its ToR set out, this MIG was created to '*coordinate and advise on business-related regional, sectoral and corporate-level issues relating to the C-19 pandemic*' [BJO6/001 - INQ000087167].
- e. **The Covid Strategy Committee ('Covid-S');** established 'to drive government's strategic response to Covid-19, considering the impact of both the virus and the response to it, and setting the direction for the recovery strategy' as set out in its published ToR [BJO6/002 - INQ000089916]. I was the Chair of the Covid-S committee and members included the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Foreign Secretary, Secretary of State for the Home Department, the CDL, the Health Secretary and the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. The committee's official Secretariat was the 'Covid-19 Taskforce'. The Secretariat commissioned all papers, agendas, Chair's briefs, actions and decisions as well as preparing and clearing all minutes. The Secretariat also convened meetings of departmental officials across the UK Government prior to meetings of Ministers. These would be chaired by a senior official in the Secretariat. The committee's meetings commenced in June 2020 and ended in February 2021.
- f. **Morning meetings:** I chaired daily morning meetings which, from early March 2020, focussed primarily on Covid-19. Attendees would change day-to-day and would include key Ministers, officials and advisers and

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often the CMO and GCSA. These meetings would generally decide what the key policy elements of the response needed to be that day and how we would communicate them to the public. These meetings were an opportunity for me to review the latest data and be familiarised with key indicators and trends. I used these meetings to ask questions and request follow up briefings. These meetings would also serve to keep me updated with developments and decisions on public lines-to-take. Over the course of the pandemic, the daily meetings evolved into what were known as the 9.15 meetings and then the Dashboard meetings which I have described in detail in relation to the economy from paragraph 73 below. Economy Dashboards would not always take place in the morning slot; sometimes they would take place later in the day depending on shifting priorities.

10. In addition to those formal and/or regular meetings described above, I would hold a range of other meetings as and when required, sometimes at weekends. Such meetings would enable me to prepare ahead of wider collective meetings, taking stock informally of the strategy, plans and approach in light of the data. I cannot say for certain whether all these meetings would have been minuted because, as described above, I was not a party to the minutes being taken, circulated, approved or retained.
11. Inevitably, because of the pace and urgent nature of the work that we were doing at this time, there were also impromptu conversations. Although those would not necessarily have been minuted, any decisions made in this way would be communicated in writing shortly thereafter.
12. Below, I have set out some of the details of some of the key meetings relating to the economic response. During the pandemic, I would meet with the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak ('Rishi') very often – weekly or fortnightly – and from 31 May 2020 onwards, was also having Economic Dashboard meetings approximately twice weekly. I have not sought to cover the detail of all these meetings (any such statement would run to hundreds of pages) but have given a summary of some of the key meetings in the narrative below, focussing particularly on 2020. This helps to illustrate my role in the design, delivery and timing of economic interventions and also provides an overview of the working relationships that I had relating to the economic response.

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13. Generally speaking, all the economic measures that we enacted during Covid were agreed upon by me, almost always on proposal by Rishi. There were some areas, like educational support, which you could argue was an economic package and where Rishi was not involved until sign-off. It would be fair to say that the Treasury did the work of formulating the schemes like furlough and bounce back loans, but this was done in consultation with No.10. Such schemes would be signed off by No.10. The No.10 Private Office was closely involved throughout the generation and the approval of the economic interventions. Some have since said some were too generous, which may or may not be right, but I take full responsibility for everything we did.

### **Narrative of economic meetings**

14. From paragraph 91 below, I reflect on the effectiveness of cooperation and joint working but I feel it is helpful, first, to set out a brief chronology of some of the key meetings that I attended during this time. As I have explained at paragraphs 2 and 3 above, my recollection of these meetings is no longer clear given the passage of time and the following account relies mainly on the documents I have seen and cited. I certainly have no individual recollection of specific meetings and, where I do have residual memories, I cannot be sure about their dates or details.
15. This narrative does not seek to be comprehensive but instead focusses on some of the economy-related meetings that I understand to be of particular interest to the Inquiry or which I consider to be helpful to explain how the economic situation unfolded. I have already covered the myriad key Cabinet, COBR, Covid-O and Covid-S meetings in previous statements so here I have focussed on my bilateral meetings with Rishi and the small number of meetings that I had with Rishi and the Governor of the Bank of England.
16. On 4 February 2020, I had a meeting with Rishi, who was then Chief Secretary to the Treasury, along with Matt Hancock and the CMO. An email from a Treasury official to others within the department recorded that in the context of the escalating pandemic, it was noted that it would be three weeks before there was an accurate idea of *'what the "central UK scenario" was'* and that *'the Sars epidemic killed less than 1k but the subsequent overreaction cost the global economy billions [sic]'*. It further recorded that I considered stopping all flights to China, but *'was very cognisant of the potential economic costs'* [BJO6/003 - INQ000232175]. This shows that from the outset we were worried about the

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dangers of overreacting and the knock-on effects on the economy of the measures we would take to suppress and then mitigate the effects of the virus.

17. In early February 2020, I have been shown what looks like a draft letter to me from Sajid Javid, then the Chancellor of the Exchequer summarising some advice that he had received [BJO6/004 - INQ000328746]. I note that Sajid told the Inquiry he sent me this letter having received a briefing on 5 February 2020 [BJO6/005 - INQ000302485, page 6] but I have no memory of seeing it and it does not appear that a signed final version has been located. In the letter, Sajid advised that China was likely to be hit hardest, but there could be '*wider impacts*' if the virus was not contained within China. He further advised: 'We should avoid increasing levels of concern in the markets without good evidence of the impacts of the virus' (underlining in the original). The uncertainty was underlined by a reasonable worst-case scenario ('RWCS') which assumed 50% of the workforce would be infected and a duration of 4 months, which might produce a UK GDP 1-2.5% lower by 2021 as against expectations at the time. Notably, Sajid stated that the economic estimates were variable on the basis of infection rate, duration, '*or the measures to prevent transmission more or less restrictive than the RWCS planning*' [BJO6/004 - INQ000328746, page 3]. It is clear that the effects of the future NPIs, although unknown, were being considered but I understand that Sajid has told the Inquiry that he did not see any modelling in respect of NPIs, any economic plans in respect of the Covid-19 response, or any financial packages to be provided to anyone during his time as Chancellor [BJO6/005 - INQ000302485, page 8].
18. On 6 February 2020, at a Cabinet meeting, it was noted in the discussion that 'a) the economic impact of the virus was unknown, and would depend on whether it was contained... c) the knock-on impact for the UK economy was also uncertain...The impact would be felt most by exporters and importers' [BJO6/006 - INQ000056137]. In summing up, I said that 'often the significant economic damage of a crisis came from political overreaction rather than the problem itself. This had been true of Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE)' [BJO6/006 - INQ000056137, page 7]. This demonstrates that I shared the caution contained in Sajid's letter (whether or not I had received it, discussed at paragraph 17 above). I was very worried, from the beginning, that Government action had the potential to do more harm to the economy than the virus itself, but we were so focussed on limiting the loss of life that we barely

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had time to think of the social and economic consequences. The damage would only become apparent as the virus began to ebb.

19. On 14 February 2020, at a Cabinet meeting, I said that *'there was potential for the virus to have a large impact on the UK's economy and it was important to be ready for that'* [BJO6/007 - INQ000056138, page 8]. A CRIP PowerPoint presentation prepared the same day, and titled *'Coronavirus – UK Preparedness'*, included *'limit economic impact to the UK'* among its four priorities [BJO6/008 - INQ000279696, page 8]. A paper prepared by the Treasury, dated the same day, again emphasised that the reliability of economic predictions was severely undercut by uncertainty over the spread of Covid-19, and that the RWCS in the event of an outbreak in the UK would be a GDP 0.6-1.3% lower by 2021 compared to current expectations. The paper highlighted that its prognostications did not factor in *'a policy response'* [BJO6/009 - INQ000088044, pages 1-2].
20. On 27 February 2020, I held a bilateral meeting with Rishi (who had taken over from Sajid as Chancellor) which was attended by Liam Booth Smith (one of Rishi's SpAds), Stuart Glassborow (one of my private secretaries) and two others. From emails between Elizabeth Perelman, the Principal Private Secretary to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and Stuart, I can see that Rishi outlined a targeted package relating to coronavirus [BJO6/010 - INQ000593326]. The majority of the meeting appears to have consisted of discussion of broader economic policy, rather than specific measures related to the emerging pandemic. As I have explained to Module 2 of the Inquiry, the true horror of the pandemic was only just emerging at this time, so it does not come as a surprise that our conversation was not solely focussed on Covid at this stage.
21. On Saturday 28 February 2020, I remember that Chris Whitty sat me down in the Cabinet Room and warned me of the likely trade-offs that lay ahead. Not only did he talk about the issues with the disease itself, he also warned that we would need to be careful with NPIs and lockdowns because they would do considerable economic damage. This was something I bore in mind right from the beginning of the pandemic.
22. On 2 March 2020, I chaired a COBR meeting. As the minutes show, I invited the Chancellor to present on the potential impact on the economy of the unfolding crisis. Rishi stated that, in a RWCS, GDP could retract by 1.6%. He

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invited other departments to liaise with the Treasury should they require extra funds to respond to the pandemic [BJO6/011 - INQ000056217, pages 2, 5].

