

Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The work of the Cabinet Office, HC 41](#)

Thursday 20 January 2022

Ordered by the House of Commons to be published on 20 January 2022.

[Watch the meeting](#)

Members present: Mr William Wragg (Chair); Ronnie Cowan; Jackie Doyle-Price; Mr David Jones; David Mundell; Tom Randall; Lloyd Russell-Moyle; Karin Smyth.

Questions 91-210

Witnesses

I: Rt. Hon. Steve Barclay, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, and Alex Chisholm, Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary for the Cabinet Office.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]

Examination of witnesses

Witnesses: Rt. Hon. Steve Barclay and Alex Chisholm.

Q91 **Chair:** Good morning, and welcome to a meeting of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee. Today the Committee is taking evidence as part of its ongoing inquiry into the work of the Cabinet Office. Our witnesses today are, in his first appearance before the Committee in this role, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, the right hon. Steve Barclay MP, and Alex Chisholm, who is the Cabinet Office permanent secretary and civil service chief operating officer. Mr Barclay, could you introduce yourself for the record?

Steve Barclay: Good morning. I am Steve Barclay, Member of Parliament for North East Cambridgeshire and Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster.

Alex Chisholm: I am Alex Chisholm, permanent secretary at the Cabinet Office and civil service chief operating officer.

Q92 **Chair:** Thank you. Before we move on to questions, I have a brief statement I wish to read to the Committee. As the Committee of the House of Commons overseeing the work of the civil service, including the Cabinet Office, of which 10 Downing Street is a department, and the proper functioning of the constitution, I would like to make this brief statement.

In recent days a number of Members of Parliament have faced pressures and intimidation from members of the Government because of their declared or assumed desire for a vote of confidence in the party leadership of the Prime Minister. It is, of course, the duty of the Government Whips Office to secure the Government's business in the House of Commons. However, it is not their function to breach the ministerial code in threatening to withdraw investments from Members of Parliaments' constituencies, which are funded from the public purse.

Additionally, reports to me and others of members of staff at No. 10 Downing Street—special advisers, Government Ministers and others—encouraging the publication of stories in the press seeking to embarrass those who they suspect of lacking confidence in the Prime Minister is similarly unacceptable. The intimidation of a Member of Parliament is a serious matter. Moreover, the reports of which I am aware would seem to constitute blackmail. As such, it would be my general advice to colleagues to report these matters to the Speaker of the House of Commons and the commissioner of the Metropolitan police. They are also welcome to contact me at any time.

Before we begin our questions, could I ask Mr Barclay to confirm that he will convey the spirit of this statement to the Government?

Steve Barclay: I will.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Q93 **Chair:** Could I ask Mr Chisholm if he would ensure that the civil service will respond as necessary?

Alex Chisholm: Yes.

Q94 **Chair:** Thank you, both.

The first question of the Committee proper is to Mr Barclay. Before Christmas, you led the Government in the emergency debate on standards. The Paymaster General recently responded to an urgent question on a similar topic. Does that mean that you are responsible for responding to Nigel Boardman's recommendations, the Committee on Standards in Public Life's recommendations and any recommendations that this Committee make in the inquiry into matters arising from Greensill relating to propriety and ethics in Government?

Steve Barclay: You are right, Chair. I responded in those debates. Obviously, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office has a role in respect of the Boardman recommendations. Boardman 1 and Boardman 2, you will recall, were reports to the office of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. There is a third Boardman report, which I am sure the Committee is very aware then interacts with the further work that Lord Evans has been undertaking. The Prime Minister is Minister for the Civil Service, but I am Minister for civil service reform, so there is a degree of co-ordination between those two roles. That is why it is appropriate for me to respond to a number of these debates.

Q95 **Chair:** What steps, if any, have you taken so far to respond to those recommendations made by Mr Boardman and the Committee on Standards in Public Life?

Steve Barclay: We have taken a number of steps. First, in terms of Boardman 1 and 2, we have accepted those recommendations in full. Boardman 1 has been implemented. On Boardman 2, we are working through a number of those recommendations, but we have accepted them. Boardman 3 was a report to the Prime Minister. As I said a moment ago, because of the interaction with the further work of the Committee on Standards in Public Life, it is right that we look at those recommendations together. That is what we have committed to doing.

Q96 **Chair:** Thank you. Mr Barclay, your predecessor cited the Osmotherly rules in preventing the former head of the Propriety and Ethics Team and current investigator into breaches of lockdown rules at No. 10 and across Government, Sue Gray, from giving evidence in our inquiry into matters arising from Greensill. What is your attitude to serving officials appearing before this Committee?

Steve Barclay: I think most people recognise there is a long-standing principle, which is that officials are accountable to Parliament in respect of their duties as accounting officers. I know that there are a number of members of the Committee—like, indeed, myself, having spent four years on the Public Accounts Committee—who, quite often in that role, will have interacted with civil servants giving evidence through the managing public money rules and their role as accounting officers.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Alongside that, there is a very long-standing principle that Ministers are accountable to Parliament and that Ministers can then determine which officials—and, indeed, whether officials—come to speak on their behalf, or whether the Minister themselves gives evidence. In respect of a previous area of correspondence that I understand my predecessor had with the Committee, my understanding is that he was offering to give evidence himself to the Committee. I think that is within the principle that I have just set out.

More pertinently to your question, I would refer the Committee's attention to previous roles I have had. If you look at my time in the Treasury, Treasury officials engaged with a number of Select Committees on behalf of my role as CST at the time. So there is a very strong desire—I know this is shared by the permanent secretary—to support the Committee, but it is within that overall guise of very long-standing principles.

Q97 Chair: Long-standing principles that have never been accepted by Parliament, though.

Steve Barclay: Well, there is quite often in Parliament a range of views. I am setting out where I think there is common ground, Chair. Committees are able to get evidence from Ministers, who are accountable to Parliament, and, where appropriate, from officials, who can support their Ministers in that.

Q98 Chair: You are conveying a message to me that there is a change of attitude now, perhaps, in the Cabinet Office approach to allowing officials to come to this Committee. Is that what you are indicating?

Steve Barclay: I wouldn't want to over-egg that interpretation. What I was referring to is that there has been a long-standing principle that the Executive is accountable to Parliament—I think that is quite right. As a member of a Select Committee, that is certainly what I expected, and as a member of the Executive, that is equally what I expect as an obligation now. That is a long-standing principle, and I am not suggesting that has changed. Equally, I think it has always been the case that one looks at these things on a case-by-case basis. That is evident from previous roles.

Q99 Chair: The difficulty is, though, as you indicated, that your predecessor offered to appear before the Committee to respond to questions that we wished to put to Ms Gray. How productive do you imagine that could be? How could the former Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster understand the thinking of Sue Gray?

Steve Barclay: I think my predecessor is well known for his talent, and therefore an appearance from him would always be informative to the Committee.

Q100 Chair: Is he clairvoyant?

Steve Barclay: The serious point is, as I say, that there is a principle on which we operate. We look at it on a case-by-case basis. Ultimately, if I reflect on many hours I have spent in the Chamber—as I know you have, Chair—one of the key comments I often hear from parliamentary



HOUSE OF COMMONS

colleagues is about the importance of Ministers coming to Parliament, whether that is to a Select Committee or to the Chamber of the House, and answering questions on behalf of the Executive. Indeed, to bring that up to the current day, the Prime Minister has given a very firm commitment himself to come and make a statement following the inquiry that Sue Gray is conducting. So that accountability is there. There is a long-standing principle. I accept there is a range of views within Parliament in terms of the operationalising of that principle, but it is key that Ministers are accountable to Parliament and I fully endorse that.

Q101 Mr Jones: Further to that point, Mr Barclay, the Committee determined that Sue Gray had personal knowledge that would be of immense assistance to the Committee in its inquiry into the Greensill affair. Sue Gray was willing to appear before the Committee. However, she was, effectively, vetoed from attending by your predecessor, Mr Gove, who, as you know, offered to come here to give evidence when, clearly, he would have had no knowledge whatever of the matters that we wished to raise with Ms Gray.

The rules state, in essence, that because officials appear as delegates of their Minister, it is up to the Minister to decide which officials should appear or whether the Minister will appear in their place. Sue Gray, at that time, was an official of the Cabinet Office, and your predecessor was the responsible Minister and therefore invoked the Osmotherly rules. She is no longer, as I understand it, a Cabinet Office official—is that right?

Steve Barclay: She still has a role. The permanent sec will set out her current role within the machinery of government in a moment. With respect to the Committee, it is very difficult for me to speculate on whether a predecessor was, to quote your words, Mr Jones, “vetoing”. That is obviously a very strong term to use. It is not for me to speculate on the conjecture around a previous position when I was not a Minister in the Department.

Q102 Mr Jones: Can I assist you? I do not want you to speculate because that is not the thrust of what I am asking you. Sue Gray is no longer a Cabinet Office official; she is an official of DLUHC, as I understand it.

Alex Chisholm: She is the second permanent secretary in the Cabinet Office as well.

Q103 Mr Jones: She is still there? Okay. The question is therefore quite simple. You are the responsible Minister now. Are you going to continue to prevent Ms Gray from attending this Committee to give evidence?

Steve Barclay: I am going to operate, as my predecessor did, within the principle that we have established, which is that Ministers are first and foremost accountable to Parliament, including Select Committees. But if the Committee raise a request, then of course we will consider that on a case-by-case basis, and that is what I indicated a moment ago.

Q104 Mr Jones: I think you can take it, Mr Barclay, that that request is there, and we wish Ms Gray to appear before this Committee to give evidence.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Steve Barclay: On Greensill or—

Q105 **Mr Jones:** On Greensill, yes.

