

Public Accounts Committee

Oral evidence: Managing cross-border travel during the COVID-19 pandemic, HC 29.

Monday 23 May 2022

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Members present: Dame Meg Hillier (Chair); Shaun Bailey; Peter Grant; Kate Green; Sarah Olney; Nick Smith; James Wild.

Rebecca Sheeran, Executive Director, National Audit Office, and Marius Gallaher, Alternate Treasury Officer of Accounts, were in attendance.

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Managing cross-border travel during the COVID-19 pandemic (HC 1148)

Questions 1 - 154

Witnesses

I: Alex Chisholm, Permanent Secretary, Cabinet Office; Patricia Hayes CB, Second Permanent Secretary, Home Office; Shona Dunn, Second Permanent Secretary, Department of Health and Social Care; Gareth Davies CB, Second Permanent Secretary, Department for Transport; Phil Douglas, Director General, Border Force

Examination of witnesses

Alex Chisholm, Patricia Hayes, Shona Dunn, Gareth Davies and Phil Douglas.

Q1 Chair: Welcome to the Public Accounts Committee on Monday 23 May 2022. Today we are looking at how Government managed the cross-border travel issues during the covid-19 pandemic, which was a responsibility for a number of Government Departments. As we know, the Government introduced different measures at different times at the border to deal with different variants—everything from quarantine to red-listed countries. There were a lot of huge challenges for the travel industry. I want to thank those who have given evidence, which was very interesting—mostly, I have to say, from the airport and airline industries. That has been very helpful as we have thought about our preparations today.

Today, we have a phalanx of senior civil servants to answer on this, and I want to introduce them. We have Alex Chisholm, who is the permanent secretary at the Cabinet Office; Patricia Hayes, the second permanent secretary at the Home Office; Shona Dunn, the second permanent secretary at the Department for Health and Social Care; Gareth Davies, the second permanent secretary at the Department for Transport, and Phil Douglas, the director general for Border Force. For anyone watching, the clue is the uniform.

I should stress that this Gareth Davies is not related to the Gareth Davies who is the Comptroller and Auditor General, but we are very pleased to have Rebecca Sheeran from the National Audit Office here in his place today, so welcome to you as well, Rebecca, as a stand-in witness.

Before we go into the main session, however, we wanted to pick up on some issues. Mr Chisholm, first of all, we have seen a further delay to the introduction of import controls as a result of leaving the EU. Can you tell us what the situation is now and what communication you have been having with businesses about yet another change at short notice?

Alex Chisholm: I would refer the Committee to the written ministerial statement made by the Minister for Brexit Opportunities to the House on this. As he set out in that statement, it is indeed the case that those import controls that were going to be introduced in July are not going to be introduced, and there will be no more this year.

The reasons given at the time were, in part, to save money for British businesses from those transaction costs at the border—an estimate of about £1 billion—and also to take the opportunity to accelerate the move to a better way of managing the border, in particular with the use of new technologies, and also taking a very risk-based approach, so that we had only the controls in place that we needed to have. The Committee will remember from previous evidence that it was, in any case, the plan to move to a new border operating model, and I think that the upshot of this decision is that we will be able to move in one go rather than in two.

Q2 Chair: You talk about saving money there, but a lot of businesses have



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been building up to prepare for this to happen in July, because they have a long lead-in time. Do you have any estimate of what businesses will have had to pay out in advance of this announcement that they were going to be delayed further?

Alex Chisholm: No, I do not have that figure, but I know that, when we were supporting businesses through the ports infrastructure fund, most of the money there was given to be ready for the changes in January, so it would have been spent and very necessary for that. You will remember that that all went smoothly. I know that we gave some additional support for other changes, and we are talking very actively to ports and other parts of the transport industry about the changes that they have made. We are also trying to make sure that any future changes are done with a great level of cost consciousness.

Q3 **Chair:** Is there some big announcement looming about accelerating a move to new technology at the border that we are not aware of, given that we have spent quite a lot of time looking at this? It just seems a very short window to introduce new technology.

Alex Chisholm: The 2025 border strategy was announced last year, and what the Minister said in his statement is that we are going to start to introduce some elements of that from 2023—that is the beginning of the move to the single trade window—and also the creation of the so-called ecosystem of trust. The Government have said that they will publish a new target operating model in the autumn, so that will give additional clarity to Parliament and to the industry.

Q4 **Chair:** We could have a whole session on this alone, as we have had many. I would just observe that we have looked at some of the existing systems that were well worked out and that have already been delayed, like CDS and so on, so there have been real challenges along the way. I would just add a note of scepticism about whether the new technology will be delivered in time, but let us wait and see if my predictions are true.

I just want to turn to Patricia Hayes on the issue of people being removed from this country to Rwanda. Can you update us on how many people you have attempted to remove from this country to Rwanda?

Patricia Hayes: Good afternoon. You had an opportunity to take evidence on this from the permanent secretary last month. I am just going to give you a very brief update, but, for reasons that you will understand, I am not going to go into a great deal of operational detail.

We have now served our first notices of intent on individuals who could potentially be removed to Rwanda. The next step in our process is engagement with the Rwandan Government on the circumstances of those individuals. The Rwandan Government will make decisions and then we will take it from there.

Q5 **Chair:** Can you just be clear: have these people gone through the asylum process in the UK and been refused, or are they people who would qualify for international asylum?



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Patricia Hayes: As you discussed with the permanent secretary last month, these are people who we have categorised as being inadmissible into the UK asylum system, so they are not going through and will not go through the UK asylum system.

Q6 **Chair:** That is a clever form of words: “inadmissible into the UK asylum system”. Is the UK signed up to international asylum law? We are, are we not—the refugee convention?

Patricia Hayes: We are, and we are confident that the new model that we announced as part of our illegal migration package is fully consistent with international law.

Q7 **Chair:** So these people have not gone through the asylum system in the UK. They have been deemed, before they have had a chance to go through that, as not admissible.

Patricia Hayes: That is correct, yes.

Q8 **Chair:** You are being tested in the courts on this at the moment.

Patricia Hayes: We have anticipated legal challenges, yes.

Q9 **Chair:** Can you tell us how many individuals you have categorised in this first tranche?

Patricia Hayes: I am afraid I cannot at the moment. It would be a mistake to give a daily count of what we are doing in implementing this policy.

Q10 **Chair:** You indicated that it was a group of people on who you had decided at one time, so is it going up day by day? Is there a daily count or is this one individual group of people that you have determined at the moment?

Patricia Hayes: I am certainly not going to issue a daily count of the number of people.

Q11 **Chair:** My question was whether this is one group of people that is going up day by day, or is it one group of people that is a set number of people?

Patricia Hayes: As you will have seen, there are people coming into the country every day at the moment. For each of the groups that comes in, we will be taking a view on whether there is anybody within that group who falls into our inadmissibility process, and then, if they do, which of them we are going to put forward to Rwanda as potentially subject to the new policy and arrangements.

Q12 **Chair:** In that inadmissibility process, do they get access to a lawyer or can they make legal representations to prove that they do not qualify under your criteria for inadmissibility?

Patricia Hayes: Individuals who may be considered for being covered by our new agreement with Rwanda will have full access to legal support, yes.

Q13 **Chair:** Is that before the determination about whether they should go to Rwanda or once they have been determined as being people who should be sent to Rwanda, in your view?



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Patricia Hayes: The determination of whether they are inadmissible is something that we do using a policy that predates the migration and economic development partnership with Rwanda. That is longstanding Home Office policy that is not specific to the Rwanda arrangement.

Q14 **Chair:** We could go again on this forever. In terms of numbers, are we talking about a group of single figures, where it is statistically difficult for you to talk about it, or are we talking about it in tens or hundreds?

Patricia Hayes: I am really sorry. I am going to annoy you before we have even really started, but I am not in a position to share numbers today.

Q15 **Chair:** It is just that it is interesting that the Home Secretary was unable to share details in the House on anything to do with numbers, and yet there is a lot of money already being paid up front for this scheme. Do you have a ballpark figure for how many people will be covered by that upfront payment to Rwanda?

Patricia Hayes: I am really sorry. I do not have any other numbers that I can share with you today.

Q16 **Chair:** We may need to pursue the Home Secretary further, but it is disappointing that, for a scheme that is costing the taxpayer, we have no idea of what numbers are currently or may be involved. On the money alone, it does not seem to stack up.

The idea of this scheme was to try to deter people from crossing the channel on small boats. Can you tell us how many people have crossed the channel on small boats and arrived in the UK since the Rwanda scheme was announced?

Phil Douglas: We have seen an uptick in people crossing the channel this year; 8,700 people have arrived since the turn of the year, compared to last year, when we had only 3,112. Since 14 April, which is when the announcement was made, Border Force and Royal Navy officers are working side by side in the Channel and using an enhanced range of military and surveillance assets and extra resource, which is bolstering the operational response both at sea and on land. We have not really seen any impact in terms of the numbers of people who are arriving, because, for the most part, since 14 April, most of the people who have been arriving will have already paid their money and will be coming across. We did not expect to see a big bang anyway, but, certainly, the trend of being almost three times of what we saw last year, which we forecast, is certainly coming true.

Q17 **Chair:** You seem to be implying that you think people will not be paying fees to traffickers, because the Rwanda scheme will mean that they do not think it is worth their while. Is that what you are saying?

Phil Douglas: My understanding is that part of the reasoning for the Rwanda scheme is to break the business model of the traffickers. If people believe that there is a very good chance that they will be sent to Rwanda, they will not be prepared to pay.



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Q18 Chair: Except that we have just heard from Ms Hayes that not everybody is being considered to be sent to Rwanda, so there is a very strong chance that, even if you take the premise of the business model being the reason for doing this, there are a lot of people who will still be able to claim asylum in the UK. Do you agree?

Phil Douglas: That is true, but we expect the Rwanda policy to have an impact once it starts working.

Q19 Chair: You are expecting that. Have you modelled the figures for what impact you think that will have? It will have a major impact on your day-to-day work as head of Border Force, no doubt.

Phil Douglas: It is really difficult to model the figures, because we do not know how—

Chair: But you had predicted that there would be an increase on last year's arrivals, so you have some modelling that you do. I know that, operationally, you will have to do that for all sorts of reasons in terms of everything from shift management to how many patrols you have. Presumably, the weather has an impact.

Phil Douglas: We model on that basis, and we model on the basis of intelligence that we get through about organised crime groups through intelligence partners, but it is really difficult to put a modelling forecast on what we expect to see from the Rwanda policy, because we do not know when it will start to have an impact and when we will be able to return people to Rwanda.

Chair: Or, indeed, if it will start having an impact.

Q20 Nick Smith: Mr Douglas, you say that just over 8,000 have come over the channel since the new year. The announcement took place in mid-April. How many have come over the channel since mid-April?

Phil Douglas: I am afraid that I do not have that number, but I should be able to get that for you.

Q21 Peter Grant: You say you do not know when we should expect to see evidence that the traffickers' business model has been disrupted. How long do we go without it being disrupted before we begin to wonder if this is working at all? How long do we leave it without any visible impact before we start to wonder if the Rwanda scheme has made any difference at all to the number of people signing up to cross the channel in small boats?

Phil Douglas: I do not know the answer to that. We hope that it will have an impact quite quickly, but a lot of it depends on getting those first flights to Rwanda and the very visible fact of people returning to Rwanda and the word getting across to the organised crime groups and migrant communities. How long that will take I do not know.

Q22 Peter Grant: I would have thought that, for the amount of money it is costing and the potential cost of legal cases, we would have had something more than "we hope" that is going to start to make a difference. Do we give up if it does not make a difference after a month, six months, a year



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or 10 years?

Phil Douglas: We expect to be legally challenged and we never expected it to be easy. We will pursue this policy for several months before we decide to review and think about what else we might do.

Patricia Hayes: Apologies for breaking in, but just coming back to the policy rationale behind the Rwanda policy, as you discussed with the permanent secretary last month, in his exchange of letters with the Home Secretary, we have been clear that this is an innovative and novel policy. Part of it being innovative and novel makes it very difficult to predict up front exactly what the impact will be and over what timescale, but it is something that we are monitoring really closely and we would be very happy to come back to the Committee later on with some further evidence, once it is bedded in a little bit.

Q23 **Chair:** Can we push you on that and just ask for a quarterly update on numbers and where things are at in the system?

Patricia Hayes: Let me take that away and give you some proper advice on what we can share. Some of this will be constrained by the nature of our relationship with the Rwandan Government, but I will do my best.

Q24 **Chair:** Can I just be clear? You have not appeared in front of us before, but you are here in lieu of the accounting officer, and we are a Committee that deals in numbers and in taxpayers' money. We are disappointed to hear that you cannot talk about numbers. Can you just be clear why you feel you cannot talk about numbers today? Is it because they are too small and therefore it is identifying people? What is the reason?

