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Civil Service Chief Operating Officer
and Cabinet Office Permanent Secretary
24 June 2021

Meg Hillier MP
Chair, Public Accounts Committee
House of Commons
SW1A 0AA

Dear Chair,

CONTRACT PUBLICATION

I am writing following the oral evidence session on 10 June and the Committee's subsequent request for information regarding the publication of Government contracts.

As you will know, central Government buyers must publish information on tender documents and contracts with a contract value of over £10,000 on Contracts Finder¹. Guidance on transparency and the publication of tender and contract documents is available in Procurement Policy Note 02/17: *Promoting Greater Transparency*, published in 2017². Further updated guidance³ has been published today which reflects changes following the end of the transition period and provides further clarifications to assist contracting authorities.

As Sir Chris Wormald and I described to the Committee, in the initial response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Government had to act urgently in a number of areas. For instance, it was necessary for us very quickly to understand public attitudes and behaviours, and it became clear that a great deal of Personal Protective Equipment would be needed to protect NHS and other workers.

I am glad to be able to confirm in writing what I said on 10 June, which is that to my knowledge all of the Cabinet Office's contracts awarded using Regulation 32 during the pandemic have been published on Contracts Finder. I have set out as you request a list of these contracts at Annex A, noting which of these contracts still have further reporting requirements beyond Contracts Finder. I have also included in Annex A the longer list of all contracts procured within the Government Communications Service (which were the majority of Covid-related contracts let by the Cabinet Office). This list includes all such contracts let since March 2020 for which publication is required, which comprises the additional Covid-related contracts requiring

¹ www.gov.uk/contracts-finder

² www.gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-policy-note-0217-promoting-greater-transparency

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/procurement-policy-note-0721-update-to-legal-and-policy-requirements-to-publish-procurement-information-on-contracts-finder>

publication that I noted to the Committee. As the Committee is already aware, Cabinet Office also let contracts for certain other Covid-related goods and supplies such as ventilators.

We are committed to learning lessons from our response to the pandemic, and that is why we commissioned Nigel Boardman to undertake an independent review of Cabinet Office procurement⁴. The review, which was published in full in December and provided to the Committee, made 28 specific recommendations which we have accepted in full. In line with recommendation 16, the Cabinet Office has now begun to develop a fully integrated departmental contracts register. Until this new system is in place, I cannot say categorically that all relevant contracts have been published. I hope and expect that we will have an operational system ready by the end of the year.

Individual departments are responsible for the publication of the contracts they award and therefore the information that we can provide to the Committee about contracts awaiting publication across Government is limited. It is possible to perform such an analysis using publicly available information extracted from Contracts Finder, but we would advise against such an approach because of special features in the data collected. As an example, extensions and variations to contracts can incorrectly be flagged as being published late as the date of the extension (and thus the date of publication) may be considerably later than the date of the original contract award. In addition, we know that there are some data quality issues, reflecting the pressures at that time on staff responsible for this activity.

I would like to reassure the Committee that we are working to improve the prompt publication of contract data across Government departments. A dashboard has recently been created that is updated daily and monitors the time taken to publish all contracts in all departments. Reports from this dashboard are distributed to departments on a monthly basis to ensure visibility at a senior level. I would be glad to keep the Committee updated as we put in place further measures to ensure the promptness and reliability of contract publication.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you have queries on the above or require any further information.



Alex Chisholm

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⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/findings-of-the-boardman-review>