Steve Barclay: Obviously, that is something that you are raising with me now. I will obviously want to take that away and get advice, and consider that within the framework that I have set out.

Q106 **Mr Jones:** Put it this way: given that you are the responsible Minister, you could not actually come here in her stead to give evidence about the matters on which she has knowledge, could you?

Steve Barclay: As the Minister for the Department, I am accountable for the work of the Department. I am sure there are questions that the Committee will raise with me about events within the Department that happened before my appointment. I am here today to assist the Committee in those regards. The point, Mr Jones, is that we will consider these things, quite properly, on a case-by-case basis. You raise a perfectly valid point, and my undertaking is to give that careful consideration given that you have raised it.

Q107 **Mr Jones:** How quickly can you revert to the Committee?

Steve Barclay: I will seek to revert in the coming days on the matter.

Mr Jones: We look forward to hearing from you.

Q108 **Chair:** It is a formal request of the Committee.

Steve Barclay: Duly noted.

Q109 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Mr Chisholm, when Lord Geidt was appointed, the Prime Minister said that he would be supported by the civil servants working under his direction. Can you explain how the independent adviser is supported at the moment?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, there is a small team that support him—a team on the Cabinet Secretary side of the Cabinet Office. That team was described by Lord Geidt, in one letter to the Prime Minister, which has been published, as “excellent” and in a further letter as “highly professional”.

Q110 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** What is the size of that team?

Alex Chisholm: It is a handful of people. He has agreed with the Prime Minister that additional dedicated resources would be added, and we are actively recruiting for those at the moment.

Q111 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Lord Geidt expressed his “grave concern” over the failure of Cabinet Office officials to provide him with the relevant information in his investigation into the refurbishment of the Prime Minister’s Downing Street residence. The Prime Minister said that this was “unacceptable”. Do you agree that this matter is of grave concern and was unacceptable?

Alex Chisholm: Have you had a chance to look at the entire correspondence published just a couple of weeks ago, covering this over at



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the end of last year? It does explain the circumstances in which the information on the so-called missing exchange, the message exchange, it wasn't available to Cabinet Office officials at the time, and why, in responding to the Electoral Commission and the formal statutory investigation, they did not seek to make common cause with other interested parties—in this case, Lord Brownlow. That is how it arose. It is all set out in the PM's letter of 21 December. I think Lord Geidt has accepted that explanation in his letter of 23 December.

Q112 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Is it acceptable that it happened in the first place? It might be understandable, but is it acceptable?

Alex Chisholm: From what I can see, it looks like an absolutely correct decision to have not tried to make common cause with other parties in a formal statutory investigation, especially as there are very significant sanctions for people who would try to do so. I think that aspect looks absolutely correct.

I think the bit that might have been done better, certainly with hindsight, and this is the reason why there is an apology there, is the fact that there was other information. When we became aware of that—officials in Downing Street and the Cabinet Office—that could have been brought immediately to the attention of Lord Geidt. That was the aspect that I think he was distressed by.

Q113 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Why wasn't it brought immediately to Lord Geidt? Why did he find out through the press?

Alex Chisholm: It was happening extremely fast and rapidly. I think, again, it is set out in the letter—the particular way in which it came to the notice of Downing Street staff that there was this other exchange. It wasn't from the PM's phone, which, as you know, was unavailable at that time. It came from the initial notice of the findings of the Electoral Commission that went to the Conservative and Unionist party—that's a small number of political staff working in Downing Street, and indeed at Conservative campaign headquarters—and it came with very strict confidentiality restrictions, so they did not feel they could go rushing around telling people in the Cabinet Office.

Q114 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Can you guarantee that Lord Geidt now has all the information relevant to his investigation that is held by the Cabinet Office, and that you are taking steps to ensure that there is sharing and that civil servants know that their primary duty on these matters is to ensure that the information gets to where it needs to be?

Alex Chisholm: Yes. He has got all the information, so far as I know, that is relevant to his investigation. I think he seems satisfied with that as well. He has agreed, directly with the Prime Minister, by mutual expectation and commitment, the highest standards of openness. Full and prompt responses will be given. That is a very firm commitment from the Prime Minister, which everybody supporting him understands, and it will be honoured.

Q115 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: You said that there were additional resources that had been agreed.

Alex Chisholm: Yes.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: From a handful—I have put down “around five”—

Alex Chisholm: I think we are recruiting another four people.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Another four people. So it will be two handfuls.

Alex Chisholm: Lord Geidt has said that he will take a view himself about the level of support he is getting and whether it is sufficient. Obviously, the Prime Minister’s commitment is to make sure that the independent adviser has the resources he needs to perform his job effectively.

Q116 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Has there been any training, or memos sent around to other staff, in both Downing Street and the Cabinet Office, about their duties to share information and co-operate in further investigations, so that these matters do not occur again?

Alex Chisholm: I think those duties are well understood, but we can certainly take the opportunity to reinforce them and—

Q117 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: They weren’t understood enough, or there were some failures that happened previously—understandable failures, maybe. So it would make sense for you, as the permanent secretary, to remind members of staff, either through a note or some training, that—

Alex Chisholm: Those teams are very clear, but you are right that additional training and measures will be taken to reinforce that.

Q118 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: It would be useful for us to know what notes or additional training take place, if you could you inform us when that happens.

Alex Chisholm: Okay.

Steve Barclay: If it helps the Committee, the Prime Minister has given that direction. In his letter to Lord Geidt, building on what the permanent secretary says, he gives a very clear direction in terms of the increase in dedicated support and reinforcing the message, both on resourcing but also on the support. That very much speaks to the point that you quite understandably raise.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: I appreciate that. It might well be the circulation of the Prime Minister’s memo to all relevant civil servants, but it is just to ensure that they have all seen and received that message.

Q119 Karin Smyth: Just to follow up on that, colleagues will remember that when Lord Geidt came to this Committee for his post-appointment hearing—I do not have the full transcript in front of me, but from reading it recently and given the circumstances in which he took up the post, which we all remember—he was absolutely aware of the nest into which he entered and the problems he would encounter. That was made very



HOUSE OF COMMONS

clear by questions from colleagues across the Committee. Either he was not supported enough to be able to do that job properly given those circumstances, or he did not recognise that he perhaps would not be availed of all the information, as one would normally expect.

Is that not a real failing of the Cabinet Office in not stepping up at that point? We hear the assurances now and we would like to see them, but we knew what this would be like last May, and the Committee was very clear in that post-appointment scrutiny session about the level of interrogation and request that would be needed, so why did it not happen then?

Alex Chisholm: Again, just to emphasise, Lord Geidt has expressed satisfaction with the excellent and professional support he has had from people and the way he has been dealt with—the courtesy and respect shown. However, it has been agreed that additional resources will be given to ensure that he has every possible assistance, and that is the commitment of the Prime Minister, which will be honoured in full.

Q120 **Karin Smyth:** So if the Prime Minister does not abide by that, it essentially rests with the Prime Minister. The support was there for Lord Geidt; he was not getting full co-operation from the Prime Minister. That is the only conclusion one can draw from that.

Alex Chisholm: The Prime Minister's instructions are very clear, and everybody in the Cabinet Office and No. 10 will co-operate fully with those. We will make sure that the office of the independent adviser is properly resourced.

Q121 **Ronnie Cowan:** Turning to covid-19 procurement, I have a question initially to Mr Barclay. Given that the high priority lane—or the VIP lane, as it has become known—for PPE procurement has been declared unlawful in the High Court following an action brought by the Good Law Project, why was it established in the first place?

Steve Barclay: It was established because we were at a time of national crisis, facing an emergency, and we needed to scale up procurement very significantly. We therefore needed to expedite that. Indeed, I think it was recognised by the court itself that the expedited process did not change the outcome. Just this week, in terms of the use of expedited processes, the Government obviously have just won a further legal case supporting the fact that we did move at pace and we were right to do so.

Q122 **Ronnie Cowan:** But the VIP lanes were declared illegal.

Steve Barclay: But on the approach that was used, the courts recognised that there had been an industry call to arms and that we were open, transparent and justified in doing so. The courts also acknowledged that it is highly unlikely that the outcome would have been substantially different. As has been set out in the Chamber a number of times, we faced a national crisis where we needed to move at pace to secure a very large quantum of PPE stock. Actually, civil servants throughout Whitehall worked round the clock—weekends; very long hours—in order to secure for the nation the PPE that we needed, and it is a tribute to them that they did so.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

The court found that the outcome of the steps that were taken was not substantially different as a result, from a legal perspective.

Q123 Ronnie Cowan: But we have had the NHS up and running, and we have been procuring for it, for decades. Are you telling me that there was nobody within that existing system who could have worked to establish what was the right equipment, in the right quantity, at the right price to deliver it, and that because of that you had to step outside of that system to work with people with no experience of procuring for our NHS at all?

Steve Barclay: We were procuring over 17.5 billion items of PPE; I think it is worth putting in place the quantum of that. The court acknowledged, in the case that you are referring to, in terms of PestFix, that it offered high volumes in terms of the range of PPE. That was coupled with the fact that it was an established source of PPE, and that was why it was considered in that way. I think that one has got to look at the context—

Q124 Ronnie Cowan: I am not so much talking about the manufacturers of these items; I am talking about the middlemen who brokered the deals.

Alex Chisholm: Can I possibly help out on this issue? There are a couple of things. First of all, as the Minister said, there was a huge increase in the volume; secondly, that came at a time when everybody else around the world was also trying to buy the same vital life-saving PPE; and some countries, indeed, put in place export restrictions on their own capacity. So there was a kind of global scramble to try to get hold of enough PPE.