23. On 5 March 2020, I met with Mark Carney, the outgoing Governor of the Bank of England, Rishi and various others. While I do not have a direct recollection of this meeting, an email sent by Ed Lidington to Cabinet Office colleagues, sent on 3 March 2020, indicates the purpose was to discuss *'the economic implications of Coronavirus'* [BJO6/012 - INQ000285982, page 1]. Similarly, an email from a Treasury official sent on 4 March 2020 stated that the Governor and Rishi would be *'jointly presenting'* to me on the *'economic policy implications of Coronavirus'*. The meeting was to cover the market and international response, the Budget package, and central banking policy tools [BJO6/013 - INQ000232147, page 4]. Slides apparently prepared for this meeting set out the Treasury's analysis that there would be a *'largely temporary reduction of up to 2% in the level of GDP in 2020'* with regard to supply effects, whereas demand effects could result in a GDP 2-4% lower in 2020. The slides further outlined the Treasury's 5 principles for the Budget: a fiscal stimulus; support for public services; support for vulnerable people; cash flow support for businesses; and reducing costs for businesses [BJO6/014 - INQ000281274].
24. On 9 March 2020, I chaired a further Covid-19 COBR meeting. The Chair's Brief prepared for me in advance of this meeting noted that SAGE had identified measures which could reduce the impact on the NHS and highlighted that *'there will be negative social and economic impacts with or without these interventions, although they will be different'* [BJO6/015 - INQ000056190, page 3]. As I describe below, I consider that most of the economic impact was caused, necessarily, by the NPIs. It is nonetheless right to say that even if we had taken no NPIs, the country would still have suffered some economic damage, and this was something we were alert to from the beginning as this briefing shows.
25. Later that day, I had a bilateral meeting with Rishi which Stuart, Mark Sedwill and Dominic Cummings also attended. The slides prepared for that meeting set out a package of interventions described as *'targeted, timely and temporary'*, including removing the minimum floor in Universal Credit, the Statutory Sick Pay ('SSP') Rebate Scheme, and Business Rates relief [BJO6/016 - INQ000281275, page 3].

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26. I have been asked to provide details of my involvement in relation to the SSP Rebate Scheme through which SMEs with fewer than 250 employees would be compensated for the 14-day self-isolation periods. At this point, the CMO and CSA's advice was that self-isolation would be one of the key measures to reduce the peak of the curve. Initially this applied only to those with symptoms and then, shortly afterwards, it extended to those without symptoms (see, for example, the COBR minutes on 9 March 2020 [BJO6/017 - INQ000056219]). I recall that there were concerns that employees may not adhere to the self-isolation rules, if they were not going to be compensated. I felt that we should incentivise – and not penalise – people for doing the right thing. I do not recall my specific involvement and have little to no recollection of this now but I am aware from the documents that No.10, HMT and DHSC had been working closely to ensure SSP was in place for anyone required to self-isolate and it seems that the SSP Rebate Scheme was a decision left to the Chancellor to make with HMRC delivering [BJO6/018 - INQ0000658577], page 3].
27. On 11 March 2020, the Budget was announced [BJO6/019 - INQ000236913] and we had a Cabinet meeting. At the meeting, Rishi confirmed that a range of scenarios had been modelled, and that the economic impact would be significant on the demand as well as the supply side. He warned of a '*significant hit to GDP towards the middle part of that year*' and clarified that the interventions in the Budget '*were about providing a bridge to get to the other side of this point*' [BJO6/020 - INQ000056132, pages 6-7].
28. On 12 March 2020, prior to a COBR meeting, a paper on the Covid-19 intervention measures prepared by the Cabinet Secretariat was circulated. The paper considered an updated RWCS, suggesting a reduction in the level of GDP of around 3.5% in 2020 [BJO6/021 - INQ000056209, page 21]. The severe impact that Covid was to have on the economy was coming into focus.
29. On 16 March 2020, I met again with Mark Carney and others but this time also with his successor, Andrew Bailey, who had assumed the role of Governor that day. I have seen an email from Stuart Glassborow to Elizabeth Perelman and James Benford (the Governor's Private Secretary) summarising the meeting [BJO6/022 - INQ000281277]. Rishi warned that the potential in-year impact on the economy would be similar to the financial crisis. The Governor updated me on recent activity, and – in conjunction with Rishi – on a discussion about a product to support corporates. I made clear that I wanted further details about

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such a product, and more widely emphasised that the '*significant*' economic impact should be '*genuinely temporary with full bounce back*'. To that end, I expressed interest in the '*potential long-term implications for the economy*'. Even at this stage, I was determined that the Government should have one eye on economic recovery.

30. Later that day, I chaired a COBR meeting. Further measures were approved at this meeting, including the avoidance of pubs, clubs, theatres and similar social venues. The '*potential economic impact the measures will have*' was raised. I am recorded as saying that '*the current priority was saving lives by flattening the curve but work would take place to consider economic impacts*' [BJO6/023 - INQ000056210, page 5]. That afternoon, I announced the agreed measures to the public [BJO6/024 - INQ000088031].

31. On 19 March 2020, I had a bilateral with Rishi with a few officials and SpAds. A readout of that meeting, supplied by Stuart Glassborow to Elizabeth Perelman, said:

The Chancellor updated on the latest market and economic position.

The Chancellor also took the PM through the measures he is refining on the next package, for individuals: a wage subsidy and welfare reform. [BJO6/025 - INQ000309435].

32. On 20 March 2020, the Chancellor announced a temporary uplift to the standard allowance of Universal Credit and the basic element of Working Tax Credit to £20 a week. I do not recall my involvement in this initial decision but my view was that the uplift was a temporary measure to help people affected by the restrictions being imposed, as I explain further at paragraphs 56 to 59 below, in relation to the decision to extend the uplift until October 2021.

33. On 22 March 2020, at a Covid-19 Strategy Ministerial meeting, I emphasized that it was important that interventions and messaging were '*made in a timely and proportionate way that balanced the economic impacts with protecting the NHS*' [BJO6/026 - INQ000056266, page 6]. I was concerned about the damage we were forced to render on the economy in our efforts to save lives and protect the NHS.

34. On 23 March 2020, I attended a COBR meeting. My briefing for that meeting set out that I was to invite Rishi to outline the economic impacts of enhanced compliance with social distancing measures, and how they would be mitigated

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[BJO6/027 - INQ000007807, page 4]. At the meeting, I emphasised that *'the measures were not to stop all work...there was a balance that must be struck. There would be a huge economic impact if all work was halted'* [BJO6/028 - INQ000056213, page 6].

35. On 24 March 2020, at a Cabinet meeting, Rishi said, 'it would not be possible to protect every job or save each business, but the measures would provide most with a bridge to the other side of the crisis' [BJO6/029 - INQ000056136, page 6]. I emphasised that the costly measures could only be funded with continued economic activity. I encouraged the Cabinet to think about the recovery and how to get the economy going, once the pandemic was over [BJO6/029 - INQ000056136, page 10].
36. On 26 March 2020, I had a bilateral meeting with Rishi over Zoom [BJO6/030 - INQ000236582]. It looks like this had originally been planned to include the Governor of the Bank of England but became a bilateral at the Treasury's request. The main focus of this meeting was to discuss the economic impacts of the NPI decisions that we were taking and when to lift the NPIs. Rishi talked me through the generous package for the self-employed and then *'the macro picture'*: a possible hit to GDP of 20-30%, double digit unemployment, and problems with financing any further measures. I agreed that the measures could not go on forever and spoke about the risk that we would destroy life chances of the younger generation. We agreed that when we came to the three-week review point on social distancing, the messaging needed to be about *'getting the economy going'* and that we should meet again to think about the longer term plan on recovery. An email from Elizabeth Perelman after this meeting recorded that I was *'visibly annoyed'* by the harm done to the economy as a result of a lack of NHS preparedness. I am sure this is accurate: I was deeply worried about the economic ramifications. That said, it seems that this was a helpful meeting at which Rishi and I saw eye-to-eye.
37. On 31 March 2020, at a Cabinet meeting Rishi reported that the delivery of economic support schemes was progressing well, and that *'HM Treasury was...working to fill in the gaps in the suite of products to ensure all corporate UK was supported in one way or another'*. He also, however, warned that the impact on economic activity had been greater than had been anticipated when the measures were announced, and relayed concerns from businesses about the duration of those measures [BJO6/031 - INQ000088891, page 6]. I praised

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the Treasury for doing an *'outstanding job'* [BJO6/031 - INQ00088891, page 8].

38. Work continued apace throughout April and May. On 18 May 2020, I had a bilateral meeting over Zoom with Rishi. I can see from an email from Stuart to Munira Mirza, dated 18 May 2020, that the agenda covered the economic recovery plan, a coronavirus update, 'Project Birch' (a Government project for managing companies in distress) and other associated issues. I had received a written briefing in advance and some documents, which was common practice [BJO6/032 - INQ000593377]. These included a slide deck that Rishi's team had prepared [BJO6/033 - INQ000593378] and two letters from Rishi dated 15 May 2020, one about the options for opening non-essential retail [BJO6/034 - INQ00088054] and another setting out the actions taken by HMG in relation to the newspaper industry and Project Birch [BJO6/035 - INQ000593380]. It is evident from the brief contained in the body of Stuart's email that my team were cognisant of the *'magnitude of the economic crisis'*, and indeed that I had discussed the economic recovery plan in high-level terms with Rishi the previous Monday [BJO6/032 - INQ000593377, page 1]. The brief advocated an ambitious approach, proposing a radical employment programme, deregulation, tax measures, and an infrastructure strategy that would involve *'getting spades in the ground this summer'* [BJO6/032 - INQ000593377, page 2]. It also noted the possibility of the disparate impact of the pandemic on different areas of the UK, such as those dependent on tourism, in the context of the Government's emphasis on levelling up.
39. One can see the inevitable difference in approach between a Prime Minister and Chancellor recorded in the briefing note which mentioned *'a gap between the Cx (see slides 4 and 5) and your team on ambition'*. Chancellors are always responsible for the purse strings and tend to be fiscally conservative and wary of large spending commitments on infrastructure or other projects. Prime Ministers – and this applied to me in particular – are often keen to undertake ambitious reforms with significant investments. That tension will always exist and is one of the reasons why our system (and bilateral meetings such as these) can be so effective.
40. It appears likely from the briefing note and documents circulated in advance that Rishi and I also discussed the opening of non-essential retail businesses, and his preference that all such businesses reopen on 1 June 2020 (with a

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secondary proposal of a phased approach over two weeks with smaller stores open on 1 June 2020, with all others opening from 9 June 2020). The brief sounds a note of warning about this proposal, advising that there may be a need for a more cautious approach, but I do not recall my views at the time or our discussion. There was further reference to the need to agree how much advance warning should be given to businesses, whatever timetable for reopening is adopted.