Patricia Hayes: I am absolutely happy to share any numbers that we can with you, consistent with the obligations that we have entered into with the Rwandan Government.

Q25 **Chair:** Can you just be really clear on what those obligations are with the Rwandan Government that are preventing you sharing with the UK Parliament figures about people who are in a system that is funded by taxpayers' money?

Patricia Hayes: Let me take away your very fair challenge and come back to you with a proposal of what we might be able to share with you on a quarterly basis.

Q26 **Chair:** It seems that this relationship with the Rwandan Government is trumping transparency to the British taxpayer, because you cannot tell us any numbers today.

Patricia Hayes: I cannot, no.

Q27 **Chair:** Is that because it is not your paygrade? I do not mean that pejoratively, but I still really am puzzled as to why you cannot share numbers with us.

Patricia Hayes: Let me come back to you with a proposal of what we can share with you on a quarterly basis, but we have, in good faith, entered



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into a Government-to-Government relationship with the Rwandan Government, which includes some controls on what we can and cannot share by way of management information and numbers. Let me give you a proper answer to your question.

Chair: I am just quite staggered that we cannot get that here.

Q28 **Nick Smith:** Ms Hayes, given that you cannot give us any numbers, can you confirm or deny whether the permanent secretary sought a direction to take forward this policy?

Patricia Hayes: As set out in the Permanent Secretary's exchange of letters with the Home Secretary, the Permanent Secretary did seek a direction on value for money grounds, given the experimental and novel nature of the policy that we are pursuing.

Q29 **Chair:** Do you have evaluation plans in place for this?

Patricia Hayes: We do have evaluation plans in place.

Q30 **Chair:** Are you able to share those with us, even on a private basis?

Patricia Hayes: Let me wrap that up with the answer to your question about quarterly data.

Q31 **Chair:** It is just extraordinary to be at the Public Accounts Committee. It is not the main subject of our discussion today, but, from what we have heard, it is likely to be in the fairly near future. We need numbers, money, evaluation and modelling, and none of that is available. Either you do not have it or, for some reason, you are unable to share it with us, and we take a dim view of public servants who are unable to share with us those facts and figures. Although it is not the main subject of discussion today, it is very important and we will come back to you firmly on this matter.

Phil Douglas: If I may, on the figure that the gentleman asked me for before, we have had just over 3,400 migrants arrive from 14 April to 18 May.

Q32 **Chair:** That is a 3,400 subset of the 8,700 who you mentioned earlier from the beginning of the year?

Phil Douglas: That is correct.

Chair: That is quite a lot. It is stacked towards this last month, which is quite considerable.

Phil Douglas: Yes, with the weather.

Chair: Without numbers, we cannot really work out what the deterrence might be, but let us park that for now, although we will be coming back to it.

Q33 **Sarah Olney:** Ms Hayes, in terms of the Ukrainian refugee schemes, people across my constituency have been very generous in opening their homes. However, we are noticing a real difference between those who are accepting refugees under the homes for Ukraine scheme and those who are accepting them under the family scheme.



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There is a real concern particularly about the family scheme, where we have lots of family members coming over and living with their families in this country in really unsuitable accommodation. The support for those host families does not seem to be there. It is very difficult for local authorities to manage. I wonder if the Home Office has any plans to increase its support to local authorities, where there are refugees under the family scheme and where that is causing issues. Homelessness and overcrowding are the particular issues we are seeing in my constituency.

Patricia Hayes: Just before I answer that question, I would be pleased to give you a very brief update on the numbers, if that would be of interest to the Committee, because this has been a topic of great interest over the last few months.

As of 17 May, we had received a total of 128,000 applications for visas under the family scheme and the sponsorship scheme, of which about 44,000 were under the family scheme and 84,000 under the sponsorship scheme. As of 17 May, we had issued a total of 107,000 visas across the two schemes, of which just short of 39,000 were under the family scheme and just short of 69,000 under the sponsorship scheme.

You will see from those numbers that the sponsorship scheme is now running well ahead of the family scheme as the vehicle that people are using to come to the UK. It is very cheering, given some of the practical challenges that we faced at the beginning of this scheme, to see that we have nearly 54,000 people now in the country.

I completely recognise the picture that you are painting of the impact on local authorities, which is why we set up the joint team that we have across the Home Office and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, run by a dedicated second permanent secretary, which is working really hard with local authorities to make sure that we are bringing together the Home Office elements of the scheme, which are around the granting of visas and the permission to come into the country, and the DLUHC side of the scheme, which is around making sure that we have good data flows on who is going where, that we are ready for education and that we are giving whatever support we can on employment. That dedicated team is trying very hard to deal with the practical issues that you are raising.

Q34 **Kate Green:** Where you have, in relation to the sponsorship scheme specifically, information that needs to be gathered to make a decision before a family can be admitted to the country and placed with a host family, there are still delays, as I understand it, in some of those assessments being made. Is there any information about where those delays might be concentrated? Is it in local authority safety checks? Is it in Home Office processing? Is there any pattern that you can discern?

Patricia Hayes: As with any new scheme, it took us a while to bed down our new systems and processes. At the moment, we have reached what my operational colleagues describe to me as frictional levels of service across the sponsorship scheme, which means that we are putting out as



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many decisions as we are getting applications in, so the turnaround period has really got a lot faster.

There are important checks that need to be carried out before people can be given permission to come to the UK, of which probably the most significant are the local government safeguarding checks, because it is really important for the sponsorship scheme that we know that the place that people are going to is safe and does not hold any safeguarding risks. Overall, the turnaround period is now meeting the goals that we set for it and we are happy with the way that it is working.

Q35 Kate Green: What happens if a host arrangement breaks down, not so much in terms of the local authority having to find a safe place to look after the refugees, but in terms of their admission status to the country and how the Home Office will treat that?

Patricia Hayes: The people coming in through both the sponsorship scheme and the family scheme have three years' leave to remain, and that is not connected in any way to the sponsorship arrangement.

Q36 Kate Green: What happens at the end of three years? Is there an intention around that yet?

Patricia Hayes: Not yet. We will have to see how things evolve in Ukraine. People are coming from Ukraine for a range of reasons. Some people are coming here to settle and build a new life. Others are coming here to stay in a safe space while they see what is going on with the rest of their families. We will just have to see as the situation evolves.

Q37 Chair: While the Home Office is busy supporting Ukrainian, Afghan and Syrian refugees, there is a very big backlog in your main immigration caseload, which has increased significantly in the last couple of years. A number of us are constituency MPs who see this very markedly. Have you taken people off the normal immigration caseload to put them on these schemes for the countries that have had particular issues right now? Is that the reason for this increasing backlog?

Patricia Hayes: Chair, can I just answer your question by dividing into two parts?

Chair: It might be okay; let us see.

Patricia Hayes: I will try. The backlog that I think you are talking about is the asylum casework backlog of dealing with asylum cases, where we have had some real challenges because of the sheer numbers of people who came into the country.

Q38 Chair: These are not just asylum cases. These are people seeking leave to remain through various routes.

Patricia Hayes: On asylum, because of the scale of the backlog that we face and because of the cost that we incur when people are in our system for longer than they need to be, we have made a conscious choice not to take people resource off the asylum system and move it into the Ukraine and Afghanistan work.



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However, for some of our other immigration work and visa routes—our marriage, work and visit routes—we have had to prioritise the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine and have temporarily taken people off some of those routes and moved them into more urgent Ukrainian casework.

We have done our best to be completely transparent with the public about the impact that that is going to have on turnaround times. We publish data on gov.uk about how long it is going to take to get a work, study or family visa, but it was the right thing to do temporarily.

Q39 **Chair:** Can I just be clear? You published that data. You are still saying it is three weeks, are you, for a student visa, for example? Is it still three weeks for a student visa? You are missing it.

Patricia Hayes: I am sorry, but I cannot remember what the latest data is that we put in.

Q40 **Chair:** Let me just give you the latest case that has come across my desk. At my surgery this very morning, somebody who had applied from Nigeria and got a legitimate place at a university in the UK to study at Bradford was waiting for a visa. They chased, but it did not come; they chased, but it did not come. It was late. The visa was eventually issued four days after the deadline for her university to accept her on the course at the time of start.

She travelled with her dependant, and she was pregnant as well, thinking that it would all be fine. The university would not accept her until September, so she has had to apply for a further visa, because the entry requirements mean that she has to leave the country on Wednesday. Add to that complication that her baby does not have a birth certificate or a passport yet, because it is a month old.

She is now stuck in limbo. If she stays beyond Wednesday, she will then be refused by your very visa system that was the reason for the delay in the first place. That is the Kafkaesque world that many of our constituents are living in. I could give you another 20 examples off the top of my head like that, but that was just the most recent this morning.

Patricia Hayes: That sounds like an awful situation and an awful story, and I am really happy to pick that up individually. Generally, we had to set up two new visa schemes from scratch in a matter of weeks, and the only way in which we could do that was to bring over some of our teams who were good at visas and knew how to run a visa scheme. Given the fact that we have managed to do more than 100,000 visas for Ukraine faster than we have ever done any visa scheme before, we would not have been able to do that without putting a bit of extra time into our other visa schemes.

We have had tremendous support, I have to say, from other Government Departments and other parts of the civil service. We have had surge teams coming in to support us from DWP and HMRC, and I know the Home Secretary leaves me in no doubt that we need to get back to normal service standards on our other visa routes as soon as we possibly can.

Q41 **Chair:** This is affecting not just people's lives, but our university sector. It



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is affecting people who cannot contribute properly because they are waiting in limbo for even longer. I would very happily welcome you, if you would like to visit anonymously, to my surgery to see for yourself what happens on the ground. The impact of these missed deadlines can be devastating for people, so I will certainly raise that individual case with you. I will breach my rule as Chair never to raise individual cases, because it is an egregious example. You have admitted today that the other schemes have meant that there has been a detrimental impact on those immigration schemes.

Patricia Hayes: I have to say that that is not news. We have been publishing this information on gov.uk.

Chair: We know about the backlogs, but it is best to be clear. Thank you for that.

Q42 **Peter Grant:** Mr Chisholm, in the February Treasury minute, you give your Department's response to a report on implementing digital change. Last week, we saw the reports about a proposed 90,000 reduction in the number of civil servants, a lot of which we are told will be made possible by the use of new technology. How much of that new technology will be incremental changes or improvements to existing systems, and how much will rely on complete transformational change within IT systems?

Alex Chisholm: It is a good question and one that I would be keen to find the answer to, because the Cabinet has asked for secretaries of state and permanent secretaries to come forward with their plans over the next five weeks for how they are going to achieve the 2016 targets that you referred to. Certainly, within that, the use of digital technology, including switching to digital channels, the use of automation and better use of data for targeting of services will all be an important part of the overall plan, but I cannot yet anticipate what proportion it will form.

Q43 **Peter Grant:** How was that 90,000 arrived at, if the Cabinet Secretary does not know how we are going to manage even the technology challenges of it, never mind all the other challenges? Who decided that 90,000 was achievable, if the head of the civil service cannot give us information on such a basic part of that achievement?

Alex Chisholm: The Prime Minister and the Cabinet set the target and have asked for us to come forward with plans on how best to achieve it. That is the sequence that we are following.

Q44 **Peter Grant:** In the Treasury minute that I referred to, in response to one of the recommendations, which was that the Cabinet Office and Departments should introduce a structured way of deciding whether the changes you are making represent incremental improvements or transformational redesign of business processes, which is what I have been speaking about, is it still your intention, as indicated in the Treasury minute, to have that in place by the end of December 2022?

Alex Chisholm: I would expect so, yes.

Q45 **Peter Grant:** Do you need to bring that forward in order to get moving on



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the target reduction of 90,000 headcount?

Alex Chisholm: I have to think about that.

- Q46 **Sarah Olney:** Ms Hayes, I have over 50 constituents waiting for their passports. They need them for job offers, weddings, funerals and study. This is getting really critical. Can you tell us what the outstanding backlog is? We read reports over the weekend that it is something like 500,000. What is the plan to fix it and when will my constituents get their passports?

Patricia Hayes: We are issuing more passports, more quickly, with more people than we ever have before, but I absolutely recognise the challenges that are faced by your constituents and other individuals who are uncertain about when they are going to get their passports. This morning we have launched a new campaign to make sure that people are very aware to allow up to 10 weeks to get their passports and have the best advice they can on how to make their passport application successful, which includes the way in which they fill in the form and the quality of the photograph.

We are putting more resource into passports than we have ever had before. We are in the process of putting an extra 700 people into the passport issuing team, and the vast majority of passport applications that are coming through are doing so well within the 10-week period. My advice is, as per our advertising campaign today to people, to get their applications in as soon as they can, get a good-quality photograph and be really careful filling in the form. Almost everybody will get their passport back within 10 weeks.

- Q47 **Sarah Olney:** Is it 500,000? Are the press reports correct that that is how many outstanding applications there are?