Again, to try to give you a sense of the reality at that time, the ordinary procurement people within the NHS and the Department of Health—an organisation called SCCL—normally distributes PPE and other equipment to 300 sites, but because of the nature of the pandemic, with asymptomatic characteristics, that had to be increased to 58,000 different sites. It was an absolutely transformational change in the volume and the speed at which that equipment had to be procured and distributed. That required around 300 additional people to be brought in and mobilised from different parts of Government to help with that effort.

Q125 Ronnie Cowan: I am not questioning the job that had to be done and I appreciate that it was an extremely difficult situation that a lot of countries around the globe were handling, but we seem to have done it slightly differently in establishing these VIP lanes to get the job done. The National Audit Office found that records were not always kept and that the source of referrals to the high priority lanes were not always recorded. You can see why that is going to cast doubt in people's minds as to who is getting the big bucks to put these deals together.

Alex Chisholm: Yes indeed, and I do understand that. There was a general call to arms, saying, "Has anybody got any information which could help us get hold of a lot of PPE very quickly?" Several thousand people immediately bombarded different parts of Government, saying, "I can help." Some of those people actually could help; others could not help, and an effort was taken, as the Minister described, to try to prioritise those—

Q126 Ronnie Cowan: When you have got several thousand people bombarding you, is that not a good argument to go back to the basics and deal with the suppliers that you have currently got in place, because you have got a track record and a working relationship with these people, and you know who they are?

Alex Chisholm: The existing supply chains were adequate for a few million pieces of PPE, not for several billion, and even some of those existing suppliers were unable to fulfil their ordinary obligations because of the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic.

Q127 Ronnie Cowan: They could not have been given Government assistance to do that? You had to go to new suppliers to do that?

Alex Chisholm: This was happening in hours and days. If we had tried to rely on existing provision, we would still be waiting for that PPE now, and the consequences would have been that tens of thousands of people would have suffered the worst possible effects, including deaths, as a result of not having that PPE.

Q128 Ronnie Cowan: I am just sceptical that people with an existing track record of providing those sorts of supplies could not gear up their supply network, but you believe that completely new people coming into this from a standing start—zero—were capable of doing that.

Alex Chisholm: Additional people. All the existing suppliers were used as well, but additional suppliers had to be used because of this exceptional increase in volume.

I think that it is also probably useful for the Committee to be aware that the high priority lane did result in—I think that 430 companies were processed through that. All of those went through the same tests that were applied to the several thousand other people who made offers. Of the high priority lane, just 10% were successful; 90% were rejected, so it wasn't an assurance of success. The court has upheld that very rigorous and appropriate financial, commercial and legal assessments and due diligence were carried out, and that also has not been questioned by the NAO.

Although I recognise the questions that have been asked about this, in reality, when you get to the end of the trail and you follow what the courts have actually said, what the NAO has said and what the PAC has said, I think you can see that a very good job was done in very difficult circumstances to procure vital life-saving PPE.

Q129 Ronnie Cowan: What due diligence was done when you were considering potential conflicts of interest for your new suppliers?

Alex Chisholm: That was the standard assessment as part of the procurement process. I think eight tests were applied and conflicts were certainly considered as part of that. Again, that has been subject to a lot of scrutiny from the NAO. We have also had a report from Nigel Boardman, as the Minister has mentioned already, which has addressed those issues of how we manage conflicts.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Steve Barclay: It is worth remembering that over 90% of those put into the high priority lane did not succeed. That speaks to the point. You ask the very fair question, "To what extent did you not scale existing suppliers?" The answer is that we did; it is just that the target we were trying to seek was way above what they themselves could meet. We have then faced legal challenges for scaling with those existing suppliers; that is one of the areas on which the Cabinet Office and Government have been challenged. The point is that for the scaling that was required, the quantum was so high that it was a question of maximising all credible routes but doing so in a way that still led to over 90% of those in the HPL actually not meeting the diligence requirements. That points, as permanent secretary set out, to the fact that there were checks in place.

Q130 **Ronnie Cowan:** Given that the High Court has ruled that the high priority lane breached the principle of equal treatment of suppliers and declared it illegal, will you be appealing this decision?

Steve Barclay: Well, the court found on two—

Q131 **Ronnie Cowan:** Will you be appealing the decision?

Steve Barclay: We consider all court judgments and we will take legal advice on that. The point, which I was just coming on to, is that the court found in favour of the Government on two of the three aspects. On the equal treatment point, to some extent your question points to the challenge the Government had. You asked a moment ago why we did not make more use of existing suppliers. PestFix was a firm that offered high volumes that were in urgent demand. That was indeed part of the reason why firms like that were ones we were turning to.

Q132 **Ronnie Cowan:** What I am asking is whether you will appeal the decision.

Alex Chisholm: It is for the Secretary of State for Health as well. It is his decision.

Steve Barclay: But I remind the Committee that on a decision that we did appeal, we had a ruling this week in our favour. In an interesting parallel, on that decision, the court had ruled in its initial judgment in favour of the Government on two of the three issues in dispute; my predecessor as CDL appealed, and the Court of Appeal found in favour of the Government on all three areas. One cannot read across from one court case into another—each court case should be considered on its own merits—but that does point to the fact that these judgments should not be taken out of context given the wider circumstances that were faced at the time.

Chair: Thank you very much for that. We will go to Karin Smyth next.

Q133 **Karin Smyth:** We will move to public appointments. Mr Chisholm, generally, public appointments are five years in term, so when someone starts, it is fairly clear when they will finish. Therefore, the critical path to recruitment is equally clear, but we seem to have a number of public appointments being late from the Cabinet Office. Can you give us any reasons why that is the case?



Alex Chisholm: Thank you for your question. First, I agree with the sentiment that it is important that we should try to make timely appointments. That is something we encourage in the Cabinet Office right across Government. We have been taking active steps to try to improve the quality of the early-stage pipeline development, with the use of headhunters where appropriate. There is also a new website and case-tracking system, which I think will greatly assist with that. We are really pushing on that. We strongly support the timeliness of public appointments as a general principle, and we are taking steps to promote that across Government. Within the Cabinet Office itself, our record—certainly in the last year—has been quite mixed. I think you are right to say that we have made about 14 appointments, and half of them have been within their ordinary terms and half have involved extensions, so we certainly want to improve on that.

Q134 **Karin Smyth:** Secretary of State, you may want to come in on this. Where is the hold-up? Is it with ministerial clearance, the process coming forward, or it is the machinery of the civil service?

Alex Chisholm: If I may say so, I think there is no single factor. Sometimes, it is the case that the bodies responsible are a bit slow in coming forward; other times, it is perhaps because there has been some absence of staff—covid has obviously been a factor recently. Changes in senior positions can make a difference. There are multiple factors, but the general point is that we need to be able to deal with those factors. Next year especially, as we move out of covid and these other things we have been dealing with, I hope and expect to improve on that record.

Q135 **Karin Smyth:** Thank you. Mr Barclay, what role does the Cabinet Office have in the appointment process of other Departments and making sure that there is also improved timeliness there?

Steve Barclay: That is a very fair point. First, it is for those Departments to make the appointments. The role of the Cabinet Office is, first, that we sponsor the Commissioner for Public Appointments. We also run the central website, and we own the governance code that applies to those appointments. We also publish data on diversity, which is a hugely important issue as well. Again, the Departments themselves have an important role to play in ensuring diversity. Moving forward, one further area where the Cabinet Office will have involvement is through the introduction of a single online application portal for public appointments, which I think speaks both to your point about timeliness and to transparency around the process.

Karin Smyth: Thank you.

Q136 **Tom Randall:** Mr Barclay, can I ask about the appointment of the chair of the UK Statistics Authority? Sir David Norgrove's five-year term was due to end in March 2022. As I understand it, it is a routine appointment. The recruitment for that launched at the end of November but closed less than a fortnight afterwards. Could you tell us why that recruitment process seems to have been so rushed towards its end?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Steve Barclay: The permanent secretary touched on a number of the competing factors that we have experienced, not least in this era of covid. However, I am very pleased to be able to update the Committee in respect of that appointment, not least as I know the Committee will want to hold a pre-appointment hearing in a timely fashion. We have a strong list of candidates who have now applied. They will be interviewed next month. One of the things I know the perm sec has emphasised is our desire to complete the process in order that the Committee then has the opportunity for its pre-appointment hearing, given the timeline that you have quite rightly set out.

Q137 **Tom Randall:** You say you have a strong list of candidates. Obviously, applications were open for a very short window. Are you confident that that short application window did not—

Alex Chisholm: It was three weeks, just to correct what you said. It was extended by a third week.

Q138 **Tom Randall:** Right. Apologies. You do not think that that has had any impact on the ability to recruit a high-calibre candidate to the role?

Steve Barclay: No, I do not, not least because of the role itself. The role is one that, by its nature—I think this is reflected in the interest of the Committee—is a very senior and important role. I think that in turn has made it attractive to a wider field of applicants.

Q139 **Tom Randall:** Thank you. I understand there is a planned independent review of the UK Statistics Authority. Would you be able to provide further details on the timeline, what that review is going to look like, who will chair it and what its terms of reference will be?

Alex Chisholm: Yes.

Steve Barclay: We are very happy to update the Committee. Perhaps, Chair, it would be useful if I dropped a line to the Committee providing that.

Chair: Yes, that would be helpful.

Q140 **Tom Randall:** When we have looked at public appointments more generally, diversity of appointments has come up as an issue. Can you outline to us what steps the Cabinet Office is taking to ensure that candidates for public appointments come from as wide and diverse a pool as possible?