41. The brief concluded by suggesting that I ask Rishi what the Treasury could do to assist with delivery on social care and PPE. Again, I do not remember this or whether I asked him, but it demonstrates the universal desire across government to work collaboratively.
42. On 22 May 2020, I had various meetings with Rishi, including an economy meeting. Various officials and SpAds attended. We had numerous further such meetings, focussed on the economy, over the pandemic.
43. The details of one of my discussions with Rishi from that day are contained in an email that Imran Shafi (one of my private secretaries) sent to various members of my team with a read out [BJO6/036 - INQ000593414]. Imran began by noting that we were cognisant of '*the current level of incidence and R*' and were '*informed by the discussion with CMO/CSA*' the night before. The email set out that we agreed on a package for Phase 2, which included the opening of outdoor markets and car showrooms on 1 June 2020, with the remainder of non-essential retail to open on 15 June 2020, subject to adherence with new guidance. We also agreed that outdoor hospitality would be permitted in June, subject to guidance on strict social distancing, and envisaged further collaboration between the Treasury, the Cabinet Office and the No.10 team to specify both the first feasible date on which this could be introduced, and the terms of any such opening. The remainder of the meeting appears to have concerned schools, social gatherings, and elite sporting events.
44. On 22 May 2020, I received a note in my box on Cabinet structures. In my comments on said note, I stated:

*1. We are moving from the battle against Covid to the next phase — the campaign to revive the UK economy.*

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2. *We need to start Operation BOUNCEBACK with a BOUNCEBACK Committee.*
3. *It shall meet every morning with a Dashboard not unlike the Covid dashboard & it should be using every lever possible to revive the UK economy and send us all surging forwards.*
4. *Apart from Alok and Rishi I don't think it needs many ministers.*
5. *Can I have some proposals ASAP? Simon C to hold pen & draw up plan. [BJO6/037 - INQ000183934, page 1].*
45. On 31 May 2020, Stuart Glassborow sent an email to officials at the Treasury, BEIS, the Cabinet Office and No. 10, as well as Chris Whitty and Patrick Vallance. Stuart stated that I had asked to do a half hour morning meeting on the economy on Tuesdays and Thursdays to '*review the latest economic indicators; key sectors; as well as the regional view of the country*'. He confirmed that the purpose of such meetings was '*to ensure that due attention continues to be given to the economic implications of C19 in these sit reps*', but clarified that '*the aim is not to get deep into policy*'. [BJO6/038 - INQ000593336].
46. Stuart further stated that there would be separate sessions on economic recovery and industrial strategy, but the '*status updates*' provided at the biweekly meetings I had requested would provide context for those other forums and perform the function of '*checking everything is joined up*' and identifying key decisions on the horizon. The Dashboard was intended to include key indicators on the macro picture, as well as headline sectoral and regional indicators. Stuart also outlined the proposed '*general handling*' of such meetings: that the Treasury should outline the '*macro picture*', with BEIS supplying '*the view from sectors*', before the conversation was opened up.
47. Stuart stated the first meeting would take place on the coming Tuesday (2 June 2020) and indeed, we held an economy meeting on the morning of 2 June 2020 and others on 4, 9, 16, 25 June and 2, 14, 16 July, 3, 10, 17 September, 15 October and 13 November 2020 according to records in my official diary. There were probably others too. They continued throughout 2021.
48. On 1 June 2020, I had a further bilateral meeting with Rishi. I have been shown a briefing which appears to have been prepared in advance of this meeting [BJO6/039 - INQ000593347], which focuses heavily on proposed de-

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regulation. The note referred to cooperation between my team, Rishi and the Covid business taskforces to devise deregulatory measures in the short term to assist with the business response to the crisis, such as relaxing Sunday trading rules for large shops and easing the process for the cafes, restaurants and bars to apply for outdoor seating. Further deregulation was mooted to support economic recovery in the long term, including possible changes to employment law. I have been shown an email readout from what I presume to be this meeting (though it appears to refer to a meeting on 2 June 2020, my official diary records a bilateral meeting on 1 June 2020), prepared by a member of my Domestic Private Office [BJO6/040 - INQ000655157]. It set out that Rishi and I did discuss de-regulation, and that I supported continued progress on '*small immediate easements that could help business and support the economy*', whilst deciding against significant regulatory easements in the short term. I further outlined that I was keen for measures on infrastructure and skills to be included in the upcoming Economic Statement. Rishi and I also discussed the guidance for outdoor hospitality.

49. In the second half of 2020, we held a series of 'Economy Seminars' to which we invited experts in the field to come and speak to me, my team some representatives of other departments and, on a few occasions, Rishi. Each seminar was about a particular economic theme:
- a. 12 June: Skills and the Labour Market.
  - b. 26 June: Industrial Strategy
  - c. 21 July: Green Investment
  - d. 22 July: Local Growth
  - e. 11 September: Housing.
50. My memory from one of these meetings was that the prognostications were awful. Someone described it as an '*economic watershed*' and warned that people were ordering products from home and working from home and this would not stop – with all the attendant damage that would do the economy. I remember the image of shuttered shops and tumbleweed blowing through city centres and one of the economists predicting unemployment would rise by four million before the end of the year. I felt my blood run cold at the prospect of joblessness at Thatcherian proportions. I felt my Government was responsible for the damage wrought by the lockdowns and the restrictions and I did not feel

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that we could sit back and leave the recovery to market forces. I was heartened by thoughts of London powering through the 2008 financial crash which was in part due to gigantic, job-rich, state-backed construction projects, from Crossrail to the Olympic park. We had to take action. We needed to drive on full-pelt with our investments – from HS2 to hospitals, schools to broadband – so that we could entice foreign investment in the UK and create the jobs of the future all over Britain.

51. On 15 June 2020, it appears that Rishi and I met again (again with others present), with a series of slides having been prepared for the meeting by the Treasury [BJO6/041 - INQ000593388]. This was not a bilateral in the strict meaning of the word but an office meeting over Teams so there were lots of officials and MPs also in attendance. To judge from the slides, it seems that the focus of the meeting was on the role that infrastructure investment was to play in the UK's economic recovery, with an emphasis on '*shovel ready schemes that can deliver jobs in 20/21*' in order to spur economic activity in the short term [BJO6/041 - INQ000593388, page 2].
52. I had various other meetings about the economy in the period that followed. By way of example only, on 16 June 2020, I held a further economy meeting over Zoom with Stuart, Rishi, Simon Case, Lee Cain, Elizabeth Perelman, Clare Lombardelli (the Chief Economist) and other SpAds and officials. As this shows, we held meetings with Treasury officials as well as those in No.10. I have been shown the Dashboard from this meeting, which warned that GDP had fallen by a record 20.4% in April (three times greater than the fall in the 2008/09 economic downturn). The Dashboard also reported elevated Universal Credit claims, dampened consumer confidence and spending, and the vulnerability of business cash reserves [BJO6/042 - INQ000184623].
53. On 30 June 2020, I gave an Economic Recovery speech at Dudley College with a small audience of apprentices [BJO6/043 – INQ000655396]. I described the '*coming economic aftershock*' and said we would not respond to the crisis with austerity but with investment. I described the things we were doing to unite and level up: the £96 billion rail programme; the upgrading of crucial roads; the broadband roll-out; the schools, hospitals, further education colleges we were either building or rebuilding and the seven low-tax freeports we were inaugurating. I mentioned Project Speed, a new Infrastructure Delivery Taskforce set up by Rishi and me, to '*scythe through red tape and get things*

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*done*. I said that we were going to *'build back better'*. This speech created the framework for a lot of our post-Covid economic programme.

54. On 15 September 2020, Rishi and I had another bilateral meeting, again with others present. An email from Imran to members of my team and Treasury officials set out the nature of our discussion [BJO6/044 - INQ000281282]. It seems that we discussed self-isolation, and that I expressed concern as to insufficient numbers of people self-isolating. I further outlined a proposal for financial support for those isolating (although I do not now remember what this was). Rishi expressed concern about that proposal, seemingly on the grounds that this would further assist those who had already benefited from coronavirus assistance measures and that the proposed rate would leave a fifth of the workforce better off isolating than in work. I stressed the importance of providing a sufficient incentive to those on low incomes. Rishi proposed a flat payment of £300, and I responded that any such payment would need to be sufficient to encourage the right behaviour. It was agreed that the matter would be subject to further discussion.
55. On 8 December 2020, based on a note of speaking points that I have been shown for this date and an entry in my official diary, it appears that I had a further meeting with Rishi and others including Martin Reynolds, Simon Case and the Chief Whip. A briefing note appears to have been prepared for me for that meeting [BJO6/045 - INQ000593395]. That note referred to an agreement the previous week that an economic plan needed to be readied for deployment in January, and suggested a need for my team and Rishi's to work closely together on the launch of the Levelling Up Fund. Though I have no recollection, it would appear from the note that I emphasized the need to focus on protecting and creating jobs in the upcoming Budget, and to spur economic recovery through investment. It appears that Rishi and I were in agreement on those points, as well as on the fact that the Spring would be too early for a comprehensive fiscal plan (though some specific measures to support the public finances were in order).
56. On 9 October 2020, the Secretary of State for Work & Pensions, Thérèse Coffey, wrote a letter to me in which she recommended to permanently uplift both the Universal Credit Standard Allowance and Child Element by £10 a week [BJO6/046 - INQ000653841]. I received a briefing on this issue the same day [BJO6/047 - INQ000658578]. I have not seen any written response to

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the letter, but I did meet with Thérèse on 9 November 2020 to discuss her recommendation. As the readout records, whilst this was a more targeted – and cheaper – intervention than rolling over the £20 uplift for all claimants, I expressed concern that too many people would lose out and it would be complex to explain. Thérèse was required to undertake a benefits uprating exercise by 26 November 2020, and I noted that decision needed to be taken shortly but further discussions were required, including with the Chancellor [BJO6/048 - INQ000593425]. The £20 uplift was not due to expire until the end of March 2021, so it was not necessary to decide whether or how it should be extended at this point, even though Thérèse felt it was politically expedient to do so, and it was agreed with HMT that we would revisit in the New Year.

