

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The work of the Cabinet Office, HC 41

Tuesday 18 May 2021

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Members present: Mr William Wragg (Chair); Ronnie Cowan; Rachel Hopkins; Mr David Jones; John McDonnell; David Mundell; Tom Randall, Lloyd Russell-Moyle; Karin Smyth; John Stevenson.

Questions 1 - 90

Witnesses

I: Alex Chisholm, Permanent Secretary, Cabinet Office; and Sarah Harrison, Chief Operating Officer, Cabinet Office.

Examination of Witnesses

Witnesses: Alex Chisholm and Sarah Harrison.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning and welcome to this meeting of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. I am here in a Committee Room in Portcullis House with a small number of staff required to facilitate the meeting, while most of my colleagues join us from their offices and homes around the country. Our witnesses are here with us in the Committee Room, and I would ask them to introduce themselves.

Alex Chisholm: Alex Chisholm, Permanent Secretary to the Cabinet Office.

Sarah Harrison: Sarah Harrison, Chief Operating Officer to the Cabinet Office.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you very much. Mr Chisholm, one of the key functions of the Cabinet Office is to carry out cross-Government co-ordination. What assessment have you made of how effectively this function is carried out?

Alex Chisholm: A key question. I know you have had a number of hearings on this already. On some of the ways in which we have been



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doing these assessments of how well the co-ordination is working out, the IPA—the Infrastructure and Projects Authority—has a particular role in that regard. On EU exit, one of our key co-ordination responsibilities, it conducted 33 reviews last year. Also in relation to Covid, another of our key co-ordination responsibilities across Government, there have been 16 reviews by the IPA, and it also reviews other programmes like Places for Growth.

That is a big part of it, the work that has been done by the IPA, and obviously we take action in consequence of each one of those reviews. We have done the integrated review, which is looking at a different area of co-ordination about how we work in relation to international relations and national security. We have had reviews done by independent persons. Lord Maude has done a review. I know he gave evidence to the Committee in January. We have had a review done by the Digital Economy Council about how we co-ordinate in relation to digital matters and, most recently, the review by Michael Barber on the way in which the delivery operations work at the centre.

Q3 Chair: What changes have you made, since you came into post a year or so ago, to that aspect of cross-Government co-ordination?

Alex Chisholm: One of the key things we have been driving towards—not just me, but other people in the Cabinet Office, No. 10 and the Treasury—is a one centre approach with a clear set of priorities and plans that are agreed across Government and published, and then we have clear metrics and can assess progress against that.

That system, which we call outcome delivery plans—I spoke about it at a previous evidence session—has been put in place and we will be publishing those plans very shortly. That has been a significant area of change and improvement.

One of the pieces of governance in support of that is something called a performance and risk planning board, which I set up and co-chair with the head of public expenditure in the Treasury. Again, that has been to try to oversee that process of the production of outcome delivery plans, but it is also about a better, more joined-up approach to risk management across Government, which is now reviewed quarterly across the whole of Government.

Some other changes that I have initiated have been in the digital area. We now have a Government digital steering group, which works to co-ordinate the efforts across different Government Departments, and a sub-board of the Civil Service Board on digital and data. Since we have completed the EU transition process, we have put in place a new EU secretariat, which also has units responsible for Ireland, Northern Ireland and the opportunities arising from our departure from the EU. We have also established a new Union directorate to give more focus and coherence to our work in that regard and, most recently, a levelling-up



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co-ordination team in the Cabinet Office. So quite a number of changes just in the last year.

Q4 **Chair:** What further necessary changes do you envisage?

Alex Chisholm: One just recently announced is the new No. 10 delivery unit. Obviously, that has just been announced and, indeed, it has an interim head. That will be a significant organisation going forward. The key person in the Government is the Prime Minister and his time needs to be well used and focused on the key priorities that he can make a difference on. That is very significant.

We have also done a major overhaul of the functions. As a consequence of the Maude review, which you heard about in January, we are taking steps to strengthen the mandates and standards that are put in place for each function, in some cases to enhance the capability, to make changes in leadership and a number of other respects. That is an unfolding programme.

Another area of significant co-ordination oversight is in relation to the cross-cutting issues that arise on PFI—public finance initiative—projects as they come up for expiry. We have a large number that will be expiring over the next 20 years; some have already done so. We established, again, an oversight board for that to try to make sure that we are supporting individual Departments, arm's length bodies, even down to school level, as they come up to this PFI expiry, learning the lessons, making sure the right resources are in place and so on.

Q5 **Chair:** How much of these changes are in response to lessons learned throughout the Covid pandemic and, perhaps, any shortcomings—you will understand what I mean—in terms of the ability of the Cabinet Office to co-ordinate?

Alex Chisholm: We have made improvements as we have gone along in relation to Covid. Again, I spoke particularly at a previous session about the changes in governance arrangements as we moved through the gears, so to speak, from a civil contingency secretariat, COBRA-led process to one with the ministerial implementation groups, the four of those, and then to this two-part structure, Covid-O for operations and Covid-S for strategy. That has served pretty well but, obviously, it represents quite a lot of change in the face of dealing with the pandemic.

Other important lessons that we have been looking to learn as we have gone along have been in relation to procurement. I wrote to the Committee just a few days ago with the outcome of this major exercise, a big review done for us by Nigel Boardman in relation to procurement in five cross-cutting areas within Government. As you probably saw in relation to that, there were 28 recommendations. We have adopted all of them and are now moving into implementation mode for that.

Q6 **Karin Smyth:** We particularly want to pick up on some of that co-ordination around contingency planning if we can. We had Katherine



Hammond saying last year that the Treasury and BEIS had been part of Exercise Cygnus and the pandemic flu programme since 2017, but when you and your colleague Tom Scholar appeared in front of the PAC neither of you were aware that the Treasury and BEIS teams had been involved in Cygnus and that no economic preparation had been made when the pandemic hit. From your view in Cabinet Office, do you think that demonstrated effective co-ordination and implementation of civil contingency planning and policy?

Alex Chisholm: Exercise Cygnus was conducted in October 2016—it has now been published, so you can see for yourself—and was led by the Department of Health and Social Care together with the Cabinet Office and was focused on one particular scenario, which was the period shortly before the peak of an influenza pandemic. A lot of Departments were involved in that, including BEIS and HMT, but as I said to the PAC last summer, the main focus was not on the economic impacts. Indeed, if you look at the recommendations and actions, none of them relate to economic activity. So that is the case.

Certainly, when we look back, there has been a lot of public discussion about that exercise. I think it was a useful and important exercise in itself. It did a lot of things to help us prepare for a pandemic, in particular around the management of communications, the legislative easements where we had draft clauses ready, management of excess deaths, where there are imbalances across the UK, and the ability to mobilise resources, including reserves coming out. A lot of useful things came out of that exercise, but it did not particularly focus on the economic impacts. Indeed, in order to have done so usefully it would have needed to have predicted that we had an asymptomatic coronavirus requiring a lockdown, which would have been a far-fetched scenario at that time, I suspect, but that is the one that has arisen. That has had such huge economic impacts.

Just to add one other word, I would not want you, the Committee or watchers to think that was our only type of economic preparation because, of course, every year the Treasury oversees a huge amount of economic preparedness work based on all kinds of other experiences that we have had over recent years, going back to the global financial crisis, preparing for different versions of exit from the EU, dealing with consequences like Carillion, monitoring economic impacts and work done by other countries. From my perspective, the response by the Government, led by the Treasury in March and April, right at the early stages, was very effective in putting in place the reliefs that have proven so important around furlough schemes and grants to businesses, and other types of vital economic support.

Q7 **Karin Smyth:** Obviously, it took four years to publish the learnings from Cygnus. I asked the Prime Minister last week about preparedness and he said that preparedness would be part of a future inquiry, so perhaps we will understand better what happened in those four years to prepare.



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The question was really about the Cabinet Office role in co-ordinating and implementing civil contingency, failing to take account of any economic impact. In those previous incarnations around an influenza pandemic from 2014 and, indeed, from 2009, if I remember correctly, potential economic disruption was forecast and we had the SARS outbreak elsewhere. It is not beyond the wit of most of us to understand that there would be economic disruption and potential lockdowns.

The question is: what assessment have you now made of why the Cabinet Office failed to ensure that a broader look at civil contingency planning was carried out? How do you assure us that that assessment has been made and lessons learned?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, I tried to describe the particular scenario that was adopted, which seemed predictable and useful to prepare. I am not aware of anybody who was predicting in 2016 that we would face a lockdown-type situation. It would have been enormously far-sighted to be able to anticipate that.

Q8 Karin Smyth: I totally agree that the extent of what we have experienced is perhaps beyond, but lessons around this type of virus and the potential to isolate it and then to potentially close down premises was learned quite a long time ago. That may be something that we find out in future inquiries about how those lessons, particularly from eastern countries, were used, if they were forewarned within the system and whether the contingency planning system took account of that. We may come back to that point at another time. I accept this is larger than most people would ever have imagined, but not that it was completely unpredicted.

Alex Chisholm: Thank you very much. Just to reassure you, we are not only waiting for the full independent inquiry, which the Prime Minister announced is expected for spring next year, but we are also—I hope you noticed in the integrated review—committed to doing a full review of our national resilience structure, working with the devolved Administrations, combined authorities, local authorities and other parties. Under the guidance of the new national security adviser, that review is already under way so we will be drawing lessons from that as well. We do not need to wait entirely for the independent inquiry, although, as you rightly say, I am sure that will have some things to say about this matter as well.