Steve Barclay: This is something that hugely matters to me, principally for two reasons. First, the Cabinet Office itself is home to the equality and diversity hub, and therefore one of the issues that the perm sec and I have discussed a number of times is how we as a Department show, not tell, more in our actions and in our interactions with Whitehall as a whole. Secondly, as someone who is originally from Lancashire, I am very keen that diversity is embraced in all its forms. By that I mean diversity of gender, race, geography, different educational routes into senior roles—just the full spectrum of diversity. Indeed, I had a very constructive



HOUSE OF COMMONS

exchange in the Chamber at Cabinet Office questions, on this point, in respect of the fast stream. There was a question from the Opposition Benches about the BME profile of fast streamers. One of the issues of diversity—I know Mrs Doyle-Price is aware of this in terms of the health system—is that when looking at the diversity of chief execs, one needs to look at the roles beneath that in order to create the ladder through. For ourselves, in the civil service, that starts with things like the fast stream, so that we have the pipeline or ladder through to generate diversity in more senior civil service roles. More fundamentally and more traditionally, the Cabinet Office has a commitment through the seven Nolan principles that must be upheld, so candidates need to declare their interest and so on. We are looking within that context, but also, given our ownership of the equalities hub, we have a role to play in using the data, in particular, that colleagues have to drive change.

Alex Chisholm: Could I add a word or two, if that is helpful to the Committee? Last May, I spoke before the Committee about how we could encourage people from different and more diverse backgrounds to come and apply for these important roles. We put effort into how we describe the roles, where we promote and advertise them and the selection processes, panels and so on that are used. All of that comes into the picture.

However, as the Minister says, data counts for a lot, so I want to share with you the year-on-year change that we have had. Last year, women—obviously one of the groups that we keep track of—made up 44% of appointees, but that has gone up to 46%; the number of people from an ethnic minority background has gone up from 9%, last year, to 11%; the number of people from outside London and the south-east—another measure, as the Minister was saying, that we now look at carefully—has gone up from 57% to 61%. There is progress on all fronts.

Steve Barclay: And the Places for Growth programme is moving more roles out of central London, across the UK. I emphasise “across the UK” because the Cabinet Office, under the perm sec’s leadership, and particularly under my predecessor, prioritised Glasgow in terms of jobs as our second HQ; for the Treasury, where I was before, that is Darlington; for the Levelling Up Department, that is Wolverhampton, and so forth. That is hugely important, both in terms of opening up opportunities closer to where the talent comes from, but also in terms of the ability to build careers within those locations, rather than simply going for a single role within one bit of Government. How we build hubs and spokes through the Places for Growth programme will be a key part of championing diversity.

Tom Randall: Thank you.

Q141 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** You have just mentioned the move of the civil service out of London. This is a question that I was going to ask later on, but I will ask it now to get it out of the way: how does that demonstrate a diversity of gender and social class, as opposed to just a diversity of where people happen to live, or might relocate?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Steve Barclay: That is a very fair point. I don't think it does, of itself. On the point of class, it may be—I am speculating slightly—about whether it is easier for certain classes to do the transport distances, or about the cost of central London and so forth. The wider point of diversity in Places for Growth is across the board, by opening up opportunities across the United Kingdom—rather than saying that people must come and work within London, given the cost of accommodation, travel and so forth—which, of itself, will make it easier for those who haven't gone to university, perhaps, or who haven't moved away from one area. It will open up more opportunities.

Let us not lose sight of the fact that we will still have a lot of roles in London, so it is not that there will not be opportunities there. As the Prime Minister has frequently said, talent is equally distributed, opportunity too often is not. People often feel that, in order to fulfil their talent, they have to leave their place of origin and move, and therefore bringing more jobs and more career opportunities closer to people's place will open opportunities up—given the quite fair point you made that diversity comes in various guises, including class.

Q142 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Is monitoring done to ensure that when you move out of London, diversity is built into all those new recruitments—more so than London?

Steve Barclay: Monitoring is done; the perm secretary has touched on some of the data that we have. It has also been done through the work led by former Prime Minister May, who had a particular focus on data for equalities and diversity. That has been continued through the work of the equality hub.

Q143 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** Mr Barclay, I would invite you, through your answers to my questions, to articulate where you think the Cabinet Office now sits in the machinery of government, and what its fundamental purposes are. At the time of your appointment, some functions were transferred away from the Cabinet Office; is it fair to say that the responsibilities of the Cabinet Office have narrowed?

Steve Barclay: I think "gained greater focus" is how I would like to frame it. You are right that certain works, such as the work on the Union and levelling up that sat with my predecessor within the Cabinet Office, have now moved to the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. As the spending review highlighted, a number of key immediate and longer-term priorities sit with the Cabinet Office, such as the Brexit opportunities or the security and resilience work—which we saw with the petrol forecourt challenges in the autumn—or work on equality of opportunity, as was touched on in Mr Russell-Moyle's question. There are some key areas on the modernisation and efficiency side that were singled out in the spending review. A moment ago, we were talking about Places for Growth: we have the single log-on and the single trade window. There are a number of major programmes that we own, and then—without running through departmental responsibilities—there is the traditional Cabinet Office role of chairing Whitehall Committees, whether that be



HOUSE OF COMMONS

covid operations, leading on cyber or the immigration taskforce. That role remains, and given the pace of events in recent weeks, it puts the Cabinet Office very much at the centre of the machine of government.

Q144 Jackie Doyle-Price: Without wanting to put words into your mouth, you use the term “focus”; is it a fair summary to say that the Cabinet Office is becoming more focused on delivery, as opposed to policy, as a result of those changes?

Steve Barclay: I would characterise it as having a very keen interest and focus on data. I think data is instrumental to delivery. There is the adage, “What gets measured, gets done.” When one looks from the Cabinet Office, many of the challenges that sit within the line of a Department are often contingent on things that happen in other Departments. Therefore, having earlier sight of those barnacles on the boat, so to speak, and having the right data sharing, analysis and skills, links in to the very good work that my predecessor and the Cabinet Secretary did on the declaration of civil service reform. That also links to some of the comments that figures such as Kate Bingham have highlighted, in terms of the change programme and bringing science and data more into the machine of government. All of those things speak to delivery, but delivery that is built on policy. One cannot be too artificial in the distinction; actually, the more one can align the policy with the delivery the better—otherwise you have people developing a policy that someone else seeks to deliver. The two should stick together.

Q145 Jackie Doyle-Price: You will know from our previous discussions that my frustration is that the biggest impediment to the effectiveness of Government is silo culture. The ownership may stay with one Department, but the impact that failure to deliver, or delivery, has plays out in other Departments. Do you consider it the role of the Cabinet Office to challenge that—to make sure that silo culture does not get in the way of policy objectives?

Steve Barclay: Yes, 100%.

Q146 Jackie Doyle-Price: Excellent. We will hold you to that—as I am sure you know. We have an operational delivery plan for the Cabinet Office, which at the moment refers to things such as Brexit.

Steve Barclay: Just to be clear on that, it is our role, but one should be careful that the centre does not try to do too much, and it is for Departments to own delivery. The role of the Cabinet Office is to assist and support them by identifying any blockages that those Departments find are getting in the way of that delivery.

One needs to be very clear at the centre in terms of the outcomes that are set, what it is that the Department is being asked to deliver and its ability to do so, but if there are dependencies elsewhere, obviously the Cabinet Office has a role in supporting.

Q147 Jackie Doyle-Price: I am glad you said that—you have put flesh on the bones, really—because what we are talking about is challenge based on



HOUSE OF COMMONS

demonstrating outcomes, not just by the process of the Cabinet Office sitting above it. I think that is really what I get from what you have just said.

However, the operational delivery plan currently refers to Brexit and devolution—the Union. Obviously, those issues have gone away. Will you be producing a new operational delivery plan and, if so, what will that contain?

Steve Barclay: There is an update on the ODP, but I would not say that Brexit opportunity, by any means, has gone away. We have got funding for that in the spending review, and if I look at just one bit of legislation that will come before the House, in terms of procurement—quite often when I mention procurement, people's initial reaction is, "That sounds a rather dry topic". When I say that we have got £50 billion of central Government spend and £300 billion of public sector spend, and that there is an opportunity within the Brexit opportunity to look at how we use that in things like better use of social value, it is not a new concept. There was legislation on it in 2013-14.

People may say, "What do you mean by social value?" That might be how, through our procurement, we target procurement to firms employing a higher number of people with disability than other firms, because that has a social value. It may be in terms of ex-offenders, to reduce the reoffending rate.

So I think there are a number of areas, without straying into other Departments—so, if the DEFRA Secretary was here, he would talk about the fundamental shift in how we get public good from what we pay in terms of land ownership. But simply within the Cabinet Office itself, one can look at things like public procurement and see opportunities for quite significant change.

Q148 **Jackie Doyle-Price:** You are right, though, that it sounds dry. But ultimately this has to become more important, doesn't it? I think that one of the things that we have all observed in terms of the culture of Whitehall and the civil service is that policy is sexy and the actual process of making things happen less so. However, we do not actually achieve effective government or value for money unless we really properly prioritise those things at the heart. Would you agree?

Steve Barclay: I think the Whole of Government accounts document is a very interesting document for that reason, and it is always a slight surprise to me how little interest—often—colleagues outside a Committee such as this one take in some of those issues, which are often seen as being more dry than others but are where a very significant quantum of spend is made.

I think there are opportunities to use the flexibilities we have—taking your example of the Brexit opportunities—to say, "How do we get the balance right between the right regulation for stability and the right regulation to drive greater competition and disruption?" How are we seizing the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

innovation opportunities, whether they are in technology or in changes that covid has illustrated?

Again, I commend the work that civil service officials have done through covid to look at new ways of delivery. There is a tendency to overquote the Vaccines Taskforce as one of the vehicles of that, but actually in a whole range of other areas, including how we work across the Department, there are opportunities as a result of covid to do things quite differently.

Jackie Doyle-Price: Thank you.