Patricia Hayes: I am afraid that I do not have a figure for the backlog and the work in progress at the moment, but we issued a million passports last month. If you think about the fact that, over a typical year, we would do 7 million a year, you can see what the scale of the challenge is.

Chair: In ballpark terms, is that 500,000—

Patricia Hayes: I would not want to—

Chair: Perhaps you could write to us with the figures.

Patricia Hayes: Of course, yes.

- Q48 **Nick Smith:** Ms Hayes, in the last few weeks, I have put in about 10 PQs. I had an urgent question about Passport Office delays. Certainly, the first four or five of my parliamentary questions were unanswered and you said that you needed more time on it. Can I please emphasise the importance of letting us know how big the backlog is? We are getting lots of constituents coming to us now and it is important that we have some confidence that you can continue the good performance, which you say you have met so far.

Fast-track applications were up 30% this year so far since November, and you say in an answer that I got today that they are going to go up a further



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20% over the next six months. That means that people are willing to pay double what they normally would to get their passport returned. Is the estimate of 20% fair in terms of these fast-track applications? If you are doing double the amount of passport applications this year compared to last—and although you have 700 staff, we are told in the media that your morale is really low and the technology is creaking—is it not likely that there are going to be many more fast-track applications, given the delays that we have seen already?

Patricia Hayes: We are launching the campaign today, encouraging people to apply well in advance and building confidence that most people will be receiving their passport within the 10 weeks that we have set. If that is a successful campaign, it will be less necessary for people to feel that they have to use the fast track. The more that we can get that message out that, if people apply in time, we have a 10-week turnaround for almost all the cases that are coming through, that would be a much better place than people feeling they have to go down the fast-track process in large numbers.

Q49 **Nick Smith:** We have just heard about the civil service headcount that you are supposed to be cutting in the year ahead. Is that realistic in the passport side of the Home Office, given the number of applications that you are likely to get and the massive backlog that you presently have? There is no way that you are going to be able to make those headcount cuts, is there?

Patricia Hayes: Thank you for giving me the opportunity, because I failed to answer part of your original question, which is related to what you just said. You were asking me about morale in the Passport Office. One of the last times that I was in the room with the group of people sitting at this table was when I was able to award the staff who work in the Passport Office—

Chair: I do not think that anyone doubts—and I used to be the passports Minister—that passport staff work incredibly hard and incredibly well, and do some quite dangerous work in some cases. We are really focusing on the numbers, Ms Hayes. Mr Smith may have acknowledged the morale issue, but can we just focus on the numbers?

Patricia Hayes: Can I just very briefly mention the civil service's award-winning digital application, because it is very relevant to your question around whether we are confident that HMPO can innovate and can do best of digital technology, which is one of the ways in which we all need to modernise our workforce between now and 2025.

Chair: That is not answering the question on the numbers. What will that deliver in terms of staff?

Patricia Hayes: Like every other Department, we have a serious and important piece of work to do over the next few weeks to develop a workforce plan to meet the challenge that has been laid down by the Prime Minister.

Q50 **Nick Smith:** You have just put on 700 staff in the Passport Office. How



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many of those are you going to have to lay off in the autumn?

Patricia Hayes: The challenge that we are facing in passports is a surge challenge. This is driven directly by the fact that, during covid in 2020 and 2021, we saw passport demand massively suppressed, because people were not able to travel and were not, therefore, in the market for passports. What we need to do this very minute is to make sure that we have the resources in place to deal with that backlog and then, hopefully, we will move into a more manageable steady state after that.

Q51 **Chair:** This is entirely predictable. In 2009, we had the banking crash. I was the passports Minister and I saw the metrics. We could see that there was a dip. We did the analysis that there would likely be an increasing demand, which then did materialise in around 2011, when I was no longer there, so I was not able to deal with the problem that we had predicted, but we predicted it.

It was, surely, predictable that there would be a dip in demand because of covid and there would, therefore, be an increase. The Passport Office was always very good at managing surges, as you have highlighted, so why were you so woefully underprepared once travel restrictions were lifted? We are discussing travel restrictions today, and you are one of the key Departments responsible for implementing travel restrictions, so why were you so underprepared?

Patricia Hayes: I would not accept the characterisation of our performance as woeful. The numbers that I quoted earlier on about the pace at which we scaled up the—

Chair: There are two ways of looking at this, Ms Hayes. I am sure that the staff are working their socks off to do this, and they are working very hard, but for those people trying to receive their passports, it is woeful if you miss your holiday, a wedding or a funeral because you cannot get the passport issued in time, especially now that you have to have more than six months on a passport; again, that is something that was surely modelled in the Home Office.

Patricia Hayes: Our performance, even with the extremely high demand that we have, compares pretty favourably with most international comparators. The 10-week turnaround that we publish is what we are meeting in almost all cases. My key message today to people is that, if they plan well enough in advance, they will get that level of service, which compares well with what they will see elsewhere in the world.

Q52 **Nick Smith:** The satisfaction rate from your customers, for which your target is 90%, is just over 60% at the moment. You are failing your customers at the moment by not hitting your own targets.

Patricia Hayes: We really care about that. We want to give the best service that we can to as many people as we can, which is partly why we are launching this campaign to help people help themselves.

Q53 **Chair:** Can I just go back to a figure that you raised earlier about you dealing with a million last month?



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Patricia Hayes: About a million a month.

Chair: We know that, in the summer, there is always more demand for passports. The numbers go up, you bring in your surge teams, and there are temporary staff to deal with that. There will have been periods in a normal year where you had a million a month, I am sure, because that 7 million that is typical was not evenly spread throughout the year. It was much quieter in the winter months.

Patricia Hayes: Because it is May now, we are just hitting the period where, in a typical year, we would have seen the biggest numbers coming in.

Q54 **Chair:** So you are not unused to dealing with a million applicants a month, and you could have seen this coming and made sure that you had the resources in place to deal with this.

Patricia Hayes: By the end of this year, we will have done more passports, by some way, than we would ever have done in any other year.

Q55 **Chair:** But the point is that it is the ebb and flow, is it not? If you have a million as your peak, there will have been points in the past in a normal year where you hit a million a month, I am sure. I cannot remember the figures, but it would not be uncommon. With 7 million, it is not spread evenly across the year, is it?

Patricia Hayes: We have done our busiest ever month. The month we have just done is more than we would have done even in the peak month of any previous year.

Chair: The publicity will fuel people applying earlier than they may need to, because they are terribly worried that they will not get their passport. Poor performance breeds interesting and quite natural behaviour by consumers, so that will have contributed, no doubt, to the increase as well.

Patricia Hayes: The deal that we are trying to offer consumers today in our new campaign is that, if people apply up to 10 weeks before they need to travel, in almost every case they will get a passport in time.

Chair: I am just thinking that we are in mid-May. For people going away at the beginning of the school holidays, it is already too late.

Q56 **Nick Smith:** The turnaround time for passport applications used to be three weeks and it has now gone up to 10 weeks. When do you think it will come back down to three weeks?

Patricia Hayes: I am afraid that I am not going to offer you a date today. That would not be very sensible. I am happy to provide the Committee with our most recent projections of the number of passports that we are going to be able to issue over the next few months and when we think we will hit that point that I talked about of having managed the surge that we need to catch up on applications in 2020 and 2021 and to get more into a steady state. I am really happy to come back to the Committee with a bit more of a projection.



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Q57 **Chair:** At a time when you have immigration teams stretched to deal with new visa regimes and additional passports, it is a perfect storm in the Home Office, is it not, at a point where you are going to have to lose 20% of civil servants as well? How are you going to manage?

Patricia Hayes: We have a serious and important piece of work to do.

Q58 **Chair:** Ms Hayes, you have been very well prepared by someone with very good stock lines.

Patricia Hayes: Flattered, Chair.

Chair: That was not meant as a compliment, but probably in the civil service it is received as such. There we go, but we are very concerned about these issues because this is people's lives in the middle of it, whether it is their visa, their leave to remain or their passport. At the moment, our constituents are getting a very poor service.

Patricia Hayes: That is understood, Chair.

Chair: You acknowledge that. Thank you.

Q59 **James Wild:** Ms Dunn, continuing the theme of delays, I want to ask about the Department's selection process for the eight new hospital schemes that it committed to last July. The Queen Elizabeth Hospital in King's Lynn, in my constituency, is the most propped up hospital in the country, with 1,500 timber and steel supports holding up its cracking concrete roof. The long list was originally due in the autumn, then early this year, and then it was expected very soon after the May local elections. There is a lot of frustration from my constituents and from me. When can the Queen Elizabeth Hospital expect to hear whether its bid has been successful?

Shona Dunn: I understand your constituents' frustration. We have discussed this before. We are still hoping to come out with the next stage in the process before the summer recess. I am conscious of the fact that there is a particular issue in the hospital that you refer to. I know that some funding has been provided to ensure that it continues to be safe for the time being, but it is a priority that we get through to the next stage of the eight, and we will endeavour to do that as soon as possible.

Q60 **James Wild:** Are you able to give a bit more certainty? Will that be next month?

Shona Dunn: I am not able to give you a date. Believe me, it is a priority. We are keen to move on to the next stage—as keen as you are—and we will get an announcement out as soon as we are able.

James Wild: If you can under underline the urgency of the situation in my hospital and the keenness to move forward, I would be grateful.

Chair: We represent our own constituents, but we are all now feeling utter sympathy for Mr Wild's constituents and their falling-down hospital. It is saying something if MPs are sympathetic to another MP's constituency, but thank you very much for that, Mr Wild. No more special pleading on hospitals today, but Mr Wild's constituents definitely deserve that at the



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moment.

Can I now move on to, finally, the main session on managing cross-border control during the covid-19 pandemic? I am going to ask Sarah Olney to kick off.

- Q61 **Sarah Olney:** Mr Chisholm, we first had covid on our shores from late January/early February 2020, but it took until February 2021 to introduce travel restrictions. What was the point of introducing them at that stage?

Alex Chisholm: First of all, the Government's paramount objectives the whole way through the process were very much around protecting public health. There were then secondary objectives around economic growth and growth of tourism and international travel. It was in the previous summer that the passenger locator form was introduced. It was introduced on a digital basis in June of the previous year.

The intention behind all these controls, as always, was to limit the spread of the disease and to slow it down. Over the course of the last year, particularly focusing on variants of concern, which were being monitored and tracked in other countries, and where we saw the need to try to prevent those coming into the country and spreading and infecting other people, those protections were introduced.

- Q62 **Sarah Olney:** But what were you trying to achieve in introducing the travel restrictions and the red/amber/green list that came in in February 2021? What was the point of doing that at that stage?

Alex Chisholm: The purpose of that in particular was that there had been a lot of work, which was led by my colleague here, Gareth Davies, working with the global travel industry, about how to introduce a scheme that would be well understood by the public, proportionate and targeted, taking the best available data from international sources about the incidence of variants of concern. That was then used to identify which countries were green, which were amber and which were red, and the signalling of that was then introduced for different levels of testing.

- Q63 **Sarah Olney:** Was the point to try to stop those variants of concern coming into the UK?

Alex Chisholm: My understanding is that the public health authorities have always maintained that it is impossible to absolutely prohibit the introduction of variants of concern, but to limit their introduction and to slow down their spread particularly while the vaccine and the booster programme were being rolled out.

- Q64 **Sarah Olney:** How do you know whether the measures were effective?

Alex Chisholm: That is, indeed, one of the challenges of the overall covid response, and we have been before this Committee on covid-related issues on a number of occasions. It is difficult to isolate the effects of one of a number of interventions from the other ones, in particular when there are also changes in people's behaviour happening at the same time.



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When we have tried to compute this—and I was discussing this with my colleague before coming in—the hardest fact that we have been able to get is that there are 12,000 cases of people who tested positive in the managed quarantine service who had come from red-listed countries. That is a measure of the impact. Red-listed countries were those where there were identified variants of concern, and those people who tested positive were not all the people within the managed quarantine service. That is a lot of people who would have been going out across the UK, infecting other people and spreading these variants of concern, which the public was protected from, due to the managed quarantine service.

The total number of people over the preceding year who were not able to come into the country or were subject to testing is much larger, but that is a hard fact about people from that particular MQS.

Q65 Sarah Olney: Is that a success? Is that what you were hoping to achieve?

Alex Chisholm: The success here around protecting public health has been that the border has continued to function, which is good. From the periods that the protections were introduced, we were able to make sure that the additional impact of people coming in from abroad with infections—and particularly infections that were concerning us—seems to have been controlled. The overall objective has always been to make sure that the—

Sarah Olney: “Seems to have been”.

Alex Chisholm: Yes, indeed, because I am trying to be statistically transparent in the sense that it is not possible for us to say that this was a unique impact of the border travel restrictions, but the general view from the public health authorities, who I defer to, is that it has been important in trying to slow down the spread of infections.