57. On 8 January 2021, the Chancellor and I met to discuss the budget. As the readout records, Rishi was *'hard against [a] permanent £20'* uplift and was advocating a hiring subsidy with a one-off Universal Credit payment. I was sympathetic to the Chancellor's position but did not agree anything [BJO6/049 - INQ000281291]. As my briefing had explained, the Chancellor favoured a *'hiring subsidy'* as a targeted intervention to introduce when the economy opened up in spring or summer, over an extension of the £20 uplift which he feared would never be undone [BJO6/050 - INQ000593356].
58. On 15 January 2021, I attended a trilateral meeting with the Chancellor and Thérèse. As a briefing for the meeting records, the objective of the meeting was to give a clear steer to the Chancellor and Thérèse to work together and develop credible options and a proposal regarding the £20 uplift, which was due to expire at the end of March 2021, as they had opposing views on the issue [BJO6/051 - INQ000658579].
59. I received a briefing on 1 February 2021 on the options to extend the Universal Credit £20 uplift, which records that I had been clear that it could not be ended whilst Covid still impacted people's livelihoods and that everyone now accepted the need for an extension, including the Chancellor who, by now, favoured a three to six-month extension. Thérèse was still advocating for a permanent uplift (if not, a twelve-month extension), as unemployment was likely to rise once furlough came to an end in the autumn. My advisers recommended a temporary extension of either six or twelve months, noting that the economic and policy arguments favoured not withdrawing too soon but that it would be harder to remove the longer it was kept in place [BJO6/052 - INQ000658580].

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My official diary records that I had a further trilateral with the Chancellor and Thérèse to discuss Universal Credit on 4 February 2021 [BJO6/053 - INQ000226185\_0346] but I understand that the Cabinet Office has been unable to locate any papers from this meeting and I have no recollection of it now. However, I can see that I had been minded to proceed with a 6-month extension (paired with a one-off £500 payment for those on working tax credits) and this was agreed with the Chancellor and Thérèse, as recorded in the briefing for the next trilateral on 26 February 2021 [BJO6/054 - INQ000658581]. This briefing further records that the objective of this meeting was to confirm the final decision on Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit uplift, bind Thérèse into delivering this policy and ensure the Chancellor took ownership of the policy after its announcement.

60. The six-month extension was announced in the Budget on 3 March 2021. Whilst there had been some disagreement between the Thérèse and Rishi, we had all agreed to adopt the policy as I have described above. As the 2 February 2021 options paper set out, the temporary extension would ensure that support remained in place while NPIs directly restricted the economy but, unlike a twelve-month extension, it did not require primary legislation and would avoid the uplift becoming permanent, which the Chancellor and I were both against [BJO6/052 - INQ000658580].
61. On 17, 18 or 19 March 2021, it appears that I had a further meeting with Rishi (I put it in these terms because my official diary records there were meetings with Rishi on 17 and 19 March 2021 but there did not appear to be one on 18 March 2021; meanwhile, and the Domestic Policy Agenda and Spending Review document refers to a planned meeting with Rishi on 18 March 2021 [BJO6/055 - INQ000593390] but the email under cover of which it was sent, was sent on 18 March 2021 and asked that it be put in the Box and Day File for 'tomorrow' i.e. 19 March 2021).
62. A briefing for a meeting around this time was prepared for me on 17 March 2021 [BJO6/055 - INQ000593390]. The purpose of the meeting was apparently to discuss domestic policy priorities and the timing of the Spending Review, which it was anticipated Rishi would be reluctant to conduct in the summer. To judge from the briefing, it appears likely that I stressed at that meeting that a jobs subsidy would have to be developed to replace the furlough scheme and uplift to Universal Credit. Another focus in the briefing is Levelling Up.

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63. Again, the briefing suggested the possibility of a difference of approach between Rishi and me on certain matters. For instance, it anticipated that Rishi might be reluctant to commit to further spending commitments in the Summer, both on the grounds that they would represent '*significant pressure on top of the spending numbers pencilled into the forecast at Budget*' potentially necessitating a '*looser overall fiscal stance than the CX would prefer*' and on the basis that the Summer would be too early to set long-term policy. As I have explained at paragraph 39 above, such tension is to be expected and can be extremely effective.
64. On 8 June 2021, I had a further meeting with Rishi, officials and SpAds. A readout of this meeting was supplied by Elizabeth Perelman on 16 June 2021 to Treasury officials [BJO6/056 - INQ000236599]. That readout stated that Rishi presented me with data suggesting that furlough numbers might have fallen, and therefore suggested that the economy needed to be opened up and furlough ended in September. He further advised that it was a marginal decision as to whether to deploy a hiring subsidy in the Autumn, but that his view was that it was probably not the correct decision. I approved of his proposal to withdraw the retention bonus. No final decisions were taken at this meeting as to the hiring subsidy or a mooted extension of the Kickstart scheme. I again emphasized the need to have a robust plan for September, when the jobs scheme and Universal Credit uplift were due to end. I also reiterated my desire for regulatory reform.
65. On 6 October 2021, the temporary uplift to Universal Credit was removed. The decision inevitably attracted criticism including from the First Ministers of the Devolved Administration, as set out in their letter to me dated 1 October 2021 [BJO6/057 INQ000658576]. As the need for NPIs lessened, I was keen to shift Government's focus onto our Plan for Jobs as the best route out of poverty, rather than welfare spending. I wanted to get people back to work and also supported the Chancellor's aim to improve fiscal responsibility. At the same time, we did consider the impact of removing the uplift and £500 million was made available to local authorities to make targeted hardship payments through the Household Support Fund (announced on 30 September 2021 and which remains in place today) [BJO6/058 INQ000658582].
66. On 18 December 2021, I had a further meeting with Rishi and many others including Michael Gove, Patrick Vallance and Chris Whitty. Elizabeth Perelman

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provided a draft readout of this meeting [**BJO6/059 - INQ000184558**], which seemingly concerned the breakout of the Omicron variant of coronavirus, and the potential need to bring in restrictions during the festive period. From this document, it appears that Rishi was unconvinced as to the need for significant restrictions, questioning the prudence of relying only on one data model to make such a decision and doing so at speed, as well as highlighting the contraction in the economy caused by previous restrictions. The note recorded that I was more uncertain and raised points both in favour of restrictions and against them. I apparently spoke words to the effect of: *'while job of govt to protect people, also important that people understand that these steps have downside'*. The decision was ultimately mine, and I retired to consider it overnight.

67. Significant restrictions – known as 'Plan C' – continued to be considered but having reflected, I knew that I did not want to lock down again. I felt we could keep watching the data over the days ahead.
68. On 19 December 2021, I had a further meeting with Rishi and others including Simon Case, Stuart Glassborow and Munira Mirza. I have been shown Rishi's briefing for this meeting, which advised him that the Treasury's understanding was that I was proposing a short package of restrictions to start on Boxing Day [**BJO6/060 - INQ000113784**]. I have been told that Rishi has stated that he made his continued scepticism clear at this meeting [**BJO6/061 - INQ000263374\_142, at paragraph 529**].
69. On 20 December 2021, at a Cabinet meeting, I said that while the data was uncertain, it was premature to reimpose restrictions. Instead, we planned to bolster NHS capacity, procure antivirals and focus on the rollout of the booster vaccine. I was resolved to protect public health and while I hoped for a world where we did not need to act further, we needed to be prepared to go further if required [**BJO6/062 - INQ000217347**].
70. In the end, the more stringent measures were not introduced.
71. On 5 January 2022, at a Cabinet meeting, I set out clearly that *'it was not the moment to slam on the brakes'* and introduce further restrictions. At least in part, I was influenced by economic considerations: I noted that *'there were 420,000 more employees than at the beginning of the pandemic and more was invested in UK tech in 2020 than the rest of Europe combined'* [**BJO6/063 - INQ000088948, page 6**].

## Types of meetings

72. In the narrative above, I have described some of the key economic meetings. Among these meetings were Economy Dashboard meetings, bilaterals with Rishi and trilaterals with the Governor of the Bank of England. I have reflected on each of these below.

### Economy Dashboard meetings

73. I have set out the chronology of the genesis and development of the Economy Dashboard meetings above from paragraph 44 onwards.
74. Generally, I was concerned that the Government would focus on the spread of the disease to the neglect of economic matters. I wanted to emphasise that a focus on economic recovery was required, as is indicated by my request on 22 May 2020 to set up meetings about it **[BJO6/037 - INQ000183934]**, cited at paragraph 44 above. I think it was that request that led to the establishment of the Economy Dashboard meetings (and Stuart's email to key Treasury officials on 31 May 2020 described in paragraph 45 above seems to confirm that the impetus for these meetings came from me: **[BJO6/038 - INQ000593336]**).
75. The Economy Dashboard meetings were designed to supply information and allow for a comprehensive overview of the economic picture, rather than involve detailed consideration of economic policy. They added context to discussions and allowed for more informed decisions to be made on specific issues. For instance, from the minutes of a meeting of the Covid-19 Economic and Business Response Strategy group ('EBRS': a convocation of Permanent Secretaries which I did not attend) on 19 June 2020, it appears that in our meeting on 16 June 2020 there was a more targeted discussion of regional economic impacts led by the Communities Secretary **[BJO6/064 - INQ000064876]**. One can see the broad sweep of topics for the meetings in a timetable included in a speaking note/agenda prepared for the meeting on 2 July 2020, including the construction and the housing sector; the international economy; entertainment and events; aviation and tourism; the Northern Powerhouse and the auto industry **[BJO6/065 - INQ000593320]**.
76. An example of an Economy Dashboard, dating from 8 June 2020 but presumably prepared for a meeting on 9 June 2020 (as recorded in my official diary), may be seen at **[BJO6/066 - INQ000593323]**. The slides prepared included an overview of the economy, analysis of consumer confidence and

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demand, data on the labour market, an examination of differences between different business sectors, information about global markets and international trade, and *'weekly topical data'* (the housing sector, road usage, high street footfall and construction site re-openings). Graphs were used to illustrate the analysis. As indicated in **[BJO6/038 - INQ000593336]** (discussed from paragraph 45 above), the data was in the most part gleaned from the Treasury and BEIS, though seemingly coordinated through the Cabinet Office (specifically, Joanna Key, Director of the Cabinet Secretariat).