Alex Chisholm: Sorry, Chair, but I will make just one tiny point in reinforcement. You are very much encouraging us to focus on delivery and the outcomes that we achieve financially. The "O" in "ODP" is for "Outcomes", as in "Outcomes Delivery Plan"; it is not "Operational". And that is exactly the intent behind them, to enable us and indeed Parliament and the wider public to have a clear focus on what you are looking to achieve with the use of these resources, how you will do it and what the benefit is in terms of the outcome. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. David Mundell, please.

Q149 **David Mundell:** Continuing on the theme of the role of the Cabinet Office, can I ask you a question Mr Barclay? Responsibility for the constitution has in part shifted to the newly expanded Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. What exactly has gone and what remains in the Cabinet Office?

Steve Barclay: As the permanent secretary said earlier, Sue Gray continues to be permanent secretary for the Union and the constitution, and an adviser on the Union, so she has the role of second permanent secretary within the Department. Responsibility for Cabinet Committees focused on the Government's Union policy remains within the Cabinet Office, so that core equity continues and sits within the more traditional framework of the Cabinet Office providing the secretariat. You see that with the supply chains unit, the covid operations and so forth.

In the Department for Levelling Up, a number of teams are working on devolution, the Union strategy and the policy areas, as well as on communications, engagement and devolution implications. For example, the Secretary of State for Levelling Up chairs, with the First Ministers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the cross-UK forum. But I have attended a number of those recently in order to update on the supply chains work that I have been leading, which has a Union element. That really is how it fits together.

Q150 **David Mundell:** We have been advised that Andy Haldane was appointed as permanent Secretary in the Cabinet Office to work on levelling up. If that is the case, why then is there a separate Department for Levelling Up, and what is the Cabinet Office's continuing role in the levelling-up agenda.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Steve Barclay: The permanent secretary may wish to come in on this, but I think Mr Haldane reports jointly to the Prime Minister and to the Secretary of State, and his appointment is a six-month posting. He reports to the Prime Minister, which is where there is a Cabinet Office interface.

Alex Chisholm: It is also a question of timing, because obviously Andy Haldane was appointed before this machinery of government change was made, and it was decided that he should continue to report to the Prime Minister and to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. As the Minister has said, he is on loan to us from the RSA for only six months, but in practice he has worked mainly within DLUHC, but with a foot in the Cabinet Office as well.

Q151 **David Mundell:** Is that a sensible way to deal with responsibility for levelling up? Should he not just have gone fully into the new Department?

Alex Chisholm: It has worked very well in practice and has not given us any issues or concerns.

David Mundell: Thank you.

Q152 **Mr Jones:** Mr Chisholm, could you describe the responsibility that the Cabinet Office now has for intergovernmental relations within the UK?

Alex Chisholm: That is one of the things that is still a responsibility of the Cabinet Office, and one of the reasons why I mentioned that Sue Gray continues to have responsibility in the Cabinet Office as well as her main role in DLUHC. She is there to help support and advise the Prime Minister on his own responsibilities in relation to intergovernmental relations.

Q153 **Mr Jones:** The Government published their review of intergovernmental relations last week, which includes a standing secretariat to be hosted by the Cabinet Office, which this Committee recommended some time ago, as you will recall. Can you explain why this is to be within the Cabinet Office rather than DLUHC?

Alex Chisholm: I think it was felt that this is something that ultimately needed to be under the Prime Minister, at the very centre of Government, and that that was appropriate for intergovernmental relations.

Q154 **Mr Jones:** And the line management therefore ultimately is the Prime Minister, is that right?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, through Sue Gray, I believe, to the Prime Minister.

Mr Jones: Thank you very much.

Q155 **David Mundell:** Mr Barclay, continuing on that theme, what is the new division of responsibility for European matters between the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Cabinet Office following Lord Frost's departure from Government?

Steve Barclay: The Prime Minister announced on 19 December that the Foreign Secretary would be the lead negotiator in respect of our



HOUSE OF COMMONS

negotiations on the Northern Ireland protocol and would take on ministerial responsibility for the UK's relationship with the European Union following Lord Frost's departure. Responsibilities for border strategy in delivery as well as for maximising the Brexit opportunities, which we touched on a moment ago, will remain in the Cabinet Office, and any further ministerial changes would be confirmed in the usual way.

Q156 Tom Randall: Mr Chisholm, the Foreign Affairs Committee's report on the withdrawal from Kabul appeared to reveal that officials from DFID were not fully integrated into the Foreign Office's IT systems for over a year after their merger. Could you tell us whether that is correct?

Alex Chisholm: Thank you for the question. It is obviously a matter for the FCDO, but since I heard that you might be asking that question, I did make inquiries, and I am told that their systems have now been fully integrated.

Q157 Tom Randall: Do you know how long that integration took?

Alex Chisholm: It appears to have taken most of a year.

Q158 Tom Randall: How long would it normally take to integrate staff who have moved Departments after a machinery of government change?

Alex Chisholm: That is quite typical in my experience; I have done it three times now. That's a lot to do not so much with the teams, which can be quickly brought together, but more with the underlying systems: back-office systems, HR and finance systems. To try to integrate them, like with any other software system, needs to be done with great caution and carefully, without any loss of data, and that can take longer.

Q159 Tom Randall: Where does the overall responsibility lie for making sure that machinery of government change runs smoothly in terms of ensuring that problems don't arise when you have those sorts of challenges?

Alex Chisholm: Let me try to describe that. First of all, the responsibility for making machinery of government changes lies with the Prime Minister, on the advice of the Cabinet Secretary. Secondly, the actual implementation of a machinery of government change is going to be for the permanent secretaries of the two Departments that are merging. In this case, that was quickly brought under a single permanent secretary, Philip Barton, and a team was put in place to achieve that transformation successfully. Thirdly, to try to make sure that we learn from our lessons and have a central point of expertise and guidance, there is a small team that sits in the Cabinet Office, and that team did indeed support that machinery of government change, along with five others, over the last year.

Q160 Tom Randall: So there is a continual learning from these processes.

Alex Chisholm: There is indeed.

Q161 Tom Randall: I suppose each change is different in some way, depending on what the change is, but when you have done a machinery of government change, how do you measure success? If it has taken a year



HOUSE OF COMMONS

to integrate something, is that a good result or a bad result? How do you measure that?

Alex Chisholm: I think that you are right in the way you ask the question, in that it does vary quite a lot according to what the motivation for the machinery of government change has been. Clearly, in this case, having a very joined-up presence in all our overseas posts between traditional foreign policy and development activities was a clear goal, and I understand that they believe they have been successful with that. Usually, there are opportunities as well to reduce costs by not duplicating corporate overheads. Certainly when I have had the experience of doing those mergers, I have been able to take those opportunities.

I think, ultimately, it is usually the external customers and stakeholders for Departments who also say, "Has this actually brought about a better Department as a consequence?" You wouldn't want to try to assess that after just one year, because these are big organisational changes. Three, four, five years down the track, you would have a different view about whether the net costs of the process have been exceeded by the benefits that have come from the merger.

Q162 Jackie Doyle-Price: Mr Barclay, your Department is going to have to make some significant savings in terms of both revenue and capital. Could you give us some views about how you expect those to be delivered and whether any programmes will have to be cut, cancelled or postponed to meet the reduced capital spend?

Steve Barclay: First, we actually got a very good settlement through the spending review, and I think that allows us to prioritise a number of the key issues that we need to be focused on—in particular, things like the single sign-on. That speaks exactly to the point you raised on outcomes. What is the customer journey for constituents? How do we make it easier for them to interact? Therefore, in terms of prioritisation, there is a distinction between the core budget and those areas that we re-charge back to other parts of Whitehall. I think what you are referring to is much more about that core baseline position. Clearly, covid has shown that there are many opportunities to do things differently. That is also about linking our headcount with our learning and development, so that we have a very positive offer for our staff and skill them up in the areas that then deliver the most effective change, and do so in a way that meets the fiscal objectives that Treasury colleagues have set.

Q163 Jackie Doyle-Price: One element of the programme you are responsible for is the Government estate strategy. I am not surprised that you have mentioned throughout your evidence the importance of good data and good metrics, so what sort of metrics will you be looking at to demonstrate success from the Government estate strategy and the relocation of staff?

Steve Barclay: One of the areas—the Government Property Agency has a key part here—is through the economies of scale. Part of the reason for shifting from each Department basically running its own property portfolio to bringing a much more holistic view to how we use the property estate is



that it allows that best practice and greater specialisation in the management of the property portfolio. It allows us to build hub and spokes, because it is not simply about knowing the cost of things; it is also about the value. Therefore, when we look for places for growth, it is important that we learn the lessons from this Committee, the PAC and others, which is not simply to plonk a load of jobs down in a particular location in isolation, but to build a network where you can then grow a career. It is not simply about the cost of the estate, but about how it is used to develop careers in different locations. Above all, it is part of this wider point around how we have people in the right location with the right skills and the right technical support. If we get that right, the economies of scale and efficiency flow from that.

Q164 Jackie Doyle-Price: I will bring in Mr Chisholm in a moment, but from what you have said, we need a data narrative that goes beyond x number of civil servants moving out of central London and paints a much bigger picture in terms of delivering a workforce that delivers the outcomes we want.

Steve Barclay: The data is coming not least from the work that Treasury colleagues are doing through the way they are incentivising property transfers. I know the perm sec wants to come in, but part of it from my perspective—I think you were on the Public Accounts Committee at the time—was about looking at some of the lessons from previous estate rationalisations. Lord Maude did a significant amount of work on this, and what the PAC found at the time was that the retrospective controls were effective for Departments but the proactive incentivisation was not. In essence, if a Department moved and did not get the benefit, but leases came up for renewal, the Cabinet Office control that Lord Maude put in place was effective.