Q66 Sarah Olney: Why did you not track the cost of the overall cross-border travel measures?

Alex Chisholm: From the title of the NAO’s excellent Report, “Managing cross-border travel during the COVID-19 pandemic”, it sounds like a programme, but it is a group and portfolio of programmes. There are seven different ones, because there is the public health advice, border checks operated by the Home Office, testing, the work with the travel industry, the exemptions policy, travel advice from the FCDO, and some managed quarantine service, as I have mentioned. All of those are different parts of the overall solution for being able to manage travel in the context of covid at this time. Individual Departments and their public bodies tracked their own expenditure against that.

Q67 Sarah Olney: Why was it not one single programme? If there was one objective of trying to slow down the spread, why was it not managed as a central Government programme across these different Departments with one risk register?

Alex Chisholm: There was central Government co-ordination, and the covid taskforce did monitor these alongside about 40 other major programmes happening at the same time. They would all be interlinking



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with each other. For example, I mentioned here that testing is a very core component of this programme, but it is very important to lots of other things that we are doing at the same time.

Similarly, I mentioned the travel advice that the Foreign Office was giving, but the Foreign Office has to give lots of other advice at the same time, so you are using different components of the solution in order to bring about an acceptable result in the face of what was both a changing background in terms of the spread of the disease within the UK and the success of our vaccination programme and so on, but also the intelligence, detection and identification of these new variants of concern internationally.

Q68 Sarah Olney: You spoke at the beginning about how you needed to make sure that the border continued functioning and that you wanted to support economic activity. If you are not managing all of the cross-border travel restrictions as a single programme, how can you balance the extent to which those restrictions are suppressing economic activity?

Alex Chisholm: They were managed as separate programmes, but the decision making, which was co-ordinated by the Cabinet Office in the way described by the NAO in its Report, did allow for a balancing between those different factors. Clearly, economic recovery and the health of the travel sector were very important objectives in themselves. In a way, I would describe the overall strategy for this whole period as being, "So long as we can protect public health, we want have as much freedom on the other counts as we can." Where public health became endangered—omicron would be one of those moments where it was necessary to increase the level of restriction—those restrictions were put in place, because that was the paramount objective.

Q69 Sarah Olney: We have sought evidence from some of the airports impacted, and much of what they have provided in evidence supports some of the findings of the NAO Report. Some of them have mentioned that they commissioned their own evaluation of the measures, and I wondered if you had seen that or if they had shared that with you.

Alex Chisholm: Not personally, but it is possible that my colleague here, Gareth Davies from the Department for Transport, may have.

Sarah Olney: You have been doing all the talking. I beg your pardon.

Gareth Davies: We worked closely with the airlines and the airports over the period of the pandemic, as you can imagine, right from the start, back in March 2020. A number of airports commissioned Oxera to look at the impact of the measures. We and my analysts worked closely with them to understand the structure of the model. The underlying issue is, in many ways, at the heart of what Alex Chisholm was saying about the problem of unpicking individual measures from the overall position, because the impact of and the risk presented by travel is not just a function of the border; it is also a function of the level of domestic controls at the same time.



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Also, all of the modelling that was done by Oxera, which I thought was a very good piece of simulation modelling, focused only on infection rates and potential for infections in the UK. It was not able to look at the risk from potential variants of concern. If you look back over the two-year period of the pandemic, our concerns shifted over time. Pre-vaccine roll-out, it was mainly around potential numbers of people coming into the country and risk from infections. At the later stages, it was around protecting the vaccine roll-out. Then through 2021, it was more about variants of concern.

Although the modelling was a very good piece of work, given the fundamental constraints of the environment that we were operating in, in terms of looking at prevalence, it was not able to effectively model the issue around variants of concern, and so, ultimately, it became a judgment decision for Ministers balancing the issues of public health advice with keeping the border open.

Q70 Sarah Olney: Ms Dunn, the programmes were set up quite hurriedly. Once they had decided that they wanted a quarantine service in January, it was then set up quite hurriedly and ready on 15 February 2021. Was there no pre-planning or anticipation prior to that that some sort of quarantine service would be required at the border?

Shona Dunn: You are quite right that the period of time between the decision to set such a service up and the launching of it was a very short period of time indeed. The full range of potential measures and controls at the border had been debated and discussed quite openly in public for quite some time. As Mr Chisholm and Mr Davies said, there had been, at various points, a shift in focus and a change in need in terms of what we did.

Although it certainly is not the case that there had been, months before, an MQS plan devised, it was there as an option, but the planning and the delivery really did take place over that period of time.

Sarah Olney: But you had not anticipated prior to that that you would need to put something in place.

Shona Dunn: As I say, at the time, there were so many variables and moving parts, and the judgments that were being made were being made in a very real-time way as the variables and factors changed. It was there as part of the range of things that could potentially be deployed. It was not the case that it had been prepared in advance, ready to be rolled out. We were making judgments based on changing factors as we went along.

Q71 Sarah Olney: Why was it finally implemented in February 2021? Why then and why not earlier?

Shona Dunn: As Mr Chisholm and Mr Davies both said, the key factors at that point in time were around growing concern around variants of concern that could be vaccine-evading. This was at a time when we were relatively early in the vaccine roll-out programme and where we had gone into the third lockdown.



We were looking ahead and anticipating, potentially in the spring, a road map out of that and wanting to make sure that we were in a position to protect the gains that had been achieved through that in the country, but in a way, as Mr Davies says, that was properly targeted, such that you had the most stringent controls with respect to those countries that posed the highest risk. It met the requirements of the time, and those requirements were certainly different than they had been earlier in the pandemic.

Q72 Sarah Olney: Can I just ask a bit about those risk factors? I have a lot of travel companies in my constituency, given its proximity to Heathrow. A lot of complaints from my constituents were that they could not understand why countries were red, amber or green. There was a real lack of transparency around the particular criteria. Can I just ask you, Mr Davies, why that was? Why could it not have been clearer, for the purposes of planning, for individuals who might have been needing to travel, for travel companies such as my constituents, and for the wider economy?

The data was available. There was a lot of good international data on the progress of the virus in many overseas countries. It should have been possible for people to match up the good-quality, real-time data that they were seeing coming out of different countries with the instructions that they were getting from the DFT and Government Departments about which countries were in which category. Why was it not clearer?

Gareth Davies: I spent a lot of time talking to the aviation sector as well about this issue, because, ideally, you would want a system that is as transparent and predictable as possible. There are a couple of things that I would touch on.

One—the underlying situation was very volatile. We moved from a concern around prevalence at the early stages to variants of concern. A lot of the data we used to inform the decision about which countries fell in which categories of the traffic light system was produced by the Joint Biosecurity Centre, which pulled together a range of public sources. As you say, a lot of this was publicly available, and we highlighted which public data we were using as part of that assessment, which then went to Ministers.

There were issues around prevalence levels in the country, levels of vaccination in the country, variants of concern, assurances around the data and levels of testing, because we needed to be sure about the levels of testing and the accuracy of the data coming through. However, this was not an automatic black box process, because, if you could just have a simple model where you, essentially, put data in and get a result out, that would exclude the role that the public health officials played to provide advice to Ministers.

Also, there was a role of private information that we received confidentially from other Governments around the state of levels of infection in those countries. This was not an automatic process. What the JBC—the Joint Biosecurity Centre—was able to do is, on a three-weekly cycle, produce data around the risk profile in each country. That, together with public



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health advice, went to Ministers through the Covid-O process, and they were then able to make a decision around the ranking.

Q73 Sarah Olney: Was it not possible to share some of that risk evaluation more broadly, just so that at least people could understand? If they thought they would want to be traveling in six weeks' time, they would get a general idea that infections were going up in their destination country, and so it was probably not going to be possible.

Gareth Davies: All the public data was shared at the time. The issue we faced was that, whilst we shared all that data, you were not able, as a member of the public or even internally, to go from the publicly produced data to what the outputs may be, because there may be other factors at play. For example, although the data may be trending in the right way in your destination country, if we had reduced confidence around the testing regime or we had private information around emerging variants of concern, the public data would point one way and the judgment based on the recommendations of public health officials would point in the opposite direction.

That was why we were not able to make it, unfortunately, something that was more easily interpretable or predictable in public, and we had to constantly get this balance right between what I see as the need for clarity, transparency and certainty on the one hand, and having a more tailored and timely system on the other. We had to constantly adapt according to how the situation was developing in over 200 countries on a three-weekly basis, assessed by the JBC.

Q74 Sarah Olney: As far as the quarantine rules were concerned, there was a survey in July 2021 that showed that about two in five respondents either misunderstood or were unsure of the quarantine requirements. Ms Dunn, why were the rules so complicated?

Shona Dunn: It is entirely fair to point out, because it is a fact, that the rules framework that was used changed on a number of occasions during that period of time, and so, inevitably, that was quite a challenging context to manage. The reason why the rules and the framework that we were deploying changed on a number of occasions during that period of time was because the context and the circumstances that we were dealing with changed.

At various points during the pandemic, the Government responded in as agile a way as they possibly could to those changing circumstances, always with an eye to prioritising the best public health outcome. As you say, that is always a challenging thing to balance with a very simple and consistent message, which, in communications terms, is always what we would prefer to be able to offer.

The materials that went on gov.uk and the efforts that were gone to in order to make sure that, where rules were changing, we were being as transparent about those as possible, as quickly as possible, were very high on our list of priorities, but I fully accept that the number of changes that



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we had to make made it difficult to make sure that those messages got across to everyone.

That is a lesson for the various programmes that made up the overall programme. I cannot say hand on heart that, if we were faced with the same circumstances and the need for an agile response again, there would not still be some difficulty in making sure we got those messages across, but we would certainly do our utmost to do so.

Q75 Sarah Olney: Was there a risk that making the process complicated undermined the objectives, in as much as, because people did not understand the rules for quarantine and why the rules were there, they did not follow them and, therefore, undermined the public health objective?

Shona Dunn: That could potentially have been the case, but coming back to the point that Mr Chisholm made, in the same way that it is extremely difficult to disaggregate the impact of the different measures in the suite of measures, it is also extremely difficult to disaggregate the different things that will have influenced the degree to which people were able to comply or otherwise at any particular point in time.

A great deal of effort was put into communicating the requirements as clearly, simply and consistently as possible, consistent with rapid change as the circumstances changed. We have had this discussion in the context of a number of components of the response to the pandemic and, as we have said on some occasions previously to this Committee, we had to make a choice between making the change quickly when circumstances changed in order to drive the best possible public health outcome, or following other best practice that you might normally apply around, for example, communications.

We always felt it was better to be transparent, fast and agile. We certainly did not consciously do anything that we thought would deliberately undermine people's ability to respond to that, but it is very hard to disaggregate those different parts and be certain of that.

Q76 Sarah Olney: You have mentioned lots of different rule and guidance changes throughout that time, but there was a lot of responsibility placed on the travel and aviation sector to implement those rule changes. Mr Davies, were transport carriers and other organisations involved given enough notice of the changes that they were being required to make? Was there a risk that that meant the changes were ineffective?

Gareth Davies: Just before answering that, the carriers had an incredibly tough two years. They were probably one of the industries affected more than anyone else in this period. We did ask a lot of them, but they performed incredibly well in terms of shifting some of the checks away from the border in line with the broader border strategy to make sure that the flow at the border was as smooth as possible, although it was not always smooth.

The travel industry and the carriers are well versed in checking travel documentation and rights to travel, but we did ask them to provide



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information to passengers around covid rules, check pre-departure tests, completion of the PLFs, MQS bookings where appropriate, and also proof of vaccination certificates over time.

The situation, as Shona has said, moved rapidly over that period. We would have liked to have given them as much notice as possible, and there was constant calibration around the extent of notice. There were two phases of the overall policy. In 2020, we had a policy called travel corridors, with countries to which you are able to travel without necessarily having to self-isolate. We changed the designation of countries regularly, but without any fixed pattern.

One thing we learned from the travel corridor policy was to have a more stable rhythm of the way in which we updated which country was in which tier of the traffic light system. We went to a three-week cycle, where we made an announcement, typically on a Wednesday or a Thursday, about changes to the traffic lights, implemented typically six days later on the Monday or Tuesday the following week. I would love to have been able to give more notice to carriers, because I am conscious of the operational challenges, having spent time talking to carriers and the airports around what this entailed, and also to passengers, as you said, in terms of getting used to an understanding of the changes and the implications for that travel.

That was a judgment around the balance between giving notice for the operational changes to be worked through, but also ensuring that the system was timely. When there was a gap between a country changing status—typically, say, if it was going from green to amber—you had a bit of a closing-down sale of people wanting to travel before the rules changed.

If we look at the changes in summer 2021 to France in July and then to the Balearics in later July, we had a spike in travel patterns of 31% and 41% to those two countries in that small window. There was a constant calibration between giving people enough notice to operationalise it, but not so much to undermine the fundamental public health goals of the policy.

