

Forensic Analysis: Cummings, the Vaccine Taskforce and the circumvention of ordinary process

Ethical Approach UK

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1. Evidential status of the May 2021 Parliamentary account

Dominic Cummings himself gives considerable weight to his May 2021 Parliamentary evidence.

In his 2023 Inquiry statement he says that, before appearing before MPs, he had spent weeks examining notes, phones and documents and that his May 2021 account represented his “*best memory, particularly of crucial conversations.*” He says the transcript was important and that he gave the evidence “*as if I was speaking under oath.*” He further explains that Inquiry lawyers instructed him not to cross-reference that Parliamentary evidence because of legal complications concerning the use by courts of evidence given to Parliament.

That is significant.

Cummings is not distancing himself in 2023 from what he told Parliament in 2021. On the contrary, he expressly identifies the 2021 account as his best contemporaneous recollection of critical conversations.

The evidential proposition therefore becomes:

The May 2021 “*ignore rules / bulldoze lawyers*” passage should be read alongside, rather than displaced by, the considerably more detailed operational narrative Cummings supplied to the Covid Inquiry in 2023.

2. Patrick Vallance appears at the inception of the Vaccine Taskforce

The 2023 statement places Patrick Vallance very close to the inception of the Taskforce.

Cummings says that from late February he was being urged to reject the assumption that vaccines could not materially affect the pandemic response and to pursue something resembling a “*Manhattan Project for vaccines.*” He says he discussed this with Marc and Ben Warner and with Vallance during February and March.

More importantly, on 24 March 2020, according to Cummings, Vallance texted him saying he wanted to

establish a Taskforce, that it could not all be within DHSC, and asking whether Cummings supported the proposal.

Cummings says he replied that he definitely did. Vallance then said he would speak immediately to Permanent Secretary Chris Wormald.

Cummings and Vallance then agreed that the Taskforce should sit outside DHSC.

That is a central structural fact.

The later arrangement described before Parliament - Bingham being insulated from the ordinary Department of Health chain and operating with direct authority from the centre, was not merely some incidental consequence of how the Taskforce evolved. According to Cummings, removing the project from ordinary DHSC control was part of its conception.

3. The Taskforce was deliberately designed not to operate through normal Whitehall processes

Cummings is explicit.

He says he told the Cabinet Secretary that the UK should create a dedicated taskforce “*not subject to normal Whitehall processes.*”

That is extremely important when compared with the May 2021 phrase:

“Treat this like a wartime thing. Ignore rules.”

The 2023 statement provides concrete content to what might otherwise be dismissed as rhetorical hyperbole.

He identifies a deliberate institutional design:

Ordinary departmental control was removed; ordinary Whitehall processes were to be avoided; blocks were to be removed rapidly; and the project was to operate under authority flowing from the centre.

On 16 April, Cummings says he wrote to the Cabinet Secretary, Vallance and Whitty stressing that the Vaccine Taskforce required:

- extremely fast funding decisions;
- people capable of eliminating blocks within 24 hours;
- concurrent manufacture and distribution;
- and active intervention to remove funding bureaucracy.

This is not merely an aspiration for efficient government. It is a description of an intentionally exceptional administrative structure.

4. Kate Bingham's authority was deliberately to be exceptional

The strongest passage concerning Kate Bingham appears at paragraph 440.

Cummings says he stressed to the Prime Minister that the Taskforce had to report to the Prime Minister;

- Bingham must have real authority, including choosing her own team;
- the Taskforce “*must be free of normal bureaucracy including procurement rules*”;
- the Prime Minister would take responsibility for any resulting judicial reviews;
- and manufacturing, distribution and logistics had to proceed concurrently.

He then says that around 10 May he told officials that Bingham required authority to make financial decisions herself without clearance from Hancock.

This is probably the single most important passage in the document.

It describes a purposeful transfer of authority and discretion away from ordinary departmental processes and towards Bingham, backed directly by Prime Ministerial authority.

The architecture was therefore approximately:

Prime Minister to Bingham / Vaccine Taskforce

rather than:

Prime Minister to Secretary of State to Department to ordinary procurement/legal/financial machinery to Taskforce.

That accords closely with Cummings' 2021 Parliamentary description that Bingham was effectively told:

“You report basically directly to the PM. You don't report to the Department of Health.”

The 2023 statement supplies the detail behind that assertion.

5. The contemporaneous 10 May message is unusually revealing

The document reproduces a contemporaneous No.10 communication dated 10 May 2020.

Its language is stark.

Cummings writes that Bingham needed a much larger budget and a method of getting money out *“super fast”*, with *“no usual bullshit and processes.”*

He says:

“there is no conventional process for what this needs to do”

and insists that DHSC and BEIS might contribute expertise but should not be involved in clearing funds.

That contemporary record is particularly probative because it is not a retrospective description produced years later.

It appears within the statement as contemporaneous evidence of Cummings' thinking and instructions in May 2020.

The phrase *“there is no conventional process for what this needs to do”* is an important companion to *“ignore rules.”*

6. Prime Ministerial legal responsibility was the mechanism by which ordinary restraints were to be overcome

This theme appears repeatedly throughout the statement.

Cummings says officials faced a choice between proceeding normally or moving rapidly, ignoring normal processes to an unprecedented degree, and dealing later with any judicial review finding that conduct unlawful.

He says he told many officials versions of, ignore the procurement rules and other rules such as state aid; the

Prime Minister will take legal responsibility if and when judicial reviews come later.

This is crucial.

The approach was not necessarily:

“the law does not apply.”

It was closer to:

“act now; do not allow normal legal/process risk to prevent action; Prime Ministerial authority will carry the political/legal risk; any JR can be fought afterwards.”

That distinction matters legally.

But it also means the May 2021 “*ignore rules*” description has a very identifiable administrative philosophy behind it.

7. Cummings gives an explicit example of legal advice being overridden

The polling procurement example provides perhaps the clearest explanation of what he meant when lawyers or legal advice obstructed the desired course.

Cummings says he effectively told officials:

do this now, ignore normal procurement issues; government lawyers have a few hours to approve it, otherwise he would

obtain a Prime Ministerial direction that it be done regardless of legal advice, with responsibility assumed at the centre.

This is of direct forensic relevance.

The process described is:

- an urgent executive objective is identified;
- lawyers are given a tightly constrained opportunity to clear it;
- if legal advice remains obstructive, the matter is escalated;
- Prime Ministerial authority is invoked;
- the decision proceeds despite the advice.

That provides a concrete operational analogue for the phrase *“if lawyers get in your way, come to us.”*

It does not prove that particular lawyers were subsequently targeted professionally or regulatorily, but it makes it substantially harder to dismiss the 2021 phrase as mere colourful language.

Cummings' own later account demonstrates that circumventing, overruling or moving around obstructive legal processes was an actual operating method.

8. The Cabinet Office is identified as the institutional mechanism for overriding rules

Cummings goes further.

He says the Cabinet Office was the only part of Government with authority to tell departments things such as:

“ignore these rules, do this instead”

or replace a failing team or order something to be done ten times faster.

This may become important when mapping institutional responsibility.

The May 2021 words refer to:

“come to us and we'll find ways...”

The 2023 statement does not provide a single definitive definition of “us.”

But it materially narrows the institutional possibilities.

The machinery Cummings describes repeatedly involves:

No.10, the Prime Minister, the Cabinet Secretary/Cabinet Office, Vallance and senior actors supporting the Taskforce.

Accordingly, identifying precisely who comprised the operative “us” remains an important evidential question.

9. Cummings' stated conception of the rule of law is highly relevant

The section headed “The rule of law” deserves particular attention.

Cummings distinguishes between:

- knowingly breaking clear domestic law; and
- acting where the law is uncertain during an emergency, doing what ministers consider sensible, and accepting the possibility that a later judicial review may find the action unlawful.

He considers the latter to be a legitimate ministerial judgment.

He also complains that campaigners invoke the rule of law to “*give lawyers the whip hand*”, and says that during Brexit some government lawyers should have been fired immediately. He expressly says:

“This problem was relevant to covid.”

That sentence is significant.

It directly connects his hostility to what he regarded as obstructive government legalism with the Covid response.

10. His later section on legal advice reinforces that attitude

The separate LEGAL ADVICE section is even more revealing. Cummings says ordinary government legal advice is generally:

- slow;
- highly risk-averse;
- defensive;
- and unreliable on important questions.

He says there are “*far too many lawyers*”, advocates a “*large cull*”, and says important Prime Ministerial decisions should bypass normal legal channels and go directly to selected high-quality advisers.

He further says the Prime Minister must be able to decide how much legal risk to take, including the risk that judicial review subsequently finds governmental action unlawful.

This is exceptionally relevant to interpretation of the May 2021 wording.

It demonstrates a consistent worldview:

Lawyers and legal process were regarded by Cummings as capable of generating harmful friction; important executive decisions should therefore be capable of bypassing ordinary

legal channels where those channels obstruct urgent objectives.

11. What “bulldozing lawyers” can safely be said to mean on this evidence

The 2023 statement supports a strong proposition, but not every possible proposition.

What it supports

It supports the conclusion that Cummings' May 2021 language was consistent with an actual operating philosophy under which:

- normal processes could be bypassed;
- procurement rules could be ignored;
- bureaucratic and legal barriers were to be removed quickly;
- ordinary DHSC control was deliberately avoided;
- Bingham was to exercise unusually direct authority;
- Prime Ministerial authority was used as the ultimate escalation mechanism;
- legal advice could be overridden;
- and the Government would accept the risk of subsequent judicial review.

What it does not establish

The statement does not establish that:

- Philip Hyland or Lois Bayliss were among the lawyers contemplated in 2020;
- any professional regulator was instructed to take action against lawyers;
- the SRA was used as an instrument of Government;
- or “*bulldozing*” necessarily meant professional disciplinary action.

Those propositions require independent evidence, which may or may not exist.

The proper forensic formulation can therefore be stated as follows:

The 2023 statement materially corroborates the operational premise underlying Cummings' 2021 testimony - that lawyers, rules and ordinary legal processes regarded as obstructive could be bypassed or overridden through central governmental authority. It does not, standing alone, identify the later regulatory treatment of any particular lawyer as an implementation of that policy.

That distinction is essential.

12. Kate Bingham's role was not merely leadership; it was deliberately protected authority

Cummings describes Bingham as occupying a constitutionally unusual administrative position.

According to him:

- she was to report to the Prime Minister;
- she choose her team;
- she could exercise financial authority;
- She was free to avoid Hancock clearance;
- She could operate free from ordinary procurement bureaucracy;
- she could and call on No.10 if Whitehall impeded her work.

He says that after the PM called Bingham, he and Vallance discussed the Taskforce with her and he told her that the Prime Minister's office would support her in overcoming Whitehall resistance. He then told Vallance and Bingham to come back to him if they encountered difficulties.

That last point maps especially closely onto the 2021 Parliamentary evidence:

“If lawyers get in your way, come to us...”

The 2023 statement does not reproduce those exact words, but it describes precisely the escalation arrangement by which Bingham and Vallance were to return to the centre if and when obstructed.

13. Patrick Vallance was not peripheral to this structure

Vallance's role emerges as foundational.

Cummings says:

- Vallance proposed a Taskforce on 24 March;
- Vallance agreed it should sit outside DHSC;
- Vallance was involved in discussions with the Cabinet Secretary;
- Vallance and Cummings discussed the Taskforce with Bingham;
- Vallance identified obstructive processes;
- and Vallance was involved in resolving at least one problematic vaccine contract.

This suggests that any forensic reconstruction of the Vaccine Taskforce's constitutional and administrative design should treat Vallance as a central witness, not merely the scientific adviser adjacent to Bingham.

14. Cummings explicitly identifies why he believes the Taskforce succeeded

At paragraph 445 he effectively provides his own causal model.

He says the Taskforce worked because:

- the UK stayed outside the EU system;
- it put someone competent in charge;
- Bingham possessed both responsibility and Prime Ministerial authority;
- she selected good personnel;
- and the Prime Minister was prepared to accept legal responsibility for judicial-review risk so normal bureaucracy could be cleared away.

That is highly significant.

What Cummings celebrates as the source of success is precisely the architecture which raises the constitutional question:

How far was normal legal and administrative constraint deliberately suspended, bypassed or neutralised?

Evidential questions now requiring pursuit

The statement identifies several documentary trails which I would regard as priority evidence for additional research:

- Cummings' 16 April communication to the Cabinet Secretary, Vallance and Whitty concerning the Vaccine Taskforce and elimination of blocks.

- Cummings' 10 May texts concerning Bingham's budget and authority to make financial decisions without Hancock clearance.
- the wider Cummings evidence package repeatedly relied upon throughout the statement, including contemporaneous messages concerning procurement, legal risk and the Taskforce.
- the 5 April CSA/CMO note concerning vaccine timescales.
- any surviving records of the 13 May 2020 Bingham – Vallance - Cummings meeting, where Vallance reportedly described the NIHR process as “*incredibly obstructive.*”
- documentation identifying exactly who authorised the exceptional legal/procurement arrangements and whether any written ministerial directions, accounting-officer directions, indemnities or legal opinions were produced.
- records capable of identifying who comprised the “*us*” in Cummings' May 2021 Parliamentary formulation.

Overall forensic conclusion

The 2023 Cummings statement materially alters the way in which the May 2021 Parliamentary testimony should be interpreted.

The phrase:

“Treat this like a wartime thing. Ignore rules. If lawyers get in your way, come to us and we'll find ways of bulldozing them out of your way.”

might, in isolation, be characterised as rhetorical shorthand.

The 2023 statement makes that explanation considerably less satisfactory.

Cummings describes an identifiable operating model in which the Vaccine Taskforce was intentionally placed beyond ordinary DHSC control; Kate Bingham was given exceptional authority backed directly by the Prime Minister; normal procurement and Whitehall processes were deliberately bypassed; legal and judicial-review risk was consciously accepted; and obstructive legal advice could be escalated to the Prime Minister and overridden.

The forensic significance is therefore not that the 2023 statement proves that specific lawyers were later *“bulldozed.”*

It is this:

Cummings' later evidence substantially corroborates the existence of the governmental mechanism and philosophy capable of giving practical effect to the words he used before Parliament in May 2021.

The outstanding question is no longer merely “*What did Cummings mean?*”

There is now a sharper question:

Who, precisely, was empowered to remove legal obstacles; what actions were taken when such obstacles arose; which lawyers or legal processes were regarded as obstacles; and where is the documentary record of those interventions?

That, I think, is the proper next evidential frontier.

Concluding Statement

The evidence examined in this paper does not establish that Philip Hyland and Lois Bayliss were, as a matter of fact, identified within Government as lawyers obstructing the Vaccine Taskforce objective. Nor does the evidence presently establish that subsequent regulatory action concerning either solicitor was undertaken at the direction of Government.

Those propositions require evidence and should not be asserted in its absence.

There is, however, a further dimension which cannot properly be ignored.

Dominic Cummings told Parliament in May 2021 that Kate Bingham had been instructed to treat the Vaccine Taskforce as a “*wartime*” undertaking, to “*ignore rules*” and, if lawyers got in the way, to return to the centre where ways would be found of “*bulldozing them out of your way.*”

Government's own published regulatory framework provides an important institutional context in which that evidence must now be considered.

Its Core Regulatory Competencies Framework expressly identifies, as its first contextual competency, an “*Understanding of the role of regulation as a tool of Government.*” It additionally requires regulators to understand the wider regulatory framework, work towards regulatory objectives, understand the responsibilities of partner organisations and work effectively with other organisations.

None of that establishes improper governmental interference in an individual regulatory case. Regulatory bodies may possess substantial statutory and operational independence while regulation nevertheless performs a recognised governmental function.

It does, however, make the institutional question considerably more important.

Against that background, the chronology deserves careful examination.

By December 2021, Philip Hyland and Lois Bayliss were not merely lawyers expressing disagreement with Government policy. They had become directly involved in reporting allegations of serious criminality concerning the Covid response through CRN 6029679/21.

The question which therefore arises is a narrow but important one:

From December 2021 onwards, were Philip Hyland and Lois Bayliss regarded, by anyone within Government or within the wider governmental, policing or regulatory architecture, as lawyers whose professional activities were obstructing the Vaccine Taskforce objective or the wider Covid programme?

If they were, another question necessarily follows:

Was their subsequent exposure to regulatory intervention entirely independent of any such assessment, or did information, influence, referral, coordination or other communication pass between governmental, policing, regulatory or associated bodies concerning them?

The Government's own description of regulation as a “*tool of Government*” makes that an evidential question which

cannot satisfactorily be disposed of merely by pointing to the formal institutional independence of a regulator.

It requires examination of the actual communications.

- Who communicated with whom?
- What information was exchanged?
- What referrals were made?
- What governmental or policing bodies knew of the two solicitors' involvement in CRN 6029679/21?
- And, critically, what did the relevant regulators know about that involvement when their own processes were commenced or pursued?

There may ultimately be entirely conventional and independent explanations for each event, but the documentary chronology has now developed sufficiently that independence should be demonstrated from the evidence rather than simply presumed from institutional labels.

That is particularly so where Parliament had already been told, months before these events occurred, that lawyers obstructing the Vaccine Taskforce were to be “*bulldozed*” out of its way.

The ultimate question therefore remains:

Were Philip Hyland and Lois Bayliss, from December 2021 onwards, considered to be two of those lawyers?

That question should not be answered by speculation.

It should be answered by disclosure.

Note:

The 2023 statement to which this analysis relates is annexed below.

STATEMENT OF EVIDENCE TO COVID INQUIRY

DOMINIC CUMMINGS

11 October 2023

'Nothing was ready for the war which everybody expected.' War and Peace

'Definitely on digital, project management we've got nothing to learn from the private sector.' Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary.

'Fascinating that the same problems recur time after time, in almost every program, and that the management of the program, whether it happened to be government or industry, continues to avoid reality. So many programs fail because everybody doesn't know what it is they are supposed to do.' George Mueller, leader of the Apollo program.

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PRELIMINARIES

My role, dates

1. I arrived in No10 the day Boris Johnson became PM, 24 July 2019. In July 2020 I told him I would leave on Friday 18 December. In November I agreed with him that No10 would announce my departure as a full time employee on 18/12 and this happened. When I left No10 on Friday 13/11 it was not supposed to be my last day in No10. We had agreed I would continue working until 18/12 then from January 2021 would work for the government in a new possibly part time role. However the PM and his wife blew up our deal. I continued to help some officials for a few weeks after 13/11 but that was effectively my last day in the role. I did not speak to the PM again after 13/11 and my last texts were 15/11.
2. I am usually described as 'Chief of Staff'. I was not.
3. My official title was Adviser to the Prime Minister.
4. I chose this title because I think 'chief of staff' is a bad job title for No10.
5. It is modelled on the White House.
6. In the White House the Chief of Staff is actually the chief of the staff. Staff report to him/her. There is not the Whitehall distinction between officials (civil servants) and special advisors ('spads').
7. In No10 the Chief of Staff is not the chief of the staff.
8. Not one official in No10 or anywhere else in government reports to the 'Chief of Staff' who cannot hire or fire any official or even, formally, give any official any orders. All authority is indirect and is exercised in the form of 'requests' or 'suggestions' and implicitly rests on the degree of influence the 'chief of staff' is thought to have with the PM.
9. Most No10 officials regard themselves as reporting to the PM's PPS or, if there is a Permanent Secretary in No10, to them. But the situation is complex. On some matters (e.g 'ethics') No10 officials would regard senior Cabinet Office officials as really 'in charge'. E.g James Slack was an official, in theory he reported to another official in the Cabinet Office (not the PPS) but in practice he often took orders from the Cabinet Secretary and sometimes from the PM.
10. I was urged by many to use the 'chief of staff' title but it is bad management on principle to use a job title that is literally false. When the PM suggested I adopt this job title in summer 2020 I replied, 'If you agree with the Cabinet Secretary that I am actually chief of the staff in No10 then I'll call myself Chief of Staff, otherwise not.' He did not want that. When it was reported later in 2020 he was looking for a 'new chief of staff' he meant it in the fake sense not the real sense.
11. This confusing picture is itself an illustration of the complexity of management and the problems of divided responsibility/authority that contributed to covid errors and which persist.

12. I was seen by the system as the PM's most senior *political* adviser in most ways but it was also clear to some officials near the centre of power that on some matters the PM listened more to Lord Lister than to me and that the PM gave Lord Lister things to do without always informing me. This happened increasingly as our relations deteriorated and after I had refused to help on some issues (e.g I refused to help him organise what I saw as illegal and unethical secret donations.)
13. Although I am described everywhere as a 'political' adviser I spent practically no time on politics or talking to the media after the 2019 election. My time was spent on: policy, management (both special advisors and Whitehall), handling the PM, planning, personnel, and talking to officials about important problems that for whatever reason were very hard for Whitehall to solve in normal ways. I spent almost all of my non-covid time on: trying to improve science, technology and data (both how government directly influenced these things (e.g UKRI or ARIA) and how it could help the country and world); how to improve the civil service generally and the No10-Cabinet Office-Treasury system in particular, including the critical questions of how No10 should set priorities and manage them; issues around national security, the shocking problems of MOD procurement, improving critical national capabilities or creating new ones, the Integrated Review; and the combination of issues around stagnant productivity (e.g policy affecting the ecosystem of universities, labs, startups, investment, regulation, taxes, procurement etc). Over 99% of media coverage of 2020 gives a completely false idea of what I focused on and how I spent my time (for more details beyond the scope of this document see my blog, <https://dominiccumings.substack.com>)
14. The impression you got/get from reading media accounts was/is that a large part of my time was spent talking to journalists. This is the opposite of the truth. Journalists wanted it to be the truth and were campaigning for it to be the truth. After the election was called in 2019 I hardly spoke to journalists at all and in 2020 practically broke off relations with some I'd talked to for twenty years. (The only journalist I spoke to semi-regularly, perhaps once every 2-4 weeks on average, was the BBC political editor, because of her role in the national broadcaster. Cf. 18/3.) In most weeks I had no discussion with any journalists. I made clear to the PM, officials and journalists my determination to try to turn no10 from a 'media entertainment service', the dominant model for No10 since Major (epitomised by the PM starting the day with a meeting about what the media wants to know), to a radically different entity focused on governing. This led to anger among the media which collectively and individually depend on the media entertainment service model. There was a concerted effort to remove me. They invented stories, invented quotes, invented briefings then wrote punditry about my supposed activities. Senior journalists lobbied the PM to remove me. At the same time the PM's girlfriend was constantly telling him that I was briefing the media. And the PM said repeatedly after the election he didn't want to end the 'No10 as media entertainment service' model, he wanted to extend it. I had a bad argument with him about this in the first week of January 2020 when he asked me to spend time talking to senior journalists and I refused. This discussion showed we had a fundamentally different view of the next four years — I wanted to focus on the hardest problems facing the country and marginalise the old media, he wanted to make friends with everybody he'd alienated in London elite circles and enjoy himself. And the PM and I had many heated arguments about the media. Eg in summer I wanted no10 to be much more aggressive about explaining fake news and errors. He refused (see below). By the end of January No10 special advisers were already discussing that a) the PM's girlfriend was waging a campaign to remove us, b) the PM was in a terrible mental state (e.g ranting 'I'm the fucking Fuhrer around here' over illegal

donations), c) we had lost our ability to influence/control him. While the civil service undoubtedly failed in vital ways, there is no doubt that this dysfunction within the political team contributed to mistakes and problems in coming weeks and months (and was carefully exacerbated by Whitehall and media forces that opposed change).

15. Although I was/am often described as 'all powerful' in No10 in 2020 this is false and very misleading regarding covid. In fact I had much more power/influence in 2019 than I did after the 2019 election with the partial exception of roughly 14 March to mid-May. For example, in January 2020 I could not even stop Chris Grayling being appointed by the PM to chair the Commons intelligence committee.
16. On most subjects I did not have strong opinions (or any opinion) on the right thing to do about subject/problem X. My strong opinions were mostly concerned management, bureaucracy, building teams, friction, the right way to have a discussion about X and to implement X, identifying that X may be right or wrong but the meeting we'd just had about it was a disaster and had to be revisited, how does X fit with many other things given there has been no proper thought about how it fits in a larger system and so on.
17. My intention in January 2020 was, as I said publicly then, to recruit excellent people, persuade the PM to begin radical changes on the core problems including the basic ways No10 and the Cabinet Office worked, then leave by Christmas or shift to a very different role.
18. There were many false reports that I gave myself a pay rise in 2020 after covid struck. I was responsible for agreeing advisers' pay with officials. In July 2019 I decided to pay myself £96,000, the same as I'd been paid at Vote Leave and less than the roughly £140k normal for my role. After the 2019 election, before the covid crisis, I moved my pay to the normal sum. This was made public long after and gave rise to the false reports. I opposed all pay rises for senior officials and special advisers after covid. There were many false reports that I was fined for attending parties in No10 and other breaches of covid rules and that I was interviewed by the police. I received no fines or punishments of any kind regarding parties or any other breach of covid rules. I was never interviewed by the police, formally or informally, regarding a) covid parties, b) any breaches of any covid rules by me at any time, c) the PM's breaches of covid rules. I was never interviewed by the police regarding anything during or after my time in No10. A statement by Durham Police that they interviewed me was false and corrected but too late to stop the story spreading. My only discussions with the police (in a personal capacity rather than regarding my job) have been about security issues.

This statement

19. The Inquiry asked me to answer many questions not in the form of Q&A but in my own way. I'm happy to answer further questions if this fails.
20. I have looked at all documents provided to me on the Relativity system. This document refers to an evidence document I submitted, reference number: INQ000048313. I have not checked all the document references inserted by the Inquiry lawyers; if any are false I assume the Inquiry will correct them and reissue this statement.
21. I have not looked at all of the tens of thousands of emails given to me on a laptop by the Cabinet Office in May 2023. I have agreed with the inquiry that I will continue to look through these in coming months and perhaps send a further document if I find things of importance.

22. I have not taken personal legal advice (either directly or via the Cabinet Office or anybody else) at any time in government or since in relation to any government business including in relation to the covid inquiry or the drafting of this statement or my dealings with the inquiry. All media references to me having taken legal advice / working with lawyers are false. I have answered all questions from the Inquiry to the best of my ability. This statement is the outcome of a draft that I have updated in response to requests for clarification from Inquiry lawyers and as I've seen further information.
23. Inquiry lawyers have determined the paragraphing of this statement. I apologise for some of my very bad language, in some places particularly offensive, but I have left all messages uncensored.

Evidence

24. I provided the Inquiry with all evidence I was asked for and hold including the full unedited downloads of WhatsApp groups I'd saved (including some I was not asked for). These included crucial groups with the PM, me, Hancock, CSA, CMO. I have not tried to tell the full story revealed in these groups but have tried to pick out what I think is most important.
25. I asked the Cabinet Office in spring 2020 to ensure all senior No10 email accounts were saved for a future lessons learned exercise. This was not completely done. Some who worked in No10 have told me that emails they kept in hard copy do not turn up in electronic searches.
26. If I reference texts etc below then either a) I have already provided them or they were posted on my Twitter/blog, or b) they are in the evidence I sent earlier, or c) I include what I'm referring to. In referring to some texts I may make tiny syntax/spelling changes for clarity but you have the originals. I have not edited/redacted evidence in any way. (Some emails will appear slightly different from originals due to being copied/pasted from one document to another (sometimes formatting goes funny) but the texts are identical.)
27. In summer 2021 there was a significant hack, using WhatsApp, of staff in the PM's office. I was then targeted via their phones/WhatsApp. I informed senior staff at GCHQ immediately. After this I took screenshots of some crucial messages (provided to inquiry) then deleted some chats from my phone and changed my phone. There has been much media criticism about the disappearance of WhatsApp/Signal messages. Whatsapp/Signal were used partly as a result of the lamentable systems available in No10 (see below). It's important to note that officials and spads were officially told to delete regularly work messages from personal phones. This entire system is obviously bad but individuals cannot be blamed for following official guidance. (There is an issue regarding WhatsApp evidence unsuitable for a public statement but which I can explain to the judge.)

Memory

28. In May 2021 I gave evidence to MPs. I spent weeks going through notes, phones, documents etc. At that point events of the covid crisis in 2020 were between 5-15 months in the past. Since May 2021 there has been huge public discussion, evidence has emerged, others have given their views on those events, and I've discussed crucial decisions with many of those involved. Inevitably this creates 'layers' of memory to some extent replacing

original memories that can make it hard to be sure in some cases what I actually remember re 2020 and what I've learned subsequently.

29. I volunteered to give evidence in May 2021 because I thought (as I'd argued to the PM and Cabinet Secretary in summer 2020) that there should be a swift lessons learned exercise that would speak to crucial people while memories were fresh and documents could easily be assembled then report quickly so it could help the ongoing covid crisis and crisis management generally. I wanted to give my honest view of crucial events when my memory was relatively fresh. My May 2021 account is my best memory, particularly of crucial conversations, so the transcript of that evidence is important and I gave it as if I was speaking under oath. The Inquiry lawyers have told me that, because of complex legal problems regarding how courts deal with evidence given to Parliament, I should not refer to or cross-reference that 2021 evidence in this statement. In this statement therefore there are some quotes where I have relied on the May 2021 transcript because that is my most accurate memory of the event and there are passages that are identical to that evidence but I do not explain/reference in this document that text is copied from that evidence. I have removed all references to that evidence as requested. My view, expressed to MPs then, was that there was no good excuse for delaying an inquiry, and the longer it is delayed, the more people would rewrite memories, the more documents would go astray and so on.

Blame and officials

30. The ultimate responsibility for the failure of officials regarding emergency planning over many years, before 2020, lies with ministers and successive PMs.
31. In 2020 a handful of senior officials were the wrong people for the posts. This meant they were unable to replace other people who were wrong for their posts.
32. However, it is the PM who is responsible for the wrong people remaining in crucial jobs.
33. In our system only a PM can insist on most personnel changes. Successive PMs have not used their powers to improve personnel systems in Whitehall or open them up so we can recruit from the very best people in the country. The system has remained a closed caste for decades and this contributed enormously to the failures.
34. Officials are often blamed for things that are the fault of MPs or special advisors ('spads'). But MPs and spads are often blamed for things that are the fault of officials.
35. Ultimately persistent failures of officials are the fault of MPs because only they have the power to fix these problems but do not exercise it. Cf. 'responsibility and authority' below.
36. While I make clear my views on the former PM below, it's important we avoid an obvious problem — it's highly convenient for everyone now to blame him for everything and use his obvious errors and lies to avoid tough questions about the failures of the system. Johnson was a symptom of the system's sickness and this is even more important than his (or others') personal failings.

Spin, distortion, illusions

37. In 2020 there was a campaign from the first week of January by a network of spads, officials, journalists and the PM's then girlfriend to have me and other staff removed. This made managing the crisis even harder and led to a stream of stories that were not true.
38. For example, in March there were many stories presenting 'herd immunity' as if it was 'Cummings's plan'. This was widely believed in Westminster. The idea that a controversial political adviser was setting a highly controversial 'herd immunity' covid plan added to the chaos. Further there were numerous reports in the media of meetings, comments, and decisions that never happened, e.g the *Sunday Times* on 22 March, to the effect that I was callously writing off the deaths of thousands of old people (which the journalist later admitted was a terrible error but the damage was done) [INQ000280041]. This created a lot of political noise that affected the PM. Many decisions taken simply to help handle the crisis were presented as corrupt and criminal (e.g the *Guardian's* campaign against rapid tests in Q3-Q4 2020).
39. I have been critical of the PM but some criticisms of him are false. In particular the idea spread by many that in March-April many procurement decisions were made by the PM to enrich Tory Party donors is, I believe, false. Unfortunately he contributed to this confusion by beginning a campaign in spring 2021 to pretend Plan A was never 'single peak' and by telling so many lies that his sometimes truthful statements are not believed. This has distorted public discussion further.
40. Much of the media has evolved to create two simple sides: pro-lockdown, pro-masks, pro-vaccine etc vs anti-lockdown, anti-masks, anti-vaccine. They have then layered Leave vs Remain onto these sides. This helps clicks for the *Guardian* and *Telegraph* but it distorts what actually happened and the debates in No10 at the time.
41. Many journalists now write about March 2020 as if public health experts were longing to do lockdown and bullied the PM into it. This story is totally false. In fact public health experts in February-March were overwhelmingly hostile to lockdown, thinking it should not be tried and if tried could not work. Most public health experts only supported lockdown after it was done. Similarly they strongly opposed closing the borders/airports in Q1 2020.
42. And the distortions have made analysing errors impossible. Practically nobody in the world of political Insiders argues both that a) the first 'lockdown' was unavoidable (given the actual quality of planning, preparations, state capacity, leadership etc in Q1 2020) and b) there need never have been others (my view). They either oppose or support all lockdowns in principle. Insiders ignore the practicalities faced by officials and advisers dealing with the PM in autumn 2020 such as the fact that if you are extremely confident that he will a) ignore problems then b) u-turn and order lockdown at the last minute, this is unarguably the 'worst of all worlds' approach – yielding neither 'herd immunity' nor avoiding economic carnage but guaranteeing more death and economic carnage – therefore responsible officials will try to avoid this scenario with an earlier therefore shorter lockdown. The logic of this is inherent in the nature of exponential growth/decay, explained to me by *inter alia* Tim Gowers in spring 2020. [INQ000048313/23-26]
43. My qualification above 'given the actual quality' is crucial. The first lockdown was not intrinsically necessary. It became necessary to stop NHS collapse because of the actual

historical circumstances including a large fraction of Insiders refusing to accept the referendum result and driving the country into a constitutional and political crisis that consumed a vast amount of the focus of the core of the state 2016-19 such that critical capabilities and planning were ignored, not taken seriously by senior people and so on.