Q9 Karin Smyth: Has there been a further assessment by the Cabinet Office of those Departments to ensure better civil contingency planning? Is that ongoing?

Alex Chisholm: It is ongoing. The national risk register also gets reviewed. It was reviewed last year, and a new version of it was published in December.

Q10 Karin Smyth: Obviously, that was also very late because we would expect one every two years, and it was a late publication of that risk



register. We understand, and this Committee has looked at, how poor some of that co-ordination has been. What we would like is some assurance that the assessment has been made and that new mechanisms and measures have been or are being put in place.

Alex Chisholm: Certainly, enhancements have been made. Whether or not those are going to be fully sufficient is something that is going to be subject to the review that I mentioned is being done to follow up on the integrated review, led by the NSA. We are certainly open to improvements in that system. Indeed, reflecting on the extent of the pandemic, a low probability, massive impact event like that, I am sure one of the things we will conclude is that we need to have a higher level of resilience right across the system and that things that in good times you have no need of—we need to be more attentive to the need to build up stockpiles, contingency supplies, extra resources, which in normal years you would be criticised for doing because significant public expenditure would be involved in that, but you will have it for the time when you face a massive impact event like this. I am sure there will be a resetting of the dial in terms of how much we prepare for low probability, high impact events.

Q11 Karin Smyth: Which is, of course, the point of preparedness and resilience response, isn't it?

You mentioned that the levelling-up unit is part of the Cabinet Office. The Social Mobility Commission also came in before Christmas. Do you see those two units continuing, and how do you see their relationship?

Alex Chisholm: That is an interesting question. The levelling-up unit has just been formed now, so it has been formed around this. There is a connection, because one aspect of levelling up clearly is to create opportunities for people from less advantaged groups across the whole UK.

I welcome the fact that the Social Mobility Commission has come into the Cabinet Office and, indeed, they have been doing some ground-breaking research into the whole area of opportunities for people from less advantaged social and economic backgrounds and will be producing a report very shortly, which I think will be published. You will have a chance to see the recommendations. I think that will be important.

The levelling-up unit is trying to co-ordinate a much bigger area because they are looking at economic activity across the whole country, as well as social activity. Again, I am sure there will be significant publications over the course of the next few months setting out their initial thinking and a lot of analysis that supports it.

Q12 David Mundell: How would you assess the effectiveness of the Cabinet Office's co-ordination of the common frameworks programme?

Alex Chisholm: Probably in two ways. I would say no lack of effort has been going into these things. There has been a tremendous amount of



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effort by colleagues, with weekly meetings and working right across Government on this, but led by the Cabinet Office. They have certainly been energetic. In terms of the progress, I would say it has been steady rather than spectacular. I suppose it is easy to see with the EU exit work, with Covid work, that all four Administrations have plenty else on their hands. Recently, of course, we have had elections to parliamentary bodies in Scotland and Wales.

Notwithstanding all that, decent progress has been made. The target is to have 32 frameworks in place; eight of those have been agreed by all four Administrations, 15 have been provisionally agreed by the UK Government and Governments in Wales and Scotland, and six of the UK-Northern Ireland only frameworks have been agreed by the UK Government. You will be aware of changes in the Government in Northern Ireland in prospect, with the First Minister stepping down shortly and a new First Minister to be appointed.

When the other Governments have settled down into their new responsibilities, I expect we will catch up on that progress. The agreements that are currently in place on an interim basis should also take full effect, having gone through the Joint Ministerial Committee process.

Q13 David Mundell: It has not been this Committee's experience that the Cabinet Office has been able to ensure actions are taken in a consistent manner across Whitehall, such as notifying this Committee, for example, about published frameworks or producing a consistent quality of framework summaries.

Alex Chisholm: I think it is fair to say that each of the different Administrations, to achieve that level of agreement in a timely way to be able to provide all the information the Committee has every right to expect, we could do a better job of that. We recognise that, and we have adopted through the Cabinet Office frameworks programme team a new template for trying to do that in a more consistent way, to make sure that the information you have every right to expect is provided to you. The notification that the Committee received from Minister Lopez on 22 March on public procurement was one such following that new template.

I am also very happy, if it pleases the Committee, as an action from this hearing to reinforce the importance across all Government Departments of a timely provision of these common frameworks as soon as they have been agreed and giving a clear view about what the necessary steps going forward are for their full adoption.

Q14 David Mundell: What is your scope to do anything if they do not respond? In some of the previous correspondence undertakings we are simply told that Departments have been asked to do something, and then clearly some of them have not done it. In your role, can you not require them to do it?



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Alex Chisholm: We will certainly be providing a consistent template for doing that, much closer management of the process, and I will take your words in the Committee here today to ensure that Departments take their responsibilities very seriously. If it is helpful, I can suggest to Cabinet Office Ministers that they also reinforce it with their colleagues across Government.

Q15 **David Mundell:** Is it not indicative of perhaps wider issues in terms of the Cabinet Office's role around co-ordination and consistency that you are in a position to ask people to take that approach but you cannot require them to do it?

Alex Chisholm: It is a mixed economy, if I may say so, in the sense that where the Cabinet Office is enforcing a Cabinet decision and is writing around to say, "This is what has been agreed," which happens every working day and plenty more besides with the constant activity of Cabinet Committees, it can say, "This is what has been decided, this is what you must do." That is not asking, that is telling. That is also the case for certain kinds of Cabinet Office controls, where our approval is a condition for it to be able to proceed. That is true for a huge amount of procurement activity, for example.

Where we are working more in a facilitating-type role, trying to encourage best practice, it is more of an ask. But I think we can make that ask a very firm ask, and it seems to me that is a very reasonable expectation from the Committee and we will reinforce the position on that.

Q16 **David Mundell:** Obviously, we will come back to you if your ask is not followed through by the Departments.

I have one final question in relation to Northern Ireland. You mentioned the change of First Minister. We all hope that the Executive continue in place, but one of the reasons previously given for delays in the framework process was the non-functioning of the Executive for a period. Therefore, I wonder whether there are any contingency arrangements in place if that were to occur again so it is not a blockage in the whole process.

Alex Chisholm: I clearly share your hope and expectation that the Executive will continue smoothly in the months ahead. However, probably the most available contingency would be to proceed on the basis of what has been agreed between the UK Government and the Scottish and Welsh Governments. That is something we have done in relation to eight of the frameworks already, so that is the available contingency, I would say, in that unexpected and unwelcome eventuality.

Q17 **Chair:** Ms Harrison, if you want to come in at any point on these questions, I think they could be applicable. Mr Chisholm, the Covid-status certification review, the global travel taskforce, the events research programme and the social distancing review are all the responsibility of the Cabinet Office. You are conducting a number of reviews, as I have



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listed. How are you co-ordinating those with other Departments?

Alex Chisholm: Just to offer a small correction, the events research programme is led by DCMS.

Chair: The Cabinet Office has no role in that particular programme?

Alex Chisholm: We are involved in all cross-cutting reviews, but that is a DCMS-led exercise. Vaccine certification is absolutely one of ours, as is the Boardman review and the one on social distancing.

Parliament was updated in the first and last week of April on the progress with the two Covid-related reviews. I wrote to you about the Boardman 2 ones. The Boardman 2 review of all our procurement is a completed review and we are in implementation mode. The other two are ongoing, and there has been a huge amount of consultation and research right across Government to go into that. There has been a huge amount of public response. We have had, I think, tens of thousands of responses to the vaccine certification one. There has been no lack of involvement and views, understandably, on that issue.

Q18 **Chair:** The Covid-status certification review and the social distancing review are both presumably crucial in terms of step 4 on 21 June, which will come around soon enough. When will those two reviews report?

Alex Chisholm: I agree that they are going to be very relevant to those decisions, so my expectation is that they will be concluded in time for those decisions to be made.

Q19 **Chair:** What is that time?

Alex Chisholm: 21 June is the next significant date, but I think there is a commitment always to tell people a week ahead of what is going to be happening, so we can work back from that to say that really it is only about three weeks away.

Q20 **Chair:** If you are going to do it a week before the 21st, I presume work on those reviews is more or less complete at the moment.

Alex Chisholm: It is certainly reaching a zenith.

Q21 **Chair:** We will look forward to seeing that. Can you confirm that the full data of those reviews will be made available in advance of, or alongside, the reports being produced?

Alex Chisholm: I am not involved in it directly, but my expectation would be that all the data to support the decision and to help communicate the basis of that decision will be shared with the public, as has been the case with all other significant decisions taken in recent months.

Q22 **Mr David Jones:** Mr Chisholm, could we discuss the case of Mr Bill Crothers, who joined the Cabinet Office in 2010? He had a variety of roles there, but he was effectively, for most of his time, the Government's



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chief procurement officer. He went on to work part-time for Greensill Capital while he was still a senior official at the Cabinet Office. Could you describe the procedure that was undergone to authorise Mr Crothers's work at Greensill?

Alex Chisholm: I know you took evidence on that from the Cabinet Secretary and from the head of the propriety and ethics team about a month ago. I cannot add substantially to what they have said about the matter, because what we have decided to do, or the Prime Minister decided to do, was to invite an independent review of this area. That review is being done by Nigel Boardman, the same Nigel Boardman I referred to earlier as doing the work on procurement.