Q77 Chair: You were just saying about the closing-down sale approach, Mr Davies, and making sure you try to get that balance. Too often, we did see that rush, did we not, of people getting in under the wire? You said you tried to avoid that. What, precisely, did you do to try to avoid that, and what would you do differently? We have monkeypox and who knows what might happen. What would you do now?

Gareth Davies: In that time, we had the fixed periods, so we tried to hit a rhythm of, as I say, the announcement Wednesday or Thursday, with the implementation early the following week. When a country was shifting towards red—for example, Portugal, both in January and later in the summer 2021—we would move much faster.

Another good example is omicron. On 26 November 2021, when we identified the omicron variant—and my colleague Shona Dunn led the work



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on this—we moved overnight to closing travel for those countries and requiring managed quarantine service on almost instantly to prevent those risks.

Q78 **Chair:** The corollary of that is that you get people stranded. Can you talk through what conversations you would be having with other Departments to try to manage that? There were always going to be some losers in this. How did you balance who was going to be the loser? Public health would trump things, I guess.

Gareth Davies: Yes, it goes back to what Alex said. The No.1 goal here was public health. To back up, the way in which it was managed was through the Covid-O process. The covid officials process was the way in which Government as a whole were able to balance these competing needs and give rounded advice to Ministers, who were then able to balance off—

Q79 **Chair:** Just to be clear, Covid-O was officials.

Gareth Davies: Yes.

Q80 **Chair:** That then went up to COBRA. In the room in COBRA, there are very few people there.

Alex Chisholm: Covid Operations.

Chair: Yes, Covid Operations.

Alex Chisholm: That is the ministerial group.

Q81 **Chair:** That is the ministerial group, but what was the official group below that?

Alex Chisholm: It would be a shadow group of officials who would also meet to prepare papers beforehand.

Q82 **Chair:** But Covid-O made the decisions. It did not have to go to COBRA, except on very—

Gareth Davies: No.

Q83 **Chair:** Never, ever. Looking back, Mr Chisholm, did you have the right people in the room at all times?

Alex Chisholm: One of the good innovations of the whole covid thing was the mixing of experts, officials and Ministers in the room together, because the rate of decision making at the peak was so rapid, with sometimes more than one meeting a day.

Chair: More than one meeting a day—gosh.

Alex Chisholm: For the same Cabinet committee to meet more than once a day is exceptional, is it not? That would mean that there was not the time to say, “Come back with a paper in a week’s time or two weeks’ time”. We needed to have the people in the room to be able to bring that integrated view to make the best decision.

Q84 **Chair:** Do you feel you kept proper records of those meetings when you



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look back? We have had issues of recordkeeping and contracting. Were you confident that you had proper records of why these decisions were made?

Alex Chisholm: The minutes of Cabinet committees have been kept up the whole way through.

Q85 **Chair:** Sometimes, though, I have had the delight of reading Cabinet minutes and they did not really reveal very much. In fact, you might as well not read them. Are these useful documents for future pandemic planning?

Alex Chisholm: They are useful documents, and we are in the process of collecting all those documents for the forthcoming inquiry. We are up to about 200 million so far.

Q86 **Chair:** That can be a dampener on being candid, when people know there is an inquiry looming. Are they clear and candid, warts and all?

Alex Chisholm: Yes.

Chair: That is a yes, I should say for the record, very quietly from Mr Chisholm there, so we will wait and see. There is an importance in being honest about what went right and what went wrong.

Alex Chisholm: Indeed.

Q87 **Kate Green:** I would like to ask a bit more about the managed quarantine stuff. The NAO has calculated that the net cost of the service was £329 million. Earlier, Mr Chisholm, you talked about the number of people who were prevented from travelling around the country, and you said 12,000. My understanding is that, between February and December 2021, only 2% of quarantine guests tested positive. Even when we got into the early stages of omicron in the first couple of weeks of December 2021, we got up to about 6% of quarantine guests testing positive. Given the low percentage of positive tests, was that value for money for the taxpayer?

Alex Chisholm: I think Shona has to address that.

Shona Dunn: The positivity rates that you refer to were an average positivity rate. That positivity rate was higher than the background positivity rate, so it was certainly the case that the managed quarantine system was always finding higher levels of positivity in the cohort that was going into it than would have been found in the background rate.

It was certainly the case, when you looked at the levels of positivity from certain countries, that the levels of positivity from some countries at certain points in time were very high indeed. Given that one of the stated success criteria and requirements of the managed quarantine system was focused on countries that were very high risk—and often very high risk because of the risk of a variant that could be vaccine-escaping—capturing those positives was particularly important.

On your question about value for money, I refer back to the point we made earlier that it is extremely difficult to disaggregate the different parts of this system, but it is very hard to argue that the amount of money that



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was spent on the managed quarantine system, given what I have just said, was not value for money. It absolutely was value for money.

- Q88 **Kate Green:** Given that, as you have just said, the point of the managed quarantine service was to align with where we thought the highest risk of variants that might be vaccine-escaping could be coming from, is 2% a surprisingly low success rate for positivity?

Shona Dunn: I do not think so. Not only was it a higher positivity level than the background positivity level, but the managed quarantine system, at the point in time that it was put in, was also specifically designed in part to minimise the number of people who were choosing to travel from those high-risk countries to the UK. You have a proportion of the people who would otherwise travel, you have pre-departure testing and you have a variety of safeguards, if you like, that would not make it surprising if the percentage of positivity from those countries that makes it into MQS would be lower than the positivity rate from the source country, and yet it was still higher than the background positivity rate.

- Q89 **Kate Green:** The funding of the MQS was, in part at least, to have been from guests paying for the accommodation. The NAO reports that £428 million had been recovered at the time of the Report being prepared. At the same time, at 1 March, you were owed £74 million from guests. Can you tell us now how much of that has been recovered and how much more you expect to recover?

Shona Dunn: The £74 million that the NAO refers to is broken down into two parts: £21 million is from credit card chargeback and £54 million from the hardship scheme. The sums referred to in the NAO Report are only just marginally higher, so I am still working on the basis that we have recovered about £1 million of the £21 million. All of the other cases that are with respect to credit card chargeback are with our partner—sorry; I cannot think of the word—that tries to get our debt back.

Chair: The debt collectors.

Shona Dunn: That is the one, thank you. They will continue to pursue that. On the hardship cases—the £54 million—£20 million of that has now either been recovered or there are arrangements to recover it. That is true debt, if you like. We do not know what proportion of the £21 million may or may not be fraudulent. We would expect the hardship cases to be a debt recovery task.

- Q90 **Kate Green:** Was it of concern at all that the hardship cases were self-certifying their hardship? Has that contributed to the cost to the taxpayer in an unreasonable way?

Shona Dunn: In the first part of the story of the MQS, the hardship cases were self-certifying. It was from about August that arrangements were put in place to check the eligibility for hardship. Of course, the hardship payment, in very few cases, was hardship around someone being able to access MQS for free. It was, in the vast majority of cases, having a payment plan, so that you could pay over time, and there were criteria associated with that.



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From August, we introduced checks on eligibility. Up until that point in time, it would certainly have been the case that, if you had had many months to plan for the introduction of the managed quarantine system, there were a number of things that you would have put detailed procedures in place for. The hardship scheme was one of those, frankly, at the beginning of MQS, where we had to conclude that the priority was to make sure that it was available, rather than to make sure that it was absolutely buttoned down, and that we would introduce more stringent requirements as time allowed.

Q91 Kate Green: Did you see fewer people being eligible for the hardship scheme after August, when you moved away from self-certifying?

Shona Dunn: That is a very good question. I do not know the answer. I am very happy to go away and see if we can disaggregate that. I have not seen a disaggregation of that. It was a very good question.

Q92 Kate Green: I would be very interested if you were able to do that. You alluded a few months ago to the element of fraud in the MQS, and the Department has identified that nearly £80 million of MQS refunds were fraudulent. Is that correct?

Shona Dunn: Potentially. These are the credit card chargebacks that we started to see in the first couple of months of MQS. Some of those may be people who are disgruntled with the service that they received and do not feel that they received the service that they paid for and, therefore, are attempting a credit card chargeback in the way a consumer would if they were not satisfied with a service.

I expect that quite a number of others are as a consequence of fraud. We know and we saw, and we did a lot of work with bodies such as social media platforms, where we identified, for example, fraudulent sites offering MQS products at a lower price. We now know that there was a considerable amount of fraudulent activity of that type.

Q93 Kate Green: Just looking at those two elements—first of all, the chargebacks—are you or your agents taking any steps to challenge the requests for chargebacks?

Shona Dunn: Yes, absolutely. That was action that was taken very early on once it was identified that this was an issue. As early as the beginning of June, we were at that point already challenging every chargeback request. We were engaging with the banks on screening and, as I say, we were, at that point, checking every attempted purchase of an MQS package where the name of the person taking the package and the name on the credit card did not match. It is important to say that we were focusing quite a lot of the resource that we had available on making sure that we were preventing fraud at that point rather than going after individual cases.

Q94 Kate Green: Yet by January this year, UKHSA had investigated only two chargeback cases. That does not sound like a very vigorous set of measures being taken to challenge and follow up on unreasonable chargeback requests.



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Shona Dunn: Our debt recovery partner, working with us and with others, will continue to go after those cases where we can. Some of them, of course, are made more difficult by the fact that they are overseas. In most cases, of course, they are, individually, relatively small amounts of money. I am always keen to go after every pound of taxpayers' money that may have been defrauded. You always have an eye to the point in time where the cost overtakes the benefit to the taxpayer of doing so, but we will continue to go after that.

Q95 **Kate Green:** Are you publishing the figures on an ongoing basis, where you are recovering money, either as a result of fraud or because payment plans have been agreed under the financial hardship arrangements?

Shona Dunn: No, I do not think that that data is published.

Kate Green: The Committee would like to see it on an ongoing basis.

Shona Dunn: I am more than happy to provide that.

Q96 **Chair:** It is also part of the lessons learned, because you have the chargeback option, whereas other bits of Government do not. That was an interesting element of how you tackle this.

Shona Dunn: Of course, the reason we did that at the start was that we were trying to make sure that it was, from the consumer's point of view, as user-friendly as possible.

Chair: That was the main reason.

Shona Dunn: At that point in time, making sure that we had a system that people were happy to use.

Q97 **Chair:** I am puzzled as to what else they would do if you are paying for a week or 10 days of hotel accommodation. I do not know what the percentage of credit card ownership is. What was the other option?

Shona Dunn: Chair, you are right. I am not sure, but my point was in terms of others not using credit card chargeback. You are quite right that that is one of the lessons that we would consider.

Q98 **Kate Green:** In terms of the experience of guests in the quarantine hotels, there were reports of harassment and abusive behaviour. What checks were done in advance to ensure that guests would be safe in the hotels?

Shona Dunn: There was a great deal of effort put into making sure that the hotels would be a safe environment for all of those staying in them. Right from the start, we put in place security arrangements, where all security officers would need to have Security Industry Association licensing. We put in place measures to make sure that there were liaison officers in every hotel. There were processes in place to make sure that there was a rolling 24-hour report on all incidents that occurred in hotels. We put in place additional safeguarding training, enhanced safeguarding training and enhanced supervision. We also put in place a DHSC oversight board, which consisted of senior female executives as well, particularly in the light of the instances you referred to.



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The really important thing not to lose sight of is that five security guards were dismissed for gross misconduct, but that was out of many thousands of security guards. They were deeply horrible experiences for the individuals concerned. Overall, we had a complaint rate below 1.5% for MQS, which is a very much broader range of complaints. None the less, we took every single one of those seriously. We had the system in place to draw those incidents in, to review them on a daily basis, and to make sure that we were using our liaison officers on site to deal with them.

Q99 Kate Green: We have had experience—I can see Ms Hayes nodding—of some of these providers in other custodial contexts. Were there discussions between, for example, the Home Office and DHSC about the kind of protections that needed to be put in place?

Shona Dunn: There absolutely were. Of course, I had the advantage at the time of having come from the Home Office, so having sat before Committees like this and answered questions on that side of the fence as well, similarly. I was very well aware of those and, yes, detailed conversations occurred right from the start.

Q100 Kate Green: Why was it that the reporting helpline was set up only after allegations began to be made about security guards?

Shona Dunn: The reporting hotline was an additional safeguard. We had procedures in place to allow people to report these and for these instances to be gathered and considered nationally. Coming back to lessons learned, that is, again, another very good lesson learned. There are a number of lessons learned that we would take from the managed quarantine system, which, given the speed with which it was set up and the fact that we were doing some learning as we were going in those first couple of months, is unsurprising.

Q101 Kate Green: In November 2021, the hotels were closed down. They were reopened very shortly thereafter in December, because of the rise of omicron as a variant of concern. Why was there a 48-hour delay between you recognising the need to reopen them and being able to have people back in the hotels when omicron began to emerge as a threat to us?