44. If we had had a government that implemented the referendum decision and focused on a government's core job like preparing for large disasters and changed procurement law and so on, then no lockdowns would have been necessary. We could have met the crisis with rapid action at the borders and rapid build up of testing capacity, rapid vaccine building and so on. Mass rapid tests deployed at scale (tens of millions per week) could have averted any need for lockdown to stop NHS collapse in spring 2020 as well as autumn 2020.
45. Westminster has proved unable to debate such issues in Parliament or mainstream media, both of which are dominated by false memes and illusions. Note that in 2021 the government started dismantling domestic manufacturing and other critical infrastructure we started building in 2020 (e.g sewage monitoring and the ONS random test) and there was barely a squeak from the media or MPs.
46. The herd immunity Plan A was the official plan, not mine. The Imperial model was not the cause of the change of policy. Advice on masks did not change 'because of focus groups'. We decided to go for mass rapid testing before the rest of Europe because of advice from a network of scientists (who had failed to persuade the DHSC but who were proved right), not because of 'corruption' as repeatedly alleged by the *Guardian* (before the *Guardian* suddenly switched party line to attacking the *lack* of rapid tests and memory-holed their original party line). But many such memes have persisted.
47. A meme that has become deeply embedded in parts of the media is that we didn't need to go further in March because the public started staying at home anyway. It's true the public was so worried by government inaction they started locking themselves down and keeping their children out of school before the government ditched plan A. Arguing that *reasonable public fear of the government's incompetent slowness to act actually solves the problem so negates the need for the government to act* is such a twisted logic it's weird (unless you know Westminster) to think it has become a mainstream view among many pundits and MPs. Yet it has.
48. It's now normal to see a severe 'narrative whiplash' where a 'line to take' spreads quickly among a few thousand hyper-politically obsessed people who treat it partly as a spectator sport (academics, journalists, think tankers etc), encouraged and enforced by Twitter dynamics, then abruptly reverses with little or no explanation. These reverses can't be acknowledged by this network. The reverses are deeply confusing for any normal people trying to make sense of 'the news' especially in a crisis like covid.
49. E.g over the past few years we've seen this politically obsessed network suddenly *en masse* change its view and treat the new view like it was always true and always their view:

Masks are harmful... Not wearing a mask is a sign of idiocy and Brexit-Trump support... Closing borders is racist-Trump-Brexit behaviour... Closing borders is sensible... Natural herd immunity is sensible policy from public health experts... Natural herd immunity is an insane policy pushed by Trump-Brexit supporters... Rapid tests are the latest example of Tory/Brexit corruption, they're unsafe... Tories are foot dragging on distributing rapid tests, more corruption...

*It's absurd to say the war is about Ukraine joining NATO... Ukraine must join NATO...
 Putin is so stupid and irrational he launched this mad invasion... We don't have to worry
 about nuclear war because that would be mad/irrational...
 Putin blew up the pipeline, warcrime... Ukraine blew up the pipeline, must have had a good
 reason...
 Hunter Biden's laptop was KGB misinformation, don't let it affect your vote in the imminent
 election... Err, it was genuine but it's now old news, irrelevant.
 There's no collusion between the Democrats and Twitter to censor anti-Democrat voices...
 The evidence of collusion shows there wasn't ENOUGH action to suppress
 DISINFORMATION!*

1. A connected crucial dynamic I observed from summer 2019 was that standards of fact-checking have totally collapsed across the old media so a journalist now tweets that they've heard X will happen, it spreads across Twitter without anybody checking, No10 denies X is or will happen or has even been discussed, the denial is ignored, columns are written about how stupid X is, X doesn't happen, columns are written about the 'u-turn'. An example: the *Telegraph's* front page coverage of a supposed government campaign to get everyone back in the office in September 2020. The campaign never existed but the claim was widely reported, No10 said truthfully the *Telegraph* report is fiction, then the campaign's non-appearance was reported as a 'u-turn' and another example of 'government chaos'.
2. These dynamics are very poorly understood by the 'communication' professionals in government who are themselves largely embedded in this network and susceptible to its psychological pressures. MPs generally tend to believe almost everything they see in the old media and have become *more* likely to believe things over time as the fact checking standards have *declined*. Nothing currently discussed about 'government communications' (especially if it has the word 'strategic' anywhere near) gets to first base in facing these issues realistically. This seems to me inherent in the wider crisis of our entire political regime which is at the heart of covid failure and the inability of political-media-academic-legal elites to discuss it sensibly. Every elite is enmeshed in the media culture and its susceptibility to a constant series of emotional waves that lie behind the rapidly evolving line-to-take for that network that refers to itself unironically as 'the grownups' (this emotionalism is ironically perceived as 'rational', in contrast to the median voter, by the network's loudest voices).
3. All this means that trying to get to the basics on covid now involves uncovering layer after layer of narrative whiplash driven by shifting emotions within and between Westminster gangs. If you've trusted the *Telegraph* since 2020 you'd now be shocked to consider that the PM was NOT pushed into lockdown by public health professionals (who in fact opposed 'lockdown' and closing the borders in Feb-March). If you've trusted the *Guardian* since 2020 you'd also be shocked but for almost opposite reasons.
4. Overall I think the scale of state failure and collapse was so extensive, and the implications so disruptive to conventional views across party and ideological lines, that the overwhelming majority of Westminster, academia and the media have been unable to process what has happened and display what seems a wilful blindness, a desire to live in a parallel universe. What else can explain the way MPs and media staggered towards the predictable and predicted debacle over omicron in 2021 — with the government 'forgetting' to order enough rapid tests, shutting down sewage monitoring, de-prioritising second-generation vaccines — while Westminster wrote endlessly summer 2021 about how everyone wanted to 'get back to normal politics'? What else can explain that all the pathologies that led to the 2020 collapse have been allowed to continue, that politicians and officials have even sought to attack attempts to change direction that were started (e.g Truss and the Cabinet Secretary demoting the '10ds' team intended precisely to help warn about sudden disasters, one of which then immediately overwhelmed Truss)?
5. This connects to the broad issue of 'disinformation'. Almost everything written about it is false. Academic work on it is often itself a source of disinformation. The most high profile example is the Cadwalladr story on Trump/Brexit/Facebook/Russia that went global thanks

to the mainstream media. During covid many people were censored on social media for 'spreading disinformation' when what they were saying turned out to be true (e.g people saying the vaccines did not stop you getting infected). The dangers of censorship by government or companies is much greater than the danger of odd cranks saying dumb things. In Q1 2020 it was government errors spread by the mainstream media that were the greatest 'disinformation', e.g the mockery of people like supermodel Caprice for saying 'close the borders'.

6. Political elites have not faced the way in which their handling of crisis after crisis has eroded trust in institutions and themselves. Repeatedly the response from political elites and mainstream media has been to attack voters as stupid or evil and babble about disinformation. This has been highly counterproductive. (Eg. Communication around vaccines has been disastrous and persuade millions that government can't be trusted.) But they're stuck in a cycle where political-media-academia elites cannot see that their behaviour is the real problem, not voters' behaviour.
7. There is great confusion about 'herd immunity' and 'was the plan herd immunity?' etc. This reflects confusion between aims and strategy, between intentions and assumptions. Herd immunity was never the intention in the sense of 'we want a majority to get covid and prefer this to a world in which a majority does not get covid' or 'our aim is herd immunity'. When I have described Plan A as 'herd immunity', I do not mean 'government policy wanted to achieve and/or set as its goal herd immunity'. What I mean is: in February-March, until the change of approach around 13-20 March, it was assumed a) there was no practical alternative to herd immunity happening, it was only a question of how fast, b) even if it was possible to suppress it sufficiently to avoid herd immunity by September (which was thought not possible) this would be bad because a second big wave would occur in winter and be worse, c) therefore the real issue was how to affect the shape of a single peak so as much as possible it was flattened and occurred over summer with herd immunity inevitably happening by roughly September. In summary: herd immunity was not 'the plan' if you're asking about intentions but it was seen as an inevitability that we could only alter in terms of how fast it happened, therefore the point of action was to change the shape of how it happened in one flatter peak. I think these distinctions account for me and others describing Plan A as 'herd immunity / single peak by September' and others saying 'the plan was not herd immunity' — those saying the latter are not claiming we thought 12 March that herd immunity would not happen. This confusion was heightened at the time by accusations that we/I saw the population in animalistic terms as 'a herd'.

SPECIFIC INSTITUTIONS

WEAKNESSES IN SYSTEM FOR DEALING WITH CRITICAL PROBLEMS

8. I viewed much of the core machinery for dealing with crises as weak before going to No10 and my views strengthened July-December 2019.
9. I wrote a lot pre-2020 (and pre-referendum) about the weaknesses of Whitehall and how these are particularly dangerous for issues of war, terrorism, pandemics and so on. 2016-19 I wrote about the problems with the Cabinet Room and COBR, how they would fail in the next big crisis, about biosecurity in labs and AI safety, about ideas and tools to do it better.
10. I had spoken to ministers and officials for years who watched, for example, Cameron and Letwin trying to deal with civil contingencies problems in COBR. Constant themes were: the lack of planning, the lack of crucial skills at the centre, 'the levers of power' didn't connect to much in a crisis, the by-design confusion of responsibility and authority, and a worrying air of complacency and fatalism.
11. I therefore dug into a lot of things relevant to covid in 2019.
12. Without straying into non-covid issues in any detail, my experience of July-December 2019 strengthened my view that we had a mix of a) some wonderful people dotted around, b) some amazing capabilities, but c) a broken system for thinking and building capabilities and budgeting and planning in the whole realm of 'national security' including civil contingencies.
 - I participated in COBR meetings (e.g terrorism, floods) and saw its strengths and weaknesses.
 - I watched the Cabinet Office trying to deal with very complex issues regarding Brexit and 'no deal' preparations, many of which were similar to 'civil contingencies' problems (e.g exploring potential drug shortages). I watched people in the COBR room who could not do their jobs and had to speak to the Cabinet Secretary to have them replaced. Within 24 hours of starting in No10 I emailed the Cabinet Secretary about a structure I wanted for handling Brexit, what became XS and XO which sat in COBR, two Cabinet committees to deal with strategy and operations (I based this approach partly on how Eisenhower structured the NSC in the 1950s which seemed to be vindicated by severe problems JFK had with Cuba).
 - The National Security Council main meetings (with the PM and ministers) did not work well and, disastrously, the culture of leaking had infected even those meetings so that senior officials were rightly reluctant to speak entirely frankly in that forum. There was too much reading out scripts by ministers instead of getting to the heart of problems. They were far too big with huge numbers of people sitting 'against the wall' (bad practice).
 - Junior Cabinet Office ministers nominally responsible for crucial functions in the Cabinet Office were seen by officials as rubber stamps and kept out of anything important.
 - I spoke to senior officials about questions such as 'where is the place that we think about a conflict across all domains, conventional, special forces, propaganda, space, cyber, civil contingencies and so on?'. The answer was: nowhere, there is no such place and no such institution and no training program.
 - During the constitutional crisis generated by May's botched Article 50 process and botched election, there had grown a culture of the National Security Secretariat becoming to a large

extent beyond ministerial or spad eyes. NSC(O) meetings actually decided a lot and all political figures were excluded. The SoS Defence, FO and HO had very limited insight into what was happening and PMs were limited by time. And in parallel many officials outside the NSS said to me that NSS had acquired more and more power and imposed more and more entropy on the system.

- Within a few weeks of going to No10 I had to deal with emergency requests from the MOD to deal with the 'bow wave' of problems caused by the disastrous 2015 Spending Review. This process demonstrated that the approach to budgets for national security issues was appalling. The crazy system incentivised people to manipulate annual budgets to show 'savings' that actually lost the taxpayer vast amounts then, in turn, the following year, another trick was applied to punt the next problem. This had led to a spreading hollowness, as senior people described it to me – critical capabilities that exist on paper but do not exist in reality. I spent a lot of time in No10 dealing with this problem which is enormous and touches the entire system for thinking about and preparing for things like pandemics, war and mass terrorism. The worst examples were when I was briefed on capabilities concerning, for example, nuclear weapons security and biological threats. Some of the things that were disclosed in highly classified settings were almost unbelievably worrying and a shocking indictment of over twenty years of politicians punting decisions and refusing to focus on their core responsibilities for national security.
- During terrorist attacks there was no data connection between the PM's office and the police or intelligence services. Briefings were old school and we could not share live data.
- In general there was a massive problem that has been a feature of debate in Britain for decades: a lack of management and what is referred to as 'followup' or 'grip' from No10/Cabinet Office, i.e monitoring what actually happens as a result of a meeting, are the things that are agreed would be done actually done. The oldest trick in the book for officials who do not want X to happen is simply: don't follow up. They don't have to fight X or stop X. They merely have to not push to make X happen and normal Whitehall entropy stops X. Successive No10s have been bad at enforcing decisions. NB. The important comments by former Cabinet Secretary, Robin Butler, telling the Lords in 2010 that the Cabinet Office does not view itself as there to enforce the PM's decisions (though PMs persist in thinking the Cabinet Office does think this is its job).

55. In 2019 I said to senior people in the intelligence services, MOD, and National Security Secretariat: one of the core reasons I did Brexit and came to No10 was to get to grips with fundamental capabilities to deal with war, disaster and so on, to deal with the horrorshow of MOD procurement, I want to help you build capabilities, come to me with plans, I will help with HMT and the PM and the spending review, this is all a personal priority for me. (Cf. emails between me and Hannah Young, the excellent PS in PM's office, in October 2019.)

56. In 2019 I worked with officials to start an 'integrated review' of defence and security capabilities including disaster response and how they connected.

57. In January 2020 I began work on many issues related to disaster response:

- Organising the building of a secure cloud in No10 so we could improve data sharing across Whitehall. The lack of this or even a basic document sharing system seriously hampered No10 generally. E.g Unlike almost any modern office, No10 staff working on a PM speech could not edit the same document, they emailed each other attachments like in 2000 – or used a personal gmail account to allow googledocs. During the intense pressures of March, we often had to use personal gmail accounts in order to edit PM statements to the country

as quickly and efficiently as possible because of this lack in the PM's office. The Cabinet Office had said that No10 could not use googledocs 'because it's insecure' even though they used it themselves. No10 and the Cabinet Office had protracted rows about the right approach. The whole issue was ludicrous and exposed just how bad the management of all things data was. By March we had got GCHQ to build a secure cloud system that helped us make data widely available but we were still using private gmail accounts to access googledocs for PM statements to the nation on covid. I was recently told (May 2023) by a Cabinet Office official that four years after I started these discussions, No10 and the Cabinet Office are still fighting about googledocs versus Teams and the Cabinet Office is planning a multi-million pound study of the issue by consultants.

- Building a data science team for the PM's office ('10ds') that could also enhance capabilities in the Cabinet Office and National Security Secretariat. My blog of 2/1/20 was the start of this. On 21/2 (11:39) I emailed the Cabinet Secretary and deputy Cabinet Secretary about a) problems with Government Digital Service and a lack of confidence in its leadership among key people; b) the general plan by Ben Warner, me and others to create and execute an overall plan for major data changes across government, about which there was widespread agreement among people who understood the problems and what was needed (e.g Anthony Finkelstein, the excellent chief scientific adviser to the intelligence services; c) my desire for them to put the Cabinet Office's weight behind rapid changes. Action was not quick enough to save us in February-March but was crucial from summer 2020. '10ds', as it became known (with 'ds' being both Downing Street and 'data science'), had some spads, some officials and some outsiders. We wanted it to embed as a core part of a PM's office so we said it should be led by an official and we recruited Laura Gilbert (who did an excellent job).
- Visiting MI5 to discuss their needs (organised to go to Porton Down but scuppered by covid).

National Security

- Getting the Integrated Review going.
- Starting weekly procurement reform meetings in the Cabinet Room with external experts.
- Starting weekly meetings on science and technology including a British version of the 1960s ARPA which funded the internet and personal computing in highly innovative and fast-moving ways.
- Starting regular meetings with Vallance in No10 to discuss the science, technology, data plans.
- Trying very hard to cancel HS2 which HMT forecast would cost £35-40 billion in the 2020-24 Parliament and which I wanted to spend instead on many of the things mentioned here.
- Starting to push through a major re-organisation of No10 (layout, structures) so we could deal with major events better, improve use of the space, technology, tools etc to cope with a crisis. A lot of work was done but the PM agreed it then dropped it in late January (saying I wanted to push him out of his nice office into another room 'like an old labrador'), I revived it in May, the PM agreed it then dropped it again. When I started this in early January covid was a relatively small part of the motivation. When I revived it in May obviously my argument was 'we've now tested the old system to destruction and we have to do what we started doing in January so we're ready this winter'. It still hasn't happened. (See below)
- Getting JIC/JIO, Vallance's office, MOD officials and others together with Superforecasters from the Tetlock experiments to improve warnings for emergencies (cf. email 6/1).
- Pushing for emergency legislation to limit the application of GDPR, generally and with covid in mind (cf. my email 29/1). On 30/1 I emailed Vallance about talking to the network of departmental science advisers about dealing with the serious problems with data operations and data sharing. When covid struck, GDPR caused huge problems, with officials saying

that sticking to recognised interpretations of GDPR would prevent many things necessary to save lives (e.g shielding), and I had to threaten to get the PM to say publicly 'ignore GDPR' in order to get guidance issued. This remains a big and dangerous problem and the EU's errors have been compounded by our own (e.g the MOD idiotically volunteering to apply it globally).

- Pushing for changes to civil service HR including the problem that HR rules generated huge churn among crucial jobs including for resilience and security (e.g my email of 21/1 to the Cabinet Secretary and other emails in January re changing the HR rules).
- Pushing for changes in counter-terrorism, surveillance, warrants, the authorisation process for drone strikes, ways the ECHR/HRA undermined security (e.g relevant to the terrorist incident in January which also took up No10 time in February). (Cf. my email to the Cabinet Secretary 8/2.)

58. Many officials engaged very positively with this and agreed that the start of a new Parliament was the best time to start such far-reaching and complex changes (e.g Lovegrove email to me 21/1 accepting serious problems with MOD procurement and budgets which weakened crucial capabilities and could not be fixed by the established approaches).

59. If we'd had just 6 months some of this would have helped with covid. Unfortunately almost all of these workstreams were smashed by covid and had to be revived in summer. Weekly procurement reform meetings had to stop so I could work on specific procurement disasters related to covid. Weekly meetings on data in government had to be stopped to deal with actual data crises on covid. Meetings on civil service personnel/HR reform were stopped to deal with actual personnel disasters on covid.

60. When covid came I often heard officials say 'thank God we looked at X during No Deal preparations'. My strong impression was that intense No Deal preparations in 2019 helped many times with covid in 2020. The idea that if the system which shut down sewage monitoring in 2021 and ran out of tests and closed the manufacturing we started building in 2020 had been left to itself without Brexit to deal with 2016-19, then it would have done all the preparations it claimed to have done and actually made us 'world-leading' — such claims are absurd. The attempts by some officials to blame 'Brexit preparations' for the failures of the system show how some are refusing to take responsibility for the true reasons behind the lack of planning pre-2020 and the delusion of 'best prepared in the world'. Further there have been many claims, including by Hancock, that No10 generally and I personally were 'totally focused on Brexit' in January and this undermined covid planning. This is the opposite of the truth. The whole point of the election was to 'get Brexit done'. After the election I made clear in No10 that apart from the small team focused on the negotiations, the rest of us had to refocus government from the all-consuming Brexit drama to the country's other priorities, as we'd promised in the election. I suggested pulling the plug on the Brexit talks so that everyone (here and in Europe) could focus on the emergency.

61. Hannah Young and Steve Higham from Private Office were excellent and extremely diligent officials, unafraid to tell the PM and spads the truth. They would have very valuable perspectives on this broad issue.

CABINET / CABINET COMMITTEES

62. Cabinet was largely irrelevant to policy or execution in 2020. The combination of its size, the PM's inability to chair it, and its constant leaks meant it was seen by everyone in No10 as

not a place for serious discussion. Its main function was political and as part of the 'government theatre' of Westminster, whereby the media and MPs treat the Cabinet as central but those working in No10 see it as another problem to manage while real discussions happen elsewhere. In my experience Cabinet becomes genuinely important in proportion to the drop in the PM's personal authority.

63. I advised the PM that if he wanted Cabinet to become serious again he would have to cut its size radically and the start of a fresh Parliament was the perfect time for such changes. He thought it would annoy colleagues and it was better to keep Cabinet as theatre and do important things elsewhere. I did not attend Cabinet in 2020 (though will have seen some of the 'zoom Cabinets' on a screen).
64. It's impossible for me to remember now whether meetings were officially Cabinet Committee meetings so it's hard for me to say how well they worked from April.
65. A flaw of Cabinet Committees is they are by design scripted. Ministers are given scripts to read out. Much of a typical meeting is simply people reading bullet points written for them by officials who have exchanged them in advance. And the conclusions ('Chairman's notes') are largely scripted in advance too (i.e the conclusions of a meeting are written before the meeting and appear in the PM's folder, therefore drafting those notes is often much more important than the meeting). This means that much time is wasted for those at the sharp end. And time is not spent digging into problems. This makes 'pre-meets' much more important than is realised and pre-meets between officials and spads are often far more important and useful than the official meeting. And post-meets where officials and advisers consider what they will actually do and which things decided by ministers must be undecided.
66. Important meetings with ministers other than the PM were often ad hoc, sometimes before or after meetings in the Cabinet room.
67. In spring 2020 the most important forum was the Cabinet Room meetings, first at 815 (which I set up on 11/3) just with officials and spads then a roughly 915 with the PM and ad hoc other ministers. It was not COBR or a Cabinet Committee. Most crucial discussions were either there or the PM's study with only small groups.
68. If I think of critical moments I think of the Cabinet Room meetings or the PM's study, I don't think of the Cabinet or Cabinet committees.
69. It's also important to realise that the pervasive culture of leaking everything, even NSC meetings, inevitably distorted the entire machine around official meetings. Serious issues could not be discussed in any large group with MPs and many other forums without risking partial/distorted versions immediately causing media chaos. (E.g If I wanted to know anything sensitive from intelligence officials, I would speak privately, not in a formal meeting like NSC, as we could not trust ministers including the PM not to leak. During reshuffles there were leaks from people sitting within 10 metres of the Cabinet Room giving real-time updates to the media of who was going where, which the Cabinet Secretary said was unprecedented and a security risk yet the system proved unable to stop.) This inevitably meant that much of government involved a) largely Potemkin meetings with lots of people and formal notes etc but which deliberately did not engage critical issues and b) much smaller groups where critical issues were discussed but outside a formal structure (in the

sense that they were not Cabinet Committee meetings etc, they were often just discussions in or around the PM's office). Traces of the latter discussions might only be in an email or WhatsApp if they exist at all (e.g most obviously the unofficial meeting with the PM on 14/3). This appalling culture was embedded when I arrived and my attempts to change it were an almost total failure. This was partly because the PM regarded the steps needed to change it as more threatening to him than leaks, which he saw just as more familiar chaos and practically never took seriously. It was partly because of other dynamics such as a pervasive culture in Whitehall of having massive email copy lists and far too many people attending every meeting, which I repeatedly said should change and senior people agreed but action almost never resulted.

70. It would be a serious mistake to conclude that the answer to these problems is 'more process' as if more minutes would have saved the day. The system was drowning in people emailing each other 'readouts'. That was not the core problem or the solution. The answer is: better leadership, better people, better training. Only with this can any 'process' actually work.

CABINET OFFICE

71. The Cabinet Office generally is more 'sand in the petrol tank' than 'the gearbox' it is often described as.
72. It is bloated, particularly at senior level, with poor responsibility.
73. It has huge numbers of 'communications' staff that duplicate others and generally spread confusion and cannot do the 'strategic' functions they're usually described as. Hence why I and others in No10 had to waste valuable time on public health communication Feb-March.
74. It cannot drive priorities or fix problems with departments.
75. On covid it:
- Could not ask SAGE the right questions, understand technical SAGE discussions, communicate SAGE material to relevant places across Whitehall. It lacked specialist staff who understood discussions about subjects like genetics and diseases but *was responsible for tasking SAGE*. It lacked specialist staff who were serious experts on data and analysis but it was responsible for setting up and tasking the new JBC (which went wrong). This is partly why in March I brought in people like Laura Pimpo (epidemiologist) and James Phillips (one of Britain's leading young neuroscientists who had engineered genes at the famous Janelia lab). I wanted more people with advanced technical skills around the apex of power.
 - Could not figure out that DHSC plans were full of holes. It told the PM's office on 16 March that it still had not gathered departmental plans and they were 'not held centrally'.
 - Could not cope with the huge data demands or build a system that could (hence why Tom Shinner, Marc and Ben Warner et al had to build a network of officials and external consultants to build this).
 - Could not coordinate the response. In response to the lack of coordination in March I initiated 0815 meetings in the Cabinet room chaired by Sweeney and me. This ad hoc response morphed into a new meeting structure that actually ran the crisis, rather than the COBR process.

- If a team is failing in a department and the Permanent Secretary can't or won't solve it then the Cabinet Office is supposed to (the SoS cannot insist on officials being removed). But it can't fix itself. In September the Cabinet Secretary ordered his own head of HR to stop slowing down the testing team recruiting people but was initially ignored and we had to repeat the meeting and repeat the demands to make this happen. (I threatened to have the official fired by the PM if necessary to make progress and often only such threats were sufficient to force action.)
76. Given its crucial role and powers in fixing personnel problems elsewhere, its slowness and its own problems inevitably added to the friction and delays and made it harder to fix the rest of government.
 77. On 19/3 I was appalled to be told that Mark Sweeney, the senior official recently put in charge of covid by the Cabinet Secretary, was not working on it that day because he had been asked to work on the Windrush report. (NB. I am not blaming Sweeney for this.) I felt this was symptomatic of the failure of the Cabinet Office to appreciate the urgency and scale of the disaster hitting us. I complained to the Cabinet Secretary.
 78. My views are not idiosyncratic. They were widely shared across No10 and the Cabinet Office itself (cf. my meeting with Private Office about it in May).

COBR

79. The team that runs the COBR rooms were competent, disciplined, professional. They rightly enforced tightly the very strict rules necessary to preserve COBR as a 'STRAP' environment, i.e they are run such that STRAP material (the most sensitive material) can be safely discussed. This means that phones, laptops etc are not allowed in. The room is closed to outside data by design.
80. COBR works well for things where a) the crisis is not too big, b) the problem is familiar, c) there is established process. For example, I dealt with COBR on minor terrorist incidents and floods. It worked well. With some adjustments it also worked well for 'XS' and 'XO' meetings, the Brexit strategy and operations meetings, that ran from July 2019 though this was partly because senior No10 officials and spads focused on this very sharply.
81. But the closed system was totally unsuitable as the place to handle the pandemic. In such a huge and fast-moving crisis, it was crucial that officials could access data and systems not through COBR systems.
82. The COBR meetings with the Devolved Authorities were particularly bad as Sturgeon immediately briefed everything discussed to the media. They therefore became even more scripted, formulaic and pointless than the normal Cabinet. They were 'handling' meetings rather than the place where issues were really hashed out.
83. In early March it became clear that the COBR system could not cope with the vast scope of issues. The communications people were screaming at me that the communication meetings were hopeless because the policy response was so far off the pace. I started an 8/815 meeting in the Cabinet Room with officials and advisers, chaired initially by me and Mark Sweeney, before a meeting with the PM at 915. (We installed video conferencing in the Cabinet room via Zoom which I believe was another major security failure.) This helped

No10 and the Cabinet Office get on top of the complexity and triage crucial issues. COBR was still used for DA meetings but not for the main covid meetings.

84. Many have pointed out that the PM did not attend COBR meetings in February. Many argue that had he gone then preparations would have been better. I think the opposite is true. If he had gone he would have said in COBR what he said in No10: *'this is the new swine flu, I want Whitty to inject me with it on TV, the real danger is we do too much and harm the economy'*. (He gave a few versions of this line many times from January-March sometimes in official meetings, e.g "The real danger here isn't this new swine flu thing; it's that the reaction to it is going to cripple the economy.") This would have sent disastrous signals across Whitehall and undermined, not strengthened, vigorous action. This is why I did not try to persuade him to go in February. I discussed this with other officials in the PM's office Jan-Feb and they agreed (including Lee Cain, Cleo Watson, Martin Reynolds, Ben Warner and I think Imran Shafi and possibly others).
85. I sent Ben Warner to COBR meetings on covid in Jan/Feb with Imran. Ben was a trained scientist (PhD physicist). It was a good division of labour for those two to go to the official meetings and for me to speak one-to-one with Valance, Whitty and others. On 25/2 I asked that Ben also be invited to all civil contingencies meetings too.

TREASURY

86. Treasury had almost no specialists in data science and did not use advanced tools in 2020.
87. HMT's analytical capabilities were poor. Although senior HMT officials pushed back repeatedly over policy they never had their own serious alternative based on quantitative analysis. At no point when I was there did HMT produce models of the economy in different scenarios, the only such work I saw was done by outside academics. Many have said that there was never a full cost-benefit analysis done on lockdowns including the economic effects. This is true but the Treasury could not and would not produce such analysis, either pre-first wave or later in 2020.
88. Furlough was designed by [Name Redacted] and Tim Leunig. Originally officials said that they could not execute it. [NR] persuaded them it could be done, partly by calling Stripe and confirming that Stripe could rapidly build the infrastructure needed.
89. The 'one team' I developed with Liam Booth Smith worked very well and was a huge improvement on the previous regime where it was normal for HMT to hide information from No10. This helped No10/11 coordinate in the crisis. 'Trust is very low friction' (Charlie Munger) and we had trust. This system ended immediately after I left and made 2021 worse.
90. Sunak and his team strongly supported the Vaccine Taskforce, both financially and removing it from DHSC control and creating an independent team.
91. Whenever No10 asked Sunak's team to fasttrack things they did — often having to deal with Hancock's lies and attempts to blame them for failures.
92. In the autumn Sunak's team supported me with the mass testing team as we tried to overcome horrific Whitehall bureaucracy, secretly buy hundreds of millions of fast tests

before other countries realised their value and there was a PPE-like panic, and build manufacturing capacity in the UK and so on.

93. I do not remember Sunak being closely involved in the main discussions in the weeks of 9/3, 16/3, 23/3. I remember one alarming meeting arranged at very short notice (some time between 12/3 and 20/3, possibly 19/3) with the Chancellor and Cabinet Secretary in which the PM was warned that we also potentially faced a disastrous financial crisis if markets stopped buying our bonds etc. (Attendees were: PM, Chancellor, Cabinet Secretary, Liam Booth Smith, me, the Permanent Secretary of HMT (I think), Stuart Glassboro; possibly Lee Cain came in.) My view was that we had to take this risk because a) financial crisis might not happen but we could see definite disasters coming if we did not act aggressively, b) the scenario of sticking to Plan A was more likely to lead to widespread panic including in financial markets.
94. I dealt with Liam Booth Smith, the Chancellor's main political adviser, on many occasions. He was highly professional, solved many problems and could be relied on to tell the truth.
95. There have been many reports that the Chancellor tried to stop serious action in March 2020. These reports are not right. He did raise, properly, the serious risks to financial markets. My impression was that he was sceptical of aspects of the shift away from Plan A but I did not discuss this with him in any detail and he was not much involved in the critical 2-3 weeks in March.
96. In 2022 Sunak gave an interview to the *Spectator* [INQ000280042]. Much of what he apparently said, as reported by Fraser Nelson, was rubbish and he blamed the former PM Johnson and/or No10 for things that were not his fault or did not happen. But Sunak's team said to me that the interview was 'overwritten' and implied Sunak had said things he had not actually said. I have not given a rebuttal of those claims here but can answer questions about them if he repeats them to the inquiry. (The then Chancellor is a believer in British institutions. The relatively clear mission in HMT made him underrate the lack of such focus elsewhere. He found the scale of collapse and incompetence hard to process. And I think, given the then PM's obvious unseriousness and Hancock's behaviour, it was easier for Sunak to overrate their responsibility and underrate the much more alarming truth that beyond the PM's failures the core institutions had collapsed. Some of Sunak's closest advisers have said this to me. I believe this error continues to weaken the focus we need from the PM's office on national security and civil contingency issues.)

SAGE

97. Much of the scientific work of SAGE and the scientists involved was outstanding. Vallance chaired and managed it very well. But how it connected to other parts of Whitehall involved big problems. My criticisms are not criticisms of the SAGE scientists or of Vallance.
98. The Cabinet Office commissioning work from SAGE did not work well because the Cabinet Office did not have enough of the right people with the right skills to ask the right questions.
99. SAGE minutes did not capture anything like what we needed hence partly why I sent Ben Warner to listen and often asked Vallance and Whitty to brief No10/PM/me direct.

100. The reporting system from SAGE to the PM's office did not work well. It essentially consisted of Vallance and Whitty giving us verbal reports which they did very well but these could not substitute for listening to the full discussion or the PM/advisers watching experts explore the issues and probe for weak arguments.
101. The lack of paper provided to the PM's office about SAGE discussions meant that there were often confused memories about what had been said. Adding to this, different people around the Cabinet Office and No10 had listened to SAGE themselves and sometimes had different impressions. This was partly why I wanted Ben Warner there, a scientifically trained No10 staff member who could explain what people in SAGE had said and clarify confusion in No10 meetings. This problem was particularly bad with this PM because he wanted to believe things and without paper it was harder to say 'no, you're wrong, that's not what was said earlier/yesterday' etc. (I do not blame CSA/CMO for this, it was a failure of No10/Cabinet Office /CCS process.)
102. There was confusion in No10/Cabinet Office between 'scientific advice' and 'policy'. Often in meetings it was hard for the PM to be sure what was 'scientific advice' from SAGE and what was 'policy advice' from DHSC or elsewhere. I had some sympathy with him. It was sometimes confusing even if you understood the intricacies of Whitehall. Sometimes the PM would say after listening to discussion 'so SAGE advises that we do X' and would be told 'no PM, that's policy, SAGE gives scientific advice' and he would look baffled. The PM was not well served by this and the lack of written advice, in particular about what was DHSC or Cabinet Office policy and what was scientific argument, made the confusion greater. Sometimes after meetings I had to say to him things like 'no, X was from SAGE not from Hancock' or vice versa.
103. It remains unclear to me why CSA and CMO represented SAGE as agreeing with Plan A / 'herd immunity' by September as the only viable strategy pre-14/3 but so many SAGE individuals have subsequently denied they supported it. But it is an important fact that until roughly 16-18/3 *the PM and others in No10 thought (reasonably) that SAGE understood Plan A and thought there was no practical alternative*. It was only around 13-15/3 that I detected Vallance and others on or around SAGE shifting.
104. In February, No10 was told that SAGE a) did not support testing at borders, b) thought ramping up testing was 'not possible', c) assumed testing and tracing would stop, not be expanded, d) opposed stopping mass gatherings.
105. Almost all the secrecy was counterproductive. Vallance and I discussed this. Vallance agreed that we should make the vast majority of SAGE stuff public including data and models. But this was held up. Discussions with officials led me to think that much of the reluctance in the Cabinet Office to open SAGE up was because SAGE was technically part of the Cabinet Committee system so Cabinet Office feared the implications of opening it up. I have no doubt that the failure to expose SAGE discussions and papers to public scrutiny was very bad. MPs' failure in 2021 to demand that plans to deal with future variants or other diseases be made public contributed to further disasters including with omicron. I warned in May 2021 this could happen and urged MPs to force No10 to publish plans (e.g Twitter, 18/5; blog June). MPs did not act. It happened with omicron.
106. The media has claimed that I somehow perverted SAGE by inviting others to attend. I had worries about a) how SAGE advice was transmitted to the PM (above). And b) I worried

about the actual policy. So I started forwarding SAGE papers to an informal network of people to get other perspectives, mainly: Venki Ramakrishnan (Nobel Prize winner, President of the Royal Society), Tim Gowers (Fields Medallist, Professor of Maths, Cambridge), Demis Hassabis (CEO of DeepMind), and Mark Warner (CEO of Faculty AI). All four of them told me in March — the advice to go with herd immunity is wrong, you should move much faster, if you have to lockdown then the sooner the better. I asked Vallance to invite Hassabis and Gowers to the SAGE meeting on 18 March because I wanted to see what SAGE would say to their arguments. This meeting convinced me further that I should do all I could to get everybody to act faster.