77. The attendees at such meetings varied. For instance, on 2 June 2020, I was joined by Rishi, Mark Sedwill, Lee Cain, Chris Whitty, Stuart Glassborow, Martin Reynolds, Patrick Vallance, Simon Case, Ed Lister and Tom Shinner **[BJO6/053 - INQ000226185, page 119]**. In contrast, on 9 June 2020, I was joined by Rishi, Alok Sharma, Robert Jenrick, Mark Sedwill, Simon Case, Dominic Cummings, Ed Lister, Munira Mirza, and various figures from the Treasury and BEIS **[BJO6/053 - INQ000226185, page 125]**. On 25 June 2020, I was joined by Rishi, Liz Truss, Alok Sharma, Mark Sedwill, Dominic Cummings, Munira Mirza, Simon Case and Lee Cain **[BJO6/053 - INQ000226185, page 139]**. What appears broadly consistent is I would be present at all meetings, almost invariably joined by Rishi, a representative of BEIS, key civil service figures and political appointees. Other ministers would join on a more ad hoc basis: for instance, as explained at paragraph 75 above, the Communities Secretary on 16 June 2020 for a more specific discussion on regional economic impacts.
78. I am unable to add to the description of *'general handling'* of these meetings described by Stuart Glassborow when we started these meetings (**[BJO6/038 - INQ000593336]**) (mentioned in paragraph 45 above). I do not and would not then have been able to tell you all the sources of the data and how it was captured in the Dashboards but it does seem likely that I would have interrogated the data and analysis supplied as I did with the other Dashboards. I have been shown what appears to be a briefing note prepared for me in advance of the meeting on 2 July 2020 **[BJO6/065 - INQ000593320]**. This note suggested a number of queries to raise in respect of the data supplied, for example on mortgages and the implications of increased consumer savings.
79. I do not have any direct recollection – and probably would not have been aware at the time – about the channels through which Dashboard updates were

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provided to core decision-makers across government. I have, however, been shown a memo for the EBRS, prepared by BEIS and dated 12 June 2020 [BJO6/067 - INQ000064866]. This document asserted that '*CO aims to use EBRS to share with other Permanent Secretaries outputs of the new twice-weekly Prime Ministerial economy/Covid-19 meetings*'. On 12 June 2020, the EBRS Group met. From the minutes of that meeting (which I did not attend), it appears that attendees indicated a desire for the Dashboard to be shared more widely within Government, and the Cabinet Office referred to steps that would be taken '*to create a more shareable version of the Dashboard*'. The chair of that meeting also apparently requested a '*forward-look for the PM Morning Economy meetings for the next couple of weeks...and noted that these topics will help to inform future EBRS agendas*' [BJO6/068 - INQ000064871]. From a further memo prepared for an EBRS meeting on 26 June 2020, it appears that the content of the Economy Dashboard meeting on 25 June 2020 was reiterated [BJO6/069 - INQ000064878]. It therefore appears that the content of the Economy Dashboard meetings was communicated to the highest levels of the Civil Service.

80. I was assisted by the material provided in the Economy Dashboards. For instance, it appears from an email summarising actions arising from such a meeting on 3 September 2020, that I expressed interest in the nature of the recovery (specifically, whether it would be '*V-shaped*' or not), the furlough scheme, DWP programmes (specifically Kickstart and the need for '*tough messages*' on the importance of its delivery), and the need to not talk down the economy [BJO6/070 - INQ000281281]. Thus, the meetings did serve a function and action did result from them. It is also evident that the information contained within the Dashboards evolved – as was the case with other Dashboards – in response to my interests and priorities.
81. In all honesty, however, I am not certain that the meetings did much good beyond helping us all to stay abreast of economic developments and keeping focus on the economy which could have been lost beneath other priorities. This limited utility was almost a necessary consequence of the nature of the subject matter. As I have explained above, it is my view that much of the economic damage in this period was caused by NPIs imposed by the Government. The Government could remove or lighten those interventions when the time was right, but we could not pull a lever to create economic growth quickly. The matters under consideration at the Economy Dashboard meetings were

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therefore never as directly susceptible to our actions as, for example, the Covid Dashboard or the Vaccine Rollout Dashboard. The Dashboard itself, however, performed its purpose in that it effectively communicated the overall economic picture.

### **Bilateral Meetings with the Chancellor**

82. As the narrative above described, I had many bilateral meetings with Rishi. The term 'bilateral' is used rather loosely and can describe a one-on-one meeting between just the two of us or a meeting between us at which other officials and SpAds also attended. They would have varying degrees of formality. Thanks to the close proximity of our homes on Downing Street, sometimes we would meet in the evening to discuss things with less pressure of time.
83. I was generally supported in my engagement with the Chancellor by Stuart. He was my point-man on all economic issues and everything relating to the Treasury. This would include giving me briefings, discussing economic matters, attending my meetings and circulating readouts as required.
84. It is fair to say that fiscal interventions were typically discussed and agreed between Rishi and me, sometimes in bilaterals and sometimes in wider meetings. I certainly sought to provide direction on and shape economic and fiscal policy through these meetings, among others. They would feed into the decision-making process in different ways: sometimes we would discuss issues that we could see arising and make plans to address them; sometimes Rishi would come to me with a proposal and we would discuss it; sometimes we would talk about measures that were underway and how they were working. There was no one-size-fits-all model for these meetings but of course they played a role in Government decision-making.
85. Bilaterals were held on an ad hoc basis as and when required. Sometimes I would ask Rishi to meet if I saw something emerging on the economic horizon; sometimes the suggestion would come from No.10, Rishi or the Treasury. By way of example, I have been shown a message for a billet-doux on 27 March 2020 which was to be given to me along with some slides put together by the Bank of England and which said *'We'll put in a 1-1 with you and Rishi in due course, to discuss handling of the 3-week "review point" on social distancing, and longer-term recovery options to get us back to a normal footing.'* [BJO6/071 - INQ000655158]. This was typical for the way in which a bilateral might come about.

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86. I cannot now remember any occasions where Rishi and I disagreed about economic policy or fiscal interventions. I have been reminded that in June 2021 we had some misunderstanding about fixing social care – which I was set on and which was a manifesto commitment on which we had both stood. Rishi was concerned about raising taxes. We arranged to speak and talk it through and had a very productive chat diffusing the tension and working out that we were on the same page [BJO6/072 - INQ000226237\_0007-0008]. I am sure this would not be the only such example but what it shows is that there were, inevitably, moments of friction and that we had a strong relationship that allowed us to discuss differences and resolve them. That is as it should be in any professional relationship and as I have described in paragraph 39, is common between Prime Ministers and the holders-of-the-purse-strings, Chancellors.
87. I cannot recall fiscal interventions not being discussed between Rishi and me – whether in bilaterals or other meetings – but I find it difficult to remember. For the reasons I have set out above, I felt that our meetings were effective.

### **Trilateral meetings with the Chancellor and the Governor of the Bank of England**

88. As I have set out at paragraphs 23 and 29 above, I had very occasional trilateral meetings with the Governor of the Bank of England. These seem to have been rare (only 5 March 2020 and 16 March 2020 from the documents) but I would have other updates from the Bank of England and Andrew Bailey also attended a Financial Services Roundtable on 7 June 2021. I was supported in these engagements by Stuart and others in the No.10 team (such as Jonathan Black, Mark Sedwill, Imran Shafi, Dominic Cummings, Edward Lister and Lee Cain).
89. To the best of my recollection, I do not think that these meetings provided direction on or shaped economic and fiscal policy. I do not recall there being any substantial policy discussion. I think, from reading the documents about these meetings, that they were mostly about an exchange of information: the Bank of England presenting to me about policy implications and flagging concerns and updating me on recent activity and me describing the Government's objectives and priorities. In that sense only, they fed into decision-making but were not a forum for taking decisions.
90. I felt that the meetings were effective but it would be overstating their role to say that they played a significant role in assisting the UK Government's

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response. What was important was that channels of communication between the Treasury and the Bank – and No.10 and me as necessary – were open and I believe that they were.

### **Cooperation and joint working**

#### **Working Relationships**

91. As the narrative above demonstrates, I had many working relationships with individuals and teams relating to the economic response. Overall, I felt that my working relationships were effective and assisted the work in the economic response. As I have said, in my team Stuart Glassborow was the person with whom I liaised most closely day-to-day. James Bowler and Jonathan Black were also key. I had a good working relationship with all three of them and trusted them to give good and impartial advice.
92. It is obvious that my relationship with the Chancellor – Rishi, who took up the role at the start of the pandemic – was important. I think that I had a good working relationship with Rishi. We worked closely and harmoniously throughout the pandemic. My impression was that the Treasury did a very good job and delivered many schemes at great speed. I felt that the working relationship between the Cabinet Office and the Treasury was highly effective. What was particularly good was the relationship between the No.10 economic team in the Private Office and Rishi's team. I think that it probably encouraged our respective teams that Rishi and I had a strong working relationship and could resolve issues together when they arose, as I described at paragraph 86 above.
93. I also felt that I had an excellent relationship with both Governors of the Bank of England, Mark Carney and his successor Andrew Bailey. We did not meet often (as the narrative above shows) but I felt when we did meet or liaise, it was effective. I recall that there was some tension much later where Rishi was concerned about the rise in inflation and how it was dealt with – he was frustrated by the time it was taking to raise interest rates to manage inflation but I cannot now recall when this was.
94. Of course, I also worked with ministers and senior civil servants in the Cabinet Office, Treasury and other government departments and from the Devolved Administrations as well as senior officials in Local Government and businesses and organisations outside government. I have no complaints about any of these

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working relationships which I found to be effective. I did not experience any challenges working with anyone.