Shona Dunn: When we stood the hotels down, some very clear contingency arrangements were put in place, which were to allow us to be able to step back up very quickly if needed. That 48 hours was the absolute bare minimum that it could conceivably have been possible to stand up the hotels, when you think about the complexity of the operation, where, with these hotels, you need to get the standing operating procedures back in place, to get all of the supplies there and to get all the security guards back in. It is quite a different operation than to just running a hotel, so there were a lot of things to put into place.

There were also, of course, adjustments to be made to the PLF in that period of time. There were some mitigations that were put in place. SMS text messages were going to individuals who could not immediately go to hotels, to make sure that they were aware of the need to self-isolate. A free PCR test was provided to those individuals at that point in time to



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cover that gap, so we were conscious that there was a gap. It was absolutely the shortest conceivable gap that could be planned for, and we were very conscious, when we stood up contingency arrangements, that that may be needed, and that is why we did that quickly.

Q102 Kate Green: Do you now have a situation where you could again stand up hotels very quickly if you needed to?

Shona Dunn: What we are clear of now is that there are certain elements of the service that we could step up very quickly and are being held at zero cost to the taxpayer, if we needed to. I do not think it is the case that we have, as we had before omicron, specific hotels that are there as our contingency hotels, but we have the playbook and we know how to do this. The reason we do not have those there as a contingency is because it depends so much on the circumstances that you are dealing with at the time.

It is very clear to everyone that there is a ladder of options that will be available to us, should we ever need to take border measures for any reason again. Quarantining people in hotels is an extreme measure. It is something you would do only in real need. I am confident that, if we did find ourselves in that place again, the playbook that we developed would serve us well.

Q103 Kate Green: Would you be able to do it within 48 hours if you needed to?

Shona Dunn: I do not believe that we have hotels ready on standby, so it would definitely take longer, but part of the role of UKHSA going forward will be to monitor threats to public health and to identify when actions of that sort might be necessary, although, as I say, we all accept that it is in quite extreme circumstances that you might need those requirements again.

Q104 Kate Green: You have just talked about that 48-hour period when people had to self-isolate at home. Of course, people coming from amber countries were also self-isolating at home, and you were relying, in part, on home visits as a means of ensuring that compliance with those requirements was occurring. Given that it is believed that around a third of those who were required to self-isolate were not complying, why were there so few referrals to the police?

Shona Dunn: I may bring my colleagues in here in a moment, but I will say just one thing. We would not equate the NAO's comment that there is no evidence of a third of people complying with there being no evidence that they definitely were not. Indeed, much of the—

Kate Green: Sorry, could you say that again? You will forgive me if I say that that is a mandarin-speak.

Shona Dunn: You are quite right. Let me try to say that more clearly. The point that I am making is that some other insights that we have in terms of behaviour and some of the other surveys that we did indicated higher levels of compliance. That does not invalidate, in any way, shape or form, the point that the NAO was making.



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Chair: I am glad to hear that.

Shona Dunn: The reason why I state that as an important point is because one of the lessons that we would take from the programme of action overall is the need to really think about what drives behaviour, and to make sure that we are using behavioural science, nudge techniques and a broader toolkit, if you like, to create an environment within which people will choose to self-isolate.

One of the key lessons in this is how we anticipate that and find better ways than the hard lever that is compliance, and enforcement in particular, to get what we need there. We were, of course, not reliant purely on police checks. We had daily phone calls. We had visits from Mitie.

Q105 **Kate Green:** You spent £100 million on home visits. Was that value for money?

Shona Dunn: The visits were a very important part of the overall ecosystem for managing compliance. It sent a very important signal to people that this was something that was important and that they were absolutely expected to comply. The combination of the compliance telephone calls, the Mitie home visits and then, where necessary, the referrals to the police—there were about 7,000 in total—is what we were aiming to use to drive compliance.

Q106 **Kate Green:** You mentioned a moment ago the approach of encouraging people to comply rather than relying on enforcement. I understand that and, indeed, during the course of the operation of the amber lists, the contract was transferred from Mitie to the UK Health Security Agency in order to adopt that encouragement approach. Do you know if that switch was effective? Are you able to monitor and point to the difference that may have occurred as a result of switching to the UK Health Security Agency?

Shona Dunn: Ms Hayes might want to come in on what was done with the Mitie contract in advance of the switch as well, because the Mitie contract came to a conclusion at the end of March and was ramped down quite significantly in advance of that. Most of the behavioural work probably fell before the period.

Patricia Hayes: First, I completely agree on the point around the fact that we did not get into this business to collect a whole load of money through FPNs. We really wanted to use evidence to build a robust compliance strategy. That is why the Home Office set up the Mitie contract in the first place. Until we had the Mitie contract in place, we were very reliant on police capacity to do visits.

Just before we put the Mitie contract in place, we had been asking the police to do 1,000 visits a day. Even that was starting to prove a bit of a struggle, because we had seen some of the changes in police demand, where it had dropped a lot in the early stages of the pandemic and was starting to revert to something more like normal levels. The Mitie contract gave us the capability to do 10,000 visits a day.



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We did this because we had looked at, as Ms Dunn said, the behavioural science around what a good compliance and enforcement strategy looks like in a pandemic. We had taken advice from the SPI-B subgroup on policing and security, and its advice was that you could go down two extremes, neither of which would work—the extreme where you felt that you could not comply with the rules and there would be no possibility of consequences, but equally the idea that you would have a very draconian response to every single person who had made a mistake would, in the advice of the behavioural scientists, undermine public confidence in the regime and in policing. Policing by consent is very important to us and was very important to sustain us through the pandemic.

We put in place this system of visits. We handed it over to DHSC towards the back end of the programme, because those questions around police capacity had moved on. It was very much more in finishing off the compliance work for that stage in the pandemic. Although, for all the reasons that others have talked about today, it is really difficult to evaluate the impact of single interventions, when we looked at what we had got from Mitie, we could track that, if you had had a visit on day one of your self-isolation, you were more likely to still be in self-isolation on day four than otherwise. It was definitely a compliance move rather than something that was a driver of a really hard enforcement strategy.

Q107 Kate Green: When you were passing cases to the police before Mitie came on the scene, were you following up what the police did with referrals that were made to them?

Patricia Hayes: No, we were not, because we were not trying to direct the police to take forward any particular number of cases through to prosecution. That sat within the independence of the police and then of the wider criminal justice system. We did not set them a target or say, “We expect to get this much income”. No, not at all.

Q108 Kate Green: So you have some evidence of the effect of the Mitie home visits, but you do not know what really happened after referrals were made to the police.

Patricia Hayes: On the Mitie contract and the referrals, I have information on the extent to which they were paid. Is that what you are after? It is in the report.

Q109 Kate Green: You said very helpfully a moment ago that, if they received a visit on day one from Mitie, they were likely to be self-isolating on day four, but you do not have the same level of knowledge of what happens if you made a referral to the police in terms of whether they turned up, what they did and what resulted.

Patricia Hayes: No, I do not have that. We did not do an evaluation of the police, because that was not a financial investment in the same way for us as the Mitie contract was.

Q110 Chair: Ms Dunn, in the exchange about your interpretation of the NAO Report, which you did clarify, I would just put on the record, partly because



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Mr Chisholm is here, that we have had a couple of instances recently where, because the NAO said there was no evidence for something, that has been presented as though it did not happen. All the NAO has said is whichever Department does not know. We just need to be really clear about the difference in what the NAO Reports say. I do not know if Rebecca Sheeran wants to add anything to that.

Rebecca Sheeran: You summarised the point quite clearly about being precise about what we can and cannot say on the basis of the evidence that is available.

Alex Chisholm: Just to be very correct, previously I said 200 million documents, and I should have said 200,000. That is an important difference.

Chair: We should probably have picked that up on the basis of reasonableness.

Q111 **Shaun Bailey:** Just very briefly, this question partly comes off the back of a constituent case. I just want to be clear and to understand a bit more how you are benchmarking costs to individuals for the MQS service, and particularly for hotels. A constituent of mine reported that, for one hotel, the cost in the February was £1,750 but, by the autumn, it was £2,200. I appreciate that there would have been a prohibitive element to this, but how were you benchmarking this? Surely, this should not have been an opportunity to make money. Ms Dunn, are you able to take that?

Shona Dunn: You are quite right that it was not an opportunity to make money, and money was not made. The price of the managed quarantine system at the outset was, as you rightly say, £1,750 for the 10-day, 11-night stay. There were lower rates for a second adult and for a child between the ages of five and 12. Those figures went up later in the managed quarantine programme lifecycle. As the system started to get more volatile and as the numbers coming into hotels started to diverge from the number of hotels that we needed to keep going in order to be able to manage that clientele, the cost went up substantially.

Q112 **Shaun Bailey:** I am a little bit confused. Just so I am clear, from what I understand you to be saying, it was pressures on the system that caused the increase in that price. Is that what you are saying?

Shona Dunn: Let me try to be clearer. It was always our intention that, where possible, the cost of the managed quarantine system would be borne by the individual using it. At the outset, the cost we arrived at was £1,750. I want to return to your point about benchmarks, because benchmarks were only so possible for reasons I will explain.

Later on in the lifecycle of the programme, at the point in time when supply and demand started to diverge and became more volatile and difficult to manage, if we had stuck with the principle of the full cost of the managed quarantine system being borne by the individuals using it, the cost would have been very substantially higher than the £2,285. At that point, Ministers made the decision that, if we were to do full cost recovery, that would be an unreasonable cost, so they raised it a bit but not by as much



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as they would have done if they had been going for full cost recovery at that point in time.

Returning to the benchmarking point, at the time that we set the original cost, there were extremely few comparable schemes around the world and, of course, the contexts within which they were implementing their schemes were very different, so there was no legitimate benchmarking that could be done at the time. We did a straightforward, "How do we make sure that the cost of this is borne by the user?" We were aware of the costs of some of the other schemes. For example, the Australian scheme had a range of costs. At the top end, they were slightly higher; they were, though, for a slightly greater number of days. We looked at some of the other international costs, but the comparator was not really valid, because of the very different economies that they were operating in.

Q113 Shaun Bailey: Forgive me; it might be a very clear point, so if it is, I am sorry. In terms of arriving at that figure, you said that you did not draw on international comparisons. Clearly, there would have been a cost analysis that you would have had to do on that, but was arriving at that figure purely on the basis of some form of an internal cost analysis of, purely speaking, what this would come to for the Treasury?

Shona Dunn: It was.

Q114 Shaun Bailey: This point also relates to a specific constituency case, which is why I raise it. In terms of individuals who were caught by a change in rules, I have a case with your Department at the moment of a constituent who was caught out by that. I must say that it has been ping-ponged a few times between your and Mr Davies' Department, and it would be nice to get a straight answer at some point. How did you decide on the process to manage that, whereby an individual was caught out? For example, they were in a quarantine hotel and the rules had changed. I know that there was the plea by the Secretary of State to stay, even if they had finished that quarantine period, but that was not going to be viable for everyone. I am just curious how you came to that decision as to what to do with that.

Shona Dunn: I am not entirely sure that I understand the specifics of the case concerned and whether your constituent is concerned with the fact that they left—

Chair: Perhaps we can take this offline.

Shona Dunn: Rather than going through the details, if you would like to provide them to me offline, I will absolutely come back to you.

Shaun Bailey: Yes, that is fine.

Q115 Sarah Olney: I have a question again for Mr Davies. How well do you think you were communicating with the travel industry over the frequent changes?

Gareth Davies: We spoke regularly with the travel industry, both formally and informally. Over the period of 2021, we had over 38 meetings. We typically had a weekly expert steering group, where we worked with industry on the policy changes through the global travel taskforce, along



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with the regular changes. We then had a more working-level group, which went through how we would operationalise that. That is in addition to a series of meetings with Ministers and officials working through the broader policy changes at the key points as we were coming out of lockdown.

The one thing I would say is that this was a very volatile situation, so we spoke regularly with the industry. I was speaking with some of the chief executives of the airlines and the airports on an almost daily basis at the critical points in this time. It was a very difficult time for the industry, and I totally recognise that, but we felt that we kept them as informed as we could about the policy environment and what we were intending to do, as well as giving them the opportunity to feed into the global travel taskforce.

Going back to your earlier question, we recognise that we were not able to give them long-term transparency around why countries were moving from one tier to another.

Q116 Sarah Olney: Given how dependent you were on the aviation industry in particular to implement a lot of the restrictions, the checks and the passenger locator forms, why was the decision made not to offer more financial support to the aviation industry? In addition, a lot of these measures that were brought in were very much suppressing demand for aviation. The quarantine hotels and the very high cost of testing were costs falling on to passengers, so there was suppressing demand for aviation, added to the requirements on the aviation companies. Given that, and given how dependent you were on these measures, why was there not more financial support?