107. Was this 'interference'? In a sense yes. But I think it is impossible to argue that adding those four voices made discussion/advice/policy worse, or that generally it was wrong to add incredibly able people to the list of those scrutinising ideas/plans, and in my opinion they were proved much more right than the official DHSC advice to the PM and were vindicated by events: politicians did conclude they had to lockdown and given this it would have been better earlier. I also believe that challenge to official views from such outstanding people is good in principle. I should also say: Vallance agreed with me about bringing in other voices, this was not something I imposed on him, and he agreed with me that SAGE was flawed in various ways. The Inquiry has asked me to give specifics on this. I do not remember details of my discussions with Vallance on this but I have a distinct memory of him saying to me after the first wave that there were 'big' problems with the general SAGE process and he wanted to change it, and, like many including Ben Warner, he thought there were big problems with SPI-B. (The media story at the time was that I was pushing SAGE towards herd immunity but in fact to the extent I influenced or 'interfered' with SAGE by bringing in outside challenge this pushed advice against herd immunity / Plan A.)
108. If No10 had had the infrastructure in place that we started trying to build in January a better process would have been a) technical meetings of SAGE and other advisers (including staff from the No10 data science team expert in dealing with highly uncertain situations) without ministers to delve into details, b) written summaries provided immediately to No10 including different viewpoints (i.e not seeking consensus), then c) hard discussion with the PM, officials and advisers who had listened to the detailed discussions and understood them, and some SAGE members to hash out things to the bottom, so the PM understood the real problems, the real estimates of uncertainty etc, d) a Red Team attached to the No10 data science team watching then making their own reports on what they thought were errors and different ways of looking at the problems, drawing on outside help.
109. The network of scientific advisers in each department was very valuable. Vallance spent a lot of time on this and I think he was vindicated. This network should be more influential than it is. While Cabinet altogether should be much smaller I think the CSA should sit in routinely so they can answer questions and quickly sense if politicians are making bad assumptions about science/data and therefore get ahead of problems.

CIVIL CONTINGENCIES SECRETARIAT (CCS)

110. Given its importance it is clear that CCS was massively unprepared, under-resourced, didn't have the right people with the right skills and right tools.

111. Disasters cannot all be planned for in the same way. You must keep all sorts secret from terrorists. You don't need secrets from viruses. But the system treats everything like this with similar secrecy.
112. This secrecy was clearly damaging. There was clearly nothing like the rigorous testing of plans with outsiders that should have happened.
113. There are massive amounts of documents but it's incredibly hard even to find everything relevant, never mind what's most important. It was hard even for No10 staff to track down whether some documents exist. (Connected to the hopeless library / digital systems at the centre, see below.)
114. It could not cope with the scale of the crisis in March. E.g there was no data system for reporting covid cases with modern tools. In March the 'data system' was me listening to Simon Stevens reading out numbers, hitting x2 x2 x2 on my phone, and scribbling the answer on a white board I dragged into the Cabinet room. This had to be totally rebuilt March-April by NHS officials (including [REDACTED] NR [REDACTED]) working with Faculty and Shinner. Building the NHS dashboard was one of the successes.
115. On 16 March CCS told the PM's office that departmental pandemic plans 'are not held centrally' (see below).
116. PowerPoint dominates and this is bad for all the reasons people like Steve Jobs and world-leading pioneer of data visualisation, Edward Tufte, have explained. It's an extremely bad medium for discussing anything serious and complex but it is ubiquitous in Westminster. PowerPoint is liked for exactly the reason it's dangerous — it helps have a meeting that does NOT delve into difficult issues (helped by the culture of 'let's take it offline'). I tried to change this and largely failed.
117. My understanding from officials is the system around CCS continues to be 'a mess'.

DHSC AND CIVIL CONTINGENCIES POWERS

118. The pandemic plan was bad. It looked narrowly at flu. It was not properly Red Teamed. Any proper process would immediately have raised things like the absence of a shielding plan. The exercises that were run did not generate anything like the scale of thought and action needed.
119. As far as I could see there was no analysis of the effects of letting the NHS be overwhelmed for months in a pandemic, either by flu or something else.
120. DHSC was overwhelmed by the scale of the crisis in Feb-May. It did not have anything like the people it needed. It couldn't quickly build capacity on testing, drugs and so on and was bad at asking the Cabinet Office for help (very hard for me to know how much of this was Hancock and how much structural to DHSC). NHS-D (the section for handling data) was seen as terrible by everybody I spoke to who understood data.
121. I am no expert on this but many argue the reorganisation of the NHS/DHSC contributed to the lack of legal powers needed to govern the NHS and broader health system during

covid. Whether true or not it is unarguable that a) the Civil Contingencies Act and its powers were seen as seriously inadequate (the Cabinet Secretary and others said this to me), b) this problem had been allowed to fester for many years (perhaps decades), c) we had to pass emergency legislation at great speed which inevitably led to many errors. For example, we were often told that the emergency legislation had not provided government with some legal power it needed. And the extreme speed meant there was practically no time for serious scrutiny. And this contributed not only to a lack of powers but also, in my view, the state using powers which it should not have done — e.g imposing restrictions on people seeing dying relatives (one can imagine a much worse virus that could justify such measures but covid was not such a virus) — and allowing ministers such as Hancock to act without proper checks. I.e the problem was a mix of: lack of powers, too many powers improperly controlled, and confusion over powers.

122. This affected enforcement and created a constant confusion in Whitehall and No10 about what we could and should expect of the police and others responsible for enforcement.
123. The concept of a 'lead department' is reasonable for 'normal' problems but was totally unsuitable for a pandemic that demanded urgent and highly controversial action across the entire government. The DHSC simply does not have the authority or systems to orchestrate all the things needed. It could not cope just with the health aspects, never mind everything else (hence e.g why we shifted vaccine contracts to BEIS). This meant the Cabinet Office and No10 having to do many things for which they were also not set up to do. And it meant that other parts of the system could punt responsibility at DHSC rather than take responsibility themselves. Bad as DHSC was, there were also parts of Whitehall that tried to ditch their failures on it (and Hancock's behaviour made him an easy target for everyone to agree 'it's Hancock's/DHSC's fault').
124. There were many false reports that I was trying to fire Simon Stevens in the middle of covid. Hancock told me in December 2019 that Simon wanted to leave. My concern was for this to happen swiftly and that we did not have a lame duck for months while Whitehall spent ages on a bad process then hired someone not great. I wanted us to scour the earth for the such a critical role. Once covid hit this was forgotten but the issue returned in the summer. Unfortunately, as with Sedwill the PM refused to let me into the room and insisted on talking alone with Stevens so the PM's office again did not know what was agreed. This wasted valuable time in the summer.

PHE

125. PHE had some great scientists attached to it and some good officials but like other parts of the system it had poor leadership.
126. The CEO admitted his knowledge of public health could 'fit on a postage stamp'. When he came to see me in the summer he told me he didn't want to discuss covid but 'obesity and inequality and ethnic minorities'. Our discussion confirmed he should not have been appointed and should have been replaced in summer 2020.
127. Many senior officials told me PHE 'isn't remotely up to it' and 'the leadership can't cope', including Vallance and Whitty. Cf my email to CABSEC, Vallance, Whitty et al on 16/4 in which I refer to 'nobody' having confidence in PHE.

128. When I said the CEO should be replaced, Hancock and others didn't want to. A failing institution with bad leadership was left in place with other parts of a broken system having to work around it. This also damaged morale among the good officials in PHE.

JIO/JIC etc

129. Critical capabilities for prediction and analysis have not been sufficiently invested in.

130. Some examples:

- JIO estimated on 9/3 a 'short global recession' and 2020 growth 'may remain positive'. It did not appreciate the scale of what was coming.

National Security

129. There are aspects of this subject I cannot go into in this statement but would be happy to discuss in the appropriate forum.

130. There should have been a review of the intelligence services' performance during covid including advice to the PM. I do not know if this has happened. I found Anthony Finkelstein to be an outstanding official, one who was willing to tell me when he thought I was wrong and to push for change in Whitehall, and he would have a very valuable perspective on this and other issues (including reasons for the failure of the 'app').

Private Office

131. Most of the Private Secretaries in the PM's office were outstanding. It was a joke among spads in 2020 that if we could replace the Cabinet with the relevant Private Office official it would in almost every case bring a dramatic improvement in quality. Probably the official with the single best perspective on the crisis was Imran Shafi, the PS covering DHSC. He was in crucial official meetings that no political people were in and my 'political' team invited him to meetings, sometimes which had no other officials present, because we trusted his competence and integrity.
132. My view, shared by many, is that the PPS was not up to the job. This job gets very little scrutiny in the media, which often presents special advisors as the most important people in No10, but everyone who has worked in No10 knows how crucial it is. Day-to-day they run the building. If the PPS isn't right then the PM's office inevitably has problems even though it has some extremely able people working in it.
133. Martin Reynolds was very much a Foreign Office 'steady as she goes, let's take it offline' type but we needed the opposite. He encouraged a culture of officials constantly going to another room for 1-1 discussions which bred mistrust. He was far too deferential to the PM and shied away from confronting him with hard issues, which was a) the opposite of what a PM needs, and b) why this PM wanted to keep him. (E.g when I argued for a testing regime and a physical 'bubble' to defend the core of No10 from getting the disease, which I feared could produce a catastrophic cascade of other failures, he went along with the Cabinet Office view and did not challenge the PM.)
134. The private office is an old institution. It is tiny. However brilliant the people it is impossible for it to replace or fully compensate for the collapse of the DHSC and Cabinet Office. It is not configured to run detailed project management of departments in normal times, never mind an all-consuming national emergency of covid scale. (Nor should it.)
135. The private secretaries are relatively junior (either director or deputy director level) and cannot give orders to the legions of DGs and Permanent Secretaries in the Cabinet Office. Their influence comes from indirectly from the authority of the PM but this is amorphous.
136. In summer 2020 as I worked with Shinner and others to build a new system for No10 and the Cabinet Office, for covid and government generally (e.g the covid taskforce, the data science team), he was not supportive and instead of throwing his weight behind change took a very defensive attitude. Most of private office knew and openly discussed the collapse of the centre. Martin tried to downplay the severity of the problems and encouraged the PM to think that 'the system worked'. He even sometimes commented to the effect that 'the system' had 'worked well' in the spring, though he was the only one in the PM's office to say such a bizarre thing. He seemed worried in summer 2020 that I and others were using the collapse to argue for radical changes. (I do not know to what extent he was encouraged in this line to the PM by others in the system but it often felt he was representing the view of others and perhaps he was under pressures I was not aware of.) This inevitably meant we had some sharp disagreements. His reluctance to confront the PM with tough issues contributed to the disastrous handling of the replacement of the Cabinet Secretary.
137. In summer-autumn 2020 I, encouraged by many in the PM's office, frequently told the PM that the PPS should be replaced. The new Cabinet Secretary said he agreed with me

and discussed with Martin him moving on. The PM referred to him as 'my loyal labrador' and consistently opposed change partly because he suspected I would get someone appointed who knew me and trusted me (which by then the PM saw as threatening rather than advantage). I said that we should recruit for high ability instead. My relations with Martin worsened as I increasingly thought that he was trying to influence the PM against making changes, against facing system failures, against replacing people not up to the job.

138. In order to strengthen No10 I got the PM to agree to bring in a Permanent Secretary to run No10. This happened in the brief window after the PM nearly died when he supported vigorous action such as a Vaccine Taskforce (see below). For various reasons Simon Case was chosen. He then quickly became Cabinet Secretary. Contrary to media reports that I brought him in to be Cabinet Secretary because I thought he would be 'easily controlled' by me, neither Case nor I initially intended him to be Cabinet Secretary. He did not want the job, suggested I sound out others which I did, and resisted taking the job. Unfortunately a) people who the PM might accept (i.e system 'insiders') I spoke to would not take the job because they thought (rightly) I would soon be gone and they'd be left to deal with the PM, and b) the PM would not contemplate bringing in someone from outside Whitehall as he feared the Westminster backlash. He then suddenly started floating extremely unsuitable names and I felt I had to rush through Case's appointment, against my and Case's better judgement, to avoid a disastrous appointment.
139. The PM's botched and unfair replacement of Mark Sedwill in summer was another disaster that sowed considerable distrust and further worsened relations between him and I and created unnecessary bad blood. On the morning of the day the 'BYOB' invitation went out from the PPS, we had a big row about it. I thought he'd treated Mark unfairly. And every time he had a 1-1 meeting on such a tricky personnel issue it was always a botch. By insisting on handling it alone he spread chaos. We had the normal problem: he and the other person had very different accounts of what had been agreed. The chaos of all this in the summer undermined our attempts to build a new system to get ready for Wave 2 which by July the PM had convinced himself would not happen and he said many times in July-August that covid was 'over'.
140. There were many media reports suggesting relations between me and private office officials were terrible. This was false. Our working relationship was mainly very good and I remain on good terms with many of them.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

PREPARATIONS AND SPEED

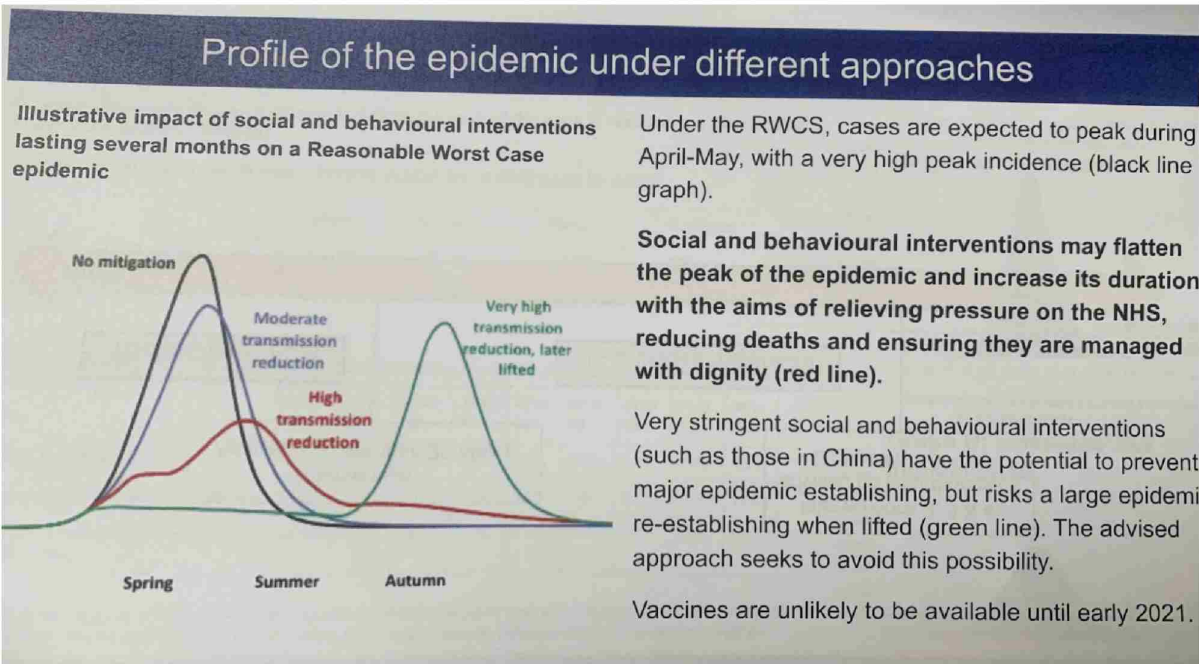
141. Places like Taiwan and Singapore had a deeply thought through plan and monitoring capabilities. Taiwan began executing their plan around New Year 2019/20. This included closing flights.
142. We had no such plan for fast action nor such monitoring capabilities. Although we were told that we were 'the best prepared in the world' monitoring and testing at airports was terrible. This meant that we had a totally false sense of the urgency. We now know it was spreading fast in January, perhaps it even arrived in 2019. Even in February/March our monitoring of airports was hopeless.

143. Even if other aspects of preparations had been as bad as they were, if we had had a serious plan for testing and monitoring and quarantine at airports and ports etc, then we would have realised the scale of the problem earlier and it would have gained us crucial time. For example, crucial people would not have gone on holiday in February.
144. Around 25 January there were meetings of SAGE and COBR. They did not hit the alarm button. During January I was meeting with Vallance regularly on non-covid matters and we often discussed covid at these discussions. He was clearly engaged and taking it seriously. I believe we had at least one covid discussion around 23-25 January and I said that if he had problems with Whitehall bureaucracy to come to me and I would try to fix them. He often did.
145. On 23 January I texted Hancock: 'To what extent have you investigated preparations for something terrible like Ebola or a flu pandemic? Please ensure we take a risk averse approach to funding preparations in the SR. I'm going to dig into this plus bioterror'. (I also made plans to go to Porton Down that day and was engaged in other connected issues including bioterrorism.) [INQ000048313/5]
146. He replied: 'Yes. We have full plans up to & including pandemic levels regularly prepped and refreshed. The CMO is an epidemiologist by background. We are stress testing again now. It is in our top tier risk register - and we had an SR bid even before this'. [INQ000048313/5]
147. It became obvious that a) we did not have 'full plans' (e.g no plan at all for shielding and hostility to creating one even on 19/3, see below); b) they were not seriously 'regularly prepped and refreshed'; c) there had not been, and was not over the next four weeks, serious 'stress testing' of these plans. In fact on 16/3 No10 was told by the Cabinet Office that departmental plans were 'not held centrally'.
148. On 28 April 2020, after the first peak, Hancock was asked about Exercise Cygnus (2016) to explore detailed pandemic planning. He said. 'I asked my officials to go back when this first came up in the press a few weeks ago and check that everything that was recommended was done and that's the assurance that I got.' He should have been studying Cygnus in January as he'd assured No10, not when it appeared in the press months later.
149. After the reshuffle on 12 February the PM went on holiday for a fortnight and was little involved in government. (Some other senior officials and ministers also went on holiday in February. I did not. I think in retrospect this was clearly a mistake and it should be automatic that senior people do not go on holiday if there is a significant chance of a major disaster.) He was extremely distracted.
- He had a divorce to finalise and was grappling with financial problems from that plus his girlfriend's spending plans for the No10 flat (which he raised repeatedly from early January).
 - An ex-girlfriend was making accusations about him in the media.
 - His current girlfriend wanted to finalise the announcement of their engagement.
 - He said he wanted to work on his Shakespeare book.
 - The unstable situation with the Home Secretary and her Permanent Secretary blew up in February (he returned to London briefly at one point to deal with this and this problem distracted key people at a crucial period).

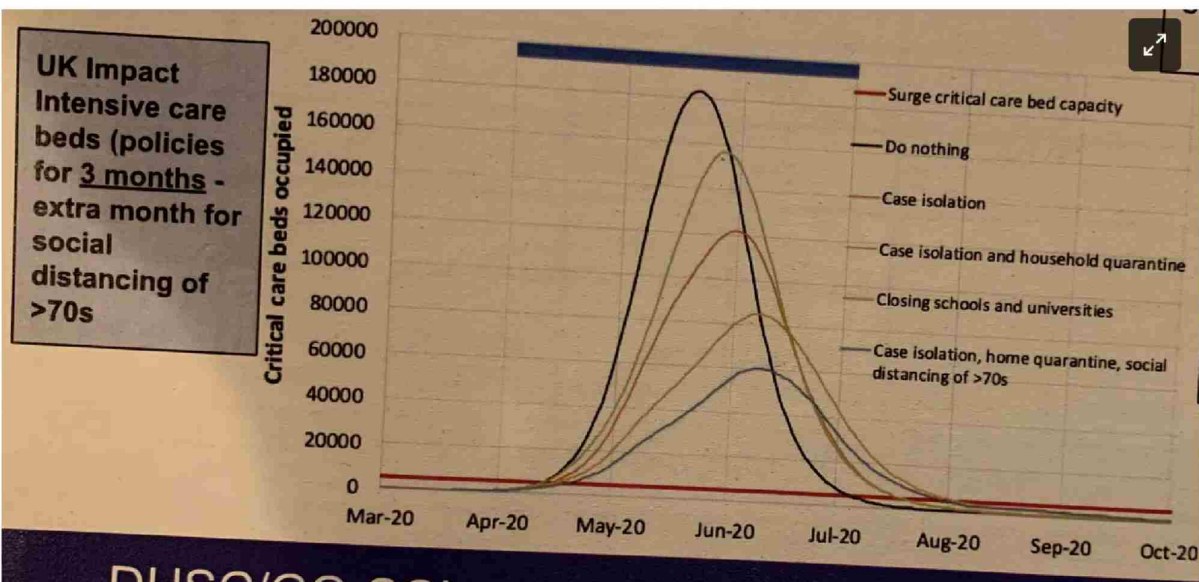
148. Even in the first week of March, crucial people were talking about the first wave, with supportive graphs, as if it would peak in June when it was actually peaking in April. This discrepancy was partly responsible for the lack of urgency in January continuing.
149. The failure to plan and prepare was partly a failure of senior politicians over many years. It was also a failure of much of the senior civil service to invest in capabilities for such thinking and planning. [An IFG event on 24 September 2015 with then Cabinet Secretary Jeremy Heywood](#) makes clear his attitude: the British government could not be expected to match the resources of organisations like 'Warwick University' for thinking about the future. [INQ000273751] I think this was an extraordinarily bad attitude and the public would find it extraordinary to be told that the massive taxes they pay gets them a civil service that regards itself as unable to fund thinking about possible future disasters as generously as 'Warwick University'. Clearly this attitude extended beyond Heywood. And Heywood received no criticism for such a comment, nor for his claim that Whitehall had 'nothing to learn' from the private sector on project management and digital. This explains a lot.
150. **The planning system for crises like pandemics was terrible.** We did not absorb lessons from near misses and East Asian responses (e.g Singapore) over the previous 20 years. We did not have a serious plan for:
- a serious **early warning system** for monitoring, testing at airports etc
 - **controlling borders**, closing flights from China to buy time ('racist' according to public health experts Q1 2020)
 - protecting **care homes**
 - **shielding** the most vulnerable
 - an **emergency procurement** system for things like PPE, with *concurrency* as a basic principle: i.e simultaneous building of research, manufacturing, distribution, logistic etc
 - an emergency funding system for vital **R&D**, e.g treatments, clinical trials
 - fast **quarantine** and appropriate enforcement and support (e.g food)
 - rapidly expanding **testing** and scaling rapid tests (no real plan until July-August) instead of shutting testing down
 - preserving a **safe bubble around key people/institutions** including No10 and the PM (we could easily have had the Cabinet Secretary and other crucial people as well as the PM seriously hospitalised or dead)
 - an **open adaptive system for integrating scientific advice** instead of the closed SAGE system (then the errors would have been exposed and fixed faster)
 - a **'situation centre' / crisis room** with edge-of-the-art systems for gathering and integrating many large data sets to improve decisions and management.
151. Much of the reason for the lack of these plans and preparations was that the pandemic plan was based on the assumption that *there was no practical alternative to managing herd immunity over a single peak* therefore work on such things would be a waste of time and money. But it also reflected that the core of government does not have a general edge-of-the-art approach to handling major emergencies including thinking about the lessons from history on how to design the physical space in which major decisions are taken.

PLAN A: SINGLE WAVE, HERD IMMUNITY BY SEPTEMBER

1. *COBR graph from March 2020* [INQ000267909]



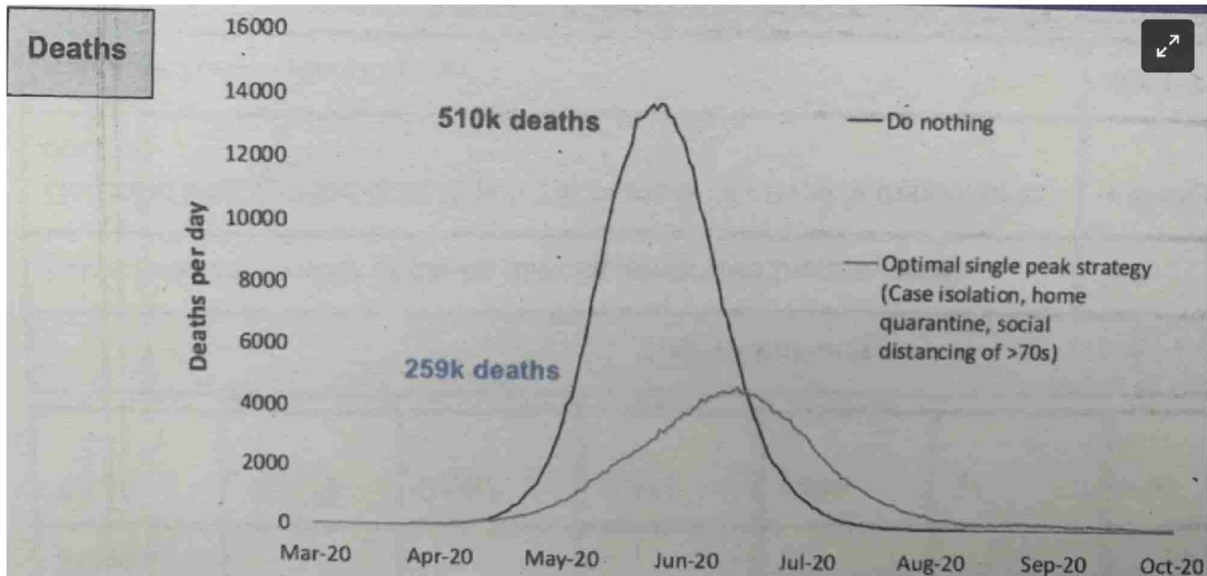
2. This graph appeared in many briefings over weeks including after the weekend of 14-15 March. It sums up the approach from DHSC and what we were told in No10 was the view of SAGE.
3. COBR graph from March 2020 [INQ000267938]



4. N.B the red line is NHS ICU capacity, it appears to be lying almost on the x-axis because at ~5,000 it seems very near 0 when the y-axis stretches to 200,000. It shows the official Plan A as of 12-15 March involving at most the three actions which a) supposedly push the peak out into June (this thinking contributed to the lack of urgency before 16/3) but b) still totally overwhelms ICU capacity. Note there is no line for a lockdown scenario because, contra Hancock's claims to MPs, DHSC had not developed a plan for it nor asked SAGE to model it

(as the Cabinet Secretary's reply to the email of 18 March below pointed out). SAGE was asked to model 'lockdown' after discussions between Ben Warner and Vallance 13-14 March. [INQ000129057]

5. COBR graph from March 2020 [INQ000267904]



6. This graph from the same COBR pack shows the effect of Plan A's three interventions: ~250,000 dead after the 'optimal single peak strategy', peaking late June, with herd immunity by September. N.B this projection, awful as it was, was obviously too optimistic in its own terms because it did not take into account that in this scenario *there would be no NHS for any other patients for months until it was rebuilt*. Versions of this graph were in many official documents in the week of 9/3 and 16/3. As we pointed out to the PM in the meeting on 14 March in his office, in this scenario many more than 250,000 would die. (We discovered in April that we did not have plans to deal with the number of dead we were facing after switching to lockdown — never mind what would have happened if it had been x5-x10 worse.)
7. Given the volume of such charts and what everybody who was there know was discussed, it is astonishing that Jenny Harries could have told the BBC in 2021: 'I can categorically say I have never been in any government meeting where herd immunity was put forward at that point of the pandemic [i.e 3/20] as a mechanism of control.'
8. No10 was told that our plan was 'the best in the world'.
9. The CONTAIN, DELY, MITIGATE 'plan', given to No10 on 2 March, was not an actual plan and did not have a meaningful CONTAIN phase. By 2/3 CONTAIN had already failed. And there was no actual plan to CONTAIN in the sense of stop it at the border and stop it spreading or contain once there was community transmission here. In fact this was seen as impossible and was not attempted.
10. Plan A rested on these crucial assumptions:

- Vaccines may never come, if they do it will definitely not be in 2020 and it may be many years.
- Suppression, as we could see being tried in east Asia, won't work and anyway if we wanted to try it, or anything approximating it, 'behavioural science experts' think the public wouldn't accept it.
- Even if we tried it and the public accepted it, we won't have vaccines, we'd then have to relax and it will just come back so there will be an inevitable second peak in the winter which will be even worse than a single peak because it will coincide with the annual NHS winter crisis. Cf. Wormald email of 18/3. [INQ000129059] (There was also discussion with the PM of historical analogies from 1918 and how second peaks in some places were worse than the first.)
- Steps such as stopping mass gatherings or draconian flight bans would not work. E.g see CRIP5 on 5/2: SAGE advises that 'restricting public gatherings would be ineffective in delaying spread', draconian flight bans could delay the peak by a month, but don't recommend doing so [INQ000056148].
- Herd immunity entirely via infection will happen, it's just a question of how quickly – it will either be by roughly September after one big peak or in Q1 2021 after a second big peak.

162. This is why some of SAGE spoke in the media about herd immunity in the week of 9 March and why Vallance, Whitty, Hancock and others briefed the media that week that the plan was single big peak / herd immunity then manage it as a seasonal disease. This is why the PM-CSA-CMO-Hancock WhatasApp group discusses herd immunity and why the PM asks how we could 'win the argument' over it.

163. While some of the media presented No10 as 'wanting' or 'aiming for' herd immunity, this is not how it was thought about (at least by me, Ben Warner, Imran and the PM): it was seen by DHSC et al as an inevitability and our only choice was *how fast it happened*. (Cf. para 51 above for how confusion over aims/strategy/motives has confused the discussion over herd immunity.)

164. Over the weekend of 14-15 March we started shifting to Plan B. This was essentially:

- Suppress to buy time and stop the NHS being overwhelmed with all that implied, people locking themselves down in fear, economic disaster happening anyway.
- Throw all state capacity at vaccines, treatments, testing, NHS capacity.
- Use the summer to build capacity and minimise future waves.

165. In spring 2021 the PM and Hancock started denying that Plan A was herd immunity via infection. I have no idea why they did this and nobody around No10 then has been able to explain it to me – everyone is baffled.

Why did I decide to persuade the PM to ditch Plan A and do Plan B?

166. Around the second week of February as the PM and other senior people went on holiday, I spent more time talking to people about covid. I talked to Vallance and Whitty. I sent Ben Warner to COBR and SAGE meetings. I saw SPI-B scientists (I think but am not sure including James Rubin) in the Cabinet Room to discuss how I could help them get more data and do more polling (cf. email 10/2).

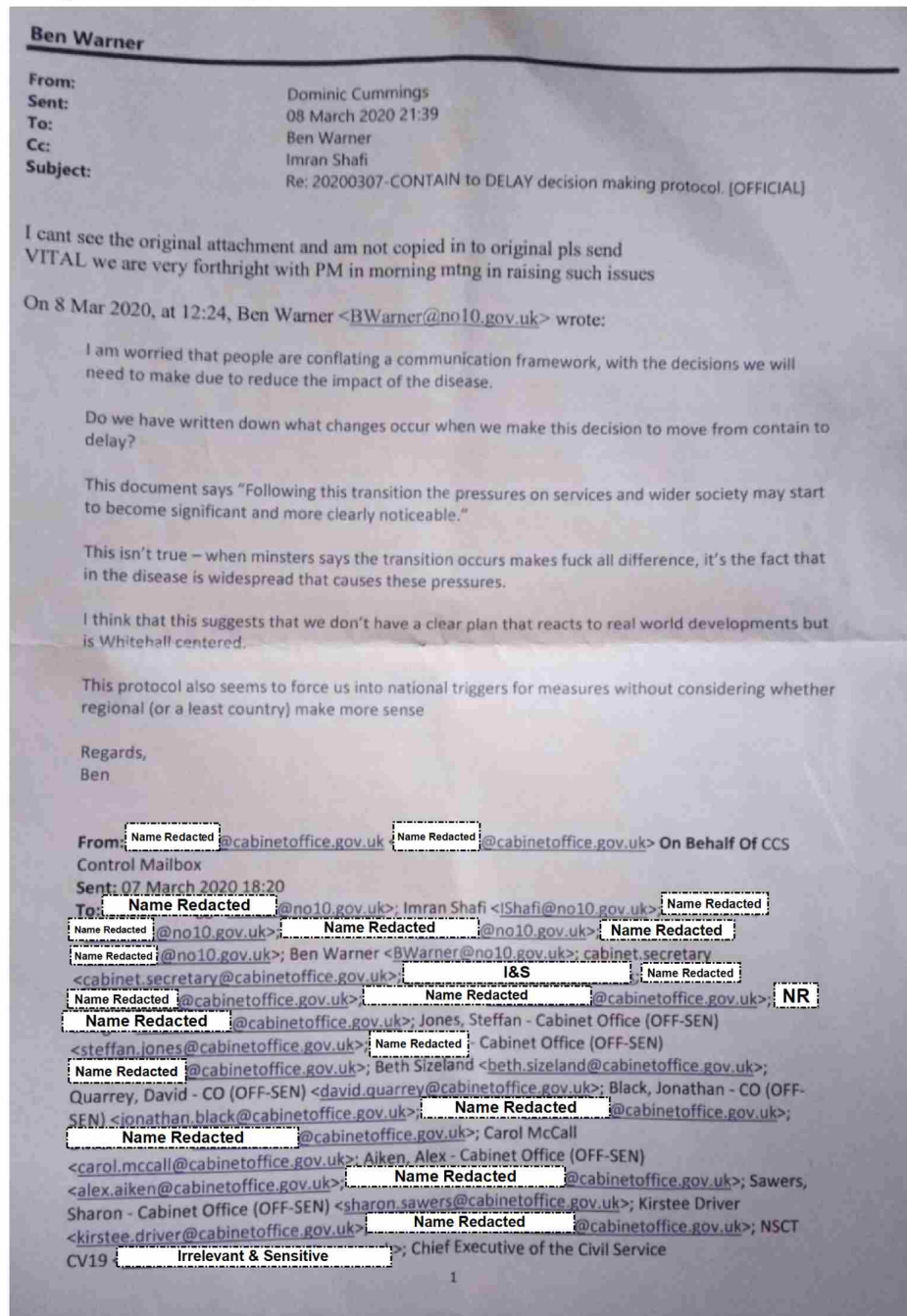
167. From mid-February there were slides being shared in No10 of projections for hundreds of thousands of deaths.
168. Ben Warner told me that at COBR/SAGE meetings he was attending in the second half of February, it was assumed that we could not do anything like the Taiwan strategy. And he increasingly reported worries about the emerging gap between the 'best prepared country in the world' internal story and the reality. For example, on 27/2 Ben emailed Vallance:
- 'In the SAGE meeting today, I was a little concerned the NHS didn't seem to know what they needed for their models and **didn't seem to have started modelling**. Did you have the same feeling?' [bold added]
169. Vallance replied:
- 'Yes I have been pushing them on this for the last 10 days or so... [T]he problem is they haven't defined the input variables well enough and we haven't validated them. I think this is on track following today.' [INQ000195863]
170. In roughly a week from 25 February, several people told me they thought the government approach was wrong and/or too slow and sent me things to read. E.g:
- Professor Steve Hsu (physicist) emailed saying America was being 'stupid' and UK should take aggressive action.
 - I read [Seeing the Smoke](https://putanumonit.com/2020/02/27/seeing-the-smoke/) (27/2). [https://putanumonit.com/2020/02/27/seeing-the-smoke/]
 - I read Scott Alexander's blog (2/3).
 - I followed George Church (world leading biologist) and similar people on Twitter.
171. In the second half of February the media was full of pieces attacking 'tech bros' for taking covid seriously and attacking the idea of travel bans as 'racist'. I was more inclined to take the 'tech bros' and some scientists dissenting from the public health consensus more seriously.
172. On 25/2 I texted Numberten Action (created by the PM 29/7/19) that it seemed 'containment has failed', we had to brief the PM, dig into plans for testing etc. It seems obvious now that containment had failed by then but see Lister's comment at 2239: 'CMO is still hopeful that it is containable but!... I genuinely don't think it has changed dramatically since last week'. [INQ000236371/45-46] On 27/2 he said that 'the real coronavirus threat' was the economic damage caused by fear [INQ000236371/47]. I was confused by EL's comment the CMO was still hopeful it was 'containable' given Vallance had told me on 6/2 he thought containment in China had failed and it would probably spread globally. But PHE the same day said that 'there is currently no transmission in the community' (false).
173. By 28/2 I was in meetings with government communication teams because it was clear that DHSC and PHE could not cope (cf. my texts 28/2 to No10 group) [INQ000236371/47]. (That night while I was in Westminster my wife, home alone with our then three year old, had to call 999 because of a group outside our house screaming they were going to 'burn it down'. Cf. below).
174. On 1 March I texted the DHSC group that we would need to have good answers to why we were responding differently to Singapore. I did not and do not think this was ever properly

faced: Singapore had been through pandemic scares, was highly competent and had built many capabilities to deal with a pandemic. There seemed much Whitehall reluctance to learn from Singapore even though it was clearly better prepared than us and all its documents were in English. (I specifically exclude Vallance from this criticism, I always found him open to learning from abroad.)