He is due to complete that review next month. I look forward, as you do, to seeing a very clear explanation of the different processes that were followed. I know he has access to all the information, which I have not been through myself, and has taken the opportunity to interview a number of the people involved about what happened and for their explanations of what decisions were taken. Like you, I will be very interested to hear what he has to say and will pay great attention to it.

Q23 Mr David Jones: Can you at least tell the Committee whether the internal procedures have changed since Mr Crothers had his experience at Greensill Capital? Have any further changes been made since the scandal came to light?

Alex Chisholm: Changes have been made. For example, when we talk about the appointment of Crown representatives, of which Lex Greensill was one at one time, a review of that was done, an internal audit review that we commissioned in the Cabinet Office, or my predecessors commissioned in the Cabinet Office, and a whole enhanced process was put in place to help manage any perceived conflicts of interest, including a six-monthly review of them, which is in place and functioning effectively. That would be an example of some of the changes that have been made since.

The fundamental responsibilities around managing conflicts of interest among members of staff are still embedded in the Civil Service Code, the management code and practice. That will adapt itself in the light of the findings from the ongoing work by ACOBA—I know they have some views about enhancements to the business appointment rules—and from the Boardman review and, indeed, from any findings or recommendations from the work being done on Standards Matter 2, which is the work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

Q24 Mr David Jones: You mention conflicts of interest. Do I take it, therefore, that it is recognised that Mr Crothers's secondment to Greensill Capital was in fact at least a perceived conflict of interest?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, and that is what you heard from the head of propriety and ethics when he was before you a month ago.



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Q25 Mr David Jones: Would a similar application for secondment be approved now if such a request were to be made?

Alex Chisholm: It is quite hard to make hypothetical judgments, isn't it, because we now know that Greensill has not worked out at all well? If we try to imagine hypothetically what it was like back at the time, they probably did not foresee that the company would end up in liquidation, as it is very sadly at the moment. Maybe at that time it was also not foreseen that the company would be doing Government work. From the evidence that you and others in Parliament have heard, it was about two and a half years after that time that Greensill won its first public contract. That might not have been as obvious in foresight as it is in hindsight.

Those judgments and the whole consideration is, again, something that we wait for in the findings and recommendations of the Boardman review.

Q26 Mr David Jones: We know there have been issues raised about the roles of Government Ministers. Lord Agnew in particular, you will be aware, has an interest in the Public Group, which is a firm that advises small firms and start-ups about how to win Government contracts. Do you think it is right that a Minister should have a financial interest in a company that can benefit from Government spending decisions?

Alex Chisholm: First of all, it is good that you are able to quote from that information, because it is further evidence that a full declaration has been made. I know that Ministers' interests haven't been published for a while because they needed to be assessed by the independent adviser on ministerial interests, which he is completing. I think he said to Parliament last Thursday that he expected to complete that by the end of this month, so you will not have long to wait.

I have inspected the up-to-date House of Lords register of all of Lord Agnew's interests. I have also seen how he has followed at all times the advice given to him on propriety and ethics since the time he became a Minister. He has adopted blind and discretionary trusts as well, where necessary, as mitigations. Furthermore, there has been careful management of his interests and individual decisions to make sure that no conflict would arise. That, too, is something that was looked at in the first Boardman review into our communications contract, which found that he had no involvement in the making of those contracts.

Q27 Mr David Jones: You are effectively saying that there are extensive arrangements in place to avoid any conflict of interest arising?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, it is a combination of declaration, mitigation and management. That is the triple-lock approach.

Q28 Mr David Jones: Are you entirely satisfied that those arrangements will always be effective?



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Alex Chisholm: I am satisfied with the way they are working now, but I obviously look to see what the independent review will conclude, because it is an independent review and that is the purpose of doing it.

Q29 **Chair:** Mr Chisholm, you mentioned in terms of Mr Crothers's apparent double hatting as both a civil servant and working for Greensill in paid employment that things had not transpired particularly well for Greensill and its liquidation. Surely whether things transpired well or not is not material in this discussion, as to whether it was appropriate for him to be doing both those roles. Greensill could have been a tremendous success, as it happens it has been a complete failure, but surely that isn't a consideration in this debate, is it?

Alex Chisholm: It probably influences people's thinking. At the time it would probably have been seen as a start-up bringing innovative approaches to supply chain finance, which is something that was of interest to the Government in improving its approach to helping SMEs through supply chain finance. Now, with all that has transpired, obviously it has affected people's view about Greensill as an operation. Furthermore, we now know that two contracts were won by Greensill at later times—I think in 2018 and afterwards—but that is hindsight, it would not have been apparent at the time. At that time, they were doing no work for Government and presumably it was felt there was no prospect of any work for Government.

Q30 **Chair:** Did you have any observations to make about the different thresholds for declaration on the Members' register compared with the ministerial register?

Alex Chisholm: I haven't really considered the matter of the different thresholds. It is the kind of thing that I would imagine Lord Geidt will be looking at.

Q31 **John McDonnell:** The Boardman review of communications and procurement by the Cabinet Office was critical of the way in which conflicts of interest were identified and managed. What was the evidence that Boardman drew on in making those conclusions?

Alex Chisholm: With your agreement, I would like to bring in my colleague. She has not had much chance to date, but she has been overseeing a lot of this work.

Sarah Harrison: Yes, the Nigel Boardman review, which was conducted in September, looked across our policies but its focus was particularly on the evidence. Some facts were drawn from a review of the award of a number of contracts in a small, specialised unit within the Government Communication Service. There was a business unit focused on insight and evaluation. That was the source of Nigel Boardman's fact finding and the evidence that gave rise to the recommendations.

Additionally, he was able to draw on the National Audit Office's report, which was published in November of last year. As a result of his



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recommendations, which acknowledged that policies, practices and processes existed, what we needed to do was to take some further action across the Cabinet Office to strengthen the way in which those were applied. His very practical recommendations have been implemented, with the exception of a few. I was able last week to write to the Committee to update on the progress in relation to that.

I am pleased to say that, at the time of my letter, about 68%, 19 of the 28 recommendations, had been enacted. A further five are due to be completed by the end of this month, and the balance by the end of the calendar year. The reason for that is because they also envisage putting in place some new systems, a new contract management system, that will further support the way in which existing rules, checks and balances are applied.

Q32 John McDonnell: Let me take you back to the question: what was the actual evidence? What was actually found that drew the Boardman review to those conclusions? What was the actual evidence?

Sarah Harrison: The detail was the evidence that had been gathered in relation to the awarding of two particular contracts. Those contracts themselves are also now the subject of legal action by way of judicial review. What Nigel Boardman looked at was the evidence base that gave rise to the award of those contracts.

Q33 John McDonnell: What was that?

Sarah Harrison: They were looking at the circumstances that applied at the time in relation to the way in which those contracts were awarded. Then what Nigel Boardman went on to do through his work is draw out the lessons that needed to be undertaken.

Q34 John McDonnell: What were the events that took place that raised his concerns and drew him to the conclusions he made?

Sarah Harrison: It is probably worth reflecting that this was the very beginning of the Covid pandemic, and at the time there was a tremendous need to look at additional communication services to get the vital public messages out, particularly around safety and saving lives. The result we saw was a substantial increase in the amount of communications activity, which of course has sustained throughout the pandemic. Specifically, though, it was the award of some particular contracts to some providers for some particular services relating to polling, to help with messaging, that were the subject of the fact-finding work. It is those that are the subject of the current legal action, and it is that evidence base that was available to Nigel Boardman for him to conduct his recommendations and his review.

Q35 John McDonnell: Let me try again. That was the process he looked at, but what were the specifics that drew him to the conclusions he made? What was it that caused him concern? What specifically was it?



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Sarah Harrison: If you look at the recommendations he made, that shows the areas he focused on when he looked at the fact-finding work. He saw that the policies existed, but what needed to be done was tightening up of the practical actions and the processes to put in place greater controls.

If I can give you an example that we have just been discussing in relation to the management of conflicts of interest, what his recommendations highlighted was the existence of the policies but the need in the procurement process to put in place some very specific additional checks. For example, we now have a three-gateway approach to ensure that throughout the award of the contract, not just at the point it is initially awarded, conflicts of interest are checked.

Q36 **John McDonnell:** Let me put this to you, then, because I want to draw out the actual evidence. That is what I am asking for. There have been cases of legal challenges by the Good Law Project, haven't there? They focus on two particular public opinion polling firms, Hanbury Strategy and Public First. Both have been identified as having strong links to the Conservative party and personal links with members of the Government. That is the evidence he found that caused him concern, that caused him to draw the conclusions he did and that caused widespread public concern. Hanbury, for example, was awarded £580,000 by the Cabinet Office for polling on public attitudes without a tender process.

The Good Law Project claimed that Hanbury lacked the capacity even to do that work. Hanbury itself continued to advise private clients on Government policies while it continued to play its public role for Government. The other was the Public First contract, which eventually paid over £500,000 to that company. The contract was awarded retrospectively for work that had already been carried out. It was established by a former special adviser to Michael Gove. Dominic Cummings came into this as well, because he requested that the work be given to Public First. He said, "I am a special adviser and as such I am not allowed to direct civil servants. However, as a result of my suggestion, I expected people to hire Public First. The nature of my role is that sometimes people take what I say as an instruction, and that is a reasonable inference as people assume I am often speaking for the Prime Minister."

