



Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
Cabinet Office 70 Whitehall London
SW1A 2AS

William Wragg MP
Chair, Public Administration and
Constitutional Affairs Committee
House of Commons
SW1A 0AA

Our reference: MC2021/05632

ZAG March 2021

Per William

Thank you for your Committee's report on 'Data Transparency and Accountability during COVID-19', which I read with interest. As requested, I am writing in response to the below recommendations [paragraphs 97 and 178] before the Coronavirus Act is considered for renewal on 25 March. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care will respond to the other urgent recommendations flagged in your letter. I will respond to the other recommendations in the report in the usual timeframes.

Throughout this crisis, the Government has drawn on robust data and scientific evidence to inform its decisions regarding measures taken to address the COVID-19 pandemic. In taking these decisions, the Government has balanced the need to reduce the spread of the virus, while minimising the impact on people's lives and livelihoods. As your report makes clear, the Government has overseen "a remarkable effort pulling together data on COVID-19", and "made much of this data and analysis available to the public". The Government has published 77 sets of SAGE papers, and presented transparent data frequently at over 125 ministerial press conferences alongside scientific experts, offering direct scrutiny by the public and the media.

RECOMMENDATION: The Cabinet Office must clearly outline responsibilities for decision making, before the Coronavirus Act is considered for renewal after 25 March 2021. This must include clear lines of accountability at Departmental and Ministerial level, stating which Minister is accountable to Parliament for ensuring key decisions are underpinned by data, and for the data that underpins the decisions.

RESPONSE: The Prime Minister has led the Government's response through the course of the pandemic, supported by Ministers and officials. The COVID-19 Operations committee and COVID-19-Strategy committee were established in May 2020 to oversee the second phase of the response to and recovery from COVID-19, following the initial crisis phase of the pandemic. The Prime Minister chairs the COVID-19 Strategy Committee and I chair the COVID-19 Operations Committee. Both Committees meet as required to take operational and policy

decisions.

As is the case for all Government business, the Minister responsible for the policy is accountable to Parliament for the decisions and actions of the Government in respect of that policy area, including for the use of data and evidence to underpin those decisions. Ministerial responsibilities for COVID-19 are set out clearly in the Cabinet Office 'List of Ministerial Responsibilities' guidance,¹ which was updated this month. My responsibilities include 'supporting the coordination of the cross-government and the devolution aspects of the response to COVID-19'; 'leading public services recovery from COVID-19' and 'oversight of Cabinet Office responsibilities on COVID-19'.

The COVID-19 Taskforce in the Cabinet Office is responsible for coordinating the Government's response to the pandemic, working closely with all government departments on particular policy areas. It provides support and advice to the Prime Minister including data and analysis, co-ordinates the Government's collective response, and provides the secretariat function to the specific Cabinet committees. The COVID-19 Taskforce draws on data and analysis from other government departments and arms length bodies, including the Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC). The Chief Medical Officer and Government Chief Scientific Adviser provide expert advice to the Prime Minister and other Ministers as part of these processes. Responses at local level are managed through the Local Action Committee (LAC).

RECOMMENDATION: The Government must publish thresholds aligned to the roadmap in ranges or using minimum requirements, and with appropriate caveats if needed. This should be done immediately with the information available before decisions are taken to take the first steps.

RESPONSE: We are learning more everyday about the threat of the virus, including on the effectiveness of vaccines, the emergence of new variants of concern, and the impact of unlocking various parts of our economy and society. As we proceed through the roadmap, we can be certain that we will be confronted with further, as-yet unknown dynamics. There is no single set of data or numerical thresholds that we could choose today that would adequately or reliably take account of all these elements and enable us to take the best, rounded assessment of relative risks at each stage.

However, we understand the need for predictability in the Government's actions to enable businesses and individuals to plan. The 'COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021', published on 22 February, set out the detailed data and analysis that underpins the Government's approach to easing lockdown.² It also set out the four tests that will need to be met to move between each step and a five week gap between steps to ensure the impact can be seen and the data analysed ahead of each decision. In line with advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), decisions on whether to proceed to the next step will be based on a wide range of epidemiological data and expertise. The next decision is due the week before step 2, which will take place no earlier than the 12 April. The Government will assess whether we have passed the four tests set out in the roadmap publication, and the decision on whether to move to the next step will be taken by the relevant Cabinet Committee where appropriate.

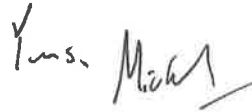
I am very grateful to the Committee for your important ongoing consideration of the Government's COVID response. As set out in previous correspondence, I would be happy to

¹ HMG, [List of ministerial responsibilities](#)

² HMG, COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021 - Data Annex

appear before your Committee once the review into COVID certification has concluded.

With every good wish,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Yours, Michael', with a stylized flourish at the end.

**Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
and Minister for the Cabinet Office**