175. 2/3 The CONTAIN DELAY MITIGATE 'plan' arrived in No10. Ben Warner sent me an email to the effect: the 'plan' is a communication framework, not an actual plan, and we still didn't know what all the detailed measures were that should be implemented. See 8/3. [INQ000195879]
176. On 2 March, CMO and CSA said the RWCS was roughly 20% likely. Just 11 days later it was seen as the most likely scenario. NB. The RWCS concept had a significant flaw. It was treated as 'the worst thing that might happen' but there was no probability attached to it. I had to keep asking in meetings 'how likely is this?' to get an update. This inevitably meant that CMO/CSA were making snap judgements. I do not blame them for this. There should have been a formal system from the start to track official predictions with specific percentage probabilities and confidence levels attached and track how they changed (as Tetlock has advised). Further over 9-13 March, I realised, mainly from talking to Ben and Marc, that the RWCS, bad as it was, did not account for the NHS having no capacity therefore its estimate of deaths did not include all those who would die because there was no emergency treatment even though with such help they would certainly live. (Cf. email from Ben Warner to Neil Ferguson, 14:55 13/3, about the models not reflecting this nonlinear jump in deaths as a result of capacity being swamped.) [INQ000196055]
177. On 2/3 after a meeting with the PM I texted Lee Cain: 'He doesn't think it's a big deal, and he doesn't think anything can be done and his focus is elsewhere, he thinks it'll be like swine flu and he thinks his main danger is talking economy into a slump.' [INQ000048313/68] Around this time he kept saying that the biggest danger was government action harming the economy. He often referred to 1918 and how 'nobody really knew what was happening then, it was much better, there wasn't any pressure to act, it just rolled through the population, people died and life went on.' Lee and I agreed that 'business as usual' was a big mistake and tried to persuade him to stop saying it.
178. On 3/3 I asked why, if we were stressing 'wash hands', we were not saying 'stop shaking hands'. People talked about 'lack of evidence'. This seemed weird to me. On 8/3 I texted the DHSC group that we should say 'no handshaking'. [INQ000102697/12] I told the PM to stop shaking hands. He was angry and said he would not stop shaking hands. It prompted him to veer towards Mayor of Jaws mode. He went on TV and made a point of shaking hands. This is an example of why it was so hard to push him over the next few weeks, I had to worry constantly that pushing a bit too much might make him trolley back to a worse position than he was in and it was impossible to predict when this might happen.
179. Around 1/3 I asked Marc Warner to talk to various officials about how he could help with data. He had already been working with the NHS (because of a project started in 2019). On 7/3 Marc Warner texted me that he'd spoken to Vallance and that his 'spidey sense was tingling' about the plan to NOT suppress. He spoke to others. Later we spoke and he said something like, 'I'm really, really worried about this. It seems to me that this plan could easily be incredibly destructive. Has this really been tested? Have you really thought it all through?

Should I and some others start thinking about a plan B?' I told him I was also deeply worried about official plans and asked him to probe and think about an alternative.

180. On 8/3 Ben Warner emailed me. He was worried that people were confusing communication plans / announcements and reality and local action (per East Asia) was ignored. [INQ000195879]



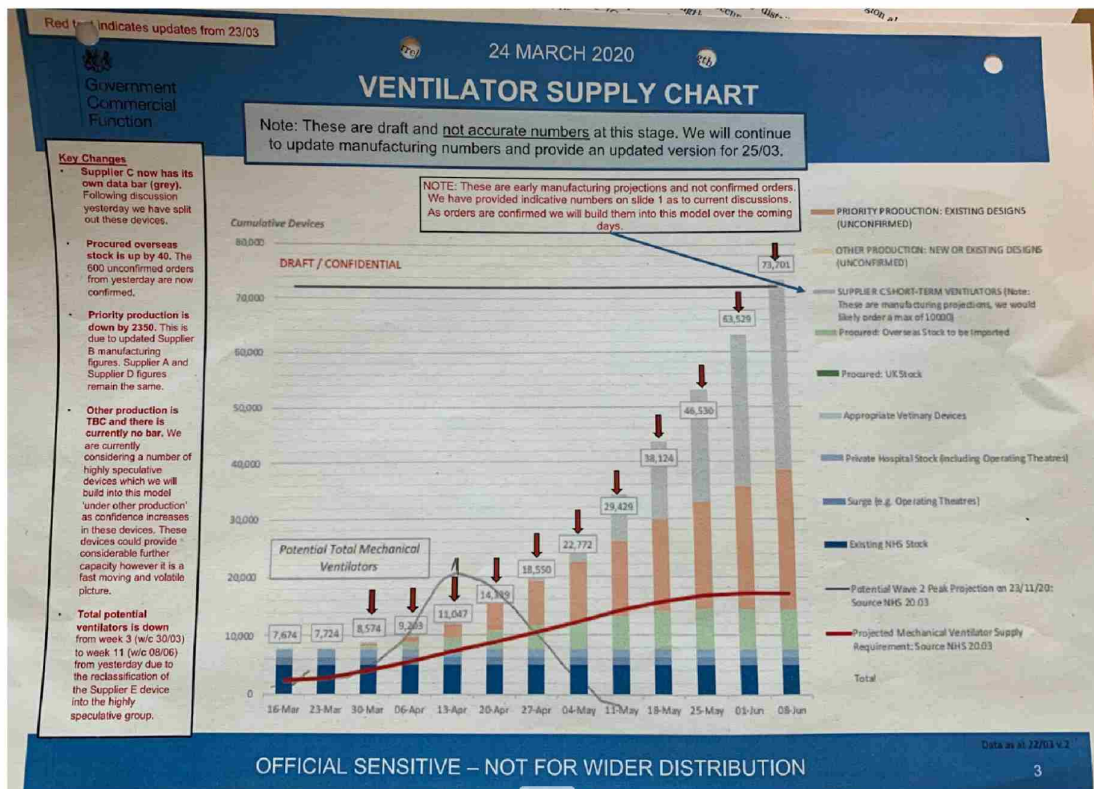
181. By the week of 9/3 it became clear that:

- The CSA/CMO/SAGE believed there was no practical alternative to herd immunity by September. Vallance said publicly on 9/3 that suppressing would just cause another peak in

winter when the NHS would be more vulnerable, which was what No10 was told was the general view in SAGE.

- The whole system was basing some of its thinking on an idea that behavioural science experts were sure that the public would not accept lockdown. This was true even after pictures from Italy of overwhelmed hospitals were playing on rolling news. At one point around 9 March in the PM's office I pointed out the door at the pictures on TV of an Italian hospital and said 'everyone can see these, I'm getting texts from friends and family asking why we aren't acting, many are going to stay at home whether we tell them to or not, I don't believe this so-called behavioural science'. But at this time the assumption remained that 'lockdown' was impossible and anyway counterproductive. (E.g look at Whitty emails to David Hunter 11/3 you will see him describe his 'main concern' as the sustainability of measures 'if we go too early' [INQ000048039] — i.e his main concern was about psychology and I had grave doubts about SAGE/SPI-B thinking on this.)
- 9/3 K Hammond sent a note to the PM saying it was 'not yet fully certain' that covid would become a global epidemic. [INQ000049583]
- On 10/3 Neil Ferguson emailed Ben saying: deaths looked like peaking at 4-6 thousand per day; lockdown 'could be worse than the disease' and might be unsustainable; the 'worst outcome' would be to a) continue with Plan A then b) u-turn in the middle of a crisis; so if the current plan and death toll are unacceptable then act in 'a few weeks'. [INQ000149008] (This email suggests that on 10/3 NF also was still being misled by wrong graphs.)
- On 11/3 Jenny Harries said: masks are a bad idea for the public; if we act too fast it will 'just pop up with another peak later on'. [INQ000273802/9] Many were telling us the same: 'any measures must be carefully timed' (cf. Wormald on 12/3 about 'fatigue' which we were told came from SPI-B, which some on SPI-B later denied). But people whose judgement I trusted, such as Gowers and the Warners, were telling me: 'this is wrong, if you accept you will have to do XYZ and are prepared to accept a second peak, then the sooner you do them then the fewer people suffer from covid and the less strain on the NHS and the less time you'll have to keep measures in place'. David Halpern explained publicly the thinking of what No10 thought SAGE generally thought re herd immunity (he got some flak for this but he was simply reflecting the consensus across Whitehall).
- It became clear from meetings with different groups in No10 that a) the Cabinet Office / COBR / CCS was using graphs that had a long growth period peaking in June but b) Simon Stevens showed us NHS graphs with a peak in mid-April totally swamping the NHS many times over (I showed these graphs to MPs May 2021). The latter (NHS) graphs were clearly right but much of the system hadn't grasped this. I became aware that key people had not seen the NHS figures — i.e there was something broken in the system between the NHS view and the DHSC/COBR/CCU view. (I believe that Whitty had been given duff information on this by DHSC as I remember Marc Warner telling Whitty that the NHS data contradicted what Whitty had said in the Cabinet Room). This confusion was inherently extremely alarming. It also suggested that many things would be worse if the system was planning on the basis of a June peak. These false graphs kept showing up on Cabinet Office / COBR documents even in the week of 23/3. Cf. my texts to the PM (after the meeting on 14/3) about him being given confusing graphs on timing. [INQ000048313/7]

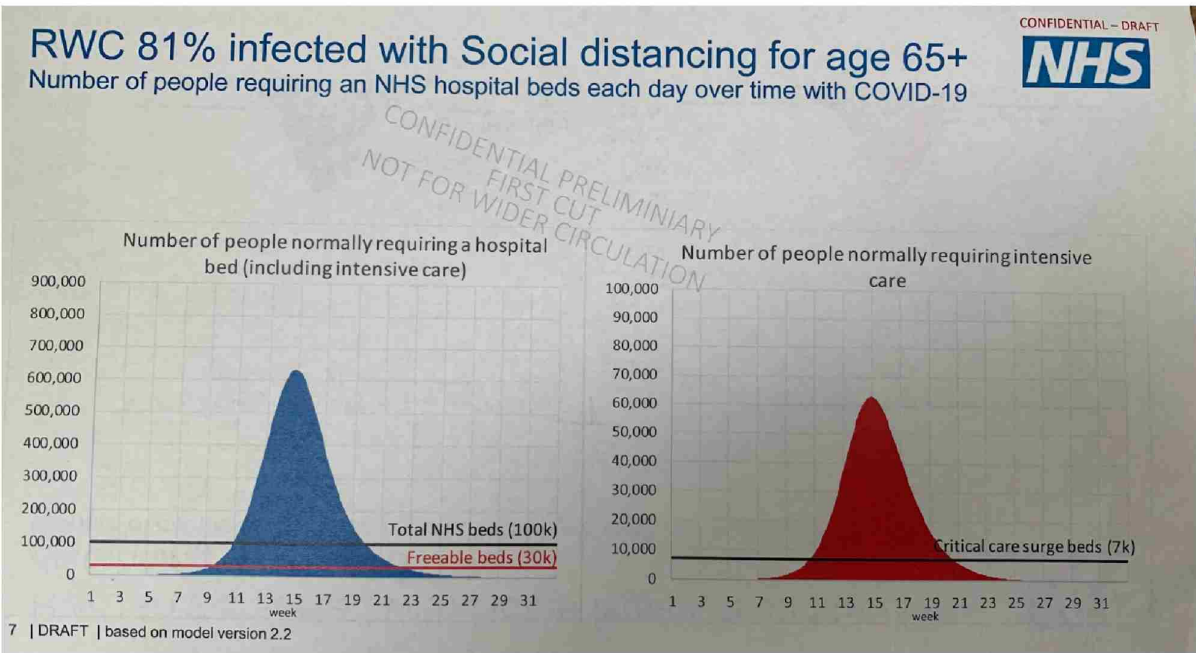
182. E.g This photo [INQ000048313/66] shows a hard copy of the actual graph shown to the PM on 24/3. You can see a pencil line drawn in by Ben Warner (who leaned over and drew it as the PM looked at the graph and was confused by other graphs being used then) showing *what the curve would actually look like given we'd ditched Plan A* (peak around 15-20 April, as happened), while the COBR graph was still obviously assuming we were on Plan A and a peak in summer.



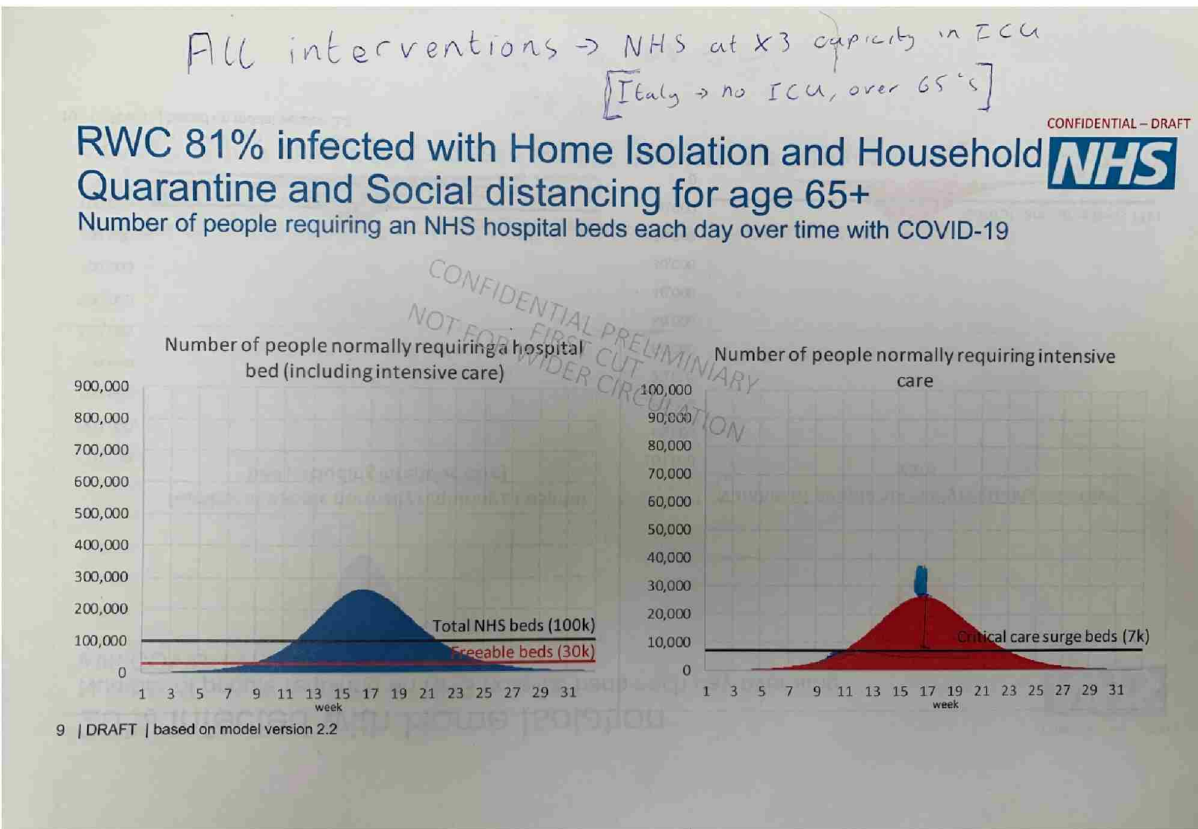
- This combined with a torrent of information heard in No10. E.g 'we haven't ordered enough body bags, officials are calling ice rinks to see if we can store bodies there'. Such reports strengthened my view that Plan A was a disaster. Similarly, there was pressure from some officials and the Secretary of State Buckland to release large numbers of dangerous criminals so they didn't get covid in jail. I strongly opposed this as did officials in the Private Office. The PM agreed with us (one of his good decisions). We were vindicated. But such incidents showed the wider system was all over the place.
- It became clear that if we proceeded with Plan A, then not only would there be thousands of deaths but NHS projections were clear that there would effectively be no NHS at all for anything for a period. And all the extra deaths and suffering this would mean were not (we discovered when we asked) taken into account.
- Further it became obvious that the public was ahead of the politicians and starting to stay at home and withdraw children from school before we told them to. And, I thought, once the public realised the NHS was going to be effectively gone for over a month millions (especially those with children) would essentially do a voluntary lockdown themselves. I also thought that many of those in Whitehall saying 'our priority should be the economy' did not appreciate this dynamic — that if a government tried to optimise for minimal economic disruption while the NHS would clearly be totally swamped, they would not get what they wanted but would still get a big economic hit anyway but in an extremely chaotic scenario in which the public concluded the government had lost the plot. I could imagine a scenario in which the PM tried to optimise for 'no economic disruption' and got an *even bigger disruption* than a controlled 'lockdown' because millions realising the state of healthcare would lock themselves down.
- As we thought about it more in the first 10 days of March it seemed increasingly clear that there was a Plan B that should be tried: a) accelerate social distancing (as fast as the system and PM would accept), b) huge efforts into vaccines, treatments, testing etc; c) and develop a plan to manage more than one wave until some combination of vaccines-treatments-testing enabled us to overcome it.

- Through the week of 9 March more and more people said to me 'there is no proper plan, we're heading for disaster'.
- In despair at the COBR/CCS/DHSC process on 11/3 (1606) I asked Sweeney, K Hammond and Aiken to fix a regular 815 in the Cabinet room to prepare officials for the 915 with the PM. As I said in the email, that day (11th) involved a load of communications officials baffled at the lack of policy and not even knowing whom to call to get an answer

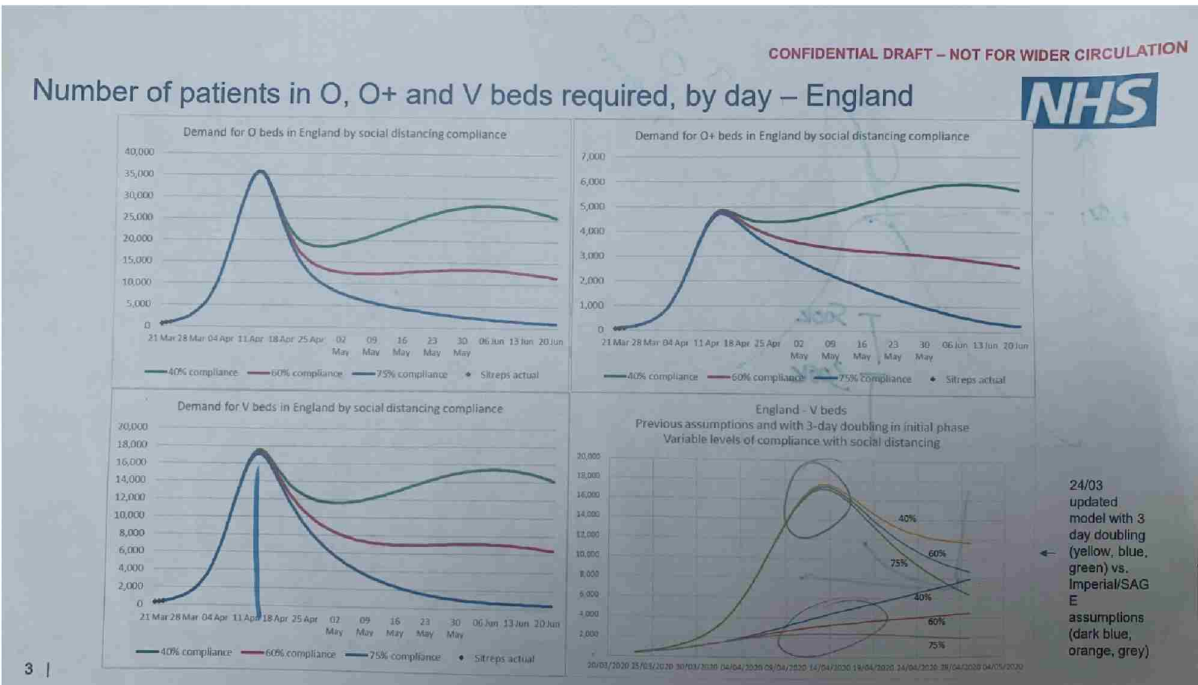
183. One of the NHS graphs we were given by Simon Stevens in week of 9/3 showing NHS totally overwhelmed for ~10 weeks and note that such graphs do not show the dynamic effects that such a scenario would actually generate: after ten weeks you would not find the service working normally again: [INQ000267928]



184. This one shows that all then-conceived options done together (i.e not lockdown/suppression) still would see NHS swamped for ~10 weeks (handwriting Ben Warner's). [INQ000267898]

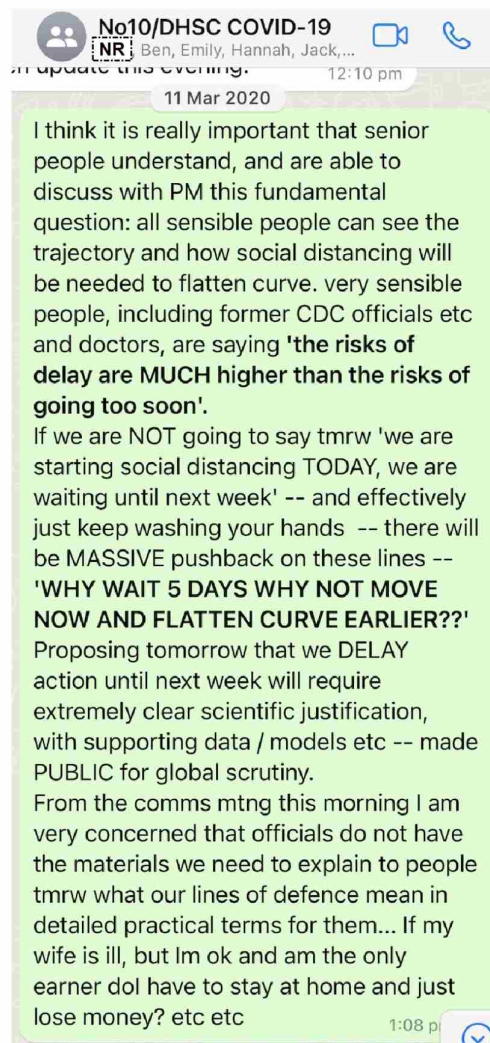


11. This NHS graph seems to be from 24/3: bottom right (I think requested by Nin and Marc Warner) shows the difference between these NHS graphs (correct) and many of the COBR graphs showing a peak in summer (compare with the one above) [INQ000267924]



Wednesday 11 March

12. By 11 March Plan A seemed guaranteed disaster with somewhere between 250,000-500,000 dead from covid then more from having no health service for many weeks. Plan B seemed like it was very unlikely to be worse than this and was likely to be substantially better. Further I increasingly thought that the PM would not stick to Plan A even if he wanted to and would come under immense pressure to switch.
13. On 11/3 I pushed with PM, CSA etc for bringing forward the quarantine announcement, 'stay at home if symptoms' etc. There were not good answers and I was very concerned parts of the system were trying to delay the announcement on 12/3. Cf. my text on 11/3 (to No10/DHSC): [INQ000048313/21] people everywhere are urging faster action, if you are NOT going to advise this you will need to justify it. Responses from Hancock and others were not convincing.



14. It became clear that Hancock and others were delaying announcements not because they should be delayed but because they had not done the necessary preparations, such as setting up NHS 111 hotlines. When the COBR meeting happened regarding announcing 14 day quarantine, I sat next to the PM so I could whisper in his ear (normally I sat at the opposite end). When Hancock and Sturgeon urged delay, I whispered in his ear 'they're saying this because they haven't got things ready, do not agree, insist we move or they'll

keep delaying'. He did. This sort of problem – delaying action with spurious arguments to mask a failure of preparation – was widespread by now. (Cf. my texts to PM 13/6)
[INQ000048313/17]

15. On 11/3 I said we should make SAGE models public. But too late for first wave. (Cabinet Office didn't want to because SAGE is a Cabinet committee.)

Thursday 12/3

16. At 0748 on Thursday 12 March I texted the PM:

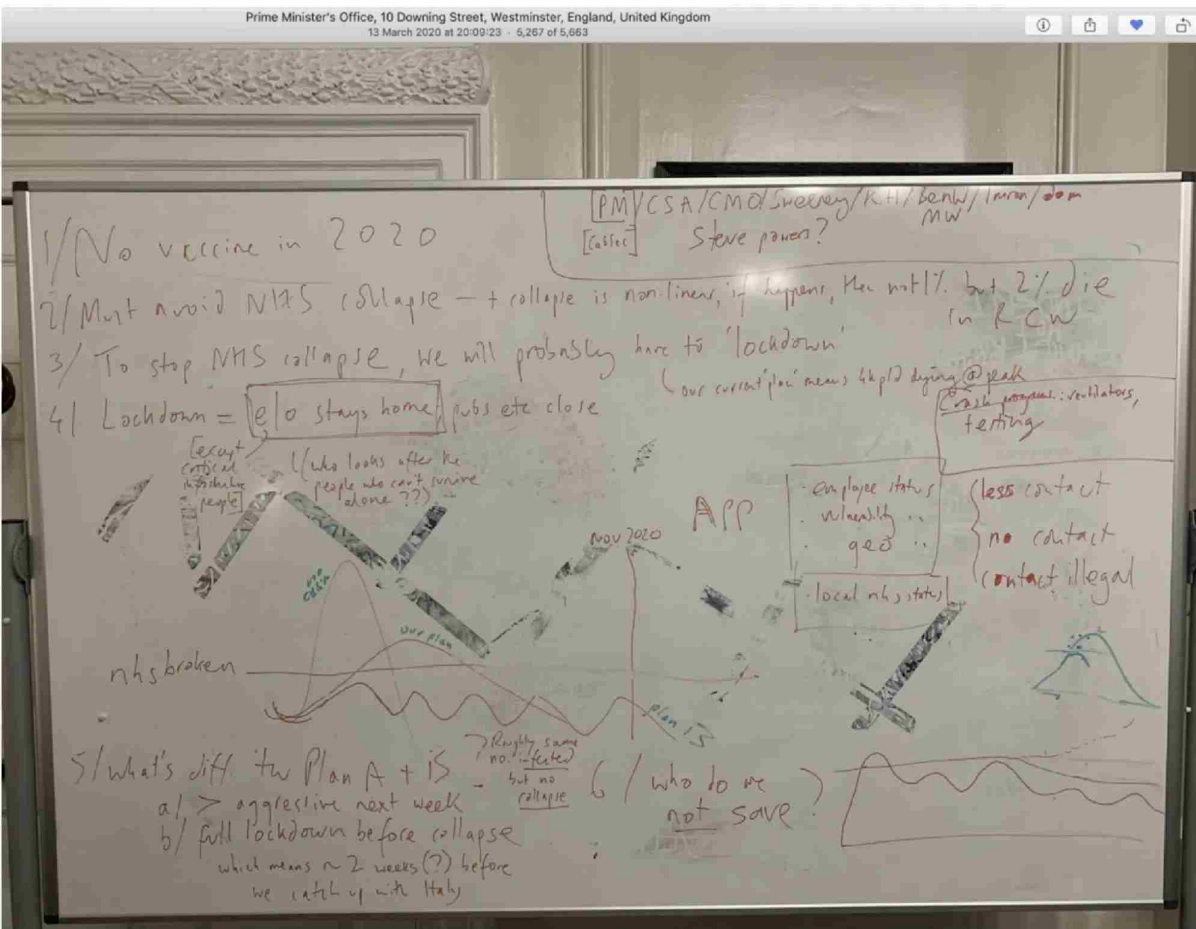
'We got big problems coming. [Cabinet Office] is terrifyingly shit, no plans, totally behind the pace... We must announce today - NOT next week - "if feel ill with cold/flu stay home". Some [officials] want delay because haven't done the work and don't work weekends. We must force the pace today. We are looking at 100-500 thousand deaths between optimistic/pessimistic scenarios... [INQ000048313/22] The overwhelming danger here is being late and the NHS implodes like zombie apocalypse film — not being a week early'.
[INQ000048313/23]

17. I thought many problems and the extreme urgency were not being conveyed to Sedwill (e.g. the conflict between the COBR and NHS graphs and timing), and his own officials were not telling him the truth – that they were trying to delay announcements because the work hadn't been done and the assumption was still a summer peak. I thought Hancock was doing the same to cover the lack of preparation. I sent this message because I thought that officials would argue that day 'this isn't the right time'. This is what happened. (For clarity, I did not think the Cabinet Secretary was lying, I thought that he was being misled by bad advice.)
18. At 08:24 Marc Warner, then rapidly building a team to help the NHS and Cabinet Office, texted me: 'This is a code red emergency, and it's clear the system's fucked it'.
19. I described the chaos of this day to MPs – the combination of covid crisis meetings being delayed because of the potential bombing mission in the Middle East combined with the PM being hugely distracted by his girlfriend going mad about a story in *The Times* about their dog. On top of the other problems the PM's girlfriend was calling officials trying to get them to send an IPSO against the *Times* on behalf of Dilyn the dog.
20. This was the day of the 'chicken pox parties' meeting in the PM's office. The Cabinet Secretary suggested that the PM explain to the country herd immunity by reference to 'chickenpox parties', i.e. our plan was for people to get the disease ASAP. This was not the first time I'd heard this analogy. I said to Mark that he should stop using it. He asked 'why?' Ben replied: 'because chickenpox isn't spreading exponentially and killing thousands of people.' The look on the faces of officials confirmed to me something had gone terribly wrong. On one hand, there was confusion that Ben and I were pushing *against* herd immunity – this was the official plan. But some of the younger officials looked horrified and it became clear they shared my view – something had gone terribly wrong in the advice to the Cabinet Secretary and this suggested many more things could have gone wrong. Even if one accepted Plan A, it was still the case that Plan A was to delay people getting covid, *not accelerate it* with 'chickenpox parties'. (This meeting must have happened by 12:17 because I texted Cain about 'chicken pox' at 12:17; possibly I sent it while in the meeting.)
[INQ000048313/69]

21. Cabinet Office and COBR documents from 12-13/3 said: still advise against stopping mass gatherings; possibly delay quarantine until next week; possibly delay household quarantine for 3 weeks, perhaps not until 10 April; still had graphs with the peak months away.
22. That night Hancock tested me at 23:29 saying that our message should be 'we are better prepared than other countries' and if we suppress like Wuhan 'when they lift the Draconian measures they will see cases rise again'. [INQ000048313/68] I did not believe the 'best prepared in the world' line given all my awful meetings and it was clear he still believed we could not try suppression.