One of the issues here is that we have, as the perm sec touched on a moment ago, the outcome delivery plan, looking at what the outcomes are for Departments. There are Places for Growth, looking at which are our most expensive London sites. What are the lessons from covid? What is the right balance in terms of working from home versus being in the office, and what is the right office mix for that? How can we deliver differently? How, through programmes like the single sign-on, do we allow automation to therefore streamline some of the headcount we need? That obviously flows through into property as well.

To give you one example, if I take a Department like HMRC, the customer journey is impaired if you have to be making calls to call centres—that takes a lot of staff. If, as in the corporate world, many of those roles are now through chats online, you deliver a better customer service with that automation. You reduce your headcount and you reduce your estates requirement, and the jobs we are able to offer are much more in that digital space and transformation space. That is how I would see that coming together.

Alex Chisholm: Just a couple of things to add to that. Financial measures are the most straightforward: how much have you saved, particularly from



HOUSE OF COMMONS

expensive London leases? We have been able to exit eight already this year, and five more are on track. Then there are all the benefits that come from the areas that you are investing in in terms of additional jobs. There is a benefit locally there. The business case that we presented on that shows a net present value over 20 years of about £1.7 billion and a further £2.2 billion of non-cashable savings, so big value on pure financial measures.

But I do not think that is the whole of it. It is very important to have measures of efficiency as to how much we utilise that space. Again, because of the moves to hybrid working and so on I think we will be able to improve the efficiency there—the amount of people we can associate with each particular office space around the country.

Environmental sustainability is also a big factor. A lot of the new hubs are much more efficient in terms of their carbon emissions per person, so that is a big benefit that we are getting.

Finally, bringing it to people, these are workspaces and, in a way, the most important thing is, what is the experience of the people working there? People tend to like more modern types of workplaces. There are opportunities, as Mr Russell-Moyle said, to facilitate greater diversity through employment across the country. We tend to find that staff stay with us longer in these non-London locations. Again, that can be a benefit in terms of building up deep skills. Of course, there is also the opportunity to strengthen our visibility and connection with local communities, and the appreciation and daily contact that people have with Government across the UK.

Q165 Jackie Doyle-Price: That is very helpful. It is reassuring that you are looking at a wide range of indicators to demonstrate success.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has set out a number of times the opportunities afforded by One Login, but we know from history that the Government find digital projects quite challenging at the best of times. Can you explain how you are managing the risks associated with what is a significant project that the Government have ambitions to deliver?

Alex Chisholm: I agree with you that this is a very significant and important project. As the Minister has said, it is a key priority for him to deliver the single sign-on. We think it is going to bring huge benefits to users; you will not have to keep endlessly re-registering yourself for different types of Government services. It will also enable Government to target services much more to people's needs. It is a hugely important strategic project for the Government.

As you say, we have had digital identity-type schemes before, such as Verify. That was serviceable in its way. It still has millions of people using it, but it is not a great tool in some respects because it is quite clunky, if I can put it like that, and it takes quite a long time to be able to verify yourself. Also, it is, so to speak, a black box solution. Having completed that, what it says is that you are very likely the person you say you are. It

does not allow any of the data that you have just submitted—for example, about your address—to be reusable. It is very strong on the preservation of data aspect, but not so much on the usability for people.

We are trying to make sure that the new solution—single sign-on—continues to fully respect privacy and data protection obligations and so on, but that it is a lot more usable, has a quick take-up across the wider public service, and in particular that the big operational Departments find it very useful. If we are able to do that, it will save large amounts of money as well as time for all the users. We have a strong, dedicated team who are busy delivering that, and we expect the first version to begin to go live in the spring.

Steve Barclay: You are absolutely right on the question, Ms Doyle-Price. We are very keen to learn from Verify. That is the point 1. That particularly speaks to the buy-in of the core Departments that are involved. Secondly, as the perm sec sets out, it is extremely important that we are clear in our communications on the customer benefit so that there is buy-in on the data concerns that Parliament has often raised, and so that people can see that the customer journey—that friction of multiple sign-ons to different Government services—becomes much easier and is accelerated. It also allows much better controls on fraud and some of the compliance issues.

I would incur the concern of the Chair if I were to pose a question to the Committee, so I will simply muse aloud that what the private sector pays for the top-level specialist digital talent is not the same as what the civil service is able to offer on these multimillion pound programmes. That is a question we are wrestling with. It would be interesting for the Committee to give some thought to how we get the talent that we need in a highly competitive market, to deliver the customer journey that the public want and are used to receiving when they interact with the Amazons of this world.

Q166 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** Of the action points on the reform of the civil service that were outlined by your predecessor, how many have actually been completed and what remains to be done?

Steve Barclay: From the July declaration of—

Q167 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** The declaration on Government reform.

Steve Barclay: On the declaration of the Cabinet Secretary and my predecessor, which was in July, I think the intention is to do an update to the Committee. I will not try to speculate on the precise number, although the perm sec may have that to hand. From memory, I think there were 30 actions that were set out in that, on things like digital and data, increasing opportunities across the UK and skills. But certainly in terms of intent, it is absolutely my intention that we continue our focus on that.

Alex Chisholm: Yes, and just to add a bit to that, there are certain actions there that you can say have been ticked off. For example, we said we would establish an evaluation taskforce; we said we would have a

central digital data office; we said a No.10 delivery unit would be established. Those are straightforward steps, which have been done and completed.

Q168 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: The civil service training facility?

Alex Chisholm: The civil service training facility is about to be launched very shortly, so watch this space on that one. And there are other ones that are more long-term and indicative. In order to do justice to them, we are doing a full report, which, as well as giving an update on the declaration on Government reform, will also cover—if you are interested—the work that we have done in response to the two reports by Lord Maude and also the report from the Digital Economy Council, which gave us some very good advice on what to do to galvanise our digital and data work. All of that will be reported to the Committee in the very near future, but I would like to emphasise that there has been—

Q169 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Do you have a date for when that will be forthcoming?

Alex Chisholm: We have not fixed a date yet, but in the near future. It has been very actively taken forward over the last seven months. It is a core part of what the Government is committed to. It will be running through the outcome delivery plans that we discussed a few minutes ago and it is something that receives very close attention, including from a monthly board chaired by CDL with the Cabinet Secretary. It is a priority and we are making excellent progress with it.

Q170 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: With the training facility, you say that it is about to come online or be launched—

Alex Chisholm: It will be both physical and online.

Q171 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: When I said “online”, I meant be live. Can you give us dates or timelines of when that “about to” is?

Alex Chisholm: I don’t believe the announcement date has been fixed, but shortly.

Steve Barclay: It has secured funding. So, again, to speak to the substance of your point, if I understand correctly, which is whether, given a change of lead Minister in the Department, there is any lessening of intent. Hopefully, I can reassure the Committee, first, as the permanent secretary has set out, that I am chairing those meetings alongside the Cabinet Secretary. Secondly, we have secured funding for it in the spending review.

Thirdly, in terms of the answer to Ms Doyle-Price’s earlier point, in terms of the direction of travel for the Cabinet Office itself, it is absolutely fundamental that we commit to our learning and development offer, and that is part of our leadership more widely and the perm sec’s leadership as chief operating officer across the civil service as a whole.

Q172 Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Do you think the civil service in the Cabinet Office



HOUSE OF COMMONS

are generally happy?

Steve Barclay: We have the people survey. So, rather than opining on opinion, we have some extremely helpful data, which the Committee may wish to share. I am conscious of time, Chair, but it is for you in terms of where the Committee's focus wishes to align. There is a people survey where we measure that, and we have some data that provides metrics on it.

Q173 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I wonder if you measure, in your Department, people who are so unhappy that they have considered taking their life. Do you record that data?

Steve Barclay: That obviously would be an issue of the gravest concern. In terms of ministerial commitment to an issue like that, just yesterday I was at Waterloo station looking at our mental health support as part of our 60 recommendations and £70 million funding in the veterans strategy, because, again, that has been a concern within the veterans community. I know there are Members with direct ministerial experience of these issues on the Committee, so I am in no doubt that the Committee would also expect us to take any issues on mental health with the utmost—

Q174 **Lloyd Russell-Moyle:** I just wondered how you recorded those crisis moments. All organisations will have them. How are they recorded? That doesn't come out in the survey. The survey talks about general satisfaction, but I could not dig down any details about crisis moments, the maximum of which, I suspect, is an attempt—

Steve Barclay: I absolutely accept that the people survey is measuring a set of metrics, which would not pick up an individual case such as that. There are other mechanisms within the Department, not least people raising concerns through line management and so forth.

Alex Chisholm: And if people are off sick, which might be for mental health reasons, that data is recorded by HR.

Lloyd Russell-Moyle: Thank you.

Q175 **David Mundell:** Mr Barclay, in addition to the ongoing focus on civil service capability, the declaration includes introducing training for Ministers. Can you elaborate on how this is envisaged to function?

Steve Barclay: Very much so. I fear that, on this, I may be a positive outlier, because I absolutely embrace this topic. Recently—

Q176 **David Mundell:** Are you suggesting that all your colleagues are not so positive?

Steve Barclay: I am sure, with alacrity, they will share my desire, Mr Mundell. I actually think this is a very serious point. I myself recently benefited from this. I had a briefing on a data masterclass that a senior official in the Cabinet Office had devised. It was a huge tribute to him and the training team, what they had put in place. I was incredibly impressed by it, to the point that I then went away and did it myself. I have shared



HOUSE OF COMMONS

the benefit of that with a number of other Ministers, who have asked for access to do that same course.

One should not overly lean into policy in terms of individual anecdotes, but I share that anecdote because I am conscious that this is my first appearance before the Committee and I hope that it signals the importance that I put on training. If Ministers are to communicate the importance of training, learning and development to officials in their Department, then they need to be willing to embrace it themselves.