What the Boardman review looked at was those examples of close links between a company and the Conservative party, close links between special advisers to those companies and a tender process that was under the direction in one instance, by the looks of it, of the special adviser. That is what he was looking at, wasn't it, that caused concern?

Sarah Harrison: Those are exactly the facts that were examined, and they are exactly the facts that are now being tested in legal proceedings. We await the judgment in respect of the Public First contract; the Hanbury contract judicial review is ongoing.



The reason why it was important to ask Nigel Boardman to come in at that time was to make sure we did not wait for the outcome of those judicial review proceedings. If there were lessons learned, practical action to be taken to improve further and build upon the policies that existed and give greater assurance in relation to them, then that was something that needed to happen. That is why we have taken forward his recommendations.

Once we receive the judgment, if there are further lessons to be learned in relation to Public First or subsequently, we will continue to act upon those.

Q37 John McDonnell: The reason I have laboured the point is because some people watch this Committee and maybe read the minutes afterwards, and I do not think they would fully understand from your earlier responses—and I am not criticising you for this—the context in which we are asking these questions.

Are there other contracts that have been signed where conflict of interest concerns have been identified subsequently? If so, which ones are they?

Sarah Harrison: No, there are no others where conflicts of interest have been identified subsequent to the signing of the contract, to reassure the Committee and wider Members in relation to that matter.

Again, it is absolutely vital that we pay very close attention to the management of conflicts of interest. What the Boardman recommendations have added is to ensure that, not only at the start of the thinking of the award of a contract but also before any recommendations are made in relation to an award of a contract, do we now establish whether there are any conflicts. Again, we check whether conflicts, both actual or perceived, are there. Lastly, before contract signature, we check a third time as to whether any potential, actual or perceived conflicts are there.

The practical application of the Boardman recommendations mean that the commercial director tests those issues. If there are matters that are a cause of concern, or issues that need to be addressed, then ultimately they will be raised with the Permanent Secretary. The result of Boardman is to put those additional arrangements in place to give taxpayers and the public wider assurance on the way in which conflicts are managed on a day to day basis in relation to the award of contracts.

Q38 John McDonnell: That is very helpful to know. Is the acceptance of the Boardman recommendations an admission that the procurement of services from Public First and Hanbury Strategy was compromised?

Sarah Harrison: No, our view remains that it was right to have awarded those contracts and to have justified the circumstances at the time to award those contracts under the urgency provisions. It is perhaps important to remember, as of course we all do, the circumstances that existed at that time. This was when effective, targeted public messaging



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was probably the greatest protection, including to members of the public that are harder to reach, and it was the most effective way of keeping the public safe and saving lives. Since then there are other protections, not least in relation to testing and the vaccination programme, but public messaging was crucial and the urgency of the situation at that time justified the award of those contracts under the emergency provisions.

Q39 John McDonnell: This is not a remark for you personally, I think it is about the system overall. I find it incredulous that other agencies without links to the Conservative party could not be found.

Let us move on, shall we? The review said that stronger enforcement of the existing approach to declaration of conflicts of interest was needed. Who is now responsible for that enforcement?

Sarah Harrison: Senior leaders who lead business units within the Cabinet Office such as myself, for example, have a responsibility to ensure that their staff know the conflicts of interest management policy and have a responsibility to advise if conflicts appear, including drawing on advice from Cabinet Office HR should that be necessary. They also have a responsibility to maintain local records in relation to conflicts. Additionally, the commercial director, through the three-stage process that I described, together with commercial experts within our Cabinet Office commercial team, check at every stage whether conflicts are present or there is any risk of those and will then take additional action if that is necessary. Ultimately, if there are issues, they are referred to the Permanent Secretary.

Those additional checks build on the local management responsibility. For further assurance, the responsibilities I have described for business leaders within the Cabinet Office are now further codified within a set of business rules, which were published at the start of this financial year and set out in one single place all the obligations that delegated budget holders and senior leaders have in relation to compliance, conflicts of interest and other controls. What we have also done is ask every senior business leader within the Cabinet Office to sign those business rules in order to accept compliance with them. It is an additional action on top of those already recommended by Nigel Boardman.

Q40 John McDonnell: Just overviewing all this, are the conflicts of interest primarily among Ministers, special advisers or mainstream civil servants?

Sarah Harrison: As I described in answer to your question earlier, no conflicts of interest have been identified in relation to any contracts that have been signed or awarded. It is worth recapping that the National Audit Office, when it conducted its work and produced its report in November of last year, was also very clear that it found no evidence of the involvement of Ministers in the award of any contract or, indeed, evidence of conflicts of interest.

Q41 Ronnie Cowan: I have to say that last response took my breath away, to say no conflicts of interest have been found after the evidence that has



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been regaled through this Committee and others. The UK Government's procurement process has been under extra scrutiny during the pandemic, and examples of contracts going to Hanbury Strategy and Public First were highlighted by the Good Law Project. They are two among many contracts that I believe have been called into question. I heard in answer to Mr Jones's question that there were reviews, including the work of ACOBA. There were recommendations, including the Committee on Standards in Public Life, and I have just heard about the codifying of additional actions. What action, if any, has been taken to address the issue of enforcement of the conflict of interest regulations regarding Cabinet Office procurement?

Sarah Harrison: As I have described, enforcement is absolutely crucial and what we have done is embedded the obligations in relation to conflicts of interest into business rules that every senior leader has had to sign. Enforcement and compliance, if you like, is also supported by the Cabinet Office commercial function, where I have commercial experts who sit and review all the awards of contracts and the different stages to satisfy that no conflicts have arisen.

Beyond that, as per Nigel Boardman's recommendations, there are single points of contact in place to oversee contracts. We have single points of contact in place at the moment for the Cabinet Office's gold contracts, which are our highest value and most complex contracts. We have single points of contact in place for all of the communications contracts, which is the area that Nigel Boardman particularly investigated, and those single points of contact are also trained consistent with the Government commercial function requirements.

Q42 **Ronnie Cowan:** Sorry, we are short of time. I hear what you are saying, and you are just reiterating what we already know. I am asking a straightforward question here. If, once in a blue moon, we magically discover that somebody has put a contract the way of some friend or relative and a Cabinet member or Minister has benefited from that, what will happen to that person? We tell people not to drive over the speed limit, but we enforce it as well. Recommendations, codifying things and reviewing things are not enough if someone has broken the rules. What happens if somebody is found to have broken those rules and actually benefited, or helped somebody else benefit, from their position in the Cabinet?

Sarah Harrison: If that is the case, it would be a matter for our HR disciplinary processes. That is the action we would look to take.

Q43 **Ronnie Cowan:** Would you expect them to resign?

Sarah Harrison: It would be entirely dependent on the circumstances, as I am sure you can appreciate, but our Civil Service Code, the procurement regulations that we adopt and the policies that we apply, the processes we put in place are all targeted on ensuring that no conflicts of interest exist and, if there are, they are identified, managed



and mitigated. That might include, for example, removing somebody from the process of awarding a contract. It might, in extremis, require us to reprocure a contract. In terms of individuals, members of staff and civil servants, clearly such behaviour as you describe would be something we would want to look at from an HR perspective and, if appropriate, take action.

- Q44 **Ronnie Cowan:** I hear what you are saying, but we are dealing with vast sums of money, taxpayers' money. I would be really happy if you would just say that, if a Cabinet Minister is directly benefiting from using his influence to allocate funds, that person would be expected to resign. If I heard it as adamantly as that, I would have a lot more faith in the system you are describing to me.

Sarah Harrison: Just to reassure, there is no evidence of that.

Ronnie Cowan: I did say "if".

Sarah Harrison: As I said, the National Audit Office specifically did not find that. Again, the Ministerial Code makes these matters very clear. If there are issues of conflicts of interest—it is in the Civil Service Code as well—then those are matters we would want to take action in relation to.

- Q45 **Ronnie Cowan:** As the civil service Chief Operating Officer, what role, if any, do you have in ensuring propriety in procurement decisions by other Departments?

Sarah Harrison: My focus is on the Cabinet Office, and I have described the situation in the Cabinet Office. Perhaps Alex might pick up the wider point.

Alex Chisholm: I agree with everything that Sarah has said. I have a couple of things to add about the cross-cutting responsibilities. Obviously, they apply to Ministers and civil servants across the whole service and to special advisers, who have their own code that matches the same requirements.

There are a couple of ways we have tried to reinforce that recently. One has been through these exercises, the first Boardman report and the second one, which have been published and promulgated across Government. The second way is that, right from the very beginning of the crisis, we understood there might be a need for people to adopt direct awards using the so-called regulation 32 procedure because it was an emergency. With that, there was a need for careful consideration of conflicts and other issues. Guidance was issued on that in the early part of last year, and at various points periodically, again in January this year, and a new set of guidance, which goes out to all the commercial directors across Government, is being finalised for this month.

That is one of the ways in which we try to make sure that people are up there with the latest thinking, including findings from court cases. We have had litigation already, one of which has resulted in a judgment with



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consequences. All those things are embedded in the guidance that comes out of the Government commercial function to all members of—

Q46 **Ronnie Cowan:** Has that guidance changed due to lessons learned in the last 14 months?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, we have issued new versions of it because it has changed. They have not been identical, they have been enhanced, they have been clearer, they have tried to learn from—

Q47 **Ronnie Cowan:** Can you give an example of what has been changed due to lessons learned?