Friday 13 March

23. Throughout the day I saw more and more evidence that Plan A was a disaster. Ben Warner spoke to Vallance and other scientists. Ben also stressed to me that Plan A was a disaster and officials kept talking about the communications plan as if it was an actual plan, and it didn't seem departments had actual plans.
24. Vallance said to me at one point on that day that something had gone 'fundamentally wrong with the policy process', which he repeated to me and the PM over coming days.
25. On the evening of Friday 13 March I briefly spoke to Lee Cain in the little G39 room in No10. He had come to me to express his extreme worries about the state of the plan, the Cabinet Office, the PM's handling and so on. Lee said that across many issues he could not tell the media what the policy was because officials could not give his team the answers. I said to him something like: Plan A is a disaster, DHSC and Hancock are a disaster, me and the Warners think we need to shift to Plan B, lots of others are screaming the same, I'm going to fix a small meeting with the PM tomorrow to go through it, I don't know how we're going to handle this nightmare, everywhere we probe we see disaster, we need to bring in reinforcements. (It's possible Ben Warner was part of this conversation, or came in for part of it, my memory is hazy partly as I spoke to Ben in the PM's office very shortly after.)
26. Shortly after this Ben Warner and I sketched out a Plan B and I scribbled this on the whiteboard in the PM's office with Ben and Imran as preparation for a meeting with critical people (top right). [INQ000048313/3] The three curves are: a) no significant mitigation (first high peak), b) 'our plan' (i.e Plan A 'flattening the curve') also exceeding the 'NHS broken' line, and c) a squiggly line representing 'Plan B' buying time to cope with multiple waves until vaccines, drugs, testing, an app, and other capacity were built. 'Our current plan means 4k [per day] dying at peak'. What's the difference between A and B? I scribbled: more aggressive action next week, full lockdown before NHS collapse, 'to avoid NHS collapse we will probably have to lockdown'. The timestamp shows I took this photo at 20:09.
27. Since I published this some have asked: what does 'who do we not save?' mean? I meant: on 13th it was already clear we'd made terrible errors and many would die, I was forcing people to consider: 'on whom are our errors going to fall worst, who is not going to be saved in this disaster, and if forced to choose because of NHS collapse how does the system do this (e.g prioritise mothers of small children)?' because only by facing such awful questions could we have a chance to change plan fast, e.g we turned shielding around on 19/3.



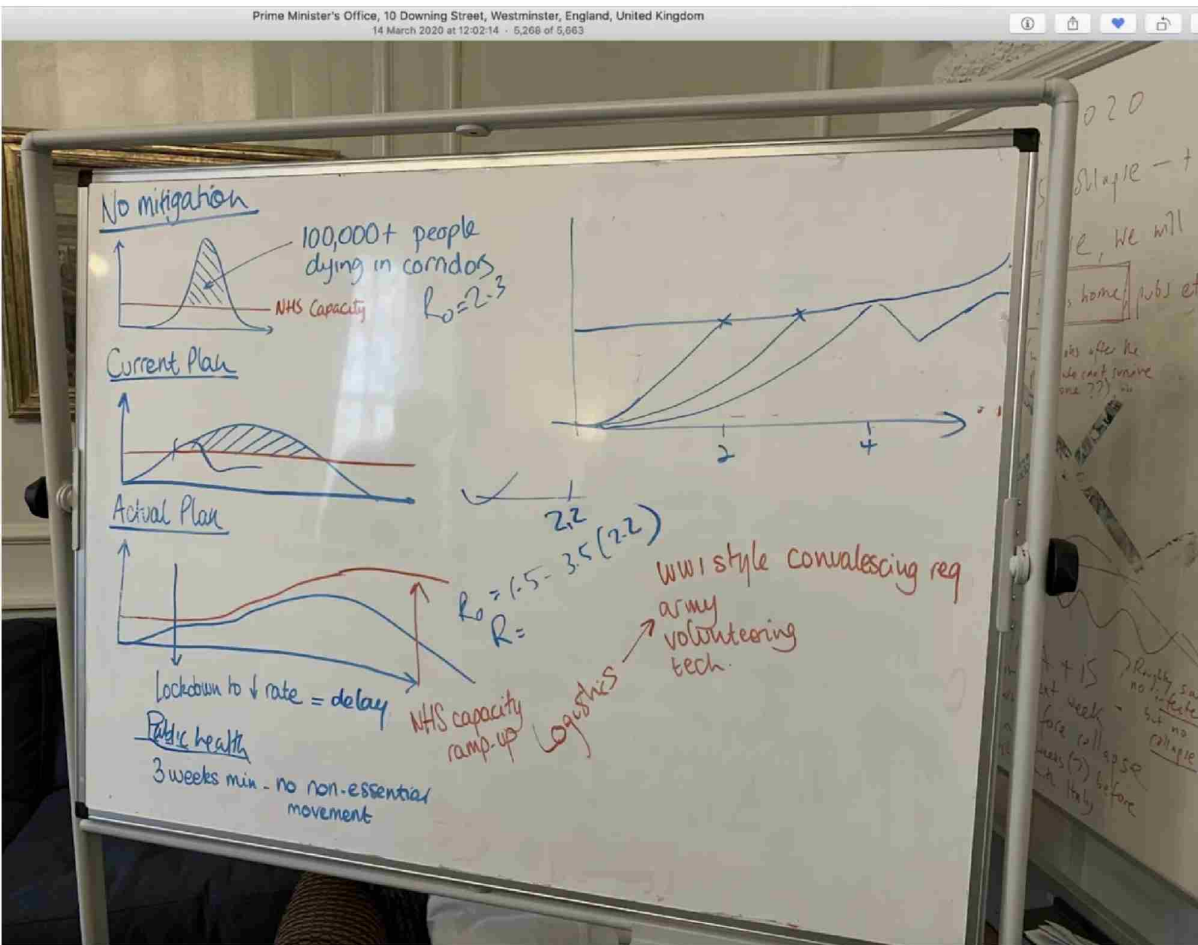
28. The Deputy Cabinet Secretary, Helen, walked in and said (per my memory May 2021): 'I have just been talking to the official Mark Sweeney, who is in charge of co-ordinating with the Department for Health. He said "I have been told for years that there is a whole plan for this. There is no plan. We are in huge trouble." I have come through here to the Prime Minister's office to tell you all that I think we are absolutely fucked. I think this country is heading for a disaster. I think we are going to kill thousands of people. As soon as I have been told this, I have come through to see you.'
29. I told her we'd just been saying the same and that the next day I intended to explain to the PM that Plan A was a disaster and we had to shift to Plan B. (Helen then unfortunately was not around from the next day as she / family were isolating.)
30. As we were discussing the whiteboard above, the PM texted me, Hancock, Vallance and Whitty asking: *how do we win the herd immunity argument?* (Cf. texts) [INQ000048399/1]
31. That evening I texted that group to the effect: many officials haven't absorbed the NHS graphs; we need to 'move through the gears as fast as possible to stop NHS collapse'; we may need to move to full lockdown to avoid Italy scenario; the briefing on herd immunity was a 'nightmare'. [INQ000048399/2]
32. I did not try to push for a total and immediate change on WhatsApp because I felt it could be counterproductive so I tried to accelerate everything while stressing the need to stop NHS collapse and consider lockdown. If I'd said 'shift to Plan B all in one go on Monday', I thought

the PM would refuse and default to Plan A. Plan B a few days later than ideal was better than sticking to Plan A.

33. There are many media stories that claim the decision to change course came from and depended upon looking at Professor Ferguson's latest data. This is not accurate. I can't remember exactly when I saw this (I think Ben gave it to me later on the 15th as he received it at 07:36 on 15/3) but we had already concluded Plan A was heading for disaster for many reasons. His data was influential in persuading others we had to change course over the next few days. But it is false to say that we were going with Plan A then saw Ferguson's new data and u-turned because of it. Many other things had convinced me and others before this. (Cf. 'models' section below.)
34. There were prominent media reports about a 12 March SAGE meeting at which I supposedly 'changed my mind'. There was no SAGE meeting on 12/3.

Saturday 14 March

35. In the morning there was a normal official meeting. Vallance said that we were 'further along the curve than we thought', maybe just 2-3 weeks behind Italy. We discussed accelerating but did not discuss the fundamentals and the assumptions of the previous weeks remained in place.
36. I'd fixed, per discussions the night before, for a small private meeting almost immediately after in the PM's study with the PM, me, the Warners, Cleo Watson, Lee Cain, Imran, [NR] [NR] (Stuart Glassboro also attended). Hancock was not invited but was hanging around outside the study and tried to walk in. I closed the door and said No. The PM was alarmed and asked why I'd kept Hancock out. I said we needed 'an honest discussion and that means no Hancock'. We had wheeled in this whiteboard (you can see the other one from the night before (above) behind it against the wall in the study). [INQ000048313/4] This whiteboard is not my handwriting, it was drawn by Marc Warner.
37. Here you again see a) Plan A 'current plan' breaking NHS capacity and herd immunity in a single peak. Below Plan B 'actual plan' has lockdown suppressing transmission buying time for increasing NHS capacity.



38. One of the participants took this photo during the meeting and sent it to me in 2021, you can see one of the NHS graphs (I mention above) on the table in front of the PM (sitting to the right of the person taking the photo and to Ben's left) as we explained confusion between the NHS graphs and the COBR graphs etc. [INQ000267940]



39. Ben Warner and I explained various problems. Marc Warner contributed but I can't now remember exactly what (possibly about what he'd found from talking to officials, the NHS (who he was helping with data infrastructure) and looking at the various data coming in).
40. We discussed with the PM then I spoke briefly to the PM alone. The basic picture we presented to him was:
 - We've been told we're the best prepared in the world, it's rubbish. Sweeney is saying 'there is no proper plan', Helen told us last night there's no proper plan and we're headed for disaster. We can see this everywhere we probe.
 - Hancock's all over the place, hasn't dug into things, is assuring us things are fine when they aren't, we can't trust his judgement.

- Officials say we don't have enough body bags by maybe a factor of ten, people are talking about using ice rinks to store thousands of bodies. Plan A is going to look like a 'zombie apocalypse movie' with unburied bodies and no emergency care for children.
- There is great confusion because much of the system is looking at COBR graphs showing the peak in June and people are acting like we are many weeks away from peak chaos but in fact we're right on the brink of it now and we're already too late in some ways. And the NHS graphs we've been given don't match the COBR graphs or the SAGE graphs. (NB. the NHS graphs we showed him were updated the next day to be *even worse*.)
- Even if we fully do the 3 interventions now envisaged as maximum action, the NHS will still clearly be overwhelmed for many weeks.
- Some officials and Hancock are trying to delay you (PM) announcing things to hide that they did not do what we assumed they've been doing since early January, remember the COBR meeting on Thursday when Hancock suggested delay.
- Nobody knows who is in charge of what, we have communication officials everywhere screaming at Lee's team because the system can't tell them what the policy is, and we're finding out about loads of gaps only because the press offices are sounding the alarm.
- The system is not absorbing that when people realise that Plan A means the NHS will be greatly overwhelmed and there will be nothing except covid treatment, they will lock themselves down especially if they have kids and there's evidence this has started (e.g schools were already reporting huge drops in attendance and some of us could see this in our own family experience). So Plan A means we'll get all the economic hit of suppression as well as all the deaths and a shattered NHS.
- Once people realise the scale of what we face and how soon it is coming, there will be deafening demands for us to ditch Plan A.
- We have a sketch of a Plan B: suppress, buy time, build NHS capacity, massive projects on tests, vaccines, treatments etc.
- All sorts of smart people are screaming at us that Plan A is a disaster and we should go for suppression to buy time. This isn't just our hunch.
- Plan B seems a good gamble: we definitely save tens/hundreds of thousands of lives now, including children's lives, we buy time to think about how we handle winter, in 6-9 months of war-like building we will be much better able to handle a second wave than we are now. We must try!

215. The PM listened carefully and asked reasonable questions. He is much better in very small meetings than big ones and his instincts had kicked in: as he said, he'd also been alarmed by the discussion of herd immunity and chickenpox parties, and he'd seen officials trying to nudge him towards delaying announcements. Reasonably, at the end he said that we were saying that the advice from DHSC, SAGE, the Cabinet Office et al to go for herd immunity by September was wrong, this was a massive call, the consequences of going for suppression were enormous, 'why aren't Hancock, Whitty, Vallance telling me this?'

216. I stressed to him that Hancock did not grasp what was happening, and within just a few weeks he'd be PM watching the NHS overwhelmed, as people realised what was happening they'd stay at home whatever the government said, and that he would inevitably end up announcing suppression – therefore the sooner we accelerate everything the better. I said that I thought Vallance was changing his mind from discussions over the previous couple of days and I was about to speak to him again (which I did) and we should get him into No10 the next day. I said something to the effect that trying to be Mayor of Jaws would get him lynched, which got his attention.

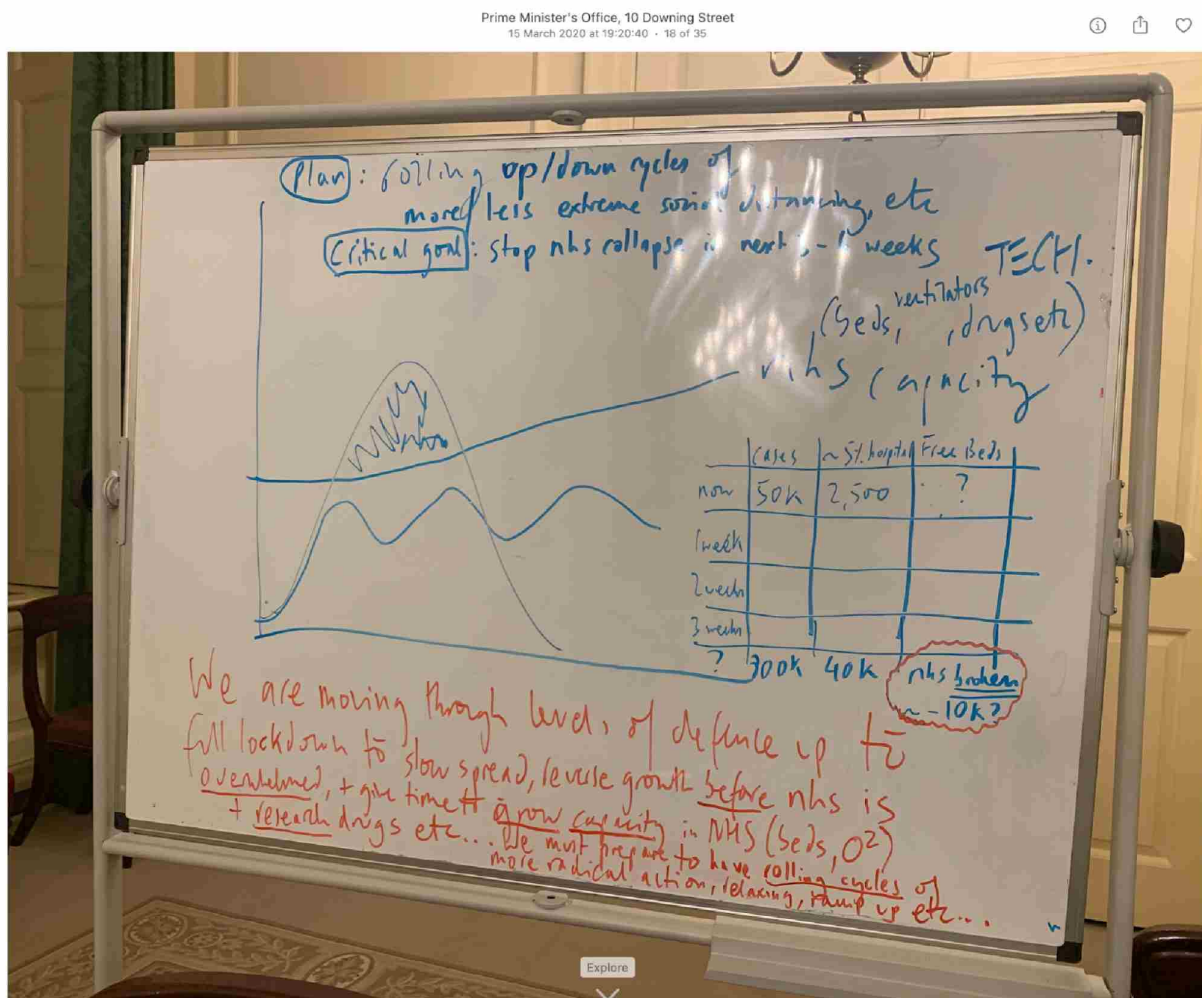
217. I had a difficult balancing act with the PM. if I'd told him 'ignore everyone, just go on TV tomorrow (15th) and declare immediate lockdown', he would not have done it. Many senior people would have said I had gone crazy. There had to be some discussion with senior people to bring them around to Plan B. While the objectively best move (given what had happened) would have been immediate lockdown on 15th, the best practically possible move was to accelerate all this over a few days.
218. My thinking was also affected by the psychological judgement that for all his talk of 'toughing it out', 'my hero the Mayor of Jaws', the PM would surely fold at the critical moment – and delaying then folding was unarguably worse than acting immediately as it guaranteed both more death/suffering and longer therefore worse economic harm.
219. After the meeting on 14/3 I spoke to Patrick Vallance (I refer to this in the text to the PM at 16:12 [INQ000048313/7] so it was roughly between 1400-1600). I summarised what we'd told the PM. We agreed that we needed to accelerate urgently and we agreed to urge jointly the next day a big acceleration, and, essentially, gambling that we could build capacity in coming months so the 'even worse second wave' scenario didn't happen. My discussion with him clearly showed that he had also updated his view significantly by now and we were pretty much in agreement on the fundamental issue.
220. The PM left No10 after our meeting for Chequers and texted that the Cabinet Office was clearly 'off the pace'. [INQ000048313/7]
221. I replied to the PM: 'The problem is [Cabinet Office] and DHSC haven't listened and absorbed what the models truly mean. And timing wise you have been told a bunch of stuff based on 'time to peak' but not 'time to NHS collapse' which is an extremely critical difference!!... Patrick has been saying 'the policy machine is off the pace' - he said it again to me just now - but YOU need to tell Sedwill this.' [INQ000048313/7]
222. Also on 14/3 I got in touch with Gowers who told me: you should push extreme suppression immediately (cf. emails and attachment). [INQ000048313/23]
223. In the evening I texted the CMO-CSA-Hancock-PM group to the effect: we'll need to accelerate social distancing, on Monday at the press conference you need to explain we will do lockdown if necessary to stop the NHS being overwhelmed. [INQ000048399/3-4]
224. Over 14-15th I called many people and said: this is the biggest national disaster since 1945, thousands are going to die, the system is collapsing, please come to No10 and help. I called Tom Shinner, an ex-official, and brought him in to lead the No10 response, build a new team, and mobilise people across Whitehall. This was one of the best things I did. Shinner made a huge difference. He had full security clearances and had worked on Brexit and No Deal preparations and understand in detail how the Cabinet Office worked, Civil Contingencies, the armed forces etc. He also had great knowledge of many officials who were right/wrong for certain jobs and he immediately started redeploying people across Whitehall.

Sunday 15 March

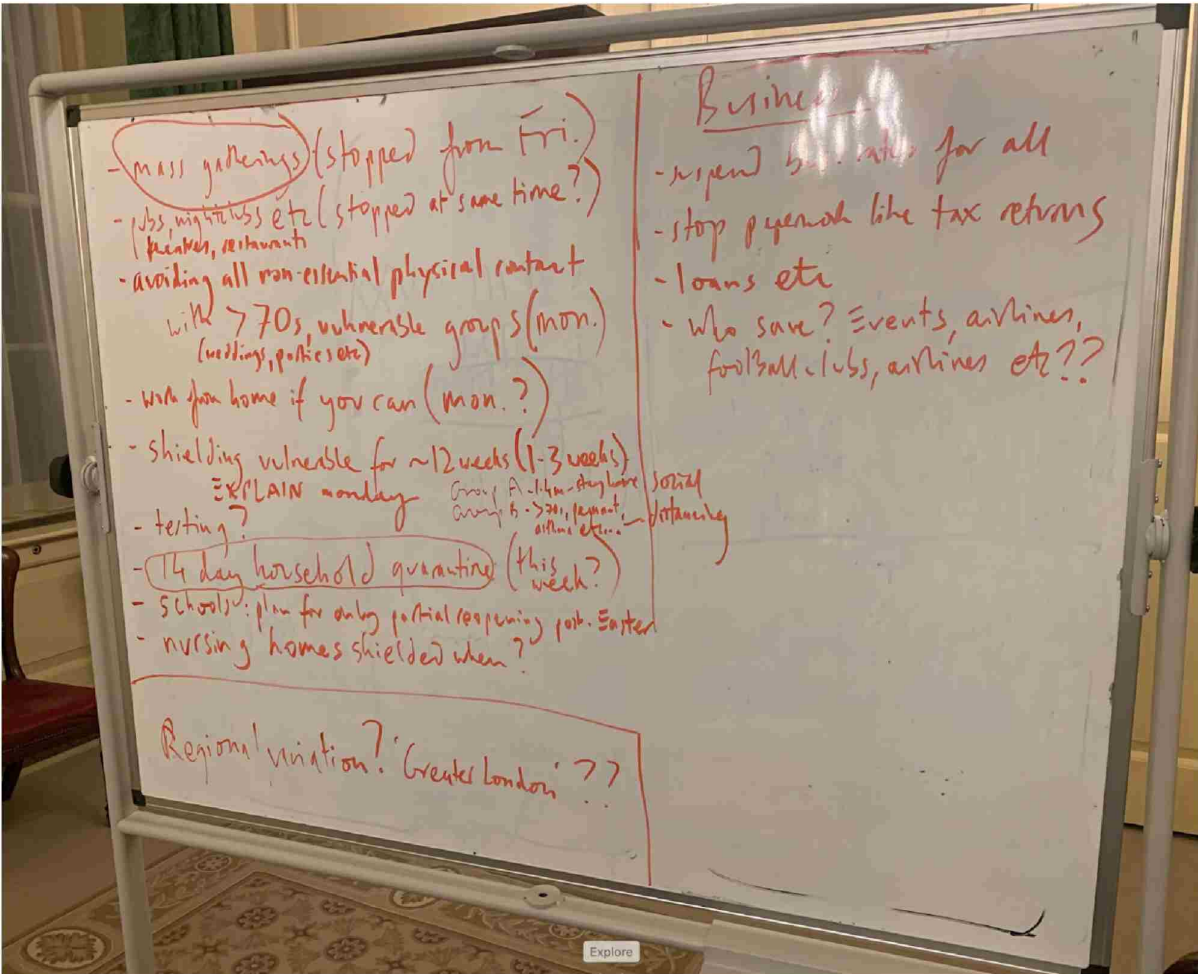
225. I asked Whitty for his view on boosting the integrity of No10 (testing, temperature controls etc). This didn't happen (cf. below).

226. On 15/3 Ferguson's email was floating around suggesting a shift to containment but I'm not sure when key people saw it. I don't understand what he meant by 'what has changed is that NHSE has been more definitive in saying they're a long, long way away from coping with such levels of demand'. I'm not sure what he meant as the graphs the previous week were clearly saying this very starkly. [INQ000195888]
227. At 12:18 on 15/3 I texted the PM summarising what we'd discussed the day before and my discussions with Vallance on the phone about shifting to Plan B: 'FYI - Vallance is on board with what will NEVER be discussed as Plan B, which the Warners talked you through yesterday. He's got SAGE modelling it. Nutshell: we move through the gears to whatever we need to to stop NHS collapse and buy time to increase capacity, we suppress it, it decreases exponentially. We then relax. Econ recovers. It will come back but we've no idea now how fast. We'll be able to watch Singapore etc. We reimpose measures as needed - perhaps regionally - to suppress / keep below the NHS collapse level. We may have to do this for multiple waves for 18 months to balance not destroying the economy or collapsing the NHS. While we wait for massive Manhattan style drug policy. [I.e Manhattan Project style super-speedy project on vaccines, treatments etc.] I'm mtng PV [Vallance] at 4 before the 5 meeting with the Warners. Sedwill will have no idea re this new approach. I'll be in office when you there at 3'. [INQ000048313/8] (By 'will never be discussed', I was trying to reassure him that we would present Plan B as an acceleration of Plan A as he was very worried that he'd be accused of the mother of all u-turns by changing course. The reference to Sedwill was a reminder to the PM that the Cabinet Office and Cabinet Secretary would not realise at this point that we were advocating a change of strategy. NB. Vallance had only just asked SAGE to model suppression – so this would need explaining from first principles.)
228. Vallance was still, understandably, worried about a second wave if we went for suppression. But by now he was coming around to the view that a) clearly DHSC and Cabinet Office had gone terribly wrong and were in no fit state to handle Plan A, and b) it was worth gambling on buying time with suppression.
229. In the evening at roughly 5-7pm there was a meeting in the Cabinet room including the PM, me, Vallance, Ben. (I think the Cabinet Secretary was there but not sure. I don't remember if Imran was there but it's extremely likely.) Vallance and I made the argument that we should accelerate everything and go further and accept the risks of suppression and future waves to buy time. At some point after this meeting but I don't remember exactly when I was told that the Cabinet Office and senior DHSC officials were 'furious' with Vallance for this shift. This was further confirmation for me of the core problem, a sign that senior people in both were still far behind the pace, and another sign of bad culture — instead of arguing things out, Vallance was reprimanded by officials privately. This also makes clear that 'lockdown to suppress' was not seen at DHSC or Cabinet Office at this time as a logical extension of the existing approach but as a radical change of approach — otherwise, obviously, there would have been no reason for the shock and anger.
230. I took this screenshot of the whiteboard that I had drawn for one of the meetings that day and used in the 1700 meeting (at 19:20). [INQ000048313/39] It shows a similar story to the previous two on 13/14:
- the shaded peak above the 'NHS capacity' line represent all those who would not get medical care under Plan A

- now the NHS capacity line rises over time from left to right
- the blue squiggly line beneath shows the basic Plan B: suppression 'up to full lockdown' to buy time without overwhelming the NHS while building capacity – oxygen beds, drugs, technology (e.g. contact tracing at scale) etc.



231. And the other side of the whiteboard showing some details of the accelerated plan:
[INQ000048313/40]



232. On 16/3 I got an email from Clare Brunton in which she said that the Cabinet Office/CCS had still not seen departmental plans for the pandemic, never mind evaluated and fixed them: 'Apparently departments hold their own detailed civil contingencies plans, as well as their business continuity plans. We do not have these centrally. The NHS also hold their own plans. CCS is working with DHSC to get appropriate sight of these.' This was another terrible sign fundamental things were broken: how could CCS not have seen departmental pandemic plans by 16/3? Ben Warner replied: 'Does this mean that the department of health haven't seen the NHS plans yet?' [INQ000272142] That No10 needed to ask such questions at this stage shows how, as we probed, the situation seemed worse and worse: if CCS hadn't asked for and got such plans 10 weeks after covid became news, what else that everybody assumed 'must' have happened might not have happened? Bear in mind at this time the data system for NHS updates to the PM was me dragging the whiteboard in and scribbling tables like the one in the whiteboard above as Stevens spoke. CCS could not provide any real time data.

233. On 16/3 SAGE defined the goal as 'avoid critical cases exceeding NHS intensive care and other respiratory support bed capacity'. This is interesting as DHSC/Cabinet Office had been assuming that this was not possible in RCWS and Wormald and others had texted on

various occasions that NHS would be 'overtopped' [INQ000102697/10] . I don't remember when I realised this had happened or why.

Tuesday 17 March

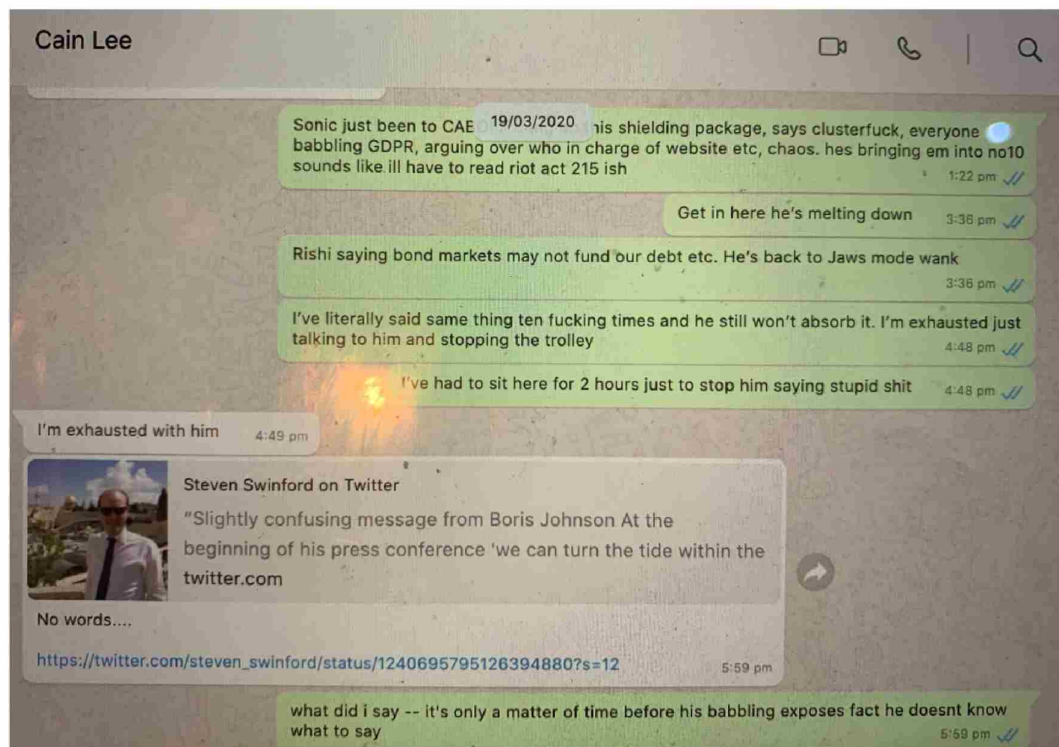
234. 07:18 on 17/3 I told the PM (cf. text) I thought we'd have to shut schools and order a full curfew in London 'within days' or we'd see an Italy-style collapse and that he should ask the Queen at their regular meeting the next day to consider speaking to the country. [INQ000048313/9] (I thought she would be the most persuasive person to reassure the old in particular. On 18/3 Cleo Watson and I had to prevent the PM from going to see the Queen in person. He rejected our advice. I was desperate and said something like, 'if you've got covid and you kill the Queen you're finished'. Cleo said she would not let him get in the car. He agreed not to go. A version of this appeared on the BBC in 2021 and was falsely denied by No10.)

Wednesday 18 March

235. I attended SAGE physically. I asked Demis Hassabis and Marc Warner to attend and Tim Gowers dialled in.
236. Demis stated that we should move towards lockdown as soon as possible. There was some push back. But the consensus of the meeting I summed up (without explaining caveats) in a text to the PM from the meeting as: close all schools now plus London lockdown ASAP or else NHS in London collapses in 15 days.
237. It's important to note that even after a) we spoke to the PM on 14/3 and I spoke to Vallance on 13-14/3 and b) we began to shift 15-16 March, the DHSC remained committed to Plan A and many in the Cabinet Office and elsewhere assumed the plan was still Plan A.
238. On 18/3 David Halpern emailed the Cabinet Secretary, Wormald and Ben Warner. He said that SAGE had never properly considered a 'total lockdown' for 3-4 weeks then Asian style hi tech tracing, that models SAGE has relied on are 'WRONG', and that 'we'll look back on it like a strange dream'. [INQ000129059]
239. The Cabinet Secretary replied to the effect that SAGE didn't advise such an option and he wondered whether it had been 'properly explored' [INQ000129059].
240. Wormald replied: **'What happens at the end of the shutdown? The virus will still exist in 3-4 weeks time and won't we just start again with reinfection and respread?'** [INQ000129059]
241. Ben Warner showed me these emails. They confirmed that the DHSC/COBR/SAGE process had *never properly considered the options including the idea of suppression* then reopening with forward and backward contact tracing using modern technology (which we had discussed with the PM on 14/3). These emails also show how the DHSC Permanent Secretary was thinking on 18th, days after we had started to change course on 14-15/3.
242. At 1pm on 18th I told the Cabinet Secretary that I'd got Hassabis and Gowers to look at the advice we were getting and they and other top people were urging that we shut

everything down ASAP, build testing 100X etc, and that on current trends London's ICUs would be overwhelmed within ~15 days.

243. At the end of the 18th Lee Cain and I had some very difficult discussions with the PM who had swung back to 'I should be the Mayor of Jaws, we've fucked up' by accelerating. He was also spending time on irrelevant or frankly alarming things (e.g talking about meeting Lebedev which he did the next day to discuss, as I was told at the time, his peerage and bunging cash to the *Evening Standard*, which I unsuccessfully opposed).
244. By the evening of 18th rumours of London lockdown had reached the media and there was speculation of No10 planning to use the army to encircle London. (I assured the BBC that this was untrue and asked that they not report it as I feared it would spark mayhem.)
245. By the morning of 19/3 we had stopped him trolleying but then there was another meeting with the Chancellor who raised the spectre of a financial armageddon, bond markets collapsing etc. This prompted another bout of 'Mayor of Jaws'. Lee Cain and I again went through what a disaster it would be to now switch back to 'leave the beaches open'.
246. This exchange sums up the problem (the top message refers to the shielding debacle): [INQ000267920]



247. He would keep bouncing back and forth on this over coming days according to who he spoke to last. What really changed is the tide of the bureaucracy shifted in that week from 'herd immunity, single peak' (Monday) to 'we must suppress or catastrophe' (by Friday).
248. On 19/3 I was appalled to be told that Mark Sweeney, the senior official recently put in charge of covid by the Cabinet Secretary, was a) self-isolating and b) was not working on covid that day because he was working on the Windrush report. (NB. I am not blaming

Sweeney for this.) I felt this was symptomatic of the failure of the Cabinet Office to appreciate the urgency and scale of the disaster hitting us. I complained to the Cabinet Secretary. We were preparing in chaos to announce unprecedented peacetime restrictions and one of the most critical ~10 officials in the country had been put onto dealing with a historical cockup from decades earlier.

249. Also on 19/3 [Name Redacted] told me that a) there was no proper shielding plan and b) officials in CLG and Cabinet Office were opposing making one. I asked him and an excellent official (Jen Allum) to work on it and told officials to drop their objections. There were also objections that GDPR prevented connecting databases needed to provide food, medicine etc to ~1 million. I told officials to ignore GDPR and the PM would take legal responsibility. The team worked nonstop and built a system in a few days. (Cf. this is referred to in the top message between me and Cain above on 19/3.) [INQ000267920]
250. On 20/3 Jenny Harries said that there was a 'perfectly adequate' supply of PPE and pressures were 'completely resolved'. [INQ000273801/5] This was totally wrong but illustrates how No10 was being told things like this by such senior people while also being told by others that this was nonsense.
251. On 22/3 the *Sunday Times* reported a comment I'd supposedly made about old people dying and herd immunity. This quote was invented. The story was not put to the No10 press office. The journalist later apologised and said it should not have appeared. This led to another spate of threats to kill me. I quietly prepared to move my family out of London and discussed this with staff in No10, the PM and the deputy Cabinet Secretary who offered secure government accommodation for us.
252. On 25/3 graphs presented in the Cabinet Room were still showing the peak in summer.
253. On 26/3 the PM texted the group with CSA/CMO that he agreed with 'every word' of the *Spectator* cover and we had acted 'without concrete evidence of excess harm occurring' [INQ000048399/17]. That day I stressed the need to shift to 100k then 1m tests per day (see below).
254. Just after midnight the PM texted me that he had tested positive. He'd shown symptoms that day.
255. I was so ill from 28/3 for roughly 7 days that I was in bed almost the entire time and I was very weak and ill for another week. I was on the odd call, and had at least one private call with the PM, but I cannot remember any of them except Lee Cain calling me to say the PM had been taken to hospital, it seemed 50-50 he might die, was it possible for me to get back to London ASAP. I knew I had to get back to No10 as soon as possible. I returned on Monday 13/4. It took months to recover partly because of constant exhaustion and returning to work immediately. The PM and I were both impaired for many weeks and in some ways I don't feel I fully recovered though I don't know how much was covid or exhaustion.
256. In 2021 Hancock was asked by MPs about my testimony to them a week earlier about this phase up to lockdown. He said that the disproof of what I'd said was 'we had a plan, we published it on 3 March', i.e the contain-delay-mitigate 'plan' published on 3 March. That 'plan' is the plan we abandoned. It is obviously not what actually happened.