### **Data sharing**

95. To the best of my recollection, the Treasury seemed to be open and transparent in its approach to sharing information and economic analysis. I have no recollection of any data or analysis being withheld and as I described at paragraph 79 above, efforts were taken to share the Dashboard data more widely (although I may not have been aware of this at the time).

### **Economic Operations Committee**

96. On 24 June 2020, I received a note from Stuart in my box enclosing a letter from Helen MacNamara dated 19 June 2020 that proposed Rishi chair an economic operations committee [BJO6/073 - INQ000655159]. The aim of this new committee was to formalise the meetings where Rishi would need to address the economic issues in the months ahead. Helen described the purpose as to *'focus on delivery of economic policy, to drive real change by the end of this Parliament.'* In the short term, it was to *'prioritise the measures that can most rapidly drive growth and investment, and support businesses, jobs and individual livelihoods affected by Covid.'* Longer term, the focus was to be on *'productivity, growth and attracting investment'*. I signalled my agreement to this proposal by ticking the box for Prime Minister's Comments.
97. On 26 June 2020, Martin Reynolds wrote to Elizabeth Perelman on my behalf asking that the Chancellor chair a new *'Cabinet Committee on Economic Operations'* [BJO6/074 - INQ000655160].
98. I understand that the first meeting of this committee took place in September 2020 [BJO6/075 - INQ000232099], by which time, I think that it was called the Domestic (Economic Operations) Cabinet Committee or 'D(EO)CC'. I have no recollections about any read outs I may have received or whether I had any views at the time on its effectiveness in assisting the UK Government's economic response to the pandemic. I do not have any memories of the Committee's work now to comment on its effectiveness.

### **Reflections on the initial economic response to the pandemic**

99. As I have outlined in my previous statement in Module 2 of this Inquiry, the Government took too long to understand the threat of the virus and the parlous

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state of our national preparedness in January 2020. Until the full horror of the pandemic emerged, no one was preparing for the economic crisis that would follow the outbreak of the virus.

100. It cannot be stressed enough that, in my view, the economic crisis was largely – but not solely – caused by the measures taken by the Government to suppress the virus. The simple truth is that the way to have avoided or ameliorated an economic crisis would have been to minimise or avoid many of the NPIs. For reasons I have outlined before, that was not an option: the Government's priority was to save lives and prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed. I think that was a priority that the public supported. No one could predict the severity of the pandemic nor the draconian measures that would be necessary to control it in the opening months of 2020: if that had been foreseen, perhaps planning to support individuals and businesses that were subject to NPIs could have begun earlier (though the measures themselves would, in my opinion, have been brought in at the same time).

101. Since the gravity of the pandemic and of the measures necessary to control it were not fully understood in January and February, work on the potential economic impact within Government was also limited. That is not to say, however, that no consideration was given to economic matters as the situation unfolded and more detail became available in February. Above, I have referred to evidence that shows we were thinking about the economic impact from the beginning and I have cited some of the (many) documents which outlined the economic analysis in Government during that period. Broadly, these documents warned that consideration must be given to the possible economic impact of the outbreak of the virus, but detailed modelling or analysis featuring the effects of the NPIs did not factor from the outset. The NPIs' absence from early forecasts is understandable at that point because those NPIs were only just appearing as ideas on the horizon.

102. I do not believe that preparation for the economic impact of the pandemic could have been improved in January or February 2020. The entire Government was reacting in real time to a rapidly changing situation. For obvious reasons, I was reluctant to impose NPIs unless they were completely necessary and I was very worried about unnecessary economic harm. As the necessity, nature and extent of those NPIs remained unknown as we moved into the Spring of 2020,

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there was no way to prepare properly for a crisis that was yet to be created. I believe that we acted as swiftly as we could in the circumstances.

103. By March 2020, the severity of the challenge posed by the virus was becoming clearer, though that was a gradual process. There was more concerted consideration of the potential economic consequences than had been the case in January or February. By early March 2020, efforts were being made urgently to model the impact of NPIs quantitatively (see for example [BJO6/076 - INQ000088046, page 3]).

104. Evidently, great economic damage was wrought by the virus and the restrictions necessary to protect the public from it. I believe, however, that the Government performed as well as could have been expected in the circumstances. The level of economic support offered in order to support individuals and businesses through the pandemic was unparalleled, and was developed at speed throughout March 2020. I do not consider in the circumstances that I could have done more to prepare the initial economic response to the pandemic in February and March 2020: like everyone else in Government, I was listening to the scientific and economic advice and was reacting to a fast-moving situation.

### **Economic Business Response Ministerial Implementation Group**

105. The Economic Business Response Ministerial Implementation Group ('EBRMIG' – I note others sometimes call this 'E-MIG') was one of the 'MIGs' that I describe in paragraph 9.d above. As with the Economic Operations Committee that I also describe above, I believe the impetus for such structures came from my private office staff.

106. On 13 March 2020, Helen MacNamara and Mark Sweeney prepared a note for me titled '*Covid-19: Next Phase*'. This document represents the first formal suggestion of the EBRMIG that I have seen. The note recommended that I set up a subgroup to focus on '*the business response*' but specified that it would '*not touch on macroeconomic issues – these would be dealt with between you and the Chancellor and Governor as necessary*' [BJO6/077 - INQ000182338, page 3].

107. The EBRMIG was designed to '*coordinate and advise on business-related regional, sectoral and corporate-level issues relating to the C-19 pandemic*' and to report to the daily Covid-19 meeting chaired by me [BJO6/001 -

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**INQ000087167, page 4].** As with all MIGs, its purpose was to support COBR **[BJO6/078 - INQ000087163].**

108. On 16 March 2020, the EBRMIG met for the first time. I did not attend, as was usual and intended for MIGs. I can see that Rishi informed attendees that I had asked him to chair the new group *'to ensure a coherent approach to business-facing communications, intelligence gathering and policy, to support business through the COVID-19 (coronavirus) outbreak'*. He further specified that the group would agree the Government's communication strategy; advise on individual Departments' engagement with their respective sectors; oversee the assessment of intelligence and analysis of impacts on business, *'including with regard to future "delay" measures'*; and oversee policy support measures and the thresholds for using them. He clarified that the group would not specifically consider macro or fiscal policy, nor specific interventions **[BJO6/079 - INQ000055892, page 4].**

109. The EBRMIG did not take major decisions relating to the response to Covid-19: so many decisions proved so difficult and sensitive that they had to come to me. This group proved relatively short-lived, as did the other MIGs. I was asked to approve their being stood down, having *'served their purpose'*, by way of a note in my box on 22 May 2020 **[BJO6/037 - INQ000183934, page 2].**

110. I no longer have any recollections or insights into the EBRMIG's effectiveness.

### **Correspondence with the TUC, CBI and Construction Leadership Council Trades Union Congress**

111. On 17 March 2020, the Trades Union Congress ('TUC') wrote to me requesting that I set up a government taskforce in the context of the crisis to *'bring stakeholders together to coordinate support and ensure that measures are being effectively targeted, delivered and accessed by employers and workers in need'* **[BJO6/080 - INQ000119147, page 1].** The letter was copied to Alok Sharma and Michael Gove. I would frequently receive letters such as this from a huge variety of organisations, raising concerns or seeking action. Some filtering of this correspondence has to take place, particularly during a crisis so I would not always see each letter. I do not recall receiving or reading this letter or having any conversations about it.

112. I have not seen any written response that my office might have sent and I have been informed that the TUC say they did not receive any response (see

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[BJO6/081 - INQ000215036\_0014] at paragraph 50). I understand, however, that on 18 March 2020, Rishi and Alok called the TUC General Secretary, Frances O'Grady and follow-up meetings also took place (see for example [BJO6/081 - INQ000215036\_0015] at paragraphs 53-54, [BJO6/082 - INQ000119228]). In particular, I have been shown a note showing that Rishi held a roundtable with the TUC which referred to '*constructive working*' and '*dialogue*' with the TUC. In that meeting, it appears that Frances O'Grady praised the '*genuinely constructive and good faith relationship at [a] critical time*' [BJO6/083 - INQ000119203, page 1].

113. As Prime Minister, I did not generally have direct engagement with the TUC and I consider it appropriate that liaison with the TUC following receipt of that letter took place with other members of my Cabinet. That is not to say that it would never be appropriate; indeed, on 6 December 2021, I did have a meeting with the TUC to discuss economic recovery. I feel these records demonstrate the Government's commitment to engaging with workers' representatives while responding to the crisis.

### ***Confederation of British Industry***

114. Similarly, I have been shown a joint letter from the Confederation of British Industry ('CBI') and the TUC, dated 25 March 2020. This letter sought clarity as to which businesses should stay open and the protections for workers in such businesses [BJO6/084 - INQ000612660].

115. Again, I do not recall receiving this letter, nor discussing it with anyone but as I have described, it would not be unusual if I did not see such a letter. Again, I have not seen any response.