Alex Chisholm: One of the things is around the quality and timeliness of the publication of those contracts. At the beginning of the crisis, the focus was being able to get hold of the services that were needed to deal with the crisis. It is clear, looking back, that the record keeping was sometimes incomplete and also that the attention given to publishing those contracts—there is a process that has to be followed to redact information, et cetera, and to agree certain things with the commercial parties—was not done as the top priority, because the top priority was to get hold of the PPE, to get hold of the testing materials, to get hold of the other things that we were procuring.

Clearly, as we have learned over time, that has caused questions to be asked about the reasons people had for selecting those particular parties. Was it good value? Was it good quality? We have tried to accelerate the rate at which we have put those contracts out into the public domain so they can be there for scrutiny by anybody, including for legal processes as we have been experiencing.

Q48 **Ronnie Cowan:** Are they scrutinised before they are awarded?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, of course, absolutely. To give an example from PPE, which is in court this week, the practice there was an eight-step process that was applied to all of the 16,000 or so companies and individuals that came to us with offers of PPE. A very careful assessment of the viability of those offers, the value, the cost, the price, the speed at which it would arrive, the quality, their previous track record and so on was followed, resulting in the contracts for all the PPE, which played such an important part as a response to the pandemic.

Q49 **Tom Randall:** Mr Chisholm, as you know, this Committee recently published a report about data transparency and accountability. There are regulatory standards provided by the UK Statistics Authority and the Office for Statistics Regulation on the production of official statistics. In response to our recent report on data transparency, you wrote to the Committee about the role of the Data Standards Authority in setting standards. Why is the DSA required in addition to the ONS and the UK Statistics Authority?



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Alex Chisholm: A very good question. I can see that it could be a little complicated, and I am delighted to try to set it out, in a helpful way I hope.

First of all, you have the Office for National Statistics, which has a big responsibility to collect, prepare, produce, publish and analyse statistics, as the name suggests, including at the moment all the work done on the census, which has been incredibly successful. That is the ONS.

The ONS has a supervisory board, the UK Statistics Authority, and the board adopts, among other things, a code of practice that is set by the UKSA. Then, because it wanted to have a degree of independence in the assessment of its own compliance with that code, it has as an arm's length body, the OSR. The Office for Statistics Regulation regulates compliance with that code as it applies to data of public utility and interest, when the Government or other politicians are quoting data, to try to make sure it is done in a way that conforms with the code.

On top of that you have the Data Standards Authority. Data for the Data Standards Authority does not relate only to statistics, nor official statistics alone; it is all types of data. Its focus is very much on enabling best practice in the sharing and definition of data. A very easy example of that would be the format for your date of birth. If you say 2/1/68 that will have a different effect to saying 02/01/1968, so that is one of the things they have to agree.

Today, most of the data exchange takes place between computers without human interaction. On those so-called APIs, application programming interfaces, the Data Standards Authority tries to agree how those interfaces should operate and has built up a catalogue of APIs. I think they now have about 230 APIs in their catalogue from 27 Departments, and that enables data to be exchanged seamlessly, rapidly and almost without cost and delay between different parts of the Government machinery, which is incredibly important.

As an example to help explain, I mentioned birth dates before. In the verification of your register of birth, you will remember as I will that many times you have to produce your birth certificate. If you were born after 2009, that is now done as an electronic link, an API interface, which goes into all the different parts of the Government system that need to know what your date of birth is and to have a valid birth certificate. That is an example of an API that has been under the authority of the Data Standards Authority, placed into that catalogue and is shared in a secure, reliable way to bring a more efficient use of data across Government.

Q50 Tom Randall: Thanks for that comprehensive answer. I will draw a diagram when I am reading the transcript later.

One of the issues that came out of this report, a serious issue, are the gaps in local level data and that more data from local leaders could have helped us respond more quickly to the outbreak. What plans are there to



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ensure that the granularity of local level data is a priority for the Data Standards Authority and across Government?

Alex Chisholm: I absolutely agree that good quality local data has been essential as part of the Covid response. In the early part of the pandemic we did not have the quality of data that we wanted across Government, particularly about the incidence of the disease, and that did hamper the response. The time taken to set up an effective nationwide test and trace operation played into that.

I think the Government have made great progress in integrating the data from Public Health England, NHS, the Office for National Statistics, the Joint Biosecurity Centre and local government sources, and in making that available to form a very comprehensive analysis of the spread of the disease, different outbreaks. We are now focused on particular variants as well as the absolute number of coronavirus cases, and related to that are hospitalisations, deaths and so on. That has been incredibly important at a national, regional and local level in the response. I could not emphasise that too strongly, and I think that has been understood from the beginning. It has taken weeks, perhaps months, to get fully on top of it, but I think we now have that very comprehensive picture. That is made available publicly and has been incredibly useful both to help the authorities but also to enable people to see for themselves, and for academic research and study as well.

It is not limited, however, to Covid. The approach of having a focus on the granularity of data at local level is something that is incredibly important in other areas of public policy, our response to environmental issues, for example, or levelling up. To try to inform that, at the back end of last year a new senior sub-national data group was formed under the chairmanship of the national statistician, and that brings together a lot of people involved both in collecting that data but also, importantly, in analysing it. That is feeding into big exercises such as our response on employment as part of the plan for growth, levelling up and other things, and then feeding off that new, much more integrated and much more granular data. It is a very important part of the overall approach to a modern, fully effective governmental system.

Q51 **Tom Randall:** This is an issue that was identified, and you have identified the progress that has been made. Are there still any barriers to sharing that granular data across Government?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, there are a number of barriers that come into play. First, it is very important that the data needs to be anonymised to protect personal privacy. There are carefully regulated legal gateways for sharing that, and they require proper data sharing agreements. All those had to be put in place, for example, in the early stage of the response to Covid when we were putting in place the shielding programme. Data agreements needed to be put in place to enable, for example, supermarkets to be able to recognise people from vulnerable groups to give them priority access and things like that. Certainly, one of the



requirements is to have the people operating correctly within the legal frame and all the necessary agreements for that.

To try to make that easier, one of the things that the Data Standards Authority has championed is a data-sharing playbook that embeds a lot of the practices, memoranda of understanding and things like that necessary to enable people to share confidently and correctly. Other potential barriers that come into play, of course, are to do with people's skills and capabilities, and we have been making a major investment in that as well. Data sharing is one of the strongest things that we can do to enable us to target public services to where they are most needed, and to respond in a very timely fashion and to learn quickly, which is so necessary for continuous improvement. It is very important, but it has to be done correctly within the legal framework and, importantly, it has to maintain public trust, including through application of the relevant ethical frameworks.

Q52 Tom Randall: Are you confident that you are able to surmount these barriers?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, I think we have made fantastic progress. A common assessment, not just one from me, is that we have made more progress in the last year because of having to deal with the pandemic than we made in the several years beforehand. I think that shows the power of rapid, good quality data sharing, and not just in the public sector but across the private sector as well. We have leaped forward in that regard, and I am very keen that we do not lose that progress and that it becomes part of the way in which we work across Government as standard.

Q53 Tom Randall: The UK Statistics Authority told this Committee that, while it is important that individual Departments are responsible for their statistics and have their own statisticians, the complexity of data and statistics during the Covid pandemic has shown a need for firmer central control. Is that something that you agree with?

Alex Chisholm: Essentially, yes. I have seen the letter from Sir David Norgrove, the chair of UKSA, and I agree with him that having statisticians embedded in Departments is very strong to make sure that they work hand in glove with policymakers and in the work delivery. That is very powerful. It is also very clear where the responsibility lies, which is excellent.

I also agree with him that in the context of Covid, particularly requiring this very integrated approach between public health and economic and social data, it has been necessary to have more of a guiding mind—I think that is the phrase he used in his letter, or something very similar. He said in the letter that it was being provided in practice partly by the national statistician and his colleagues. I think that is true, but I would add that the Covid taskforce and the Cabinet Office have also played a very important role in trying to provide that integrated approach. There is



very clear guidance to the sources of data to say, "This is the type of data that we need and are looking for, this is when we need it and this is how we are going to integrate it." Then, of course, all the processes for assessing that through SAGE, NERVTAG and all the other expert bodies has been very important.

Essentially, yes, I agree with him, but I think there are other aspects to that co-ordination from the ones that he mentioned expressly in his letter.

Q54 Tom Randall: With these different people doing these different tasks, has there been any review of the allocation of analysts across the civil service?

Alex Chisholm: The allocation, the total quantity or both?

Tom Randall: We have talked about the essential work that the people in individual Departments are doing. Has there been any analysis of whether the right people are in the right place?

Alex Chisholm: We have a cross-cutting function in analysis led by the national statistician, Sir Ian Diamond, and that has been a real support to us through this process because it has enabled us both to bring about a common standard approach to help this co-ordination exercise but also just moving people around. We did so right from the very beginning. I remember that, when I first joined the Cabinet Office, we were able to draw on top-quality statisticians and economists from across Government Departments, across agencies. We had people from the Financial Conduct Authority, the Competition and Markets Authority and others come to join us to help with this analysis, and that has been great. Many people also came out of the private sector to help us on a voluntary basis. That has been an important part of the overall response.