Coming out of Wave 1, a new plan April-May

257. On returning to No10 meetings on 14 April they were focused on:

- Testing
- Care homes
- PPE
- Continuing serious problems with coordinating the government (made worse by the PM's incapacity)
- Developing a plan for how and when we would lift restrictions
- Many different important people coming to me about problems with Hancock
- Secondary crises caused by the shock.

258. On 25/3 I had emailed Shinner and Marc Warner (by then working on the NHS dashboard) re the dreadful data situation, inconsistent numbers, lack of basic information etc. [INQ000174715]

259. My email of 18/4, after going to see the PM in Chequers, sums up my thoughts and many issues at the time: [INQ000048313/18]

- we were trying to create an 'escape plan' from lockdown;
- shows the urgency of supply chain problems for PPE, masks, tests, drugs etc and getting ahead of future supply chain disruption;
- a reference to the revelation that day re 24/7 payments only now being set up;
- building test and trace infrastructure and moving to more ambitious goals, 1m per day;

National Security

- assume advice on masks will change and make sure we're getting ahead of this now;

260. On 20/4 the PM emailed me: [INQ000048313/19-20]

- He was concerned that papers were still relying on herd immunity.
- He stressed rightly the importance of 'colossal' efforts on PPE, testing, quarantine.

261. On 26/4 I emailed No10 officials (forwarded to Vallance and Whitty) re testing and tracing which was now central to our policy. [INQ000048313/32-37] It shows how little confidence we had that DHSC could cope at that time given the scale of the problems, that whole categories of problem had not been dealt with by this stage, and that vast numbers of questions (that the public had the right to expect were being pursued by the best qualified people in the country) were not being pursued. I sketched a list of things that needed to be brought together. This should not have been part of my job. (Nobody came back on this chain saying 'don't worry this is all being done by a top team, you just hadn't been told.')

- It refers to discussions with Hancock about testing in care homes: "We agreed 10 days ago with MH that we would test everyone going into homes regularly but I don't see this happening. Shouldn't we be testing asymptomatic workers?"
- There is a long list of policy and technical questions and connections between the two (e.g can we try to do quarantine using phones as in Singapore?).
- 'I have no confidence PHE can organise the observatory and the Cabinet Office can ONLY do it with a lot of expert help -- the Cabinet Office could not do this sort of data science operation by itself pre-March. **If we leave the system to its default, we will not have the**

observatory we ought to have already and will *urgently* need when we want to undo lockdown.'

- Shinner, consultants he'd brought in, and others in the network we were building in No10 had to work on these things because neither DHSC nor the Cabinet Office had the skills needed and were overwhelmed.

262. The PM read it and replied that he agreed (cf. reply provided).

263. On 29/4 I texted the PM group that we should start work now on a plan for **winter and variants**.

264. On 1 May I emailed Alexandra Burns (PM Private Secretary for schools/education)]. I was keen that in reopening we try to think about where we could do things in such a way as to gather robust data about what worked that we could use in managing future waves. E.g. was there a way of reopening schools in such a way as to create a pseudo-Randomised Control Trial showing how much effect schools being closed actually had. Generally this sort of thing was disliked by most politicians and officials because as usual they overrated short-term communication issues ('using us as guineapigs!') and underrated figuring out the right answer. I stressed in that email we should prioritise the right answer over communications. I don't think we ended up doing (m)any such sensible experiments that could have helped for Wave 2.

265. A major concern was the overlap of testing to various problems particularly care homes.

266. On 3/5 I texted the PM/CSA/CMO/Hancock about why we were not testing systematically in care homes and NHS staff. Vallance replied we should be. Hancock replied 'We have been doing this for the past week'. [INQ000048399/19-20] This was not true.

267. A few minutes later I texted a different group: [INQ000048313/30]

Numberten action

Lee, Simon, Henry, Ben, Boris, Eddie, Martin, James, Munira, Allegra, Cleo

03/05/2020

Pls put on agenda for tmrw 915: The 3-6 month plan for testing and the plan for using testing to suppress infections in hospitals and care homes -- and inform DHSC. This shouldnt be 'lots of work at short notice' cos these goddamn plans should already exist and be happening. But i dont think they do -- either way we MUST find out tmrw morning. At the moment I think we ar negligently killing the most vulnerable who we are supposed to be shielding and i am extremely worried about it... If they ask for clarification say -- we want to see all the different strands of testing demand (e.g NHS staff, ONS survey, care homes, public demand, T&T etc) and how we plan to distribute our capacity and increase it -- and in particular how does this plan fit with the T&T plan...

10:28 am ✓✓

Johnson Boris

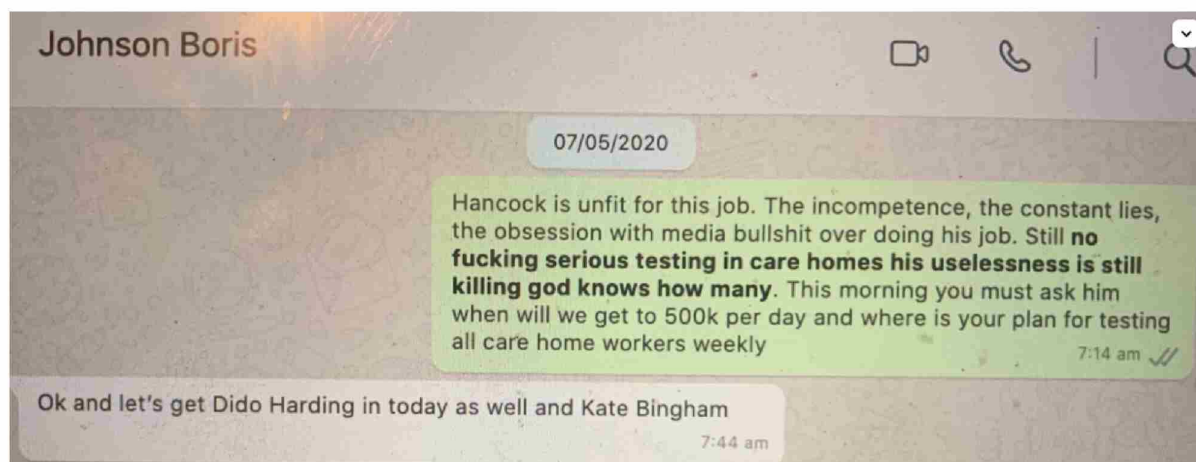
And can I have the ons data tonight so I can have read it before tomo ? I don't need a note on top of it just the raw stuff ??

2:15 pm

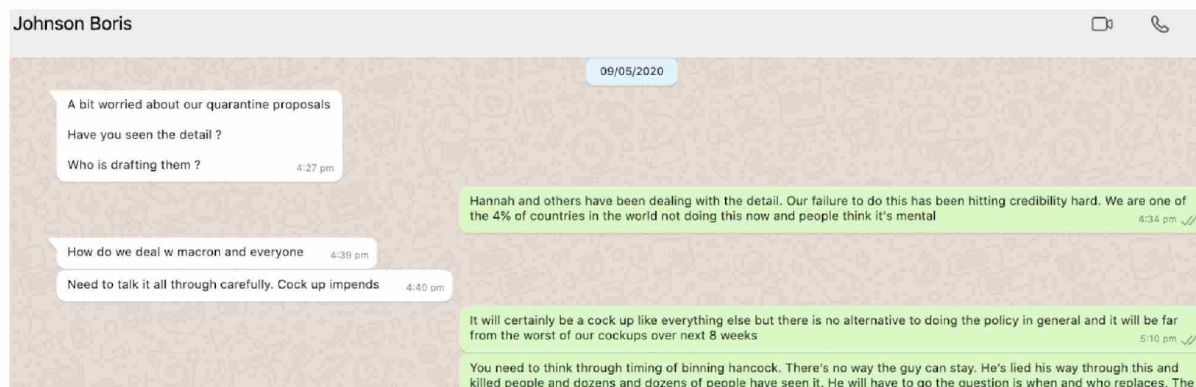
I've got the ONS note I'll send when home shortly

2:16 pm ✓✓

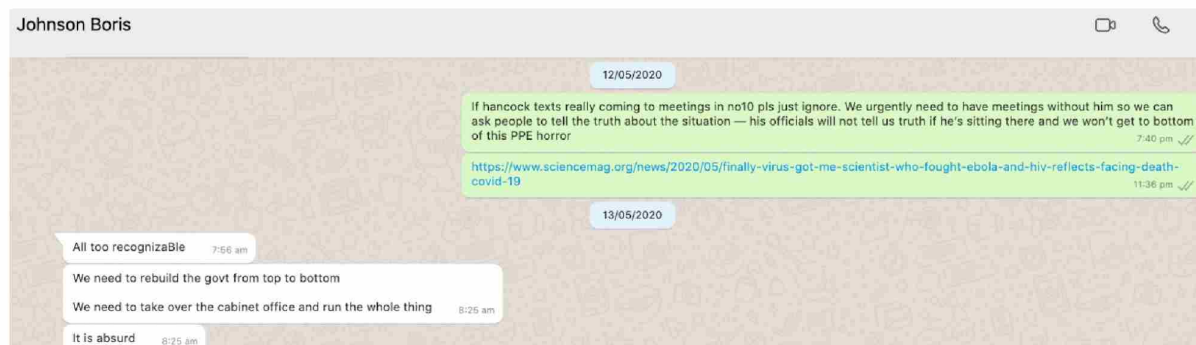
268. On 7/5 I texted the PM re Hancock, testing, care homes: [INQ000048313/16]



269. On 9/5 I texted the PM re quarantine and replacing Hancock: [INQ000048313/16]



270. On 12/5 I texted him about the problems we had with Hancock. [INQ000048313/17] I'd organised a meeting with officials without Hancock and was trying to ensure the PM did not then invite him after the inevitable complaint. We had to do this a lot to try to get the truth. ('really' is autocorrect of 're')

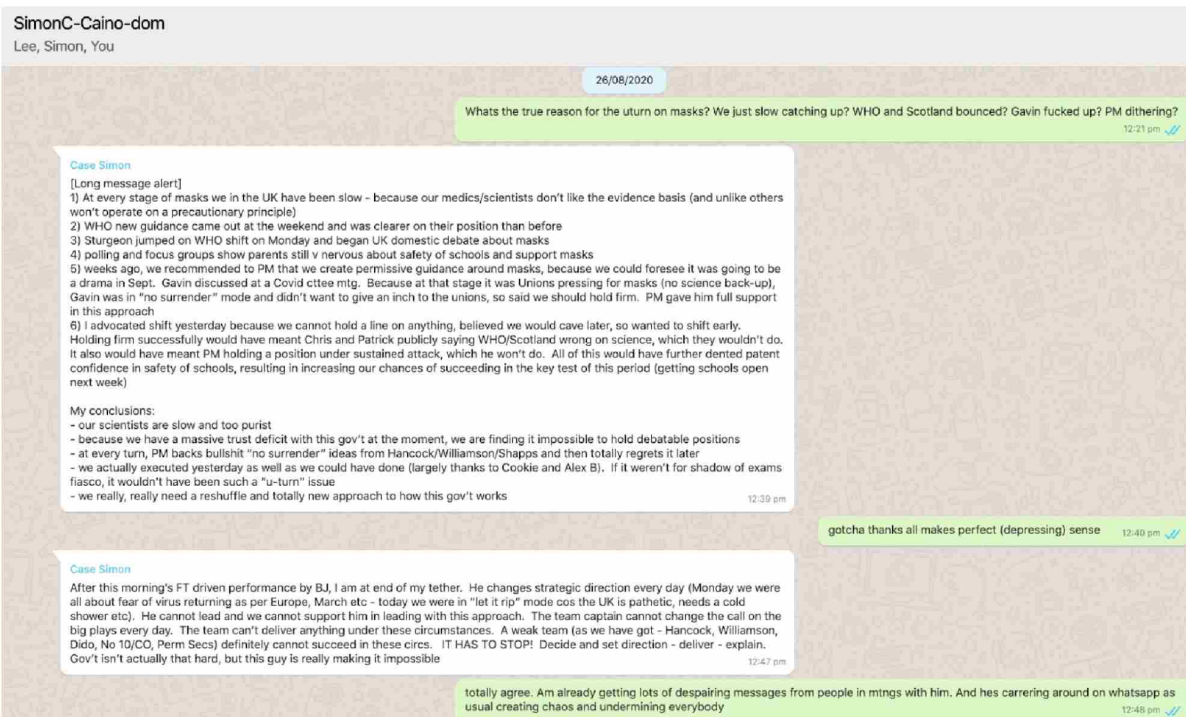


271. On 15/5 Hancock said publicly 'we've tried to throw a protective ring around our care homes']. Later he claimed to Marr this phrase referred to the wider plan and had been misinterpreted. This was false.

272. On 15/5 I organised a discussion with the Private Office to review what had gone wrong particularly with the Cabinet Office. There was near unanimity about some core problems:
- It could not coordinate Whitehall.
 - It was itself opaque concerning responsibility and had far too many people including too many DGs.
 - It often duplicated requests from PO to Whitehall adding friction.
 - Good people were disempowered, no longer seen as great place to work.
 - On covid no senior person gripping it from January.
 - Nothing like the analytical skills needed.
 - Too slow to intervene with things not working and replace people.
273. Between nearly dying and mid-May the PM had a relatively sensible outlook. When I went to see him in Chequers after he left hospital, he was sheepish for having made so many jokes about its seriousness. He was ill, tired and weak. He said when we met, 'this thing is no joke, thank god we changed course, it would have been a catastrophe'.
274. For a few weeks he supported aggressive action, for example, signing off the Vaccine Taskforce. He also supported a general fundamental rebooting of policy, rebooting of Whitehall and the Cabinet Office and so on (cf. text 13/5). He repeatedly said versions of a Clouseau analogy: 'the British state has totally failed, it's been a humiliating disaster, the government machine isn't a Rolls Royce, I feel like Clouseau in the Pink Panther in that scene where he pulls the brake and it comes off in his hand, then he pulls off the steering wheel and chucks it out the window, that's what being PM has felt like in this crisis'.
275. Unfortunately his approach was the worst of all worlds – he would depress everybody with his Clouseau analogy, by implication offend officials many of whom had made tremendous efforts in public service, but then swerve real action to solve the problems. This encouraged despair, anger and leaks from all sides to pressure 'the trolley'.
276. On 14 May, enraged by another terrible meeting the PM called the Cabinet Secretary, me, Martin into his study. He was very unhappy with the answers he got. Shortly after he called me into his office, shut the door, and said to me, 'We can't carry on like this or I'm fucked, get the Cabinet Secretary back in here, it's time to make a change'. I begged him to let me handle it. I knew it would be a disaster if he tried himself. He refused. 'Just watch, it will be a triumph.' Without any serious preparation and without an actual plan for who would take over when, he tried to change the most senior official in the country. It was a disaster (and very unfair on Mark). He half promoted the Cabinet Secretary to the Lords and half sacked him. The meeting ended in confusion. Only those two were in the room. He then blurted out to various people what he'd done, telling different people different things, some of whom tried to reverse it, others tried to negotiate a deal between the two.
277. It not only sowed chaos but also led to general bad blood among the PM's office and undermined trust between Martin and me as Martin was increasingly clear to the PM that he thought we should avoid major changes but this message was conveyed via 'popins' when I wasn't there rather than as part of an honest discussion. It also contributed to the wrong decision by Martin to send the 'BYOB' invitation a few days later. Part of the reason why the event happened was that the PM's office had been thrown into chaos, attempts to solve it, and rumours that the Cabinet Secretary might resign immediately. On the morning of the invitation going out I had an extremely heated argument with the PM in which he tried to

blame me for the chaos and I reminded him forcefully that I had begged him not to do what he'd done but to let me handle it and he had repeatedly refused.

278. As this played out, the Westminster mood was shifting. There was a push from MPs and some newspapers to remove restrictions ASAP, not to impose tests and quarantine at airports, and to declare that the suppression strategy had been a disaster, it mustn't be repeated, 'work from home must end' and so on. Many people including journalists texted him with versions of these arguments.
279. He increasingly questioned what we'd done and kept saying 'I should have been the Mayor of Jaws and kept the beaches open'.
280. So over summer he kept changing his mind, often several times per day. In July the new Cabinet Secretary, Simon Case, texted me that the PM wanted to 'declare that we are over covid' and we were in danger of 'Bolsonaro level mad and dangerous' (cf. texts). [INQ000048313/52] The PM kept repeating to No10 officials random demands from MPs or the Whips. This led to absurd discussions about things like grouse shooting: 'the Chief says the grouse moors must stay open!', 'if the grouse moors stay open then surely X must stay open too'. This destroyed confidence in the PM and No10 among many officials.
281. In July he insisted on demanding that everyone 'go back to work' in the office. In meetings he kept saying that a) it had been a terrible mistake to encourage work from home, b) those saying there would be long term changes to work patterns were wrong (the latest US data is that there have been permanent changes to work patterns and net this has brought productivity improvements even though it's been disastrous in some places especially already unproductive places like Whitehall). He was under constant bombardment from his newspaper friends to get commuters back because it was hitting their profits hard. Lee Cain and I and others struggled to convince him that in 8 weeks or so we'd be back to school and facing another wave and he should be very careful in what he said or his words would be stuffed back down his throat. 'Yes you'll please some Tory MPs and the *Telegraph* editor tomorrow but you'll annoy them even more if you reverse ferret in 8 weeks'. We failed.
282. On 26/8, Cabinet Secretary summarised basic problems (cf. texts): 'at every turn, the PM backs bullshit "no surrender" ideas from Hancock/Williamson/Shapps then totally regrets it later... we really really need a reshuffle and totally new approach to how this government works'; the PM constantly changes his mind, flips between control the virus and 'let it rip', the British are too pathetic; 'he cannot lead and we cannot support him in leading with this approach ... he's really making it impossible'; plus weak ministers. [INQ000048313/53]



283. This persisted into and through the autumn: e.g on 10/9 the PM was saying 'open up the economy asap, forget the bloody virus' (cf. texts from Case). [INQ000048313/54]

284. The Cabinet Secretary, like me and others in the PM's office, was also deeply concerned that the PM's girlfriend was exacerbating 'the trolley problem': on 14/10 he referred to this problem saying, 'I was always told that Dom was the secret PM. How wrong they are. I look forward to telling select [committee] tomorrow "oh, fuck no, don't worry about Dom, the real person in charge is Carrie".'[INQ000048313/56] After the PM went upstairs in the evening and texted, sometimes contradicting things he'd just agreed, staff often worried 'is it him or is it her?' Sometimes he would come down in the morning and contradict himself again saying 'ahhhh ignore that, Carrie was going crackers'. To confuse things further, it was clear that he often blamed her for things, including u-turns, that were NOT her fault. (He blamed everyone to everyone else and thought we didn't realise.) She wanted her allies into key roles they were unsuitable for. I thought a lot about how to deal with this growing problem but could never come up with a solution. In November he suggested giving Carrie a job with the royal family and 'lots of foreign travel to get her out of our hair'. I enthusiastically agreed but it went nowhere.

Trying to change the emergency response system as part of broader changes to No10

285. There were discussions and action over four big institutional changes from May:

- Rebooting the work started in January and boded during Wave 1 on building the No10 data science team.
- Creating the covid taskforce.
- Reviewing the COBR / CCU / disaster response system generally.

- Reviewing the No10 / Cabinet Office system generally for how it thinks, acts, monitors, intervenes including the physical layout of No10 / 70 Whitehall.

286. This was all relevant to handling of the winter wave and omicron.

287. On 2/5 I emailed key Private Office staff about 'urgent changes' to the broken system:

'We all know the operation of the last 12 weeks is nowhere near what we need and what we owe the country... the current shambles coordinating Whitehall makes it very hard for me and others to scrutinise papers properly before they come to PM, quality control is poor (sometimes awful), and this is particularly bad given the problems with the CABOFF.'

288. As you can see from feedback nobody disagreed and Clare replied positively.

289. On 3/5 (11:46) I emailed key Private Office staff about the broken system.

[INQ000253940]'Chair brief' refers to the 'Chairman's notes', the script given to the PM in his folder for a meeting guiding how to run it, and often contained the 'conclusions' in advance:

'We're wasting far too much time in crap meetings. We are not using the PM's time well. Changes from tomorrow.

1. No papers go to PM on anything related to C19 including from CABOFF [Cabinet Office] and HMT unless they are cleared by Shinner or me — NOBODY ELSE.

2. Any Chair brief on anything related to C19 including from CABOFF and HMT must be cleared by Shinner or me — NOBODY ELSE. They must be much more rigorous in setting out key decisions and probing the problems in plans. No more vague 'how confident are you...' More: What % chance is there you will have done X by date Y. They must set out why alternatives were rejected. They must justify why plan X is not the same as what more successful countries are doing. *Inform the Secretariat today that they are welcome to feed in ideas but from now on these Chair briefs are written by No10, NOT THEM.*

3. Papers for PM meetings must arrive the night before the meeting unless I say it's OK.

4. Shinner — hire whoever else you think you need, don't write 'business cases' for or to anybody, just get them ASAP, ignore PET, Clare will deal with PET. CABOFF does not control No10 hiring, I will hire who I want to sort this nightmare out.

5. We must start cancelling meetings and telling the PM — this is cancelled because X cannot produce a document for us to consider.

6. I will chair a very short discussion each day on what meetings are happening with PM when — Clare/Stuart/Shinner/Imran as a rule. E.g tomorrow morning must have 3-6 month testing plan in, as per PM demand. And we must review test-track-trace with PM and CHX on Tuesday after we've probed tomorrow. Clare pls re-send the forward look to this group of 5. All to review this afternoon.

7. These changes connect to some physical shifts of people around the building that Clare will update on.

Please copy Alex B.

If anybody disagrees with any of this do not reply on this text, text me and Ill talk to you this afternoon.

Otherwise I expect these changes to be made immediately.

I am also going to recommend personnel and other structural changes to the PM across No10/CABOFF.

Without radical changes further disasters are guaranteed.

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... If anybody disagrees with any of this do not reply on this text, text me and Ill talk to you this afternoon.

290. NB. the reference to telling Shinner to hire who he needed, not to bother with 'business cases'. This was an apparently small but very telling aspect of how bureaucracy was so destructive. Even as the country was in unprecedented lockdown with all the effects on individual freedom and economic destruction, Shinner and many others were being told, as they tried to build teams to cope with the disaster, that before hiring people they had to write 'business cases' for each new person requested that would have to be 'evaluated' (often by the exact officials who had presided over the meltdown and clearly couldn't manage the Cabinet Office). Given we were seeking large numbers of people super quickly, this was another 'shooting ourselves in the feet'. I was highly intolerant of such things. My view was that we had to do what all great teams do – bring in great people and let them hire fast based on their own judgement and taste. This is not how government works even in an emergency.
291. Connected to this was changing the meetings. A key 'use' of a PM's time is to use meetings to probe into serious problems and force 'the system' to tell the truth. This was mostly impossible with this PM who could not chair such meetings: e.g my email to private office 5/5 saying that 'deep dives' should be chaired by somebody else as current deep dives were 'making everyone suicidal to no real purpose'. Unfortunately the PM developed a theory in May that officials 'are desperate to hear me', so he spent a huge amount of many senior people's time rambling, justifying it as 'morale building'. As he put it himself, they were a mix of after dinner speech and *Spectator* conference. It depressed everybody and wasted our time.
292. We started building a 'covid taskforce'. Its creation was botched at first. When I first suspected little was happening I went next door to the Cabinet Office and tracked down the room it was supposedly being created in. It was totally empty. When I tracked down the person supposedly put in charge of analysis for it (Aldridge at CLG) he said they were part time: 'There is no analytical capability [in the Cabinet Office]. My unit does not actually exist' (Aldridge).
293. Tom Shinner, Imran and others rapidly built a new team and it did a good job. By September the covid taskforce worked quite well and was a huge improvement over Feb-March. It was much more important than either Cabinet or Cabinet Committees in setting policy, monitoring the crisis, advising the PM. The relative lack of ministers and formality and scripts meant that they were better than ministerial COBRs or Cabinet Committees at getting the facts, especially unpleasant facts, into the open.
294. In summer 2020 I went back to the connected issues of a) the layout of No10, b) the ability of No10 and the Cabinet Office to see, think and act, the whole issue of how No10

makes priorities, tracks them, and intervenes (should there be another 'delivery unit'), c) the location, people, tools, systems used for emergency response such as a pandemic or war.

295. My argument to the PM was: I made these arguments in January, you agreed then kiboshed action, we've now all seen the system implode, we all know we must change, this means physical changes to No10, something different to COBR for disasters that can handle STRAP and non-STRAP data in real time, and a fundamentally different approach to the general problem of 'the centre' controlling government.
296. Most No10 officials and spads (said they) agreed.
297. I summarised many of the problems and what was needed in my email to the Cabinet Secretary et al of 13/7. [INQ000048313/56-61] On 29/7 after walking around the building with the PM, I sent an email saying he'd signed off the detailed plan, with the PM's office shifting to the Cabinet Secretary's, the whole security bubble shifting further in 70 Whitehall, creating an integrated policy and 'delivery' team instead of a standalone delivery unit (so problems are spotted earlier and action is faster, rather than the traditional separation of policy and management) and so on. I concluded:
- '... The failure to have proper modern working methods straight after the election was directly responsible for confusion and deaths in the covid crisis. We've discussed all this for 3 months – senior people have agreed this plan and the PM has definitively signed it off and said 'I want to start the new term with this running'. So no more talk re the fundamentals... **It would be unforgivable if we enter the autumn -- with covid waves and economic disasters -- in the same hopeless management/physical/informational structure as Feb...**' (bold in original). [INQ000253939] Full email in Appendix.
298. But that's what happened. Sadly, having agreed it and told me to get on with it, the PM himself almost immediately started unraveling it. Unfortunately I had to have a medical operation at the end of July that I'd delayed repeatedly since July 2019. This meant I could not move much for some days and was at home. Just as he had in January, after agreeing the plan the PM listened to 'popins', got cold feet, objected to moving his own office and started telling people it was all a plot to demote him ('like a tired old labrador') and put myself in charge of everything. So halfway through moving people the move stopped leaving half the team in No10 and half in 70 Whitehall. We wasted August and entered the autumn with much of the same 'hopeless structure' I had warned about in July. This was the context in which I had the discussion with the PM where I said I was leaving on Friday 18 December because he was more afraid of me having the power to solve the chaos than he was of the chaos, and he replied, correct (below).
299. In summer 2020 I worked with the Cabinet Secretary to start a review of the 'new COBR' space / institution. It was led by Tom Drew. I encouraged them to bring in outsiders and think afresh, not with the existing COBR room and its technology. There are many new tools and ideas about how to do this much better than the normal in government (cf. my 2019 blog on Bret Victor and 'Seeing Rooms'). I'm told this was not taken forward properly and simply amounted to putting some TVs on the walls of a new room which No10 does not use.
300. The current No10 remains a hopeless office structure for dealing with a major crisis. It only works if you assume that a major crisis will be handled elsewhere in Whitehall but in

practice much smaller crises than covid routinely fall to No10 so *a fortiori* covid-scale crises will certainly fall to No10 and it will fail again.

301. As I wrote above viz the Cabinet Office, its problems and lack of specialist skills combined with its responsibility for HR and recruitment hampered building what was necessary. It delayed building 10ds, building the taskforce, building the new No10, and building a new disaster response system.
302. It also hampered building what was needed in summer with test and trace, replacing PHE, and building the new JBC.
303. JBC was not a success. It was set up in a rush by people in the Cabinet Office who did not appreciate what was really needed. One specific example: a crucial capability we needed was '*backward* contact tracing'. Most references to contact tracing refer to 'forward' contact tracing, i.e person X is infected, you realise, you find the people X was in contact with since infection. *Backward* tracing means looking back pre-infection to figure out where XYZ were infected – the specific building, the specific room – to identify hotspots. This would allow specific targeted action. Some East Asian countries implemented this and brought together data such as mobile phones, credit cards and CCTV. No10 tried to get the JBC to build this. We failed. Steve Higham told me that JBC was set up by Cabinet Office officials with duff instructions and it would not change unless the Cabinet Secretary officially retasked Tom Hurd. This proved true.
304. On 10 May, Ben Warner emailed Sweeney: 'I am very concerned we are setting up the wrong thing in the biosecurity centre. People keep coming back with slides that have high level data aggregation as the main ambition. Please can [you] send me what the commission to this team was.' [INQ000195924] On 13/5 Ben emailed again that the JBC slide deck was 'not even wrong', they had no software engineers, they are not listening to us when we say the point is to identify outbreaks fast, and that Vallance and Angela Mclean shared his concerns. Cf. Email from Tom Shinner to Simon Case, Ridley et al on 25 June about these problems. (Ben Warner, Tom Shinner and Steve Higham will have useful perspectives on this.)
305. Overall:
- We made serious progress with 10ds.
 - We made progress with the Taskforce but too slow and it lacked analytical skills.
 - We started a general shift in No10 / 70 Whitehall but the PM kiboshed it half way through and the issues remain unresolved (hampering government generally).
 - We started a review of the COBR system but it didn't go anywhere.
 - We created JBC and Test & Trace but too slow and bodged.
 - This meant that over summer we did not have the system we needed to generate ideas, test them, connect to real data, look for problems, and implement them fast. We therefore went into September in a much better position than March (especially on things like testing and data) but still bodging again.
 - In late September Ben Warner warned me and the Cabinet Secretary that there remained huge problems with skills and leadership in analysing covid, gathering data, understanding it, explaining it to relevant decision makers etc.

306. These problems were never solved because solving them would have required getting to grips with Cabinet Office itself and Whitehall HR. Officials tell me the Cabinet Office has 'gone backwards' and is 'even worse'. Reform that started in summer 2020 mostly stopped or reversed.

NO EMERGENCY PROCUREMENT SYSTEM

41. *'Definitely on digital, project management we've got nothing to learn from the private sector', Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary.*
42. With airline safety incentives have driven incredible performance improvement. The pilot falls out of the sky with the plane so they take it seriously. Incredible efforts have been made over decades to make commercial flight really, really safe. If you listen to an emergency you hear pilots and air traffic control talk, you hear the fruits of this learning and incentives. Cool and calm under pressure, everybody knows the drill, everybody knows what they're responsible for and how to do it. After an emergency there's a rigorous process to be honest about errors so the system improves and individuals learn.
43. This is the exact opposite of the UK's procurement 'system' for a pandemic which was characterised by: utter chaos, lack of accountability, thousands not knowing their exact job and contributing to bedlam, repeated failure. And, the opposite of airline safety, afterwards the debacles brushed under the carpet and no serious learning.
44. The UK procurement system was based on:
- EU law (primary and secondary), with EU law superior to domestic law
 - UK law (primary and secondary) including Westminster 'goldplating' of EU law
 - Direct and indirect effects of court cases (UK and EU courts)
 - Guidance and practice evolved over years including effects of civil service incentives and culture (risk aversion, more process as the 'solution' to failures of process etc).
311. During the referendum we argued that taking back control of procurement would be a huge gain. The argument was ignored. After the referendum I repeatedly made this argument. In 2017 I wrote a paper that said the EU system would prove a disaster in the next major crisis. Westminster had no interest in procurement and maintained no interest even after 2020 and even after the Ukraine war has made it central again. The Insider view was summarised by John Kerr who argued it would be in our interests to just keep the EU system after leaving. Such terrible predictions by powerful Insiders are never scrutinised by the media on issues like this.
312. In 2019 in No10 I had to deal with much of the system fighting to keep the EU system after we left the EU.
313. I started meetings on changing this in January including with outside experts and the IPA but they were cancelled in February to deal with covid procurement problems. The problems we discussed in abstract in January became very specific in February-April.
314. The legal framework we inherited meant we had no serious viable emergency procurement system for a crisis as big as covid.

315. The principles of handling emergency procurement were extremely vague so officials could rarely be confident about how the courts would interpret the rules and our actions, perhaps years later.
316. Normal mode Whitehall is to be very risk averse on such things, take longer, add more 'process', do things that lower the odds of judicial reviews, spend more time on 'consultation' and so on.
317. In spring 2020 officials and ministers were therefore faced with the dilemma of either a) do procurement as normal and simply accept that many, including many NHS staff, would die because we couldn't do things in time, or b) do things fast, ignore the normal processes to an unprecedented degree, and resolve to worry about judicial reviews deciding it was 'unlawful' after the crisis.
318. Different parts of Whitehall acted differently, some faster/slower, some more/less competent.
319. On many things No10 became aware of delays, including:
- ventilators
 - PPE including PPE for frontline NHS staff
 - testing (PCR and rapid)
 - the Vaccine Taskforce
320. I took the view that the overwhelming priority was saving lives and minimising disasters, not worrying about possible judicial reviews after the crisis finding our actions 'unlawful'. I insisted on swift action and said to many officials a version of 'ignore the procurement rules (and other rules like state aid), the PM will take legal responsibility if/when judicial reviews come later'.
321. Gains in speed created huge value (lives and money saved) though there was also a lot of waste and blunders.
322. The chaos was **not** 'a product of move fast and break things'.
323. The chaos was a product of:
- having a normal system based on long timelines where it's perfectly normal to take a year on a procurement process then spend time on legal challenges before anybody does anything
 - no proper emergency system
 - very few in Whitehall with skills and experience of fast procurement and execution
 - attempts to appear as if officials were sticking to the normal rules (Potemkin process)
 - some incompetence from ministers and officials
 - poor lines of responsibility for cross-Whitehall action
 - some dodgy, some possibly corrupt, decisions (least important factor in terms of things contributing to deaths etc but inherently important to the unclear extent it happened).
324. Procurement problems were worsened by their interaction with many other laws, regulations, and processes. For example, state aid rules obstructed fast investment in critical things. Similarly we had to order people to ignore GDPR which otherwise would produce fatal delays, e.g on databases for shielding. And there were endless problems with HMT

spending rules and Cabinet Office spending rules (which often conflicted). Many problems not only had nightmarish procurement aspects but had these other elements and this complexity made it harder for officials to move fast.