Gareth Davies: Like lots of industries through the pandemic, they were affected by the different decisions around both domestic and international restrictions. We estimate that airlines and airports received approximately £7 billion to £8 billion—it is hard to get the precise number on that—in terms of financial support from the Government over this period.

Q117 Sarah Olney: That was mostly through the furlough scheme. There was no additional support.

Gareth Davies: It was mainly through the furlough scheme but also through the loan schemes, which supported their balance sheets, along with the specific programmes for airports on rates relief. The overall judgment of Ministers was that that was the appropriate package to support the industry through this period. A number of airlines then went to private sources to raise equity and debt over that period in order to maintain their balance sheets.

Q118 Sarah Olney: Did that not create a big risk that, first, they might just have refused to co-operate on some of the schemes that were put in place, but also the long-term future of the industry post pandemic? As an island nation, aviation is quite strategic for us. What was the assessment there?

Gareth Davies: I should put on record my thanks to the industry for their incredible support right the way through this. Of course, we work closely in partnership with the industry in more normal times. For example, it is



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an absolutely critical player and part of our aviation security measures, and plays a critical role in ensuring that travel is safe.

The judgment throughout the pandemic was that the best way to support the industry was for the safe return of international travel, and so the focus of the global travel taskforce was to ensure that we could open up international travel in a way that did not undermine the No. 1 objective of the Government through this period, which was public health.

Q119 Sarah Olney: What is your modelling for future demand for aviation and how are you going to be supporting the industry over the next few years?

Gareth Davies: There are lots of forecasts of aviation demand and demand for travel at the moment from a range of private sources and banking sources. When I speak to the chief execs, everyone has been surprised on the upside in terms of the speed with which demand has come back.

On some estimates, demand is almost 25% higher than where they might expect it to be. We are still tracking below 2019 levels year on year. We are probably operating at about 80% overall of volumes that we would have seen in 2019, but the demand has certainly come back very strongly. This is affected by decisions that are being taken not just in this country but globally. Decisions are being taken in Australia. Those being taken in China in particular, of course, are affecting the big Asian and European travel networks, but transatlantic travel certainly is very strong at the moment.

Q120 Sarah Olney: So you think the British aviation sector is going to get through this, despite the lack of support from Government.

Gareth Davies: I am not sure that I would characterise it as a lack of support from Government, given the £7 billion to £8 billion of taxpayers' money that was given to the industry.

Q121 Sarah Olney: There was nothing for the aviation sector that was not available for anybody else, despite the fact that not only were they uniquely impacted but also had these requirements placed on them by the Government.

Gareth Davies: I suppose I would say that £7 billion to £8 billion of taxpayers' money is a significant amount of money to support the industry through that period. I would also point to the rates scheme for airports.

Q122 Chair: Let us just be clear, though, that £7 billion or £8 billion was furlough and things that were available to everyone else.

Gareth Davies: Yes, these were not industry-specific schemes.

Chair: It was not specifically from your Department, so it was not transport or sector-specific, just to reiterate what Ms Olney was saying.

Q123 Sarah Olney: We saw during the Easter break this year very long queues at airports. Is that partly as a result of airlines, or you not anticipating the demand returning to such a great extent?



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Gareth Davies: The industry has certainly said that it has been surprised on the upside at the speed of the recovery over that period. A large number of airports and airline staff were put on to furlough over that period, and they have had to rehire, which takes time. That has resulted in some of the disruption that you have seen over the Easter period.

Q124 **Chair:** I just wanted to touch on the testing market, which felt a bit like the wild west, if you ever had to go through it. There were basic checks on providers. Even though 95% of suppliers failed checks from something called the UK Accreditation Service, they were still able to list on gov.uk.

Mr Chisholm, I guess it falls to you—no. I see why you are here, Ms Dunn. I could make comments about the capable women supporting the men, but anyway, we know that. Prove to me, then, how capable you are by answering the question about how these companies—some of which were, frankly, chancers—were able to list on gov.uk, even though they really were not providing a proper service; there was no real quality measure.

Shona Dunn: There were quite a number of quality measures, but I take the point entirely. The point you were referring to about the 95% was the percentage during one week, when what was looked at was whether those providers at stage 1 of the UKAS accreditation had achieved their stage 2 at the four-week point, which is the point at which they are meant to achieve it. That does not mean that all of those providers did not go on to meet that stage 2 and, potentially, stage 3, and nor does it mean that they were not providing a service at stage 1 level.

Your completely fair point—one that we have thought about quite deeply in terms of lessons learned—is around where we had chosen to pitch the degree to which we were going to control the market at the outset. When we started off on the testing market for amber travellers, we were conscious that a market needed to be created very quickly, and we focused on accuracy and value for money. We put quite a number of measures in place.

There were 26 requirements that providers had to meet. One of those was absolutely about the validity of the tests and making sure that they were accurate and so on, but we were quite careful not to apply very high bars to entry, because we were not sure how the supply and demand was going to look as things went on. As it turned out, we could have applied higher bars of entry.

Q125 **Chair:** It is just that gov.uk had a long list and, as you would expect from any other search engine or comparison site, the fair price was put at the top. That meant that people clicked through, then to discover that there were more costs, and there was no way of determining the turnaround time or anything about the quality of the performance, not just the price of the test.

Shona Dunn: I would say a few things about that. The first thing to say—and this is, again, a lesson—is that gov.uk was not capable of being a price comparison site, and the list was not set up on gov.uk to do that.



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Chair: They played it to do that, did they not?

Shona Dunn: Yes, in a way. We added the price data in order to be helpful. It may have been the case that it would be more helpful not to add the price data. What we did about that was to make sure to put quite rigorous processes in place to validate prices, particularly where they were £15 or below, and that they were available within a reasonable timeframe. We did take providers off the list, so quite a number of providers were, over time, removed from the list.

None of that invalidates the point that you are making, Chair—and it is a lesson learned—that we could have put high bars on entry in, once we realised how the market—

Q126 **Chair:** Who should have done that checking? You have UKAS as an outside body doing this, and it would have been a big thing at the time—and even in normal circumstances—for Government to be the arbiter of this. Was it the right choice to have a third party giving some verification?

Shona Dunn: The verification that UKAS provided was very important. Not all of the verification on all of the requirements was done by UKAS. Some of them were other requirements that providers were required to self-certify against. By September, we had put in place regulations where there were sanctions if people did not meet the requirements that had been specified and they had self-certified that they were performing against.

It was definitely an evolving picture. We got tougher. We made good use of UKAS but also of CMA, for example. As time went on, we introduced regulations in September, and certainly, by the end, we had put in a lot of controls to make sure that the service being provided was the service that we expected.

Q127 **Chair:** One of the concerns when we were thinking about all of this and how it plays out is that gov.uk is a very valuable brand. We have challenged your Department about the NHS being a valuable brand. Any company going on there had the imprint of Government almost by dint of just being available through that website. Have you reflected on that across the Department and Government?

Shona Dunn: That is what I mean about the fact, which I want to return to, that we absolutely did remove providers that were not providing the service.

Q128 **Chair:** If it was four weeks between the initial accreditation and the latest stage, there is a lot of money that they can make on fraudulent or badly managed tests in that time.

Shona Dunn: I understand that, but going on at stage 1 meant that they were providing a valid test that was going to be accurate to a reasonable service standard. Stage 2 was required only for providers that were collecting samples and undertaking laboratory work. If we had held off and said that nobody could go on to gov.uk until they had achieved stage 2 or stage 3, we would not have been able to develop the scale of testing market that we needed in order to support the system.



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There was always a balance here. The point I am making and what we have reflected on in our lessons learned is that we now know that that market responded very quickly. We could probably have moved earlier to some higher bars of entry and some tougher—

- Q129 **Chair:** Quite innovative business models—pop-up stores with testers and curtain cubicles and so on, so very easy to do in some ways. Of course, the Competition and Markets Authority had some concerns because of the price issues, which we touched on. They varied massively in price, especially if you had a problem and you had to rebook. For those last-minute ones, a premium rate was applied, but you have not yet responded to the Competition and Markets Authority's recommendations. Why is that?

Shona Dunn: We have engaged a lot with the CMA.

- Q130 **Chair:** That is not quite the same as answering the recommendations.

Shona Dunn: You are quite right that there has not been a letter or anything bringing together what was done in response to those recommendations, but we engaged very deeply with CMA officials once we received that report and those recommendations. Our response to those recommendations fed through into our future work.

- Q131 **Chair:** Are you saying that you have now complied with all of its recommendations?

Shona Dunn: Bear in mind that the CMA's recommendations were mostly around a PCR market, where we were moving into an LFD market. Where those recommendations were relevant, we have definitely taken them into account in our work as we developed into the LFD market. We are now dealing with quite a different market.

- Q132 **Chair:** In terms of lessons learned—and we have discussed this with many officials—who is going to remember next time this happens? I suspect or I hope that you and I are both not here, because it will happen such a long time away.

Shona Dunn: A long time hence.

Chair: Yes. Who is going to be the repository of that information, so that we can make sure that the lessons that the CMA identified are really learned?

Shona Dunn: As every other Government Department around Whitehall is at the moment, I am engaged in a very deep exercise to make sure that we are bringing together all of the lessons learned in advance of the inquiry to make sure that we have as complete a record as we possibly can of what happened and of those lessons learned, not just across the market and how you develop the market, but across all aspects.

- Q133 **Chair:** When we looked at PFI, a lot of that was stored on CD-ROMs. I do not think that my children know what a CD-ROM is; I will put it that way. I could mention members of the Committee, but it would be a bit unfair to single people out on the basis of their youth. We have technology now that might not be readable. When the next pandemic arrives, hopefully we will



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have moved on technologically, so how are you going to make sure that it is readable, available and accessible? Is somebody thinking about that?

Shona Dunn: Given the enormous amount of detail with which the inquiry is going to look into every element of this, I am certain that we will make sure that the lessons that will emerge from that, collectively across Government, will continue to be available for our successors many generations hence.

Chair: Mr Chisholm, are you nodding sagely?

Alex Chisholm: I agree.

Q134 **Chair:** When we looked at preparation and planning—Exercise Cygnus and so on—the planning was quite narrow. When you are looking at these lessons learned in future planning, are you thinking about all those ramifications, Mr Chisholm?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, and I have spoken before about the work of the pandemic diseases capabilities board, which tries to bring all that together. There is also a Centre for Pandemic Preparedness, which is part of UKHSA.

Q135 **Chair:** The UKHSA has a very small budget that was agreed only at the very last minute, so we are a bit concerned. If that is going to become the answer, like Public Health England was often the answer, but with its budget cut, is that enough?

Alex Chisholm: I am sure that the right budget will be given to the agency.

Chair: There we go. I am sure that they are listening to that and hoping, but, seriously, it is a bit of funding that seems to get cut and cut, and we are already seeing that trend with the UKHSA. I could go on much more on testing.

Q136 **Sarah Olney:** Mr Douglas, I just want to ask a little about the passenger locator forms. Why was the checking of these outsourced to the carriers?

Phil Douglas: If we look at the passenger locator forms, it is an ongoing story throughout 2020 and then into 2021. As passenger numbers started to pick up, we recognised that this would be better done by the carriers, in the same way that carriers check passports and documentation, and whether someone has an adequate visa in order to get into the country, so they were set up, in some ways, to do it. To some degree the quid pro quo for that was that, when passengers arrived in the country, they would be processed more quickly.

In the first half of 2021, Border Force also checked 100% of arrivals' PLFs, and the compliance was really high and grew throughout that period. We also automated the PLF into the gates, so that it would be even quicker, and it proved to be quite a success. As numbers started to go up, it was much easier for the carriers to do it before somebody got on the plane, and then it was a much better service for the passenger when they arrived in the UK.



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Q137 Sarah Olney: Why was the UK's PLF so much more complicated than other countries', and did that have an impact on compliance and effectiveness?

Phil Douglas: I am not sure that it was that much more complicated than other countries'. Some other countries had quite complicated PLFs as well. I said that it was an ongoing story. In the beginning, it was about getting enough data to support a track and tracing regime and making sure that we would be able to track people, work out who they were sitting next to on the flight and those sorts of things, but as it went on, we added layers of other checks—for example, the vaccination certificate. We were able to put an address on and, although we could not check the validity of the address, we could check that it was an actual address.

It was partly to do a lot with what was being said before about nudging passengers towards compliance. We saw, by the summer of 2021, that compliance was really high with the carriers checking things. Thereafter, we did a spot check of 1,000 a week and then moved to 3,600 a week and, again, we saw really high compliance. Throughout that period, however, we did 100% checks on red-list countries, so we were making sure that the riskiest passengers were double-checked.

Q138 Sarah Olney: There was quite a high degree of absence amongst Border Force staff. Between February and September 2021, there were an average of 347 covid-related staff absences per month, and more than 500 in February and July, when cases were particularly high. Did that make it harder to manage the checks?