116. I am sympathetic to the CBI's perspective that there was a lack of clarity about which businesses should remain open, which should close and access to the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme. Throughout Government, we were attempting to be as clear as it possibly could when setting out restrictions. It is also evident that concerns from business about a lack of clarity as to what work should continue and what should cease, were heard and taken seriously at the highest levels of the Government, for example, Rishi informed the Cabinet on 31 March 2020 that '*the message that was being heard from business was that there was a lack of clarity about what work should stop or carry on*' [BJO6/035 - INQ000593380, page 6].

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### ***Construction Leadership Council***

117. Finally, I have been shown a letter from the Construction Leadership Council ('CLC'), dated 1 April 2020, which suggested a number of measures to support the construction industry [BJO6/085 - INQ000613026]. Again, I do not recall receiving this letter, nor discussing it with anyone and I have not seen any response.

118. Starting very early in the pandemic, BEIS and the Government's Infrastructure and Projects Authority were commissioned to work with PHE and the Construction Leadership Council and this was being dealt with in the EBRMIG (see for example [BJO6/086 - INQ000083304], [BJO6/087 - INQ000083305] and [BJO6/088 - INQ000083306]). I understood that there was active engagement with the CLC, led by BEIS, throughout the pandemic. By way of example, in April 2020, the CLC convened a Construction Industry Task Force to provide a focal point for co-ordinating the industry response to Covid and to facilitate communication between the industry and Government. Both the IPA and BEIS were represented on the taskforce but this is not something of which I have any first-hand knowledge or recollection.

### **Build Back Better Business Council**

119. I chaired four meetings of the Build Back Better Business Council ('BBBBC') in 2021; first on Monday 18 January 2021, the second on 30 March 2021, a third on Thursday 29 July 2021, and the last on Monday 9 November 2021. I do not now recall the origin of the BBBBC but, as my briefing for the first meeting sets out, it served as a forum for the Government to set out our vision and priorities, with the aim of gaining business support, as well as feedback and advice. As I have said, I was deeply cognisant of the need to deliver economic growth and did not want to waste the opportunity to 'build back better', greener and to level up the whole of the United Kingdom as we exited the pandemic. With vaccines now available as our 'escape route' from the pandemic, I felt the next 12 months were critical for the economic recovery [BJO6/089 - INQ000655162].

120. In addition to Rishi co-chairing the BBBBC, at a ministerial level, the first meeting was attended by the Secretaries of State for BEIS (Kwasi Kwarteng had taken over from Alok Sharma on 8 January 2021), DIT (Liz Truss), and the Covid-19 Vaccines Minister, Nadhim Zahawi, with thirty business leaders from a variety of sectors, including construction, banking, technology, retail, and

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hospitality. I exhibit readouts and minutes (which have been provided to me) of the four meetings, which set out what was discussed. The discussions included a broad range of issues but focussed on our strategy to drive growth through investment in infrastructure, skills and innovation, which formed the three pillars of our 10-year 'Plan for Growth' published in March 2021 [BJO6/090 - INQ000624546; BJO6/091 - INQ000593374; BJO6/092 - INQ000624547; BJO6/093 - INQ000593292].

121. In January 2022, my office published a 'Summary Report' which set out some of the progress achieved through the BBBBC across these three pillars. Of particular note, the BBBBC led to the formation of the Electric Vehicle Fleet Accelerator by BBBBC members from BT, Direct Line, Severn Trent, Tesco, as well as non-BBBBC members, identifying obstacles to the rollout of electric vehicle re-charging infrastructure. The 'green' focus of the BBBBC is further reflected by the work of Sir Ian Wood and creation of a ministerial-led taskforce to accelerate off-shore wind projects in the UK. The report includes positive feedback from the business members as to the efficacy of the forum for driving public-private collaboration, and I do not recall the BBBBC facing any particular challenges as a discussion forum. The BBBBC continued, albeit in a different guise, as the 'Business Council' in 2022 with a fresh cohort of business leaders [BJO6/094 - INQ000624686].

### **Council of Economic Advisers**

122. Throughout the pandemic, I was keen to listen to the thoughts and ideas of experts outside of Westminster (as well as those doing wonders within Government). Economists were no exception. I received a note dated 12 January 2021 which outlined three ways this could be done by:

- a. convening a small sub-group of the existing Industrial Strategy Council;
- b. setting up an informal advisory group of three to five individuals to provide challenge to the Chancellor and the No.10 and No.11 teams on big picture economic decisions; or
- c. setting up a formal 'Council of Economic Advisors', whose members would be formally appointed to government advisory roles with a secretariat.

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123. As my comments on the note say, I had a preference to *'keep it small and informal but [to] make it happen fast'* by using the second option which could morph into the third if it worked **[BJO6/095 - INQ000655173]**.
124. Whilst Stuart had cautioned that Rishi might be sensitive to the third option **[BJO6/096 - INQ000655161]**, I understand that Rishi had indicated his preference for a small group with fixed membership **[BJO6/097 – INQ000236554]** (a document I would not have seen at the time). I maintained interest in the idea and, as my private office informed their No.11 counterparts on 26 April 2021, I confirmed that I wished for the Council to *'press ahead in some form'*, albeit by this point Rishi had a preference *'not to do something super-formal'* **[BJO6/098 - INQ000236566\_0004]**.
125. I believe that my interest in the Council was, in part, driven by Rishi's preference for a tighter approach to fiscal policy, which would make it difficult for us to deliver our proactive policy without spending cuts or tax rises. I was advised by Huw Leslie on 14 April 2021 that there was a broad range of alternative approaches available which would still fit within Rishi's overarching fiscal principles set out in the Budget, and it was suggested that I discuss this with academic and international experts, which could be done jointly with the Chancellor and via a formal 'Council of Economic Advisers' or through ad hoc discussions which, he noted, the Chancellor would prefer **[BJO6/099 - INQ000655165]**.
126. On 4 May 2021, I received a further note from Huw regarding 'External Economic Engagement' which records that No.10 and No.11 had discussed the Council, but the Chancellor was reluctant to proceed with this formal approach. Instead, it was recommended that I chair a series of seminars with the Chancellor and leading external experts every few weeks before the next Budget (which was delivered on 27 October 2021). Even then, as the note says, the Chancellor was reluctant to discuss fiscal policy in these seminars, which would also cover Levelling Up, Net Zero, Productivity and Innovation, and Overall Economic Prospects **[BJO6/100 – INQ000655156]**.
127. As my official diary records and I describe at paragraph 49 above, we had convened a number of 'Economy Seminars' through 2020 but it does not appear we held any through 2021. I understand that no Box Return on this 4 May 2021 note has yet been located and do not now recall whether any further

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seminars went ahead (I understand that the Cabinet Office's view is that that they did not). Certainly, no formal Council of Economic Advisers was formed.

128. I have been shown a 'Meeting with External Economists' briefing from May 2022 which seems to have been prepared for me with attendees listed as Gerard Lyons (a former Economic Adviser of mine), Baroness Minouche Shafik (Director of LSE and former Deputy Governor of the Bank of England), Lord Mervyn King and Rupert Harrison (Chair of George Osborne's Council of Economic Advisers) [BJO6/101 - INQ000655172]. I do not now recall this meeting.

### National Economic Recovery Taskforce

129. By contrast, the National Economic Recovery Taskforce ('NERT'), which was also proposed in January 2021, *did* go ahead. NERT was essentially a re-focused Domestic and Economy Strategy Committee and had the same membership, but its terms of reference went beyond simply considering '*matters relating to the Government's domestic and economic strategy and strengthening the union of the United Kingdom*'. NERT was to concentrate on economic recovery, as reflected in its terms of reference being '*to catalyse growth, level up across the United Kingdom, and drive public service performance and delivery*'. Its key focus in the first quarter was on our 'Plan for Growth'. I chaired the NERT with permanent membership of the Chancellor and CDL. Other ministers would attend based on the agenda. Meetings were to be held fortnightly [BJO6/102 - INQ000654732].

130. NERT first met on 19 January 2021 with Rishi, Michael Gove and myself in attendance, as well as officials and SpAds. I have not seen a readout of the meeting but there were three topics on the agenda: first, for me to set out my Vision for the NERT; second, for Rishi to discuss the 'Plan for Growth'; and, third, for the CDL to discuss 'Opportunities from EU Exit' [BJO6/103 - INQ000593359]. In advance of the meeting, my private office also circulated a paper from the Transition Taskforce with a number of proposals for maximising the opportunities from Brexit based on five key themes: Green Growth; Regulatory Reform; International and Trade; Levelling Up and Building Back Better; and Science and Innovation, which had been identified by individual Departments. NERT was being asked to review the proposals and indicate our priorities, as well as note the approach to communications [BJO6/104 - INQ000610241].

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131. Following the meeting, I received a 'Forward Look' advice on the NERT from Mark Sweeney dated 24 January 2021, which set out the priorities for NERT's next three meetings as:

- a. Public services recovery, and identifying the worst of the backlogs driven by the pandemic for Departments to focus on tackling. The CDL was to act as lead Minister on this work through a sub-committee, NERT (Public Services) ('NERT (PS)'), with the Home Secretary, and Secretaries of State for Health and Social Care, Education, Justice, Work and Pensions, and Education invited to attend.
- b. Levelling Up, and to agree upon clear metrics and outcomes across economy and public services, and the Plan for Growth for us to agree potential policy proposals.
- c. 'Project Speed', being the Government's review of infrastructure project delivery **[BJO6/105 - INQ000610242]**

132. These initial NERTs did not all take place in February as first envisaged. According to my official diary, I chaired a total of six which took place on 19 January 2021, 2 February 2021, 9 March 2021, 25 March 2021, 28 April 2021, and 6 May 2021. Typically, I would have a quarter- to half-an-hour prep session blocked out in my diary ahead of the meeting.

133. Over time, a number of NERT sub-committees were created to address specific issues. These were not all 'economic' in the narrow sense. For example, at the second NERT on 2 February 2021, I asked Michael to chair a NERT PS sub-committee which would test Departments' plans to recover public services performance and report progress to the NERT. Given it was not primarily focussed on the economic recovery, I shall say no more about it here but it did take hard work and I believe it was an effective sub-committee.