I also think it has reinforced the need for people with high-quality skills in analysis, data analysis particularly, and we have taken a number of steps to try to strengthen those. You may be aware that we had a target, the Cabinet Office and the Office for National Statistics, to train 500 civil servants in data science by 2021. In fact, we are well ahead of that. We have trained 700 so far, and we are only in May. That is excellent. They have all been specially trained at the ONS data science campus.

We have also been making big investments in trying to improve the overall supply of people with data science skills coming into Government. As an example of that, the ONS has co-sponsored with Cardiff University—one of their headquarters is based in Wales—a special masters course in data science and analysis, and there are 230 people studying for that course this year. That is just one of the ways in which we have tried to encourage people to study data science and analysis in general but also specifically to meet the needs of Government. Those people, as part of that course, will have a better understanding of the



public policy context than those on a more generic type of course would otherwise have had.

Tom Randall: This Committee might be interested in seeing the outcome of this work. A report on that would be helpful.

Q55 **David Mundell:** Mr Chisholm, I would like to ask you about your confidence in being able to get data across the United Kingdom, and the production of United Kingdom-wide data. It seems to me that one of the issues we face is, first, being able to make comparisons on all sorts of issues within the United Kingdom but, secondly, being able to provide UK-wide data.

Alex Chisholm: Yes, I think that is something to focus on. I would not say we do it perfectly, but I know a lot of effort has been made to try to do it well. Institutions such as the Joint Biosecurity Centre have a UK-wide remit. They have been enormously helpful to us.

I also think it is right to recognise that the health authorities, the chief medical officers, for example, have overseen a very rapid and helpful sharing of data at all times between the authorities in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. That has been very important.

I think you are right. Given the structure we have, we should not rest on our laurels at all and we should pay constant attention to the quality of data sharing across the whole UK. We should make sure when we do major exercises that they give us, where necessary, a UK-wide picture as well as a differentiated one across the different Administrations.

Q56 **David Mundell:** I certainly agree with that, which is why I am particularly disappointed that the census did not go ahead in Scotland this year. For the first time we will not be able to make direct comparisons within the United Kingdom. I do not expect you to comment, but from my perspective that is very disappointing.

Alex Chisholm: I know the Scottish Government decided that they did not want to do the census in parallel with England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We provided an offer of support to enable them to do so, if they wished to do so. They have chosen not to, and we should respect that. England, Wales and Northern Ireland have been spectacularly successful, with nearly 98% coverage. I think the target was 90%, so they absolutely smashed that. I am sure it is the most successful census ever, since 1801, but we do not have the records going back so it is hard to say for sure. That is excellent, and I expect that when the Scottish Government conduct their own census they will also have a good experience and will be able to integrate all of that data by the back end of 2022-23 to provide a UK-wide picture.

I looked into this question of the time shifting, the fact there is a one-year difference between the censuses, and I am assured that a whole lot of statistical techniques can be used to make sure that we have a



coherent and robust UK-wide picture, so we should have no concerns in that regard.

Q57 David Mundell: It would be helpful if you could drop us a note setting that out. I find it difficult to be fully confident that an event taking place one year ahead of another event, particularly in the turbulent circumstances we are currently in, could be made totally consistent. I would be very interested to hear more on that.

Alex Chisholm: If I could make that commitment on behalf of my colleague, the national statistician, who is an international expert on the conduct of censuses. He is the one who assured me that is the case, so perhaps he will be the person I ask to write to the Committee on that matter.

David Mundell: Thank you. I look forward to it.

Q58 John Stevenson: Mr Chisholm, you have probably covered my questions but I want clarification. The Cabinet Office, alongside the ONS, has a target of training 500 civil servants in data science techniques by the end of 2021. Can you confirm that you will attain that? Secondly, is there an intention within the civil service to design a career pathway for people specifically involved in data expertise?

Alex Chisholm: On the first of those questions, I said we have exceeded the target—already 700. In terms of the career pathways, it is probably a slightly more complicated answer. Within two major functions there is a considerable need for data scientists. That is within the digital data and technology cross-cutting function, where understandably they have a need for top-quality data science analysts. It is also true in the cross-cutting analysis function, which includes statisticians, economists, social scientists and so on. Those are two areas of strong demand within the cross-cutting functions of Government.

We also recognise that, in order to have a fully effective modern Administration, these skills cannot only be embedded in specialists. There needs to be a deeper understanding among relative generalists about the role that data can play. We have pioneered a course in the last six months, a data masterclass developed and designed by a specialist working in No. 10. It is doing a great job, and the course has been taken up by 200 members of the senior civil service so far. I think the plan is to extend it to several hundred more over the year ahead. By all accounts it is an excellent course, and it has really helped to get non-specialists comfortable with all the key concepts of data science analysis.

Q59 Ronnie Cowan: Lord Maude told this Committee that policy civil servants lacked the training to conduct high-quality analysis. Lord Maude, not me, but with that doubt planted in my mind has there been any action to ensure that policy civil servants receive training in conducting high-quality analysis?



Alex Chisholm: I agree with almost all that Lord Maude said in his evidence to you in January. That was one area where, with respect, I did not entirely agree. My experience of working with policy professionals across Government, which is a very big area of Government expertise, is that they are very skilled in analysis. A lot of work goes on under the authority of the policy profession led by my colleague, Tamara Finkelstein, assisted in that by Susan Acland-Hood and many other excellent civil servants, to make sure that policymakers are equipped with the analytical skills they need to do a good job of the advisory function they have.

I have experienced that a lot in the Cabinet Office as well, and we do not rest on our laurels. We have a big focus on the intake of people who come in for new policy. Last week we had our annual policy school, which I had a session at myself, and I can tell you that of the people who signed up for that—it is a competitive process to get on to it—a more analytically sharp group of people it would be hard to imagine.

Q60 **Ronnie Cowan:** I did not think you would agree with Lord Maude, but I thought I would give you the opportunity. I am not looking to pick a fight here. How does the cross-cutting analytical function work collaboratively with the policy area?

Alex Chisholm: There are two areas that I was discussing with the head of the analysis function only a few days ago where they have two important frontiers. One is that, as well as making sure that the analysis function as a whole is coherent, which has been incredibly useful in integrating the work of statisticians with economists, social scientists and so on, they have a frontier with the policy profession on the one hand and with the digital data and technology function on the other. Both of those have distinct tasks, but they need to work very closely together.

I have agreed, as a consequence of that, to convene separate meetings with those two bodies to make sure that in their future work, and in the way they enhance their own people, the standards that they set, their co-ordination and so on, it is fully fit for purpose to make sure that we do not have policy here and analysis there, but a fully integrated approach, which I think is what is required.

Q61 **Ronnie Cowan:** Could you give us a specific example of that, where the data gathered has affected the policy that has been taken forward?

Alex Chisholm: One springs to mind from my direct experience going back a tiny bit, if you will allow me. You may remember that I worked a lot in competition. If I go back to my early career, the way in which policymaking was done was by administrators, who would then hand to a separate Department for economic analysis and a separate Department again for legal commentary. The way in which it works today is absolutely integrated, with economists, lawyers and statisticians involved right from the beginning with policymakers and administrators in a multidisciplinary team. That is what I regard as the modern way of working. It is



impossible to make sense of the big challenges we are dealing with, whether it be Covid, EU transition, net zero, global Britain or levelling up, without that integrated approach to using people with different professional skills and backgrounds.

Q62 **Ronnie Cowan:** If I am hearing you correctly, policy is now based on the evidence and the data gathered. Are you comfortable with that?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, I think that is absolutely how it should be. We have had a very difficult experience as a nation in dealing with Covid, but it has had some positive findings or effects. One of those is that the most likely question to be asked at the beginning of a meeting now is, "What does the data show?" That is something that I would say is the basis for all good policymaking.

Q63 **Ronnie Cowan:** Can you agree with Lord Maude when he suggested that, when a new policy decision is communicated, the associated evidence and data on which it is based should also be published?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, and I think that is Government practice. I suppose the whole process going back to a Green Paper or White Paper is a good example of that. I think the supporting data has become a huge feature that we have gained in response to Covid. You sometimes almost worry whether there is too much data, and we now put a lot of effort into making sure it is intelligible and able to be easily understood by everybody. I entirely agree with the basic principle that he espouses.

Q64 **David Mundell:** Mr Chisholm, you wrote to the Committee on 13 May about the response to the Adrian Joseph review of personal data handling in the Cabinet Office, which I am sure did not make happy reading for you. What steps are being taken in response to Mr Joseph's review?

Alex Chisholm: I wrote in April, with an update in July, and we owe you another one because we have now completed that project. Sarah has been leading this work in the Cabinet Office, so I think she would be best placed to speak to it.

Sarah Harrison: I can assure the Committee that good progress has been made, a comprehensive programme has been put in place and now the work has been completed to put additional protection in place to reduce significantly the probability and risk associated with data handling breaches. That includes, for example, the appointment of a chief data officer within the Cabinet Office. It also includes, in a central way, creating a data privacy and compliance team and then, in different business units across the Cabinet Office, identifying a risk owner whose job will be to assess the policies and procedures that are in place, the extent to which they are mitigating the risks of personal data handling breaches and then to take action in relation to those, and to make quarterly reports so that we can assess the progress made. If any further actions are required, we will take those. Those measures, cumulatively, give more assurance in relation to the reduced probability of any data handling breaches.