Phil Douglas: It made it really hard, as you can imagine. Not only were we were suffering from staff absences and staff absences, but we also had our own social distancing and bubbling measures to maintain the safety of our people. There was no disguising that that was a really tough summer, up to the point where we stopped doing the 100% checks—those checks take time, of between five and 10 minutes for each PLF. Notwithstanding the really low number of passengers, that soon built up.

Q139 Sarah Olney: Mr Chisholm, we have heard that the cost of checking the PLFs fell on the carriers, by and large, and that individual passengers had to bear the costs of their own tests, which were quite large sums. To what extent was limiting these costs on businesses and individuals a factor in your decision making about changing the rules when those discussions are being had?

Alex Chisholm: It was a factor, but not the biggest factor, just bearing in mind that about £400 billion in total of taxpayers' money has gone into the Government's response. The overall dominant thing was to make sure, as I said before, that we protected public health, but also to try to use as full a range of interventions as effectively as possible to that aim and to get back to normal living with covid, as we have been able to do.

Q140 Sarah Olney: With these high costs falling on businesses and individuals, was it not considered a risk that some people might just try to evade those costs and that that would undermine the effectiveness of your programmes?



Alex Chisholm: A factor, yes, but, as I say, not the decisive one. We have been very impressed by the high levels of compliance shown by individual travellers during this time. The travel industry, as we have heard before, was very keen to get back to active international travel, so it would not want to have been part of anything that would have delayed that return to ordinary travel conditions.

Q141 **Sarah Olney:** Mr Davies, some people were able to evade some of these costs and these restrictions. There were 2.5 million exemptions for 57 occupations. Was that a proportionate approach, given the health risks that you were trying to manage?

Gareth Davies: The overall approach on exemptions, which is similar to what you have seen in other countries like France, Germany and the like, was to get the balance right between protecting public health and ensuring the operation of the economy.

On the 2.5 million people who you say were exempt, there are two points. 70% to 80% of those were travel-related, so these were, essentially, hauliers bringing in food, and we know the critical importance of importing food over the short straits; 20% of our fresh food comes in across the short straits. In terms of veterinary and medical products, 100% needs to be escorted over the short straits, so those haulier exemptions were absolutely critical. Ten of the overall exemption categories were travel-related. About half a dozen were diplomatic-related. In terms of volume, the vast majority were travel by hauliers or air crew, so it was about maintaining overall travel.

Just to put the 2.5 million figure into overall context, that was 2.5 million compared to 30 million people who entered the country in that period. If we then compared back to 2019, you would have had 146 million people entering the country in that period—just to contextualise the 2.5 million.

Also on the 2.5 million, these people who were coming in were not completely exempt of all regimes. The way in which the exemption system worked was that they are exempt only for the part of the regime that would stop them performing their work. For example, hauliers still had to do a pre-departure test and fill in a PLF. They were exempt from self-isolation, but, of course, they were mainly held in their cabs and had a bespoke testing system. We set up haulier testing centres around the country to ensure that we could manage the risk.

The idea with the exemption system was not just a free-for-all but was around a balanced risk judgment of managing public health against the overall economic benefits of some of the exemptions. On hauliers, because we ran the testing system, we were able to understand the overarching level of risk faced by having this exemption. If you look at the haulier positivity rate, that was running at around 0.1% to 0.2% over the period, so 0.1% to 0.2% of hauliers coming into the country were testing positive, which is a tiny proportion and far lower than the background level rate of covid at any point during that period.



Q142 Sarah Olney: What about the footballers for Euro 2020 or the people coming for London Fashion Week? They would all have claimed exemptions. Have you any idea roughly what the models of infection were?

Gareth Davies: It was not so much that they claimed exemptions. We managed the overall process whereby individual Government Departments could apply for an exemption. They had to produce a case that looked at the economic benefits, along with having consulted with public health officials to understand the underlying risk, where the evidence existed, and also the potential for mitigations.

On issues like Euro 2020, as part of the conditions for running the competition, certain UEFA-invited VIPs and members of the different federations were exempt from self-isolation, but they were still required to complete the PLF. They had to participate in pre-departure testing. They were required to self-isolate at times when they were not attending games, and that was then managed through the attestations of people coming in. What we did not have is data for all of the different exempt groups, but, as I said, because the vast majority of the exempt groups—70% to 80%—were hauliers and an air crew, for whom we do have data, we knew that the risks were relatively low at that point.

Q143 Sarah Olney: Beyond the hauliers and those groups, you cannot really say what the risks were or what the impact was of allowing them exemptions.

Gareth Davies: The judgment was that it was not to track individual cases, but to make sure that we had the proper risk framework in place. As I say, we were making sure that we had bespoke testing where appropriate and limits on when people had to self-isolate outside of performing their tasks. A good example would be on COP26. We wanted to make sure that we had every country at COP26, given the global importance of climate change. A number of countries at that time would have been formally in the amber category and, given uncertainty around travel, we wanted to give certainty to delegates that they were able to attend the conference and participate fully.

What we put into place was the need to do PLF and the pre-departure tests, but rather than having self-isolation, which would have precluded them from participating in the conference, we put in place a bespoke package, which included a vaccination offer, daily testing at the COP, face coverings and social distancing. Essentially, based on public health advice, we put in place a risk package.

Q144 Sarah Olney: Was there a risk with people seeing VIPs like the footballers, the fashionistas and the COP26 attendees getting special treatment, whereas, if they wanted to travel for a relative's funeral or to see family, they would be forced to self-isolate? Do you not feel that that "one rule for them and one rule for everyone else" approach undermines public confidence?

Gareth Davies: These are some of the very difficult decisions that Ministers had to make throughout the course of the pandemic in terms of



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the balance of ensuring a focus on public health while also maintaining the economy. Constantly trying to balance those two issues was difficult. I recognise that these are difficult judgments that have to be made, but I would focus on the fact that the vast majority of these exemptions were critical roles for the importation of food, medical products and vaccines.

Q145 **Chair:** About 9% were critical roles. Before I hand over to Ms Green to finish off, I just wanted, Ms Dunn, to look back in the Report at paragraph 2.16 on page 34, which talks about the Competition and Markets Authority. I just wanted to see if you wanted to revisit your answer, because the final sentence rather sums it up, in that it suggested potential mitigations in April and May 2021, but the NAO says, "but the DHSC took no action at that time". You said things had moved on and we were moving into lateral flows.

Shona Dunn: Sorry; that comment was with reference to the CMA's September report and we were moving into the LFT market after that point in time.

Q146 **Chair:** Can you explain why you took no action in April and May 2021?

Shona Dunn: We did engage with the CMA. We did take some actions at that point in time. As I understand it, the CMA was satisfied that we had responded to elements of its concern around, for example, price and some elements of terms and conditions and so on.

Chair: This is an agreed Report.

Shona Dunn: I appreciate that.

Q147 **Chair:** It is not an opinion of the NAO, is it, Ms Sheeran?

Rebecca Sheeran: No. As you say, this is an agreed Report. We agreed the facts. The statement in the Report is based on not seeing any direct evidence of response to the CMA's comments around mitigations.

Shona Dunn: It is absolutely an agreed Report. My point—and I should be clearer—is that there are things that we did in the period of time around then that align with some of the messages that the CMA was giving us. What that was referring to is a thing from CMA and a thing from the Department going back to your point earlier about the Department's formal response to these, but there were things that I have described that the Department did around the time that were aligned with the messages that the CMA was giving us.

Chair: Almost pre-empting what the CMA was giving you.

Shona Dunn: They were aligned with the messages that the CMA was giving us.

Chair: You have all been coached to tread carefully with the language you are using. I will leave that there for now, because we are running quite late.

Q148 **Kate Green:** I have a few final questions. First of all, we have no travel



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restrictions now coming into this country. That is not the case for travellers from here to some other countries. What evidence has been relied on in making the decision that we no longer need travel restrictions?

Shona Dunn: As has been described on a number of occasions today, there are a variety of points of evidence that go into that assessment. We are in a fairly fundamentally different position today, with the roll-out of the vaccine programme having been as successful as it has been.

Of course, Ministers will have looked at the full range of factors that go into making those decisions and, in line with the objectives of the living with covid strategy, have concluded that, at this point in time, border measures of any sort would not add to this stage of our response to the pandemic. That is a complex judgment, as has been referred to, but the fundamentals of the vaccine programme and where we are on variants of concern make that possible.

Q149 **Kate Green:** This might be a question for Mr Chisholm, because it is pulling together a whole-Government response, but a number of you have talked over the last hour or so about a playbook or a toolkit for future situations. How has that been developed? Is it simply writing down everything we did, so that we can do it again, or is there an assessment of what was effective and how costs could be managed, and how is that process taking place across Government?

Alex Chisholm: You have heard some of the answer to that, in the sense that, for example, the Centre for Pandemic Preparedness has captured a lot of the learnings within the UKHSA. Each Department, when it concludes a programme—and this is partly in response to NAO and PAC advice in the past—has write up its conclusions and lessons learned from it. All Departments are doing that, partly because they have been asked to, but partly because they would need to anyway in order to be ready for the forthcoming inquiry. That is probably the most comprehensive way of gathering all these learnings.

Perhaps it has not come up so much in the evidence to date, but this family of programmes did evolve quite a lot over the last two years. If you think about it, as you have heard, we became a lot better informed over the course of time, with a whole new scale, efficiency and timeliness of the testing and genome sequencing, which enabled us to be much more targeted and risk-adjusted. Again, you have heard about the traffic light system—the red, amber, green and all of that.

In effect, that has also meant that we have been able to be more traveller-friendly, and you have heard about how, for example, the PDF scheme then got integrated with eGates in October 2021, so that it worked with passports. Those are all examples of how we have been learning as we go along, capturing the best approach and enabling us to make the minimum and most targeted interventions necessary to achieve the intended purpose.

Q150 **Kate Green:** What scenario-planning is going on now to envisage future possible situations and how that learning could be applied to them?



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Alex Chisholm: That scenario-planning is done through the Civil Contingencies Secretariat, which co-ordinates this cross-Government effort. I am not sure whether you were here at the session we had earlier in the year, when we went through, in the context of covid preparations overall, how that has been integrated into the new national risk assessment and the new resilience strategy, but increasing and stress-testing the number of scenarios that we work to.

Q151 **Kate Green:** How can you be transparent about the way in which you are developing lessons learned and then how you would apply them in future, so that the public can be well informed and reassured about the way in which future reactions and responses might be implemented?

Alex Chisholm: In terms of those changes in policy implementation, those have been described along the way. The covid taskforce reporting into Ministers did, at every stage, talk about spring, summer, autumn and winter plans, so they were very clear about what the basis for that was. On a transparency basis, you could see the way in which we were consolidating our approach as we went along.

In terms of other learnings, again you have seen things like the Boardman 1 and 2 reports. You have seen that 65 cases of covid litigation so far have been through the courts. All those judgments were published by the courts. I mentioned already—and corrected myself—the 200,000 documents that we have pulled together within the Cabinet Office, and other Departments are doing the same for their own evidence into the inquiry. There will be massive levels of transparency.

Q152 **Kate Green:** Are any staff still employed within the covid-19 taskforce? Does it still exist?

Alex Chisholm: The covid-19 taskforce is now part of a larger group working on public services and analysis within the Cabinet Office. Many of the taskforce, happily, have been able to go on to other roles, because we are now living with covid and are no longer in the same pandemic situation that we were, but there is a residual capacity. As you have heard already from colleagues here, there is an ability to stand up a response on a contingency basis, if necessary.

Q153 **Kate Green:** I think you said that staff were working on public services. That sounds very broad. How does their work relate to both developing and recording lessons learned, and then being able to ensure that, if we need to react quickly, the systems could be put in place quickly to do so?

Alex Chisholm: As part of its wrap-up, the covid taskforce did a big job of trying to pull together all their documents and lessons learned themselves, and I know that that equivalent exercise is going on across Government as well.

Q154 **Chair:** We talked about the risk register, Mr Chisholm, when you were—whenever it was. Time marches on very fast on this Committee. Are there lessons from covid that you are applying to other issues on the risk register?



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Alex Chisholm: Yes, because the testing of those different scenarios and the way in which we look at, for example, combination effects is one of the main learnings that we have taken from that. Also, it is to do with not only being able to itemise the risk but, of course, the extensiveness of planning. Again, that is another area where the testing of that and assurance against it was one of the things that we spoke about in our evidence in February.

Chair: It feels like a million years ago, but it is not that far away. We continue to keep looking at the risk register, because we are, as you know, very interested on this Committee. Can I thank our witnesses very much indeed for their time and for the rather lengthy segue at the beginning of the session? Ms Hayes gets a point in the civil service books, but the next time you come in front of us, I hope that you will be more forthcoming with numbers. Can I thank you all very much indeed? The transcript will be up on the website in the next couple of days, uncorrected, and our report will be produced at some point after the recess.