325. All of this was inseparable from the problems of the Cabinet Office. That is the only part of government with the authority to tell departments things like: ignore these rules, do this instead; this team is failing, replace it; X must be done 10 times faster, if this team can't do it then it must be immediately replaced. So if the Cabinet Office itself doesn't have the people and the drive to do this, failures are not fixed. And in 2020 it did not have the people and the drive to do this.

326. A useful case study of how the complexity generated huge uncertainty, the interaction between the complex law and judicial review and civil service incentives/culture was the judicial review brought over our decision to buy large amounts of polling to help SAGE and ministers.

327. The judicial review over the polls we commissioned in spring 2020 illustrates some problems. I wrote about it at length here (2021). [INQ000283153]

- No10 had no secure cloud system in 2019 (see above).
- Normal pollsters including industry leaders served clients by emailing spreadsheets and PDFs. This is a highly inefficient way of handling polling data and limits how users interact with data.
- Only weeks earlier we had been doing polling at scale on the election and knew Hanbury could a) organise large scale polling really fast, b) handle it well, c) use a cloud system that Ben Warner had helped them build, therefore d) we could immediately extend access to the data across Whitehall. We would not have to have any meetings or ask anybody to build anything or have meetings with officials about how to handle procurement all of which would have caused delays if we'd used another pollster. We knew the people and had just been using the system.
- The system did what was natural: start talking about an accelerated procurement exercise that would still have taken weeks. The law is so uncertain that nobody could make reliable predictions about what a court may deem reasonable and lawful perhaps years later. In March concerns that moving extremely fast would be later deemed unlawful stopped officials doing what was unarguably necessary, urgent polling to augment covid data. Some officials correctly said that the 'normal' approach was to run an accelerated process to provide paperwork both to justify themselves internally and as evidence for a possible JR.
- I said effectively: do this now, ignore normal procurement issues, government lawyers have a few hours to say 'this is ok' or else I will get the PM to order it done regardless of legal advice and take responsibility. (An illustration of the huge bottleneck problem with the PM's authority as such problems could be fixed only if a) they got to me and b) I prioritised them).
- It was the right decision, it helped SAGE and the government (as Vallance and others said), it saved lives and money. I was even told that Hanbury did the polling for less than the Cabinet Office had been paying. But even if a process would have found someone to do it all cheaper than Hanbury, that would have taken weeks (months normally) and therefore *would have been a disastrous decision depriving government of crucial data at a crucial time.*
- Political activists (some of whom had been chasing me with legal cases since the referendum) accused me of corruption and brought a judicial review.
- The government lost the judicial review in the High Court. The High Court made some errors of fact and law concluding that the lack of formal process in my decision was not *objectively*

biased, and there was no corruption, but could be *seen* as 'apparent bias' therefore was 'unlawful' and we should have prioritised a 'process' to signal no 'apparent bias'. This was not surprising but was still extremely depressing. It sent a signal to all officials – even in a crisis this big, everything will prioritise sticking to dumb rules, officials should prioritise a paper trail.

- The media reported this as vindicating criticisms of me and others. Allegations of corruption flew across the media again. The Cabinet Office at first decided not to appeal then did appeal.
- It sent a huge signal across Whitehall: yes the system really does not prioritise building necessary things in a crisis, take note vis your career.
- Fortunately the Court of Appeal overturned it and said *we had acted lawfully* and it was unreasonable to say we should have done various things given the emergency. This obviously got a fraction of the media coverage.
- This is not the end of the madness. In autumn 2020, I found emergency action on testing, then central to whether another lockdown might be needed and whether many more lived or died, was being delayed because officials had been pulled off handling it to work on producing evidence for judicial reviews including the polling one!! I had to order that this be stopped too and deal with officials warning me that other officials would say that they had to prioritise the demands of the courts. Then I was asked to cancel meetings on mass testing to give evidence to the lawyers about JRs! When I said the public would want to lynch people if they could witness these Kafka-esque discussions, the normal response was a shrug: the lawyers say it must be done so it must be done, nobody can question the lawyers.
- In order to handle the volume of JRs, officials in No10 often organise Potemkin meetings to provide evidence for the JR they assume will happen. E.g there is a discussion, a decision is taken, officials then organise another meeting where people produce papers and people read things out to the PM, officials take notes and file them. The second meeting is Potemkin so officials can pretend the 'decision' was taken by the PM 'after properly considering XYZ' and provide 'evidence' (i.e the Potemkin paper trail). (This sort of thing never makes its way into the media and many brilliant lawyers do not realise how this complex system of primary legislation, international treaty, judicial review and civil service culture/incentives generates Potemkin government. My uncle was a highly distinguished 'Treasury Devil' (the government's top independent barrister for big cases) and judge. He was shocked when I would tell him the consequences of JRs inside Whitehall, his Kantian mind could hardly absorb the Kafka-esque dynamics.)

328. Almost all such craziness and costs of the interaction between procurement and judicial review and civil service incentives are normally totally hidden from MPs and the media.

329. In the relative calm of 2021 our elected representatives could have reflected on this and built the system we need for emergencies. They have continued to ignore the subject. This also sends a strong signal to Whitehall.

330. Some other examples...

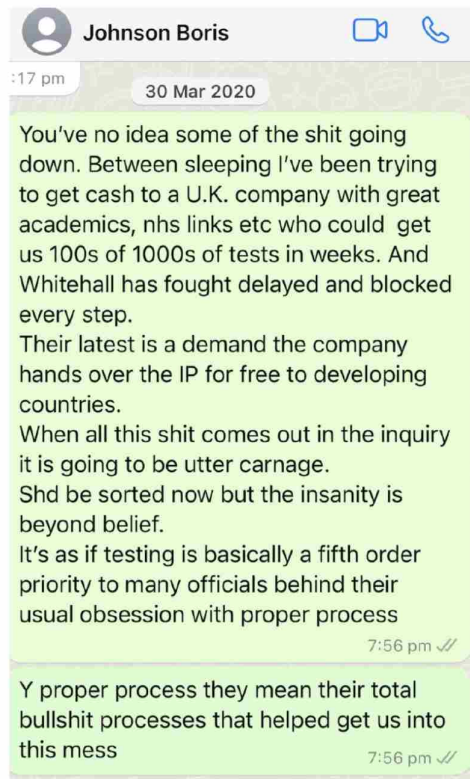
331. E.g In a Cabinet Room meeting on 26 March, officials described the shortage of PPE and the timelines for 'shipping' PPE which would arrive in the 'summer'. 'Why are you talking about shipping?' 'That's how we buy PPE, most of it comes from China and it is shipped here.' Why? 'It's the rules.' This meant that PPE vital for NHS staff wouldn't arrive until *after* the peak.

332. I said to officials: After this meeting, call the airlines, tell them we're hiring their planes, their entire business is dead so you'll be able to get a great deal, get officials figuring out where the nearest airfields are in China to the factories with our stuff, then fly the planes to those airfields, collect our stuff, fly it back, and tell everybody we're flying stuff in an emergency not shipping it.
333. There was concern that this violated various 'rules'. I said the PM would personally authorise it and take legal responsibility. My impression was that generally officials thought only the PM's office could take such a decision and only the PM (or a small number legitimately invoking his authority) could order officials to 'just do X and don't worry about later JRs saying it was unlawful'. This impression was reinforced by many similar discussions and clearly constituted a big bottleneck. Many things invisible to No10 will have been slow or not happened because of this issue.
334. Partly because of this discussion I got the PM to say generally later on 26th that officials should ignore procurement rules and be the best customer in the world for our priority purchases.
335. E.g In a meeting in No10 on 27 March (the day he tested positive) officials said that ventilators had been turned down because 'because the price has been marked up'. I texted the PM (1122): 'They've totally fucked up ventilators. I just heard officials admit we have been turning down ventilator offers because "the price has been marked up"'. [INQ000048313/11] We'd given instructions to ignore normal rules on 'value for money'.



336. As he had the night before viz testing, the PM summed up the situation: 'It's Hancock. He has been hopeless.'

337. E.g On 30 March (in bed in Durham) I texted the PM about the horrific bureaucracy slowing testing, and the way Whitehall seemed to see testing as a lower priority than sticking to their normal glacial processes: [INQ000048313/12]



338. E.g PPE. In the last meeting the PM and I attended together in the Cabinet Room on 26 March, Hancock told us that PPE procurement was 'under control'. On 31/3 Hancock told the Cabinet Room that there was 10 weeks stock for most PPE (minutes). This proved false.

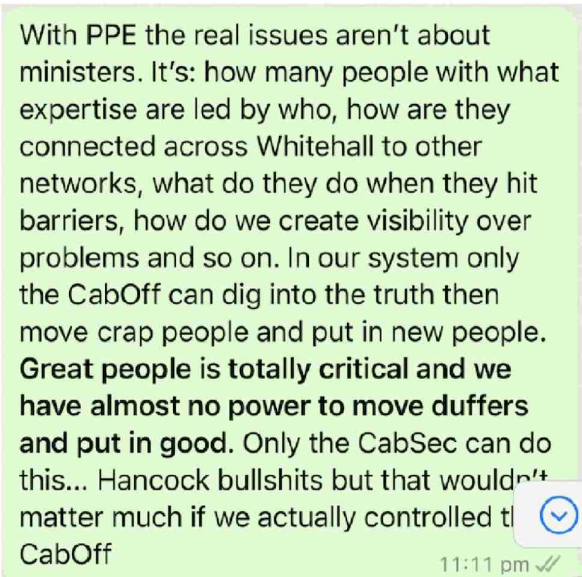
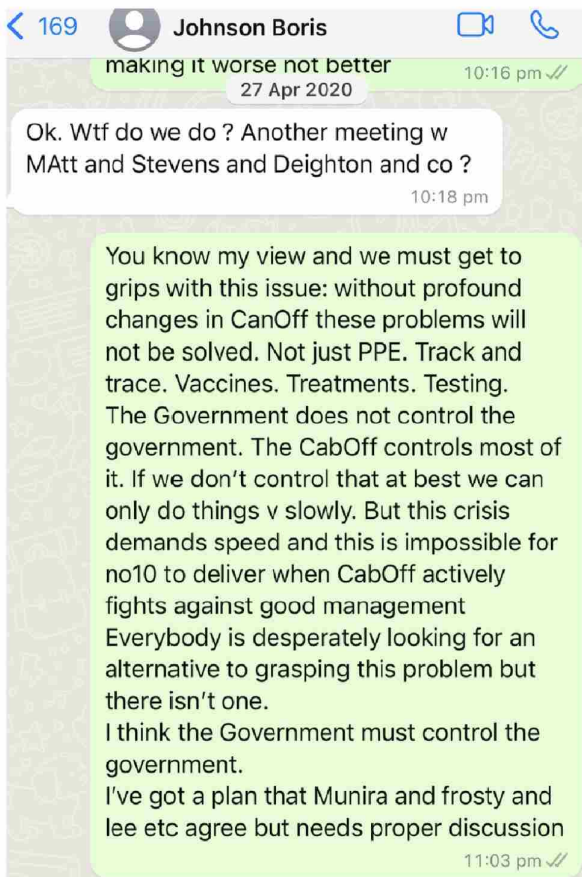
339. On 18/4 the PM (recovering in Chequers) reminded me of this given by then it very clearly was not fine, it was a disaster, and I asked the Cabinet Secretary to look into it (cf. text). As the Cabinet Secretary said, Hancock was indeed 'slippery on all this'. [INQ000048313/26]

340. On 20 April, it was clear in a meeting in the Cabinet room that Hancock was lying, that PPE was in a terrible state, that PPE had been turned down because officials had been told to demand discounts, that steps to create a 24/7 payments system for DHSC officials (which should have been done in early January) had only just been taken (i.e after it was too late to affect the first wave). Raab, then chairman as the PM recovered, pointed out to him that DHSC never gave him (Raab) PPE 'asks' of foreign leaders for his calls. (I should say given criticism of him later: I never saw Raab 'bully' anybody when he was acting PM in No10 nor did anybody complain to me about this, in fact the general view in No10, among officials and spads, was happiness and relief that the meetings were much more disciplined and orderly under Raab — he was much, much better at getting experts to explain and did not ramble his own views.)

341. Hancock tried to blame Simon Stevens, the Cabinet Office and the Treasury. The Cabinet Secretary texted me, I think as the meeting was still going on, to say how concerned he was, about Hancock's 'grip' and 'candour' (cf. texts) [INQ000048313/26]. The next day the Cabinet Secretary went through some of the PPE issues himself with officials and texted me that it was another example of DHSC 'not asking for help early enough, not sharing responsibility and covering their tracks when pressed.'
342. On 14/4 we agreed with Hancock to build domestic manufacturing for PPE and scope supply chains. In my email I referred to the vetocracy problem hobbling so many efforts – '20 people can say no but nobody can say yes' (cf. my email to CABSEC et al). [INQ000198050]
343. Shortly after this I texted the PM re the latest shambles (cf. email 18/4): [INQ000048313/13]



344. These issues hampered our response throughout 2020. Cf. rapid testing below.
345. I summarised the overlapping issues of a) our inability to do procurement properly and b) the problems of the Cabinet Office to the PM on 27/4: [INQ000048313/14-15]



346. On 13/5 Lord Deighton explained to the Cabinet room the reason for the disaster on PPE: he said there had been administrative blunders that meant that people thought we had a lot so hadn't put in the orders actually needed. This confirmed what we'd thought had happened.
347. The problems with PPE and other procurement were worsened because every country was locked in a zero sum game and everybody was encouraged to use underhand methods

'The rule of law'

348. There is a lot of talk about 'the rule of law' and how ministers must never tell officials to 'break the law'.
349. This often elides two different issues.
- a) There is a huge difference between *international* law (which does not have the force of domestic law) and *domestic* law. Traditionally our constitution has treated the two extremely differently. A Minister cannot break clear domestic law passed by Parliament (other than authorised exceptions, e.g MI5 allowed to do 'burglary'.) But international law is not enforced in our courts and nobody has thought until recently to condemn ministers as 'undermining the rule of law', as if they are undermining our constitution and sliding rapidly into fascism, when they breach international obligations. (Is a Minister 'undermining the rule of law' when they authorise MI6 to break international law? Obviously not on any non-revolutionary interpretation of our constitution.)
 - b) There is a huge difference between a minister saying 'the law is clear but I don't care break it' and 'the law is highly unclear, this is an emergency, do the sensible thing and if a JR later says it was unlawful that's ok and it's a legitimate judgement for a minister to make'.
350. The phrase 'the rule of law' is increasingly used by campaigners to confuse these things and it does confuse MPs and media. Many want to constrain political action and judgements and give lawyers the whip hand. I saw the disastrous effects of this culture many times including during Brexit negotiations when some government lawyers should have been fired immediately for their attempts to treat international obligations to foreign nations as more important than vital British interests. This problem was relevant to covid.
351. On covid there was another elision between a) being corrupt ('breaking the law') and b) a judicial review finding an action unlawful ('breaking the law').
352. This encouraged the media to describe ministers as 'breaking the law' as if they were corrupt when the reality is the government loses JRs all the time, this has become normal, and it should not be treated as if ministers are crooks.
353. The opacity and confusion also, I think, made it more likely that ministers and officials could get away with dodgy/corrupt action in the fog.

Dodgy deals / 'VIP lane'

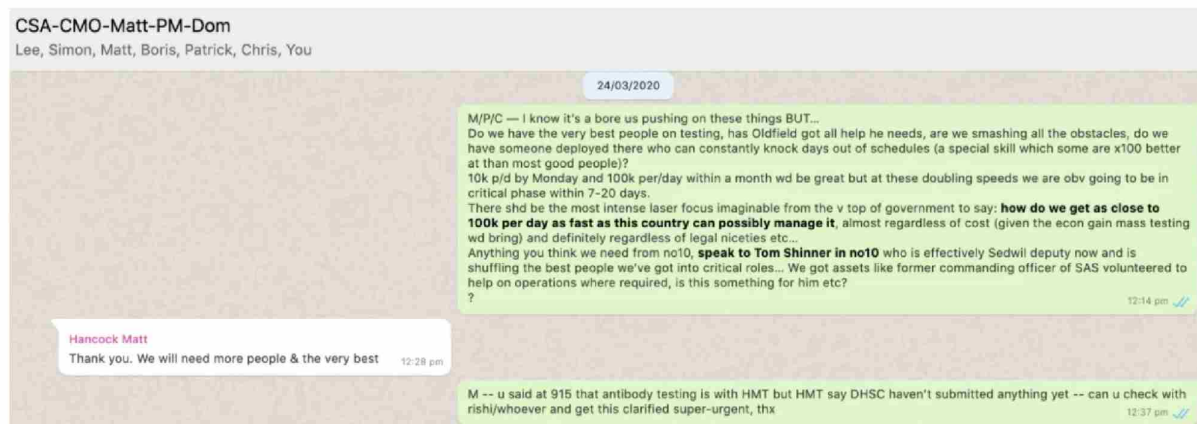
354. Caveat: I very rarely involved myself in commercial contracts. My role was much more to identify problems/blocks then get the system moving then I would move on. I am not at all expert in contracts. The PM often used Lord Lister, who is an expert on contracts, as a 'go between' with companies. Also because I refused in January to help him with secret donations for the flat, he used other people to do things he considered dodgy and would not have asked me to fix some contract for a friend.

355. I don't think I heard the term 'VIP lane' until after I left No10. My impression in No10 was simply that in the chaos officials rightly set up a triage system that ministers, spads and other officials could connect people getting in touch with, so their offers could be quickly assessed. All of us around No10 were sent messages from people offering help with testing, PPE etc. Some were charlatans, some were extremely talented and/or rich/powerful and therefore could potentially offer valuable help.
356. I did not see evidence that the PM was using covid contracts to enrich himself or friends. The only exception concerned bunging cash to the media, an episode that has, unsurprisingly, barely been covered by the media. He did not ask me or Lee Cain to do this. He said he wanted to bung money to Lebedev/Osborne and that Osborne had been begging for cash. I said I thought this an extremely bad idea. I overheard him telling a senior official to bung them cash and my understanding was this happened as part of a general bung to the media which has never properly been investigated. (Cf. his meeting 19/3. The fact that the PM was acting in my opinion unethically does not imply that Lebedev had asked him to. I have never spoken to or met Lebedev.)
357. The PM was accused in spring 2021 of improper behaviour regarding James Dyson. I believe these accusations were false. I spoke to the PM and Dyson staff (possibly Dyson too I don't remember) in spring 2020. I know Dyson a little. I believe he was trying to help the country. I never saw or heard any evidence of him trying to improperly enrich himself and neither Dyson nor his staff made any suggestions to me that I considered even hinting at anything dodgy. If I'd been asked about the Dyson story when it leaked in spring 2021 to the BBC I would have given a supportive public statement that I believed the accusations against the PM and Dyson to be false. Instead the PM accused me of creating the story and this spread the 'corruption' meme. (I was not on the chain of emails that leaked regarding this story.)
358. I did not see evidence of Hancock doing dodgy deals. The PM, Hancock and Lister discussed deals with Feldman and others. I did not know any details.

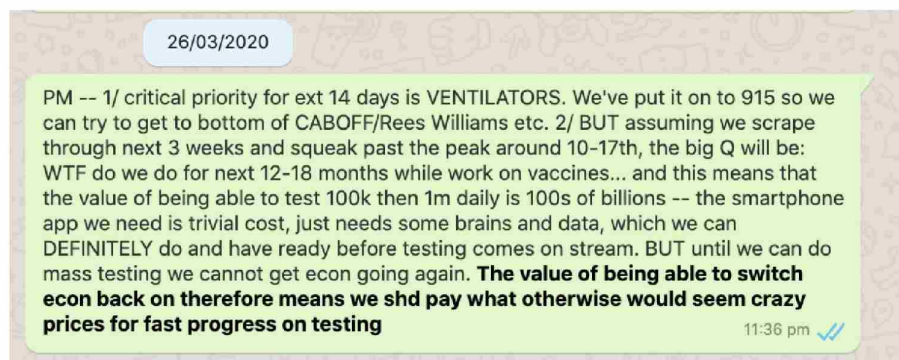
TESTING

359. We knew in February that many infections were asymptomatic and this was discussed at SAGE. Hancock and the PM suggested in 2021 that a) this was not the case and b) we didn't realise this until after the first lockdown. This is false. It's possible the PM became confused on this and was not lying. E.g on 8/7/20 he said that 'nobody knew' at the start that it could be transmitted asymptotically. Hancock also became convinced somehow that testing did not work with asymptomatic people (cf. WhatsApp group).
360. Before March our testing capacity was pathetically small. It was not ramped up by DHSE and PHE in any serious way because the original plan was herd immunity so there was no concept of scaling up testing to do track-and-trace or mass testing.
361. The PM and I pushed Hancock on this in February and March and said we've got to ramp it up as other countries are to 100k per day then more but it was painfully slow.
362. On 24/3 I texted the Covid/No10 group confirming that we'd just agreed with Hancock on 100k per day by the end of April and we needed to help Oldfield and others to deliver. [INQ000267913] (Hancock said we'd definitely get to 10k in the next few days which didn't

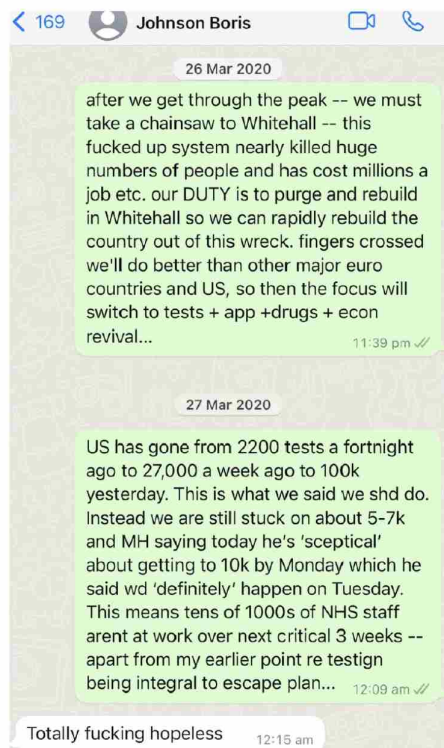
happen.) A bit later I texted the PM/CSA/CMO/Hancock/Cain group urging we explore *every aspect of state capacity* to improve testing capacity. At this stage there was a constant refrain of 'let's take it offline' instead of getting to the bottom of problems with DHSC. Hancock had again tried to blame HMT for delays on antibody testing. No10 was told that HMT was not the block.



363. On 26/3 I texted Numberten Action: we should be aiming for 100k tests per day then over 1 million, the value of mass testing was so high in regained economic activity that it justified massive investments. [INQ000048313/51]



364. Before the PM got covid on 27/3, we had told Hancock to aim for 100k per day (cf. my text below, minutes before he told me he'd tested positive). [INQ000048313/10]



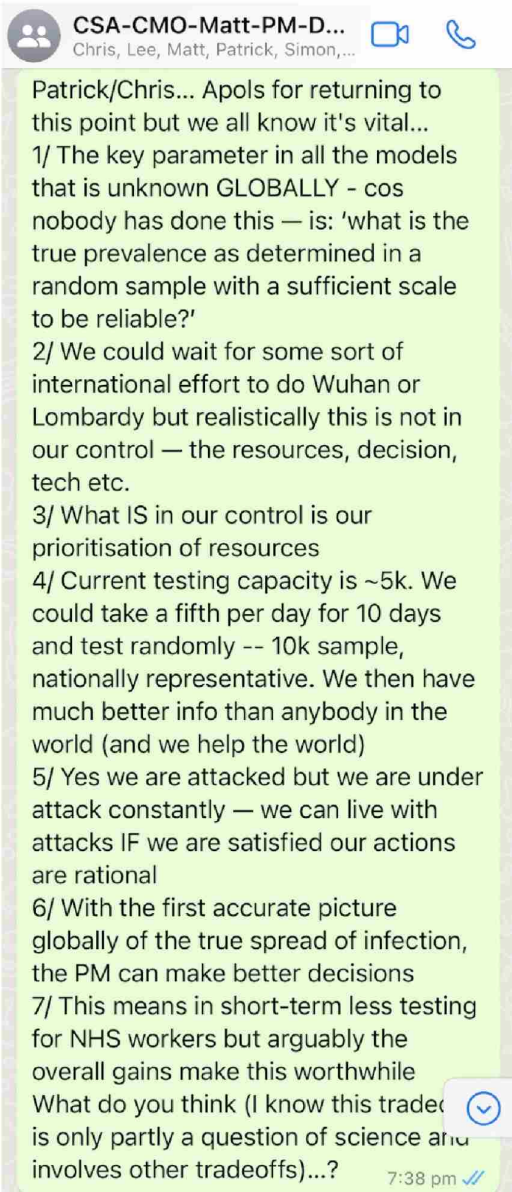
365. On 2/4 Hancock told the PM meeting that DHSC was confident about hitting 100k a day by the end of April but there were 'risks' with announcing it. He announced it anyway later that day to the media *without coordinating in Whitehall in advance*. He also said that 'every single patient who has needed a test has had access to a test'. This was not true. (Cain can confirm how this was blurted out without proper planning.)

366. A lot of media has portrayed my criticism of this as 'the goal of 100k was wrong'. No. The goal was right and already existed in March. I pushed for it to expand to 500k then a million and more. The problem was a) announcing it without coordinating it then b) pulling the system to focus on the end of April announcement rather than on what was truly most important for coming months, and rather than the immediate crisis in care homes. In April No10 got frequent calls from people to the effect that building testing infrastructure in the right way for the months ahead was being pulled out of shape by Hancock demanding people do things to help with his press conference at the end of the month. It was great that huge efforts were made in April to increase testing capacity but the efforts should have been optimised for 'how to make the infrastructure we need for the months ahead', not 'can Hancock announce success on 31 April'. Having a target and milestone dates: good. Having a plan to increase the target: good. Making targets/milestones public: good. Telling people working on testing to change what they were doing from the right thing for the medium term to help Hancock's announcement: bad.

367. Tracing was always bad. It was bad to rely on outsourcing to these large often dysfunctional companies like Capita. It was bad it was so centralised. One of the strengths in places like Singapore and Korea was hyper-local support services, both tracking down outbreaks to the specific building or room and in providing support.

Random ONS tests

368. In March Ben Warner and I organised polling at scale to give us better information (below).
369. Out of these discussions we suggested to Vallance the idea of random testing of the population in order to get the most accurate possible picture of the prevalence and rate of spread of the disease and an accurate picture of the importance of asymptomatic spread and we'd improve the accuracy of predictive models helping us figure out where it was more likely to 'run hot' (e.g my text to Vallance, 1938 on 19/3, on the WhatsApp group with CSA, CMO, Hancock and Lee Cain, in which I explained that as far as we could see nobody in the world had done a random test and if we did it it would help the whole world). [INQ000048399/7-8] Nobody in the world had yet done this. Vallance agreed it would be very valuable. But our testing capacity was so poor it was not done then. As testing capability grew we started doing it. Many advised that PHE couldn't do it. Ben suggested we run it through the ONS because Ian Diamond was excellent. This worked. Diamond did an excellent job.



Rapid tests

370. In spring various (particularly younger) scientists had shown that a) rapid testing was possible (lateral flows, LAMP etc) and b) it could be used to hugely improve the speed and efficacy of quarantine and relieve the need for central legally enforced restrictions. It provided a potential way out of the dilemma of March – if there is no vaccine then either a) the NHS is overwhelmed with all that implies or b) the economy is wrecked with all that implies.

371. DHSC and PHE did not grasp this potential for months. Precious months from March to July were largely wasted. Eventually a network of young scientists including Veronica Fowler (LAMP), Gaurav Venkataraman, and James Phillips organised themselves. (James Phillips was a great young neuroscientist who had engineered viruses at the famous Janelia lab and answered my 'weirdos and misfits' call of January to help No10.) Phillips told me to bring in

Vallance and others to be briefed. I organised a meeting in No10 at which the scientists presented and explained that parts of the system including DHSC and PHE were not driving action. I spoke to Vallance. He agreed it seemed very promising and did not understand why this had not been prioritised. We both spoke to the Cabinet Secretary and agreed that No10 should drive the system very aggressively. (I urge the Inquiry to ask for a witness statement from Veronica Fowler about the journey of mass testing because this story has not been properly told.)

372. I made it a central focus for No10 for months to come. I persuaded the PM that rapid/mass testing was a potential way out of the Catch-22 and we should throw the whole government machine behind it. Even then parts of the bureaucracy were incredibly resistant. I started Friday morning meetings in No10 (first with me and no ministers then immediately after with the PM and ministers) to drive progress. I brought in some of the scientists and technologists building the different tests to the Cabinet Room so the most senior people could see and ask questions. (E.g LAMP demo to PM, 16/10 by Veronica Fowler.)
373. My email of 6/10 explains some thinking at the time. If we could get millions of tests that gave results within minutes then getting a fraction of superspreaders (crucially, the asymptomatic) to isolate would allow most of the country to operate as normal. This explained emerging thinking about the potential for millions of tests per week and decentralised action to replace the centralised test-trace operation which couldn't cope.
374. In September I was told by people working on the project that they were struggling to build their team because officials were insisting on normal Cabinet Office HR rules which were the opposite of urgent. The Cabinet Secretary and I got key people around the Cabinet table including the head of commercial and head of HR in the Cabinet Office. We both delivered an extremely blunt message: the country faces another covid wave that could kill thousands, mass testing could save thousands of lives and save huge economic damage, we need to build a mass testing operation at extreme speed, this means total freedom to hire the best possible people immediately *without any normal HR rules applying*, and freedom for the team to *ignore EU procurement rules* to buy what they needed – I said the PM would take legal responsibility if there were judicial reviews.
375. Another aspect adding to the complexity (of operations and law/process) was that we had to do some of the buying secretly so we could get what we needed without alerting the rest of the world and prompting another scramble that would mean us paying much higher prices and/or losing out as we had with PPE etc in the spring. (I also explored using the intelligence services to acquire and reverse engineer critical things, I think this proved unnecessary but it's something to consider for future emergencies.)
376. Heads nodded. The new Cabinet Secretary delivering such a message, and making clear he and the PM were assuming responsibility for the consequences, was a highly unusual event.
377. And nothing happened. Over the next few days I kept getting the same messages about the friction. Issuing orders from the very apex of power in an emergency killing people did not trump decades of accumulated HR bureaucracy. We had to bring the same people back to the Cabinet room a second time and say, what did you not understand, we explicitly said Alex Cooper et al do not have to go through Cabinet Office processes to grab the people they need, do this now.

378. Some officials continued to resist rapid tests on the basis they were less accurate than PCR tests. This misunderstood a crucial point. Rapid tests were at least as accurate at identifying infectious people which was the crucial metric – not whether people still had some virus in their system.
379. September-October we bought hundreds of millions of tests before most of the world realised the potential. We got many experimental tests validated. We started building domestic manufacturing as a hedge against another global scramble as we'd seen with PPE. We did a large test in Liverpool. And we deployed them at scale. Initially the Guardian and others campaigned against them. After I left, this campaign suddenly stopped and they campaigned for more rapid tests.
380. The failure to seize on this technology in spring, and rapidly build the capacity to deploy at mass scale, wasted at least 3-4 crucial months. These tests were not deployed at scale until later in Q3/Q4. We could have developed these tests in Q2, built manufacturing and distribution, and deployed them with schools going back in September – roughly at the scale of (tens of) millions being able to test daily/weekly.
381. This could have allowed us to get through the period from September to vaccine deployment *without* facing a choice between NHS collapse or another lockdown:
- thousands fewer deaths
 - much less economic damage
 - schools open (only shutting specific classes/schools when tests detected an outbreak)
 - keeping outbreaks localised
 - the NHS safer for everybody
 - leisure facilities using tests to stay open.
382. It would also have given the UK a valuable lead on the technology — we could have made the costs of the effort back multiple times over by being ahead of the game and selling to the rest of the world.

The resilience of No10, the PM and key people

383. Before the first wave I argued for testing of people coming in to No10 to try to limit the chances of disasters spreading throughout the system because the centre of government could not function.
384. Cabinet Office officials did not want to (because of lack of NHS tests) and the PM did not want to (because of the media story 'tests for MPs when NHS short of tests' etc).
385. What happened was very bad but it could have been worse. Potentially the PM and Cabinet Secretary and others could have been hospitalised/dead at the same time.
386. On 25 June I emailed Reynolds about this (cf. evidence doc). I said that this should be fixed in the summer so we didn't have the same disaster again. This happened. A testing site was installed upstairs. We did not have a repeat of this problem.
387. There must be a serious plan for protecting No10 and key people in a future crisis.

BORDER CONTROL

388. No British government has taken borders seriously for over 25 years therefore there was a lot of infrastructure missing in Q1 2020 even if there had been a plan for serious border control which there was not.
389. Before April the PM and I were told repeatedly – in every pandemic people blame foreigners, we should not listen to those demanding that we stop flights, close the borders, it will have practically no effect on the spread.
390. On 22/1 SAGE agreed with NERVTAG not to advise border screening [INQ000051718/3].
391. This had some logic given Plan A was herd immunity by summer anyway.
392. At this stage public health professionals were publicly arguing that closing borders was stupid/racist: look at the reaction to (supermodel) Caprice on TV, when she said ‘close the borders’, as a great example of the misplaced superiority of many public health ‘experts’.
393. And Jan-Feb the PM’s ‘it’s swine flu’ attitude meant he did not challenge the conventional wisdom. And one of his few consistent views on policy was that he favoured open borders.
394. The PM did say in some meetings before March, especially after some countries took action at borders, ‘Hang on, aren’t a lot of people going to think we are mad for not closing the borders?’ The advice was consistently: no PM, this won’t work, every pandemic sees foreigners getting blamed, public health experts do not support border closures etc.
395. I believe we should have closed flights from China etc immediately in January. Caprice was right, the public health experts were wrong.
396. After we shifted to Plan B the old logic made no sense. We could hardly ask our citizens to quarantine and suffer financially while simultaneously saying ‘foreigners can arrive with no tests and run around the country infected’. And officials who had said in January-February ‘no testing in airports, no closing borders’ were from April shifting to ‘test in airports and quarantine’.
397. But this provoked furious lobbying from various business organisations and the media. Worse, the *Telegraph*, which the PM often referred to as ‘my real boss’, campaigned against a serious border policy. Although the PM supported a change in April when he was briefly in ‘this is serious, thank god we changed course’ mode, when he shifted back to ‘I should have been the Mayor of Jaws’ mode he kept prevaricating and changing his mind through summer 2020. Some days he would change his mind 2 or 3 times on this subject and even brief newspapers himself (and encourage others to) against the policy we had agreed. This caused chaos.
398. I pushed for us to adopt something like the Singapore border policy, cf. texts to various groups March-May, my texts with PM on 9/5.
399. We had to keep emphasising that it was ludicrous for us to tell the public both a) YOU have to quarantine but b) foreigners can just fly in and don’t have to test/quarantine. This

tended to provoke the answer 'the whole thing is insane we shouldn't be doing this at all'. But if we said 'ok then go out and tell everyone that' he would not persist.