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Q65 David Mundell: Are you satisfied that they will bring about not just the process changes but the cultural changes that Mr Joseph identified as being necessary?

Sarah Harrison: Absolutely, and it is a very good and important point, as it is in relation to all matters of policy and process, which is the culture. Accompanying the work I have just described has been a consistent programme to raise awareness of the issues and risks around data handling breaches and security more broadly. The security function within the Cabinet Office runs a very successful awareness-raising programme, well received and extremely well attended. That is about trying to raise understanding, awareness and the associated responsibility and accountability for reducing risks in relation to security and/or data handling breaches.

Q66 David Mundell: Are you confident that there will be no further data breaches within the Cabinet Office?

Sarah Harrison: I am confident that the actions that we have taken reduce significantly the risks of that and, more importantly, that the commitment to continuous improvement in the way I have described will continually seek out if there are more things we need to do to reduce that risk substantially.

Q67 Karin Smyth: Mr Chisholm, if we can turn to the Cabinet Office estimates, particularly of the Covid-19 budget. The estimates in the latest edition say there is £117.5 million for a public information campaign to run until September this year. Is no other Covid-19-related expenditure anticipated in this financial year beyond September?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, there is, but we were not sure of the quantum of it, which is why we put it on that basis. Almost all the Cabinet Office expenditure for the current financial year would have been agreed at spending round 20 and announced at the end of last year, with further supplementaries in April. An exception to that is things that are so uncertain over the course of the year that it is hard to predict, so those in an ordinary way are dealt with by allocation from the reserve. For the case of Covid we felt confident of our plan through to September. We knew we would need money after September, but we did not know how much we would need because it quite depends on the process of going through the different phases of the road map and what happens afterwards. Over the course of the summer, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury need to agree what the resource will be for the period from October until the end of March and that will need to be allocated from the reserve, which is the type of thing the reserve is for.

Q68 Karin Smyth: It may be my ignorance, but when would we be able to see that publicly? I cannot remember. Is there a revision to the estimates that comes partway through the year to Parliament?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, there is. Like you, I cannot remember which month it is, but there is.



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Karin Smyth: Okay. We may pick up with our Clerks just so that we are clear on how that comes forward.

Q69 **Rachel Hopkins:** Mr Chisholm, am I right in understanding that you are the civil service diversity and inclusion champion?

Alex Chisholm: Correct. Also carers and age now.

Q70 **Rachel Hopkins:** Fantastic. How important do you think it is to have a diverse range of candidates for public appointment roles?

Alex Chisholm: Very.

Q71 **Rachel Hopkins:** What do you do to ensure the Cabinet Office gets a diverse field of candidates for the roles that it advertises?

Alex Chisholm: As well as advertising, which is very important, and doing so in a way that is public and open to people, we go out of our way to try to make sure that those posts are available for people's consideration, especially for people from underrepresented groups—for example, women on boards. When we are looking for people for appointments across the public sector bodies, we tend to find that the number of male applicants exceeds the number of female ones, so we particularly try to make sure that we have women on boards. We have done that for a number of other protected characteristics to try to improve the flow of candidates.

An additional consideration is the way in which we describe the roles to try to make sure there is no hint of preference, bias or anything that is discouraging in the language. A lot of effort goes into the terms in which we describe that, and then the selection of the panel themselves, the composition of that panel and then, of course, the way they ask questions and otherwise assess criteria. We try to make sure that, at each stage of the recruitment process, we are as open as possible to people from all backgrounds.

Q72 **Rachel Hopkins:** Within that, does the Cabinet Office monitor the characteristics of the candidates it interviews and appoints? All the way through, are there checks about that?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, it does, and there are declarations that have to be made by the candidates themselves. Mostly people do make those declarations. On the latest published data that we have, the proportion of female appointees was 44%, then 13% of appointees were people from an ethnic minority background and 11% of appointees reported having a disability. That gives you a sense of some of the results of the analysis and monitoring that you ask about.

Q73 **Rachel Hopkins:** The Cabinet Secretary told this Committee that there was no formal process for the appointment of the Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests, there is no information about the diversity of the longlist or the shortlist, so why is it acceptable for such an important role to be recruited without any regard to diversity?



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Alex Chisholm: I think the Cabinet Secretary wrote to the Committee on 10 May setting out the process that was followed, and also the list of candidates and an explanation of why we do not have diversity data for that particular appointment process. I have nothing to add, I am afraid, to what he said.

Q74 **Rachel Hopkins:** You say you have nothing to add, even though you are diversity champion and the clear process to improve diversity, or even to consider it, was not followed? You have nothing to say?

Alex Chisholm: Nothing to add to what he said about that process.

Q75 **Rachel Hopkins:** Right, okay. You mentioned senior appointments earlier, and you mentioned the appointment of women to senior boards. Part of the prep for meeting with you today was checking the Gov.uk website. There were two women featured in the Cabinet Office management section, excluding non-executive directors, one of whom was Lucy Smith, who I think has moved across into Defra. Why does the Cabinet Office have so few women at the very top? You mentioned that so few of them apply, but surely there are more reasons than that.

Alex Chisholm: First, I apologise to the Committee that we have not kept the website up to date. That has now been updated, and Lucy Smith has indeed moved to a different role.

On your general point, it is exactly right, we do want to make sure that we have very even representation from women as well as men. At the moment within the senior civil service, which is about 500 within the Cabinet Office, about 47% are women, if I have that figure correct, which is a little bit higher than across the civil service as a whole and very near to 50:50.

Where we are less good is at the very top of the pyramid, so to speak, in the numbers of directors general and permanent secretaries. We clearly have some ground to make up there. From my perspective, I am very used to serving in organisations with a very equal mix and I am delighted that, since I started, we have been able both to attract some very high-quality female director general candidates to join us, in the shape of Sarah here, for example, but also to make permanent appointments of outstanding female candidates, the directors general Emma Churchill, Jess Glover and others. Joanna Davinson is our new head of cross-cutting digital operations. Of course, as I wrote to the Committee, Sue Gray has come back to the Cabinet Office as a permanent secretary leading on our Union work. I think that will help change the profile of the Department, and the experience will provide encouragement to women working in the Cabinet Office that they can perform at all grades as well as all roles in the Cabinet Office.

Q76 **Rachel Hopkins:** I appreciate that. As a good friend of mine said, "You can't be what you can't see," so I think it is hugely important that that is encouraged at the senior roles in the Cabinet Office. I look forward to the



website being updated. Thank you.

Sarah Harrison: We have talked about gender, but diversity in terms of ethnicity and disability is also a very strong focus for us.

Rachel Hopkins: My colleague will be pursuing that with you shortly.

Sarah Harrison: I look forward to the question.

Q77 **John McDonnell:** On the appointment of Lord Geidt, do you know if the allegations—and I emphasise “allegations”—about his role in Cambodia were examined before he was appointed?

Alex Chisholm: I have no information on that at all.

Q78 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I suspect this is the question you wanted to get on to. Looking at the 2020 diversity report, why has there been so little progress on ethnic minority and disability representation in the Cabinet Office senior civil service in comparison to gender?

Sarah Harrison: You are right to highlight it, and I think the latest annual report showed only about 6.8% of our senior civil servants were from minority ethnic representation and slightly more, 9.1%, were declaring disabilities. I am pleased to say that, although we do not yet have the data in the public domain, when we publish our annual report in the summer we will be showing much more positive progress in relation to ethnicity and disability. That is really encouraging; however—

Q79 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** In the senior civil service or in the general civil service?

Sarah Harrison: In the senior civil service. However, there remains more work to do, and Alex has described some of the actions that we take in relation to attracting, nurturing and supporting that talent. Within the Cabinet Office, as across the civil service, there are many schemes to encourage progression, not just coming into the civil service but progression through the civil service, particularly for colleagues who have disabilities or colleagues from minority ethnic groups. There are tailored programmes that the Cabinet Office supports and additional steps that we have taken as the Cabinet Office, including, for example, very recently committing to a pilot programme to identify black women at grade 6 and 7 and to support them through their progression into senior civil service roles, so there is a consistent commitment to that. I would be very pleased to write to the Committee alongside the publication of our report to set out some of the progress that has been made.

Q80 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Is there any direct evidence that those particular programmes work? Do people who attend them tend to progress faster than their colleagues?

Sarah Harrison: There are several things that go towards supporting progression. Certainly, those programmes play a very important part because, as part of those programmes, there is a component that



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involves coaching and supporting colleagues, for example, as they approach interview, as well as working with role models.

I should also point out that there are other things that are potentially equally impactful. In the Cabinet Office, over the course of this last year, we have launched a new sponsorship scheme, where DGs such as myself, for example, sponsor more junior colleagues from minority ethnic groups. We now have 50 different sponsoring arrangements in place. We have extended it beyond the DG community into the director community. In my experience, those things also have a real impact on helping to seek out opportunities, stretch opportunities for colleagues, giving them the ability to be able to demonstrate at interview and elsewhere their capability and talent.

Those are the sorts of schemes, and others additional to the ones that I have mentioned, that cumulatively help promote that progression, which is so important to see.

- Q81 Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** In terms of actions that you have taken to remove barriers from underrepresented groups within the talent pipeline—and when I say “underrepresented groups” I am not just thinking about people with protected characteristics per se, I am thinking about people who attended state school, people who come from more socioeconomically diverse or poorer backgrounds, to call a spade a spade—what actions have we done to reach out to those groups and those people?