134. Whilst I do not recall the specific organisational structure or mechanics, it seems that, over time, the sub-committees drove the work forward working closely with the No.10 Delivery Unit. For instance, I chaired a number of 'Delivery Unit Stocktakes', many of which focussed on 'Jobs and Skills'. By the fourth stocktake, which I chaired on 9 July 2021, it had fallen into NERT's auspices as a 'NERT Delivery' sub-committee **[BJO6/106 - INQ000610253]**. Through my attendance, I sought to convey the importance of the 'Jobs and Skills' pillar of our Plan for Growth, identify and understand the issues individual

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Departments faced, and ensure action was being taken to drive forward delivery. The 'agreed actions' demonstrate how the NERTs sought to focus the relevant departments in how to achieve our key goals through tangible action, such as setting outcome targets, reviewing policies, and assessing operational readiness and capacity – here, in the context the end of furlough and upskilling the workforce. **[BJO6/107 - INQ000610259]**

135. Other NERT sub-committees included: NERT Better Regulation; NERT Policy, which considered fisheries strategy; and NERT Logistics. I do not recall being as directly involved with these sub-committees.

136. It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the NERT structure in assisting our economic response to the pandemic. As I note above, my intention behind the NERT was to really focus Ministers and their Departments to deliver recovery. In that sense, the NERT delivered. As Michael reported in his weekly update of 12 July 2021, the NERT(PS) had compelled the Secretaries of State to '*grapple more actively with the issues in their departments than might otherwise have been the case*'. However, in the same memo, he noted that there was still a '*helluva long way to go*' in reducing the Crown Court backlog. Michael expressed some reservations that the NERT(PS), as an intensive Cabinet Committee process, may not have been the right vehicle to drive progress for delivery of other backlogs **[BJO6/108 - INQ000654635]**. Similarly, I note that, at the fifth Jobs and Skills stocktake, there still remained a number of actions that needed work to be completed to a good standard **[BJO6/109 - INQ000593370]**.

137. In terms of coordination and engagement with the Devolved Administrations, one of the key messages I wanted to deliver through NERT was that the economic recovery needed us all to work together. On 3 June 2021, at my invitation, the four Governments met virtually to discuss our recovery from Covid. In advance of the meeting, having received advice, I noted that it would make sense for someone to give a presentation on the NERT backlogs and this should be followed by further joint working on public services and the economy via existing meetings (i.e., the JMC and HMT-led quads) chaired by Michael and Chief Secretary for the Treasury ('CST'), respectively **[BJO6/110 - INQ000655166]**.

## **Domestic and Economic (Strategy) Committee**

138. In September 2021, a NERT Logistics committee had been established to address certain short-term supply issues, primarily caused by HGV driver shortages. The media was reporting that our 2021 Christmas dinners would be without 'pigs-in-blankets'. While there was speculation about sprouts and Christmas dinners, we were also facing shortages about all sorts of other things: the chemicals needed for pig farming, semi-conductors for construction, petrol in petrol stations, carbon dioxide and fuel supplies. As my daily update on 8 September 2021 records, Michael Gove had been leading on this issue. He and Simon Case recommended that this be formalised by this sub-committee. The committee was to be chaired alternately by the CDL and CST with core membership of the Secretaries of State for Transport, Business, Environment, Work & Pensions and Education, as well as Lord Frost. It would meet weekly until it was clear that strong mitigations were in place **[BJO6/111 - INQ000655168]**. On 24 September 2021, the secretariat provided a paper to my private office setting out the detailed mitigations **[BJO6/112- INQ000655169]**, which were to be discussed at a 'Supply Chains' update meeting with the CDL (following a reshuffle on 15 September 2021, Steve Barclay replaced Michael as the CDL) and others **[BJO6/053 - INQ000226185\_578]**. These included a recruitment drive of inactive HGV licence holders, a 'bootcamp' to train 3,000 new HGV drivers, targeted visas for 5,000 HGV drivers and 5,500 poultry workers, increasing testing capacity, and a bespoke solution for driver shortages in the fuel sector.

139. The NERT Logistics then turned into the Domestic and Economic Strategy Committee with a 'Strategy' and 'Operations' committee. I do not recall the reason for this structural change. I chaired two meetings of the Domestic and Economic Strategy Committee ('DE(S)'), the first of which was on 26 October 2021 (although, I note that my official diary referred to it as a 'Supply Chains meeting'), and the second on 4 November 2021 (it met again in March 2022 but I did not attend). As my briefing for the first meeting sets out, its purpose was to focus on doing everything to reduce the short-term risks and impacts caused by the HGV shortage, in addition to discussing a Supply Chains Dashboard. The attendees at the first meeting included the CDL, the Levelling Up Transport and Business Secretaries, as well as Sir Dave Lewis (previously of Tesco, who we brought in to advise on supply chain issues). Essentially, my

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role was to get the committee to agree on the decisions and actions proposed by the Supply Chains Unit, so that they could be implemented as quickly as possible [BJO6/113 – INQ000655170][BJO6/114 – INQ000593319]. The second meeting focussed more on improving resilience and capacity. Again, it was an opportunity to get agreement between the relevant Secretaries of State and ministers on the relevant actions required concerning port planning regime changes, warehousing of PPE around ports, easing city centre delivery restrictions, and HGV licences. The Secretaries and ministers would then provide a progress update for the following week's first Operations committee [BJO6/115 - INQ000655171][BJO6/116 - INQ000593290].

140. I understand that the Operations committee first met on 9 November 2021 and was chaired by the CDL. It made sense for the CDL to continue leading work on the operational side of alleviating the supply chains issue, as he had with the NERT Logistics. I do not specifically recall appointing Steve to chair this committee but it is likely that I did or at least gave my approval. Steve had also been Brexit Secretary when we left the European Union, the planning for which involved consideration of similar issues (at least, in theory), and had then served as Chief Secretary of the Treasury.

141. The 'Strategy-Operations' model reflected that of the 'Covid-S' and 'Covid-O', which were introduced in May 2020 to improve our management of the pandemic and I think worked well. The obvious advantage of this model is that it provides a clear distinction between strategic and operational discussions, allowing for the right people to be in each room. The fact that the DE(S) met only three times indicates that, once the strategy was agreed, the delivery could be left to the Operations committee. By this point, I think there was an element of 'Gosplan' creeping in the Cabinet structures, by which I mean that the Government was getting heavily involved in all aspects of production and distribution of goods, service and the economy generally, whereas I was keen to get back to the free market as soon as we possibly could.

142. Again, it is always difficult to assess how effective a particular Committee model is over another in achieving its aims but the acute supply chain issues, which NERT and the Domestic and Economy Committee were set up to address, were resolved and I think we put in place measures to increase resilience. For example, Logistics UK reported that the decline of HGV licence holders in employment had slowed in Q1 2022 compared to Q3 and Q4 2021,

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alongside a large increase in HGV test numbers, which was attributed to the public-private engagement [BJO6/117 – INQ000655395].

143. As I explain above throughout this statement, my recollection is that the No.10 and No.11 teams worked incredibly well together throughout the pandemic, and I do not recall there being issues raised either generally, or specifically in relation to the BBBBC, NERT or DE(S). I do not recall any specific challenges working with the Treasury and their communication, coordination and information sharing seemed, to me, to be working well with sufficient transparency in approach.

### **Analysis and Reflections**

144. I have described my views on the Cabinet Office's work elsewhere but in relation to the economy specifically, I think that the Cabinet Office did a very good job with the financial compensation packages, even if they were on the generous side. The vaccine rollout was a massive feat of government – with the Cabinet Office at the centre – and while that may appear to be a medical intervention, the best economic response is to protect the public which we did by investing in vaccines. I find it difficult to think about weaknesses or specific examples: I generally found the Cabinet Office to be slow-moving, cautious and bureaucratic especially in the early days of the pandemic and this was something that we worked hard to resolve.

145. More generally, as we came out of the pandemic, there were miscalculations about supply chains and labour markets. Because we were still operating under EU rules, we did not know numbers (how many people needed for social care? What the rules should be for allocation etc) and it is clear that mistakes were made there. But these mistakes were made for the best possible reasons: people were frightened about the economy and supply chains seizing up. I have described at paragraph 138 the shortages that we were facing in Christmas 2021 and I was very worried about inflation. Once inflation gets dug in, it is hard to dig out. I felt that Whitehall collectively was spooked by the idea that Brexit had scared everyone away, EU workers, investors and others. The system seemed to be under the collective illusion that the workforce was leaving the country with disastrous impacts on our ability to tackle NHS waiting lists, social care and to keep the economy moving. Whitehall was worried that we did not have enough hands to get the job done. That turned out to be false. I think there was a problem of people not showing up for work but in actual fact, the labour

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was there. In retrospect, none of this was the result of a conscious decision taken by me or Cabinet. There were mistaken beliefs about effects of Brexit and Covid combined which led officialdom to overcompensate on the migration side. They were worried about the loss of EU workers and post-Covid supply chains and inflation.

146. Finally, I would say that economic hardship is caused directly, overwhelmingly but not exclusively, by government actions – especially the NPIs and lockdowns. It was right to support individuals and businesses get through these restrictions but that too came with an economic cost including the huge debt burden we have today. I have already suggested recommendations to the Chair in other modules. All that remains to add here is to remind those who follow behind, those who may find themselves in the unenviable task of leading the country through a pandemic, to keep the economy in their mind at all times. NPIs and lockdowns may save lives today but economic damage costs lives and livelihoods tomorrow. As I have said in previous statements, the issue that most vexes me is whether the NPIs were, in hindsight, warranted in view of the collateral harms. I very much hope that this Inquiry will be able to offer some concrete plans and models balancing these dangers to assist the governments of the future.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed.. 

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Dated... 28th October 2025.....