We have been looking at this area more widely. For example, when I was in the Treasury, I saw the brilliant work that Nick Smallwood, who leads the IPA, has done. He has been providing training for Ministers on major infrastructure programmes, thinking about the questions and data on which he, as someone with a vast amount of experience, can assist Ministers who may not be used to managing a major infrastructure programme but suddenly find themselves in the Department for Transport, for example. They brought in Oxford University's management school to assist in that ministerial training.

I would say—I fear that if I posed a second question to the Committee, I would be treading on particularly thin ice—that we should be thinking about training not just when someone becomes a Minister but cross-party, thinking about those who may, at some point in their career, have ministerial responsibility. I cannot see why there is not scope for some upstream training. I think we should also—you are a former senior Cabinet Minister yourself, Mr Mundell—think about how we take the corporate memory from Departments and better use that for the benefit of Ministers. That, again, is probably underdeveloped.

One final point—not least because we have the Cabinet Office board meeting this afternoon—is that one of the other things that I certainly benefit from, alongside training, is the huge experience we have through our NEDs. One thing the perm sec and I are very committed to is making our non-execs much more integral to the working of the Department. My experience of other Departments was that sometimes it was a rather arm's length relationship, or an intermittent relationship. Alongside training, I think it is also about how you bring in a wider pool of expertise to support Ministers.

Q177 David Mundell: Perhaps I can ask Mr Chisholm to comment. There is a traditional view that the civil service is rather positive about the constant rotation of Ministers because that gives it more power, shall we say, in the relationship. Mr Chisholm, would you prefer that Mr Barclay stayed in post indefinitely?

Steve Barclay: To be fair to the perm sec, I feel that is a slightly unfair question.

David Mundell: But you know the point I am making.

Alex Chisholm: I do. I am not in favour of Ministers being moved around in order to allow civil servants to run rings around them—absolutely not.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Obviously, decisions about ministerial appointments are for the Prime Minister, not for me, and we work with whichever Ministers are appointed to our Departments. I very much support what the CDL has just been saying about the need for Ministers to have support themselves and their own training.

Some of the courses that are on offer now, which I think Ministers from 10 different Departments have taken up, include commercial contract management—we heard that £300 billion is being spent across the public sector—public finance, science in Government, and data and the legal framework. Getting the best possible training and support is essential these days to be fully effective as a Minister, given the enormous complexity of the world we operate in and the decisions they have to take.

Obviously, civil servants are there with their expertise and their own skills to try to support that, but I do think it makes sense for Ministers and civil servants to work together for settled periods of time to achieve these great things.

Q178 David Mundell: Is there any expectation that Ministers would actually be required to undertake such training?

Steve Barclay: They are not currently mandated. They are strongly encouraged and, as the perm sec just said, I think the quality of the training is such that, notwithstanding busy diaries, there is an appetite for it among Ministers. To give you an example, it is just next week that Gareth Rhys Williams, our chief commercial officer, is delivering a masterclass on commercial contract management. Anyone who has discussed those issues with Gareth will know that he brings a huge amount of industry expertise to them. I went on a very interesting visit with him recently to the new ambulance centre next to City airport, looking at how we can use contracts there in innovative ways.

I think there is an appetite there. Ministers have busy diaries, so there is always a tension around time. The House will often have urgent questions and other things, which sometimes can cut across this training, but for the reasons the perm sec has just touched on, I think there is an appetite. I think it is important, and certainly, both the perm sec and I are reinforcing to Departments that this is a key part of our training offer. Given that these courses are increasingly online, I think it is much more reasonable that Ministers can work those into diaries.

Chair: Very briefly from Ronnie, please.

Q179 Ronnie Cowan: I am just wondering if the Prime Minister has engaged in any of these training opportunities.

Steve Barclay: As I say, they are available for all Ministers, but some Ministers have even busier diaries than others.

Q180 Mr Jones: The declaration on Government reform speaks of increasing ministerial visibility of appointments. Could you explain what that means in practice?

Steve Barclay: Ministerial visibility of public appointments?

Mr Jones: Yes.

Steve Barclay: I think it is things like the online digital platform that the Cabinet Office is leading on, it is making the process more transparent, and I think it is reflecting some of the guidance and advice that has come from the Committee on Standards in Public Life and others, who have talked about the importance of transparency and how we deliver appointments in the best way.

Q181 **Mr Jones:** So what does the “ministerial” bit of the ministerial visibility actually entail?

Steve Barclay: Again, I think it speaks to points we touched on earlier in the session about ministerial accountability, the transparency of the process and how Ministers account to Parliament. I think those are the key elements of this.

Alex Chisholm: Yes. I do not think there is a fundamental change, if I may say so. The code on appointments has always emphasised that Ministers make those decisions. Really, what the declaration was trying to animate was that it is very important that Ministers do exercise the authority they have in relation to those appointments. It is so important to have the chance to contribute both to the description of what the job should be and how it is promoted, in the way that we described earlier, in a very open way, to make sure that we get the best possible candidates through that process, and also that the people, once appointed, can work successfully with the other parts of the Government system.

Q182 **Mr Jones:** You say there has always been ministerial visibility, but the document talks of increasing it.

Steve Barclay: Let me give you an example. I think it is a very fair challenge, Mr Jones. Like you—I think you know this—I have a very strong commitment to the Union. If the appointments that were coming across my desk were overly focused on people in London and the south-east, then I would want to say, as part of the Government’s commitment to the Union, that I felt it was proper that we should ensure that our adverts were targeting those across the Union of the United Kingdom and reflecting the diversity that we were committed to. I think it is the ability of Ministers to signal that the Government have a commitment to diversity of the Union and so forth, and to ensure, in a transparent manner, that appointments are reflective of that.

Q183 **Mr Jones:** It is not to any degree, therefore, an interference by Ministers in what would otherwise be the domain of civil servants?

Steve Barclay: Without wanting to read too much into your question, we touched earlier on the Nolan principles, the ministerial code and many of the other issues that apply, and they apply in particular to public appointments. I think your earlier question was teasing out the point under my predecessor in terms of the declaration around ministerial roles, and I think one of the roles that this Committee would expect me to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

emphasise when we make appointments—a number of Committee members raised this point—is around diversity. That is diversity in all its guises, including of place.

Q184 **Mr Jones:** There is no danger, then, that this might result in increased politicisation of the appointments process?

Steve Barclay: Again, given the clarity in the ministerial code and the issues we have touched on in terms of the various reports, whether that be Boardman 3 or Lord Evans's, I think we have covered that terrain.

Q185 **Mr Jones:** The new First Civil Service Commissioner is about to start her five-year term. Would you expect that she would oversee a rewrite of the recruitment principles under her tenure?

Steve Barclay: First, my understanding is that the person you are referring to is due to come before the Committee in early February for a pre-appointment hearing. I certainly would not want to pre-empt the decision of the Committee in any regard, and therefore I will allow that process to take its course.

Mr Jones: All right. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you. The last topic is from Ronnie. We are making very good time.

Q186 **Ronnie Cowan:** We are entering the home straight, which you will be glad to hear. I want to talk about freedom of information and touch on the operation of the clearing house. First, Mr Barclay, how often do you personally make a decision on an FOI request?

Steve Barclay: Personally, extremely rarely. I cannot think of a particular one in recent weeks. It will be very rare if I do.

Q187 **Ronnie Cowan:** Is there a particular topic or subject matter that would find its way to you?

Steve Barclay: There is a process around the clearing house. As you know, that process has been in place since 2004. If the question is referring to the Cabinet Office role in terms of having a clearing house, that speaks much more to the importance of consistency—consistency on issues such as national security, which the Cabinet Office has an interest in, and consistency in terms of personal information, so that we apply that across Departments. From an efficiency point of view, we also seek to avoid some of the duplications that can apply.

There has been the process of a clearing house since 2004. I think it is a very small number—from memory, around 500 from 30,000—that come through that lane. In addition, I think it was in 2015 that the Committee found that, when it came across to the Cabinet Office, the Cabinet Office role in the clearing house had not changed the outcome. It is quite a small subset that comes through that channel and, as I say, it is a very long-standing practice that applies.

Q188 **Ronnie Cowan:** Do your Spads review FOI requests before they come to



HOUSE OF COMMONS

you? Do No. 10 Spads also contribute?

Steve Barclay: Within the Department there will be a number of people who will look at those freedom of information requests in terms of consistency, for the reasons that I have set out. Personally, it is not something I have been heavily engaged with.

Q189 **Ronnie Cowan:** Mr Chisholm, in August last year Chloe Smith, then a Cabinet Office Minister, wrote to the Committee to say that an internal review would be carried out into the clearing house. Can you please provide an update on this, including who will be heading the review, when it will report and what its terms of reference will be?

Alex Chisholm: Yes, thank you very much. You are absolutely right, and I am glad that you have highlighted the letter that Chloe Smith wrote on 31 August. It sets out some useful information about the operation of the clearing house, as does the published letter from the previous CDL, Michael Gove, on 18 March. There are a number of misconceptions out there about the work of the clearing house, and those letters were designed to try and clarify those things. The Minister said that we would be doing a review, and it is important that the person who conducts that review is somebody who is able to command public trust and confidence. We have been taking care about that; we have not yet made that appointment, but we will do so. As the Minister committed, that review will be carried out and will look at the way in which the clearing house functioned over the long period—the last 17 years—that it has existed between multiple Departments, how it has evolved and any conclusions we should draw about that.

Q190 **Ronnie Cowan:** Where are we in the process? We are nearly five months on since the commitment was made. Where are we in appointing somebody to head this up?

Alex Chisholm: We will be appointing somebody. We have not yet made that appointment. I am very happy to write to the Committee.

Q191 **Ronnie Cowan:** I am sure you will be, but when?