Sarah Harrison: Perhaps I could start by sharing a bit of data. Across the civil service, through the people survey, we now gather that information, including within the Cabinet Office.

- Q82 Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** That data has not always been consistently published in terms of socioeconomic background. Is that something you will now be publishing more regularly?

Sarah Harrison: Indeed, and I note that I was not aware of that. To give you an example, let’s take SCS again, if I can point in that direction. So 62% of SCS come from state school by way of background, and 17% independent school with no bursary. Across the wider cohort within the Cabinet Office the figures are greater in relation to colleagues coming from state schools.

- Q83 Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** That is still quite something because only 7% of the population go to private school, with or without bursary. I do not even know what the breakdown of that is between bursary and non-bursary within private schools. There is still quite a way to go there. Has there been an improvement, or is that what it has always been?

Sarah Harrison: I agree with you that there is definitely a way to go. One of the other things that is very important for us, as the Cabinet Office or the civil service, is the action we are taking particularly in relation to location, a much more diverse approach. Take the Cabinet



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Office, for example. We have a new second headquarters in Glasgow, commitments to York, Bristol, Manchester, Birmingham, across the UK as part of our locations programme. They additionally, along with other programmes, will help to ensure a much more diverse representation across the Cabinet Office and, of course, the wider civil service.

Q84 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Is there evidence that, where civil service offices have been opened elsewhere, they have been more diverse in their hiring of state and non-state?

Sarah Harrison: Alex might like to add from his experience, and I can come back on some of the things that we are doing as part of our commitments to new locations.

Alex Chisholm: To answer your question directly, there is evidence of that. One of the interesting areas has been in relation to the fast stream scheme, which as the name implies is to try to get people quickly to senior management. That is, therefore, a very important feeder scheme, with about 2,000 people joining a year through a very competitive process. One of the things that was done to try to improve the diversity of the people coming into the fast stream was to move to a two-centre approach for assessment, so that people did not feel they had to come to London as part of the assessment; there was an alternative place in the north of England.

They also changed the way in which they described the roles and the assessment process, and that has been very effective, both in improving the proportion of civil servants coming into the fast stream from a BAME background, I think 14.2% of this year's fast stream intake, but also for people from less advantaged socioeconomic groups. I think 10% coming into the fast stream in the last year are from the least advantaged group. That has been pretty effective, and every year they have done it has improved that percentage. I think that will help in terms of being able to improve it.

Q85 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I want to come back to this point about moving the civil service out of London, which I am not against, but there seems to be an assumption that geography equals class. I want to dig down on the evidence. Is there evidence that holding interviews out of London, or moving offices out of London, means that you have recruited people from more diverse class backgrounds? That is what we are talking about when we say "socioeconomic," isn't it? We are talking about different classes of people who grow up with different levels of wealth and have different levels of privilege. Has that changed, or are we just getting people from the same class but who happen to live in York?

Alex Chisholm: First, you are absolutely right, I totally agree with you that privilege is not defined by your geography. It can make a difference, but you can find people with or without privilege in every part of the country, indeed every part of London where we are today. I 100% agree with you about that.



What I am trying to emphasise is that, if you look at the long march for the civil service to become a fully inclusive organisation, I think we have made fantastic progress from the perspective of gender. We have made better progress in recent years, about 50% better than we were, in terms of people from an ethnic minority background, but we have some other frontiers where we are looking to try to improve. Certainly, people with disabilities are underrepresented relative to the overall population. Socioeconomic background, which used not to be even monitored and obviously is not a protected characteristic, so it does not have the same level of public data, we have had a tremendous focus on.

The Social Mobility Commission, which was mentioned just recently, is going to be producing a report that looks at this very issue and is going to be ground-breaking. It has looked very hard at the data and identified all the little things that inhibit people from joining the civil service and progressing within the civil service. Certainly, geography but also culture and all kinds of networking play an important part within that.

We take very seriously our responsibility to make sure that the civil service is a place where, whoever you are, you can express yourself and have a successful career.

Q86 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I am pleased you agree with my hypothesis, and I agree with almost everything you say there. I am just trying to get to the bottom of whether there is a data-led push either for moving out of London or for those particular actions that change the socioeconomic makeup of entrants. If that is not there yet, is the baseline being monitored year in, year out so that we can see the change if it does come about?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, we do that, and a useful instrument is the so-called equality impact assessments, but those focus on particular defined characteristics. What we are trying to improve is the undefined characteristics, people from less advantaged social backgrounds or people with different types of cognitive diversity. If you look at the civil service-wide survey, the annual civil service employment survey, it has become much more sophisticated in the way it analyses that aspect, to understand where people have come from, what their socioeconomic background is, what particular skills they have, and mashing that data together to be able to understand the changing face of our workforce. As part of the Places for Growth programme, which is the name we give to this big relocation effort to try to make sure the civil service is fully effective across the whole UK, we look very carefully at the impact on our ability to recruit and attract people from the areas in which we operate.

We have known, through an exercise called "Beyond Whitehall," that historically people have felt that their career development was inhibited by the fact that they needed to move to London for the more senior roles, particularly within the policy profession. As you have seen since I was last before the Committee, there are some very major commitments: the Cabinet Office with a second headquarters in Glasgow; the MHCLG in



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Wolverhampton; the Treasury, the new economic ministry in Darlington. These are big statements that I think will really change the experience of the civil service across the whole UK.

- Q87 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Would I be right in summing up that what you are saying is that there is no evidence yet that geographical diversity increases socioeconomic diversity but you are hopeful? There is no data at the moment, because you are not presenting any data and I have asked three times. There is no data on that. You are hopeful that it is, it is something that you will monitor, and you are committing to regularly posting socioeconomic data at a granularity that we can all see in terms of regional breakdown and offices?

Alex Chisholm: Almost, yes. I would not say there is no data. I said the data is incomplete and we will continue to improve it. On the granularity of the data, we gather a lot of this data within the staff survey but we do not have it to a sufficient level of quality to be able to publish year-on-year data in the way we would like, but that is absolutely the intention. You will see when we publish the Social Mobility Commission report that there is a huge amount of data analysis on this. I do not want you to feel this is an understudied area. It is a very well-studied area, and I can absolutely assure you of my commitment to trying to make progress in this area.

- Q88 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Do you have a timeframe for when that will be completed? Clearly, if you are moving offices and recruiting already but do not have a full set of baseline datasets, it is going to be difficult for us to compare. Do you have a timeline for when you expect to have a decent baseline dataset of socioeconomic background on entry into the civil service, as well as on maintaining the civil service?

Alex Chisholm: On entry, I am not sure. I will have to consult on that.

- Q89 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Entry is important here, because once someone is in the civil service for a long time their socioeconomic background partly changes, does it not, because hopefully they are earning good wages and they are—

Alex Chisholm: I understand and respect the question. I do not have the answer to hand, and I will come back to the Committee on it.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I would appreciate that. Thank you.

Chair: Yes, if you could write to us that would be most helpful. A very quick, final question from Karin Smyth, please.

- Q90 **Karin Smyth:** Mr Chisholm, I want to return to my earlier questions about risk registers, likelihood and preparedness. I have now had a chance to look at both the 2017 risk register, which I was alluding to, and helpfully the 2020 risk register. I think it merits a bit more review if it is not to hand for yourself; I appreciate some detail there. The 2020 risk register, which was delayed from 2019, did have these sorts of risks, high-level risks at level E, with a low likelihood of occurrence, including



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economic disruption to both health and education, electricity supply, all sorts of things that one would consider.

Also, when I have looked at previous risk registers and the preparedness for a flu pandemic over the last decade—my interest is that I am a part-time emergency planner in the health service, so I have looked at risk registers—the story that is told over almost the last two decades is clear about the potential for this pandemic. My concern in your previous answers is that you are not concerned.

When the Department looks at the warnings, the assessment of likelihood—I accept that hindsight is a marvellous thing, but the warnings are there in the processes that exist. My concern from your response earlier, and I would suggest perhaps we return to this point, is that if the Cabinet Office in its co-ordination role does not accept now that warnings were there, preparedness could be better and lessons need to be learned and assessed as part of our learning in the inquiry, then that is a real worry to us. I would like your assurance about those warnings, either now or perhaps we can return to it either formally in a letter or at another inquiry.

Alex Chisholm: I am very happy to give that assurance now, because I absolutely accept that the level of preparedness and contingency planning, when we look at what has now happened, was not fully adequate. That is plain to see, and I think that would be almost a universally agreed view.

In terms of Government statements, you may notice that in the second Boardman report, the one looking at all the different procurement activity across Government, or at least in the five areas highlighted, one of the findings is that we need to review and reinforce our resilience and our contingency planning. That was also, of course, in the integrated review and the Government statement. I do not want at all to give the impression that we are content with all the preparations and contingency planning. We have lived through this. It was at the top of the national risk register, a pandemic, but nevertheless the particular pandemic that we have had and our ability to deal with it has shown that we could have done a better job of it, no question, and that our level of contingency planning and resilience will need to rise in future.

I am very happy to assure the Committee that we will continue to look to improve on that in the ways to which we have already publicly committed, and in the light, of course, of this fuller independent public inquiry when it comes.

Chair: Thank you to all my colleagues, and thank you to Mr Chisholm and Ms Harrison for coming to see us today. Again, if you would follow up any outstanding points in writing, we would be most grateful to you.