Alex Chisholm: I am sure, shortly.

Q192 **Ronnie Cowan:** Weeks? Months?

Alex Chisholm: We will be doing so as soon as we possibly can, and I will write to the Committee with the name of that person.

Q193 **Ronnie Cowan:** Why the mystery? Does this person already have an appointment somewhere else?

Alex Chisholm: No.

Steve Barclay: Chair, perhaps if we can come back to the Committee, we will take onboard the comments raised and provide an update in due course.

Q194 **Ronnie Cowan:** I appreciate that. The questions were: who, when it will



HOUSE OF COMMONS

report and its terms of reference. If you could write to the Committee with that information, we would appreciate that.

Alex Chisholm: Okay.

Ronnie Cowan: Staying with you, Mr Chisholm—

Chair: One last question from me, if I may, on the issue of polling—

Ronnie Cowan: I am still cracking on.

Chair: Ronnie, forgive me for interfering with your flow.

Q195 **Ronnie Cowan:** I have miles to go yet. In May last year, Mr Chisholm, the Information Commissioner requested to undertake an audit of the clearing house. That request was denied, with the Cabinet Office opting for an in-house review. Can you explain why the Cabinet Office chose to turn down this offer?

Alex Chisholm: I am not aware of the individual circumstances of that case. But I can emphasise the very strong commitment that the Cabinet Office feels, as the sponsor of the Freedom of Information Act, to try and ensure that we support it right across Government. You may have seen that we have made a big effort to further improve our own standards of compliance with that in terms of the timeliness of things—we are up to 93% ahead of our target now.

Q196 **Ronnie Cowan:** Sorry, my question was why, when the Information Commissioner requested to undertake an audit, was that request denied?

Alex Chisholm: I do not have an answer to that question, but I am sure there were good reasons. I would also emphasise that we are dealing with the Information Commissioner on a daily basis very co-operatively. I do not know the specifics of that particular request.

Q197 **Ronnie Cowan:** You can see why in-house inquiries are maybe not as well accepted as an independent audit. People want to see that the Government are transparent, open and honest, and when things are done behind closed doors, you immediately start off from a position of doubt.

Alex Chisholm: I agree with you, this Government is—

Q198 **Ronnie Cowan:** We are talking about an FOI here. FOIs were a vehicle created to provide greater clarity and transparency of Government. It is rather ironic that what we are doing to investigate the operation of FOIs is being done behind closed doors.

Alex Chisholm: The Cabinet Office is fully committed to the Freedom of Information Act and we support around 3,000 FOI requests a year; that number has increased by about 70%. We also publish a huge amount of additional information off our own back, going far beyond the requirements of the Freedom of Information Act.

Q199 **Ronnie Cowan:** Mr Barclay, the Business Minister, Lord Callanan, said to the House of Lords that he did not think FOIs achieved “anything at all”,

and that FOI is “a truly malign piece of legislation”. Do you think that is a fair or helpful characterisation?

Steve Barclay: His lordship was clear that that was a personal view.

Q200 **Ronnie Cowan:** I am asking you your personal view.

Steve Barclay: My view is that the Government are committed to transparency and maintaining the effectiveness of the Freedom of Information Act.

Q201 **Ronnie Cowan:** I get that line. I have heard it a lot.

Steve Barclay: Mr Cowan, you cannot have it both ways. You cannot ask me my view on his lordship’s answer and then my own view. As I have said, he has expressed his personal view. In answer to your question as to what is my view, my view is that we are committed to transparency and maintaining the effectiveness of the Freedom of Information Act.

Again, I think it is a tribute to colleagues within the Cabinet Office, as the perm sec has set out, that we have actually responded to 93% of requests within the permitted time in Q3—the latest set of data—despite there being a significant increase. There has been an increase, but we have hit our target, and we have done so while also routinely disclosing information well beyond our FOI obligations. I am sure that is very much in the spirit with which the Committee would want the Cabinet Office to operate.

Q202 **Ronnie Cowan:** I am delighted to believe that you strongly support FOIs. The evidence submitted to this Committee argues that the tone from the top matters, so what actions have you taken to encourage a strong FOI culture across Government?

Steve Barclay: One of the things we have done—I think there were some questions around whether a fee would be introduced—is that the Government has not introduced a fee in respect of FOI requests. Again, to your very fair point on how the Government are not simply complying with the requests, the data that the perm sec and I have shared shows that the Cabinet Office is doing so—indeed, it is exceeding its target. Are we complying with the spirit of those requests? Yes, we are: we are sharing more information than is sometimes required. Are we giving that leadership in terms of FOI on things like fees? Again, we have not introduced fees, in line with the Information Commissioner’s concerns that fees would impede requests.

Q203 **Ronnie Cowan:** The Information Commissioner also informed us that she had greater difficulty in getting face time with Cabinet Office Ministers to discuss FOI matters than with any other Departments. Given that the Cabinet Office is responsible for FOI policy, what actions can you take to reverse that trend?

Steve Barclay: Again, I joined the Cabinet Office in September, so I hope you will forgive me. In terms of my diary time, I think the concern she is expressing is from an earlier time. But we regularly engage with the Information Commissioner across Government. As I say, in terms of



HOUSE OF COMMONS

output from them, such as on fees, we have taken the comments of the Information Commissioner extremely seriously.

Q204 Ronnie Cowan: Finally, to you, Mr Chisholm: appearing before this Committee, the outgoing Information Commissioner stated that her FOI budget has reduced by 32% since 2010. It is our understanding that the Cabinet Office funds the ICO's freedom of information funding via DCMS. What structures are in place to review whether these resources are sufficient and whether this spending secures value for money?

Alex Chisholm: That is certainly something that the Government could be discussing with the newly appointed Information Commissioner. As I'm sure you're aware, the ICO is a DCMS-sponsored body. Nearly all of its funding comes from data protection fees and, as far as I'm aware, those have continued to grow. I am not an expert at all on its overall resources; I am sure the DCMS and Treasury would have a better picture of that. #

I am not an expert at all on its overall resources; I am sure the DCMS and Treasury would have a better picture of that. But just as the Minister has said, we would be very happy to meet with the newly appointed Information Commissioner at their convenience.

Q205 Chair: The last few questions will be from me with regard to polling, Mr Barclay. Will you commit to providing us with a full list of the topics on which polling has been commissioned by the Cabinet Office, its associated bodies and the Prime Minister's Office since 1 March 2020?

Steve Barclay: I am very happy to take that request away; let me look at that. I think the wider point on polling is that it is important. I think covid has shown this in particular. It is extremely important, as part of delivering strong communications, that we do have polling to inform that. And I think, particularly as we went through the pandemic, the work of the covid comms team relied extremely on the insights that the polling provided.

Q206 Chair: Further to that—it's a similar list here—would you be able to commit to providing us with copies of the reports that have been compiled on polling related to the Government's covid-19 policy since 1 March 2020?

Steve Barclay: Again, you have raised that with me; let me take that away and write to you on that issue, Chair. Again, I think we have had an extremely helpful legal case this week pertaining to the Government's actions in respect of the contracts that we have used.

Q207 Chair: Separate to procurement, the third one is, would you commit to providing us with copies of all the questions that have been used in polling related to the Government's covid-19 policy since 1 March 2020?

Steve Barclay: As I say, I hear the Committee's desire for more information vis-à-vis polling. I remind colleagues that the Government's methodology and approach has been subject to significant legal scrutiny, including in the Court of Appeal in recent weeks. The Government has won on all three areas in the Court of Appeal, showing that colleagues in the



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Department have acted reasonably. In terms of the specifics you raise, Chair, if you write to me with any particular requests, I would be very happy to take those away and consider them.

Q208 Chair: We certainly will, but this is not to do with the procurement or court rulings. That is legal scrutiny; this is parliamentary scrutiny. So the final one I would like to ask, which will be in the letter as well, is, would you provide us with a list of the companies contracted to conduct polling by the Cabinet Office on the Government's covid-19 policy since 1 March 2020?

Steve Barclay: Given that this will be set out in the letter, could I suggest, Chair, that once I have received your letter, I will ensure that colleagues within the Department would respond to you in due course?

Q209 Chair: Could I make a request that that letter is received by the end of this month?

Steve Barclay: I will commit to ensuring that we have a timely response, Chair, and I obviously take that on board.

Chair: Jackie.

Alex Chisholm: And just to add, I think the company information—

Chair: Sorry—I beg your pardon.

Alex Chisholm: The details of the Government contracts—

Chair: Excuse me. Just a moment. Jackie, please.

Q210 Jackie Doyle-Price: As part of that, it would be helpful for the Committee to understand the purposes behind why the Government has undertaken particular polling, because there is an issue about using intelligence to drive the appropriate behaviours, which I think has been really important in terms of covid. But there is an overall mission there, because openness about why would settle the horses considerably.

Steve Barclay: Yes, but what I suspect the perm sec may be about to come on to, and the reason why I say I would like to consider this in response to any letter from the Chair, is that, obviously, one is mindful of legal proceedings, commercial confidentiality—there are a number of factors pertaining to that. But I hear the Chair, so I suggest that if we have a letter, we will need to consider that in the round.

Chair: Please, Mr Chisholm.

Alex Chisholm: Yes, absolutely, and I am sorry to come in there when you were trying to speak—apologies. I was just going to add the point that, in relation to companies, all the information about Government contracts above £10,000, which I am sure are all the ones the Committee would be interested in, is published and up to date on Contracts Finder, so that information is already in the public domain, but we can certainly make it available in a letter to the Committee as well if you would like.



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Chair: Thank you very much. Mr Barclay and Mr Chisholm, thank you both very much indeed for attending the Committee this morning. We are very grateful and look forward to receiving the correspondence.