SHIELDING

400. There was no serious plan for shielding as late as Thursday 19 March.
401. Roughly lunchtime that day I held a meeting in No10 with [NR] (spad) and Jen Allum (official, GDS).
402. CLG's 'plan' was for a hotline which they said we shouldn't publicise so it wouldn't get overwhelmed (cf. minutes of Healthcare ministerial group on 18/3).[INQ000055933]
403. It was clear that many officials in Cabinet Office and CLG did not want to develop a shielding program. Their logic was that a) it was impossible, b) when it failed it would simply attract blame, some officials even referred to the 'reputational damage' to the civil service if it failed.
404. I thought this was not acceptable. We were ordering people to stay at home. Over a million were disabled etc. We had to try. I asked, 'can you technically solve this problem?'
405. Jen Allum said, 'I think we can'. She outlined a plan to build something fast that could work. I said, build it and No10 will worry about the 'reputational risks' and other objections. Her, Lewis and others built a team to develop and execute the plan. Mr Lewis and Jen Allum worked all-nighters for a few nights in a row to build the system.
406. Some officials, instead of supporting them, tried to get the Cabinet Office to stop action on the basis it was 'against the rules' and/or I did not have the authority to order such action. The team built it. It helped many people. I think Jen Allum and others did an outstanding job in very tough circumstances.
407. This plan should have been in place as part of general pandemic planning. Its absence is a good example of the gap between 'world-leading pandemic plan' and reality.
408. Further until that point, I think GDS didn't build services for other departments in this way and this situation highlighted some problems of current department structure. This was sort of 'nobody's problem' and everyone's problem but there were almost no effective ways of working across departments (this is the sort of problem that often defaulted to No10/me during covid). This was a big headwind. Departments were resisting central direction (from me/No10) and central design (GDS, Jen) without there being a serious alternative. Per my email to the Cabinet Secretary in February it was clear before the crisis that GDS had some great people but weak leadership and cross-Whitehall coordination. I don't know enough about GDS and the history to explain further but I think this is important and underrated.

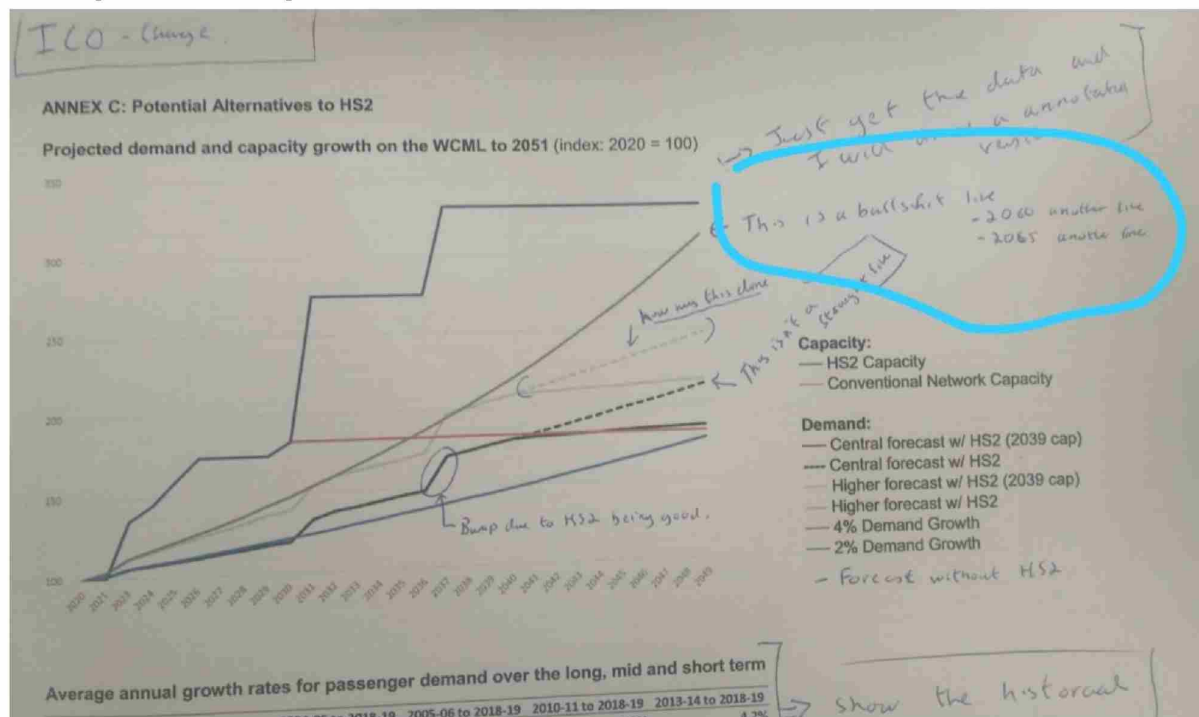
FURLOUGH / FINANCIAL SUPPORT

409. There was no plan for furlough or anything like it.
410. This plan was developed mainly by [Name Redacted] and Tim Leunig.

411. At first Treasury officials said it was impossible to implement but after Stripe said that they could implement it officials changed tack.
412. A lot of richer people had a happy time in spring-summer 2020 staying at home with family working via Zoom. Lots of poorer people had to go to work or lose money. There was resistance to thinking about how to compensate people for staying at home when they were told they had to.
413. There were connected issues such as providing food and medicine. We never built the system that countries in East Asia did to provide such support. This also undermined quarantine.

DATA

414. There was no proper data system in the Cabinet Office / CCU nor the skills to build it.
415. An example from January. We were discussing evidence for HS2. We were shown graphs by the Department for Transport showing huge demand growing exponentially. These graphs had been approved by the Cabinet Office to show to the PM. Ben Warner pointed out: this graph cannot be correct because it shows an exponential curve rising smoothly which means everybody in Britain will be riding on HS2 or building HS3, HS4 faster and faster, it must be wrong.
416. Why is this relevant? It shows the Cabinet Office did not have the people in place to stop wrong data/graphs about exponential curves being shown to the PM, and spotting such errors in Q1 2020 was often a lottery of whether people like Ben were in the room.
417. Here is the actual chart, with Ben's annotation at the time 'this is a bullshit line':
[INQ000267880]



418. When covid struck Simon Stevens would read out the latest NHS data from a scrap of paper with numbers phoned and faxed in. Because of our very low testing capacity the most reliable information came from people showing up at hospital and/or dying. The NHS, DHSC and the Cabinet Office had data systems many years out of date. NHS-D was seen as terrible. This had a huge effect on the quality of decisions.
419. In a rather pathetic effort to improve clarity, before each meeting I would wheel a white board into the Cabinet Room, write down the numbers as people spoke, then click x2 x2 x2 on my phone then say something like — it seems to be doubling every 2-3 days not the 5-7 days that keeps appearing on these Powerpoints, so in 10 days there will be A cases, B in hospital, C on ventilators, D deaths – and scribble the numbers on the whiteboard (cf. above). Some would nod their heads, some would look baffled and/or horrified. When covid cases in London hospitals were just 50 it seemed hard to imagine for some that the system could be overwhelmed in a few weeks. When conversation headed down a dead end, I could point at the white board and say — ‘but in X days the NHS will be swamped’.
420. Faculty AI, Name Redacted and other officials including Tom Shinner worked with Ben Warner to build the team and the live dashboard. This was a huge improvement. And Faculty built a system with the NHS so we could see live predictions on bed capacity, ICU capacity. This helped enormously (and helped persuade senior officials of the importance of the wider data agenda). There have been accusations by MPs and journalists that this dashboard used personal data and made it available to Palantir. This dashboard did not use any personal data and none was shared with Faculty (which said explicitly they did not need or want personal data). These false stories contributed to public suspicion about the vaccine and contact tracing app.
421. There were big problems with GDPR. Countless things could have been defined as illegal and would have been in normal circumstances. On 7/3 I asked the DHSC group to get a grip of this. Problems persisted. I told the Cabinet Office to tell the ICO that unless they put out a public statement essentially suspending GDPR (informally) I would tell the PM to say publicly it should be ignored.
422. It was obvious in February that we could help SAGE and others by commissioning polling at large scale. Ben Warner and I had meetings and organised this. It later became the subject of a judicial review which the government won in the Court of Appeal. (See above, procurement.)

MODELS

423. I was sceptical about some of the claims around the Imperial model and others. I was warned by Marc and Ben Warner (can’t remember exactly when but in first fortnight of March) that these academic models were likely to be ‘spaghetti code’ patched together over many years, very far from top notch code and perhaps highly unreliable. There was a fundamental problem: while there is good epidemiological science, predicting a pandemic involves predicting not just ‘what happens as a disease spreads unnoticed’ but what happens when government action and psychology and news create all sorts of complex nonlinear dynamics. We do not have reliable models for predicting human behaviour in such crises.

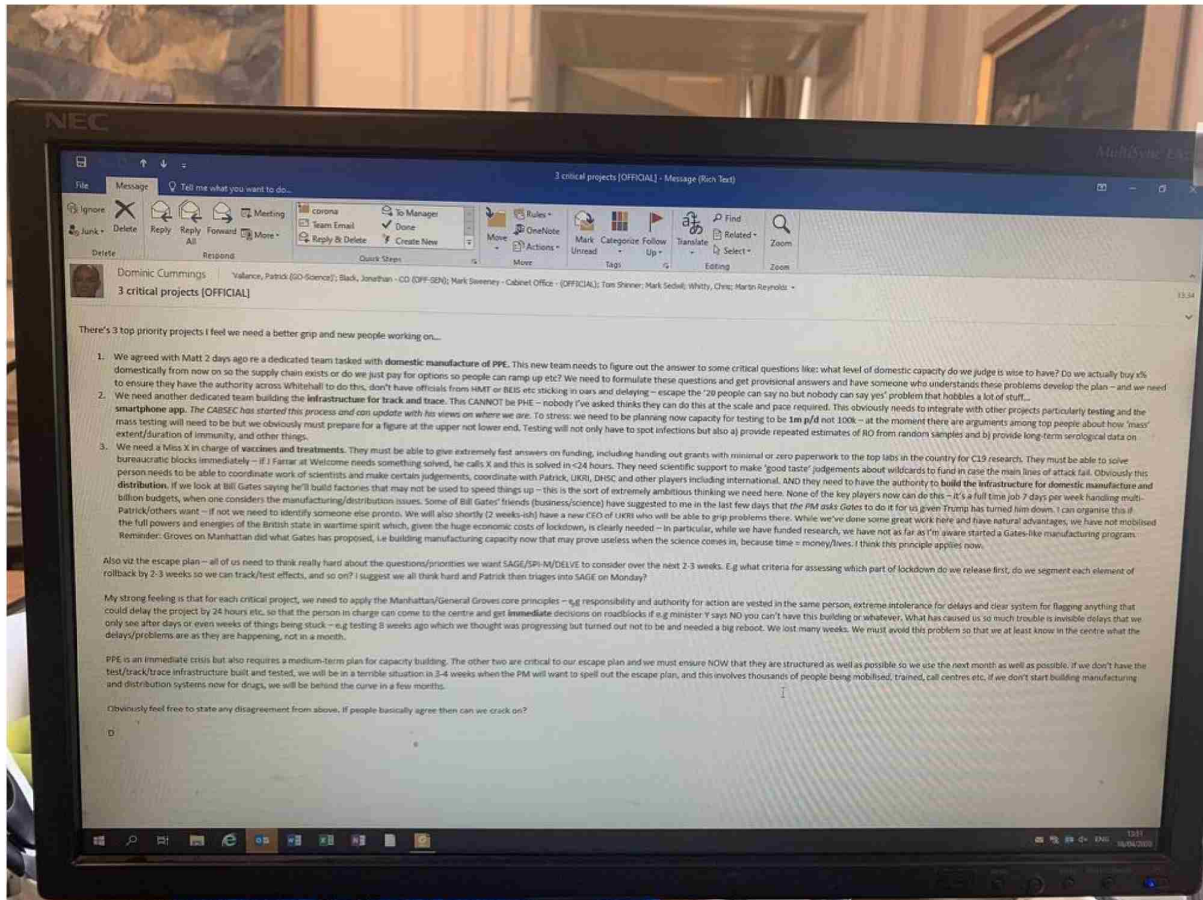
424. I asked Vallance in early March if the code could be shared with people like DeepMind and Faculty AI for verification. Vallance agreed it should be. But I was told this was agreed in principle but the chaos was such it did not happen until after the first peak. And I have been told that the code was indeed 'spaghetti code' (by Marc Warner; academics who've subsequently examined it). (It is on GitHub.)
425. For clarity, my evolving view from the end of February to 14/3 was not based on faith in the precision of these models and I did not change my mind because of new data from the Imperial model that arrived 14-15 March. My view was based on the much simpler argument that we could extrapolate from the numbers of deaths and hospitalisations to predict that the NHS would be hugely overwhelmed in April if we did not change course. Gowers, Hassabis and Marc and Ben Warner all said to me mid-March: you do not need to take a view on these highly complex models where we can't see the code, the critical things are much simpler than this. Similarly in autumn my view was not based on faith in the accuracy of academic models but on much simpler models and the work done by the No10 data science team.
426. There still has not been a full detailed investigation into all these academic models made public for proper scientific scrutiny. There is a project underway at Oxford to turn the academic models into Python code and explore them. There are many unanswered questions about how the Imperial and other models work.
427. Claims that the Imperial model was 'gold standard' were not and are not justified. I do not mean this as blame. They were an academic team with many constraints imposed on them by funding and academia. But it's important to be honest about what these models were and were not and I do not think this has happened. And I am not aware of a proper project in government to develop actual edge-of-the-art models for use in a pandemic. I fear that if a new pandemic hit now, we would be scrabbling around talking to academics with spaghetti code again.
428. While human-driven crises like terrorism obviously create hard issues around transparency, and not everything can be published, any complex models used for decision-making in a pandemic should be totally transparent including all code and data. And given what's happened in covid if this does not happen then many, including many top scientists and technologists, will rightly not trust government claims about 'models'. (I think similarly a lack of transparency on data has undermined trust in vaccines.)
429. Faculty built a model with the NHS that predicted things like bed / oxygen occupancy in spring-summer 2020. This was 'live' on the dashboard in the Cabinet Room and was used to help decisions and by the Covid Taskforce. My understanding is this worked extremely well because 1) this was a *much narrower problem* than the harder problem of predicting disease spread, 2) they had excellent data (by roughly May), 3) they had the resources and skills to attack the problem properly and 4) they were supported by No10, the NHS and elsewhere in Whitehall.

VACCINE TASKFORCE

430. The assumption January to February was that a) vaccines may not be developed at all, b) if they are it is overwhelmingly likely they will not be relevant to 2020 and winter 2020-21. Do you mean close to zero chance, I would ask. Yes, roughly, was the reply.

431. From later February I was told by various people, including Marc Warner who was talking to many in Silicon Valley, that this assumption should be rejected and that we should create 'a Manhattan Project for vaccines'. In America people like Bill Gates argued this publicly.
432. I spoke to Marc and Ben Warner and Patrick Vallance about it in February-March.
433. When we spoke to the PM on 14 March this was one of the elements of Plan B along with a huge effort on therapeutics and testing.
434. On 24/3 Vallance texted me that he wanted to set up a Taskforce, it couldn't all be in DHSC, was I supportive.
435. I replied: definitely. He said he would speak to Wormald immediately.
436. Vallance and I discussed it shortly after this. We agreed it should sit outside DHSC. I told Vallance I would discuss it with the Cabinet Secretary. On 26/3 I texted Vallance (on the group with PM) about delays in the bureaucracy for getting cash to vaccines/drugs. I then asked Alok to get onto Walport to slash UKRI bureaucracy and to put it in writing so Walport would know he'd be covered when inevitable complaints happened later. (I often said this to try to make it easier for officials to ditch damaging processes.) Alok replied that he had. Reports came to me over coming weeks that although it wasn't perfect the funding system did speed up considerably. My impression is that the 'Recovery' drug funding program is seen globally as one of the great successes (saving many lives across the world as well as Britain) though I think it could have been faster and better.
437. I discussed the taskforce with the Cabinet Secretary. The first advice had been that we should ask to join the European Commission's vaccine plan. When I and others looked at it it looked like a classic slow, bureaucratic process with lots of meetings and PowerPoints and consultants but no fast action and nothing like *the concurrent R&D* approach I believed necessary. I told the Cabinet Secretary that we'd left the EU and we should do it ourselves with a dedicated taskforce not subject to normal Whitehall processes. And I told him we should 'divvy up' Hancock's job including vaccines and testing. He agreed and was supportive partly because of all our doubts about DHSC being in a deep crisis, and Hancock's competence and honesty (cf. texts). I said I would speak to the PM about it. [INQ000048313]
438. Around mid-April it was still assumed that a vaccine could not change things for at least another 12 months (cf. note from CSA/CMO to PM et al, 5/4 [INQ000068683]) but Vallance was sounding more optimistic.
439. On 16/4 I wrote to the CABSEC, Vallance and Whitty about the VTF, inter alia. [INQ000198050] I stressed the need for:
- Extremely fast funding decisions.
 - People to eliminate blocks in less than 24 hours.
 - Build infrastructure for domestic manufacture and distribution in the spirit of General Groves on the Manhattan Project - i.e *concurrent building on manufacturing and distribution NOW will save time, money and lives and economic harm.*
 - Help UKRI improve the funding bureaucracy which was slowing lots down.

- Identify a leader (Gates had been suggested to me).
- We must generally grip the combination of 'invisible delays' - i.e delays we only see at the centre weeks after they've gone wrong - connected to the systemic separation of responsibility and accountability across the system and the need for *directly responsible individuals*.



440. I stressed to the PM that the taskforce had to report to the PM, Bingham must have real authority including to pick her team, it must be free of normal bureaucracy including procurement rules with the PM taking responsibility for any judicial reviews, and it had to build and fund manufacturing, distribution, logistics concurrently (not sequentially), BEIS should be given some of the admin tasks instead of DHSC, and the Treasury would have to authorise such a unique project.

441. On and around 10/5 I told officials that the VTF needed a) a much bigger budget, b) a completely different approach to DHSC's applying concurrency, and c) that Bingham needed the authority to make financial decisions herself *without clearance from Hancock*. (Cf my texts of 10/5.) [INQ000267906]

Covid: No 10 coordination

Alex, Emily, Liam, Clare, Lee, Simon, Henry, Alex, Jack, Elise, David, Stuart, Steve, Katharine, Imran, Kate, Katie, Oliver, Eddie, Malcolm, Martin, James, Munira, Ben...

10/05/2020

Malcolm/Will/Imran -- mtng with Kate Bingham -- we need a plan for a MUCH bigger budget and how she can work with likes of Newton to get cash out super fast -- no usual bullshit and processes, as with the previous plan that has delayed everything

7:17 pm ✓

she needs to be able to talk to people who understand then say -- give them 200m, give them 80m, give them 20 m etc -- there is no conventional process for what this needs to do -- but we need treatments by autumn, not powerpoints and meetings for months...

7:19 pm ✓

and crucially DHSC and BEIS think they will be involved -- they can contribute expertise but NOT involved in clearing funds

7:20 pm ✓

442. In April the PM had nearly died and was in 'take covid seriously' mode. He agreed immediately to create the Taskforce the way Vallance, Sedwill and I discussed. There was remarkably little discussion about it and it was mostly informal. (I think the real 'decision' moment was a quick informal discussion in his office with only a handful of people including the Cabinet Secretary, Lee Cain and Imran. There was some discussion about 'handling' Hancock who was worried it would look like he'd been demoted.)

443. Very quickly the PM called Kate Bingham. Vallance and I discussed the TF with her and I said the PM's office would support her in overcoming Whitehall resistance. Generally it seemed to run well and I did not have much to do with it after we set it up and got Bingham in, on the principle (above) that I tried to focus on problems and when things were moving OK I moved on to new problems and asked people like Vallance and Bingham to come to me if they needed help. At one point No10 was told that Hancock was trying to sign a contract that was badly written and would mean we funded a vaccine but would not be at the front of the queue for it. I don't remember the details but I remember Vallance and Ben Warner being involved in sorting it out. My impression was that once BEIS were handling the contracts things improved and the consensus among officials was that Alok did a good job on this. (My impression from some news stories about her book is that No10 could have helped her more when she was clearly the victim of briefing from DHSC, as were others who tried to help in 2020.)

444. There was a meeting with me, Vallance and Bingham on 13/5 to discuss the VTF. Vallance went through some of the obstacles such as the 'incredibly obstructive' NIHR process.

445. It seems to me now that:

- The mRNA vaccine was developed in January. We could have had the meeting we had in April in January and created the Taskforce then.
- We should have authorised almost immediate Human Challenge Trials (i.e paying people to participate in experimental trials). I think the practical and ethical case for this is unanswerable and the public would have supported it if properly explained and with a proper commitment to truly open data from the companies and governments. (Evidence is these trials are safer than widely thought, cf. *A Systematic Review of Human Challenge Trials, Designs, and Safety, 2023*.)
- The stages of trials, manufacturing and distribution could have been compressed more than we did, though we did better than the rest of Europe.
- Given what happened, it's clear that even if you ignore HCTs, if we'd started doing in January what we did April-May then we would have brought the timetable forward by ~3 months which would have substantially affected winter 2020-21 and the second wave.
- The TF worked because: we stayed out of the EU shambles; we put someone in charge who knew what she was doing; she had the PM's authority as well as responsibility (a very rare

example of responsibility and authority being put together); she picked good people; the PM was prepared to say that he would take legal responsibility if there were JRs in order to clear a lot of normal bureaucracy out the way.

- Instead of the Taskforce being turned back into a normal Whitehall agency in 2021, it should have been reinforced to develop the next generation of vaccines (better, safer) to target transmission and other variants. This would have further reduced later deaths and disruption. I warned MPs in May 2021 that the loss of energy with the TF could lead to trouble with a new variant. This happened with omicron.
- A proper Red Team could have picked up these points which were hiding in plain sight. DHSC, Cabinet Office and SAGE missed these issues.
- The fact that we did much better than everybody except America diminished appetite for looking at this objectively, combined with the usual SW1 bias against thinking about procurement and logistics.

446. In an extremely rare concession, the Commission admitted that it had to learn lessons from the relative success of Britain and the EU vis vaccine R&D. The German finance minister admitted the EU system was 'really shit' and 'a disgrace' and Germany could not 'let this shit repeat itself' (*Bild*, 2/2021).

447. Some officials suggested that if we did the EU scheme and it failed nobody would blame us but if we did our own thing and it failed it would be a disaster. This was a classic example of how highly asymmetric Whitehall incentives push people to bad defensive decisions – no career points for sensible risks and speeding up but you lose points if things go wrong, win points for slowing things down even if it's a bad call. If it had failed, it would still have been the right approach on any reasonable expected value basis, provided one was prioritising the country's interests and rational decisions rather than worrying about the media.

448. Another effect of Hancock's behaviour was that many around Whitehall did not believe the good news coming out of vaccine trials, dismissing Hancock's claims as 'more Hancock' but although he exaggerated sometimes the story coming out of trials was mostly good.

MASKS

449. Masks have been part of pandemic response for centuries.

450. Before the first lockdown No10 was repeatedly told 'do not encourage masks in the general population, they won't help, they might even make things worse'. (E.g Harries to the PM above.)

451. This was weird to me given a) medical staff clearly wear masks partly to protect themselves from disease, b) Asian countries clearly thought masks have a worthwhile effect, c) some of the top scientists in the world such as George Church were relentlessly saying 'encourage masks'.

452. I kept pushing on this and in March considered wearing a mask myself but thought it would be more likely to lead to the PM publicly opposing masks (making things worse) rather than accelerating the use of masks (as had happened on handshaking where me pushing him led to him bounding onto TV to shake everyone's hand).

453. SAGE spent months thinking about the evidence and saying 'no evidence'. As the debate started to change in April and I started to push and there was pressure elsewhere, Hancock then said we couldn't admit we might change our minds on masks or there'd be panic buying and the NHS would run out. Cf. his text on 16/4 re 'hold the line on masks or they will go like loo roll'. [INQ000102697/33]
454. Some suggested our new line to wear masks was a 'noble lie', that we did not think they would help but just said so because 'the focus groups wanted it'. This was totally false.
455. This was connected to a general failure to communicate the dangers of airborne transmission and asymptomatic transmission. Government communication overweighted 'wash your hands' and underweighted 'ventilate'. Millions remained unaware of the true risks of airborne transmission and the importance of avoiding breathing other people's air inside. Other countries got this right from the start.
456. Cf. my email 18/4.[INQ000048313/18-19]

COMMUNICATION

457. The government employs thousands of people for 'communication' but almost none of the best people.
458. The Whitehall communication machine did not have people who really understood how to build a system with fast feedback from market research to communication and marketing. Most of 'communications' was seen as 'talking to the media' which is a general view in Westminster and false.
459. The first plans from DfE/PHE in spring 2020 were bad.
460. This put huge pressure on No10 staff including me to help with this rather than focus on other things.
461. Late February and March was the only period I engaged a lot with 'communication', drafting PM words (often rejected), helping teams with public health campaigns, removing foolish red tape so we could do polling fast and at scale etc.
462. Examples. I helped the PHE team simplify public health messages and connected them to companies that could do focus groups and provide fast feedback. I suggested that the PM be accompanied by Vallance and Whitty in order that they could explain things and the scope for the PM giving his own ideas on many matters (and therefore spreading confusion) would be narrowed/suppressed. On 16/3 I suggested the PM leading an ovation nationwide for people to open windows/doors and cheer to thank NHS staff (cf. text). On 17/3 I suggested the Queen doing a broadcast and drafted a statement for her.
463. After the first wave, the media blamed much of the summer chaos on 'bad communication'.
464. This was mostly mistaken. The real causes of the summer chaos was a combination of a) Whitehall being overwhelmed, b) the PM's constant u-turns on key decisions and inability to stick to any strategy, c) too many people talking to the media and the PM refusing to act

seriously about ministerial ill discipline and constant leaks (and the No10 flat was one of those briefing the media with different lines to the No10 press office!).

465. Further, the PM did not want us to 'antagonise' the media by calling out false stories. In summer 2020 he called me into the office to complain about some of the crazy media. I said that a much more aggressive approach was needed, the media was full of garbage, partly because the newspapers feared bankruptcy from the collapse of commuter traffic. 'No no no, I want to make friends with them ... and the trouble is, my heart is with Bonkers [i.e Peter Hitchens], those are my people.'
466. We also couldn't be sure that he was not himself the source of false stories. For example in summer Fraser Nelson wrote that we had brought in masks because of focus groups even though we knew they didn't work. This was the opposite of the truth. Some thought the PM was the source of the story. A low point was when he circulated a video of a guy blowing a special hair dryer up his nose 'to kill covid' and asked the CSA and CMO what they thought (cf. YouTube link he sent to the WhatsApp group at 2133 on 14/3, which doesn't now work because it was removed by YouTube).
467. There were many claims in 2020 that it was 'government by focus group'. Almost all such stories were false. I paid little attention to them after the election other than in the period February-March. The government used them properly to figure out what people thought, why, what people heard from the media, whether they understood crucial things and so on. This was simply professional. I never suggested we do things I thought were wrong 'because of the focus groups' and I constantly stressed to officials we should focus on doing what we thought was the right thing regardless of the noise from the media and ministers' desires to appease it.
468. The 'rule of six' inside and out was a bad decision made under the influence of communication concerns. One of the most obvious things about covid from spring was that outside was much safer than inside but the rule did not incentivise people to meet outside. Why? It was the product of the chaos around the PM at the time. After many iterations people herded towards it as a solution because it seemed the only practical way to get him to agree something that was simple enough he might stick to for more than 5 minutes. It was a bad process and a bad decision. I argued against it. I lost the argument. (Perhaps a better policy would have collapsed rapidly, who knows.) Often simplifying things is intrinsically beneficial and generally a much simpler approach to covid guidance would have been a great improvement in summer. This was not.
469. The general problem persisted: far too many not very good people with 'communication' jobs. I wanted to remove the vast majority (80-90%) and got the PM's agreement. But it never happened. As soon as I left these plans for transforming Whitehall communication were abandoned.
470. An example of communication being a real problem: ventilation. Even in 2021, a year after the start, the government was over-stressing handwashing and under-stressing airborne transmission and the value of ventilation – opening windows, buying air purifiers etc. In Q3 I asked the team to add VENTILATE to hands-face-space but this never happened across the government system.

471. Lee Cain, then director of communication, wrote a paper for the IFG on government communications which explores many of the problems.

LEGAL POWERS / ENFORCEMENT

472. In summer it became clear that:
- Many powers were too vague to be confident about enforcement.
 - The police (in some places) did not want to enforce some measures.
 - Whitehall was unclear of its powers to force the police to act.
 - This combined with a general problem: the 'operational independence' mantra has left MPs and ministers unclear about what politicians' role is in telling the police what to do. Are Ministers supposed to convey to the police what the voters want and sometimes insist on it? Or is this 'political interference' and a 'slippery slope' to dangerous ground? This came to prominence in confused discussions about the BLM protests. Police did not want to act. Politicians didn't know if they should force them or not or if they even could. The PM and other ministers were and are fatalistic about this — which is hopeless in terms of preparing for the next pandemic, or a huge terrorist attack.
 - This led to a very bad outcome: arguments that we should increase restrictions on those who *obeyed* the rules to compensate for those who did *not* and people arguing 'because we can't enforce ABC properly we should introduce harsher restrictions on XYZ because they'll obey'. I would much have preferred to change the basic problem of how the politicians gave orders to the police but this is a huge issue everybody instinctively shied away from.

LEGAL ADVICE

473. The best way to get legal advice is to get the best people in the country looking at the problem immediately and keeping the team dealing with it small.
474. This almost never happens.
475. The normal process is to have a large team dealing with normal government lawyers.
476. This is slow. And it is almost always highly risk averse / defensive. And you can't have much confidence in it if the subject is important. So you end up going to the best people anyway having wasted a lot of time.
477. There are far too many lawyers and the growth has been crazy.
478. There should be a large cull and the most important decisions around the PM should skip the normal paths and go straight to the best people.
479. This will save time and money and help find more creative solutions and either a) avoid generating perverse consequences (everybody doing things they know dumb 'because legal advice') or b) bring to sharp focus the core problem for the PM who can make a decision, often political, about how to handle legal advice including how much risk to take on the question of possible judicial reviews finding action 'unlawful'.
480. Name Redacted, the No10 legal specialist, did an outstanding job in very tough circumstances.

SECOND WAVE: DECISIONS SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER

481. By September it was clear that most things were going wrong.
482. My relations with the PM were in a bad state and getting worse. By June he was blaming me for, in his words, 'bouncing' him into the first lockdown and saying he should have been the Mayor of Jaws. He was trying to keep the *Telegraph* happy by opposing all 'work from home'. He wanted to declare covid 'over' even though this would obviously backfire, not just on him but on government credibility generally. At one point in autumn he told me to 'put your campaign head back on and figure out how we dead-cat-covid, I'm sick of covid, I want it off the front pages'. I said that no campaign could 'dead cat covid' and I would not spend my time on such a project. He blamed me for all the noise about replacing Permanent Secretaries and reform of the civil service. He tried to blame me for the exams debacle and I had to remind him that I'd had an operation and been away, uninvolved in the whole thing.
483. We had had difficult conversations about his constant u-turns, the chaos around the Cabinet Secretary, refusing to move Hancock and others, abandoning (again) my attempt to change how No10 worked and bring the power of No10 and the Cabinet Office together so we could grip government and deal with the second wave. Many were saying to me that Carrie had restarted her campaign for a purge of No10 which we discussed and he didn't deny. I'd said I would leave in December and he seemed mostly happy about this.
484. I had tried to change the whole approach of the government in April-June 2020 and it seemed by the end of July I'd mostly failed. In July 2019 I was supposed to have a medical operation. I delayed it in order to go into No. 10 in 2019. Then it got delayed because of Brexit, and it got delayed from March to July 2020 because of covid. At the end of July 2020, I went to see him the night before my operation. I said, "I'm going for this operation tomorrow and I am reflecting on things. You need to know that I am going to leave at the latest by Friday 18 December. It is best if you and I part ways." He said, "Why?", and I said, "Because this whole system is chaos. This building is chaos. You know perfectly well from having worked with me that I can get great teams together and manage them, but you are more frightened of me having the power to stop the chaos than you are of the chaos, and this is a completely unsustainable position for us both to be in. I am not prepared to work with people like Hancock any more. I have told you umpteen times that you have got to remove him. You won't. It's going to be a disaster in the autumn, and therefore it's time that I should go." The Prime Minister, which I think says a lot, laughed and said, "You're right: I am more frightened of you having the power to stop the chaos than I am of the chaos. **Chaos isn't that bad. Chaos means that everyone has to look to me to see who is in charge.**"
485. On 22/6 in the Cabinet room I asked Chris Whitty, "What do you think the chances are that we will have R over 1 again by September and back to problems?" He said, "I think that, before the schools go back, probably R will be below 1, but it's over 50% likely that R will be over 1 if we bring the schools back in September." Vallance agreed.
486. On I think Friday 18/9 Vallance and Whitty came to No10 and said we needed a short sharp shock (referred to as 'a circuit breaker' at the time) to keep it under control. By now we had much better data and better ways of using data though still far from right, see the problems with JBC and Test & Trace and Ben Warner's repeated pleas at the time. We also had hundreds of thousands of tests every week. So we had much better visibility than in Wave 1. (Cf. email/paper from Taskforce on 18/9 [INQ000234016 and paper by Ridley on

19/9 which made clear that we'd surpass the first wave peak of deaths and hospitalisations by end of October / early November.[INQ000137293])

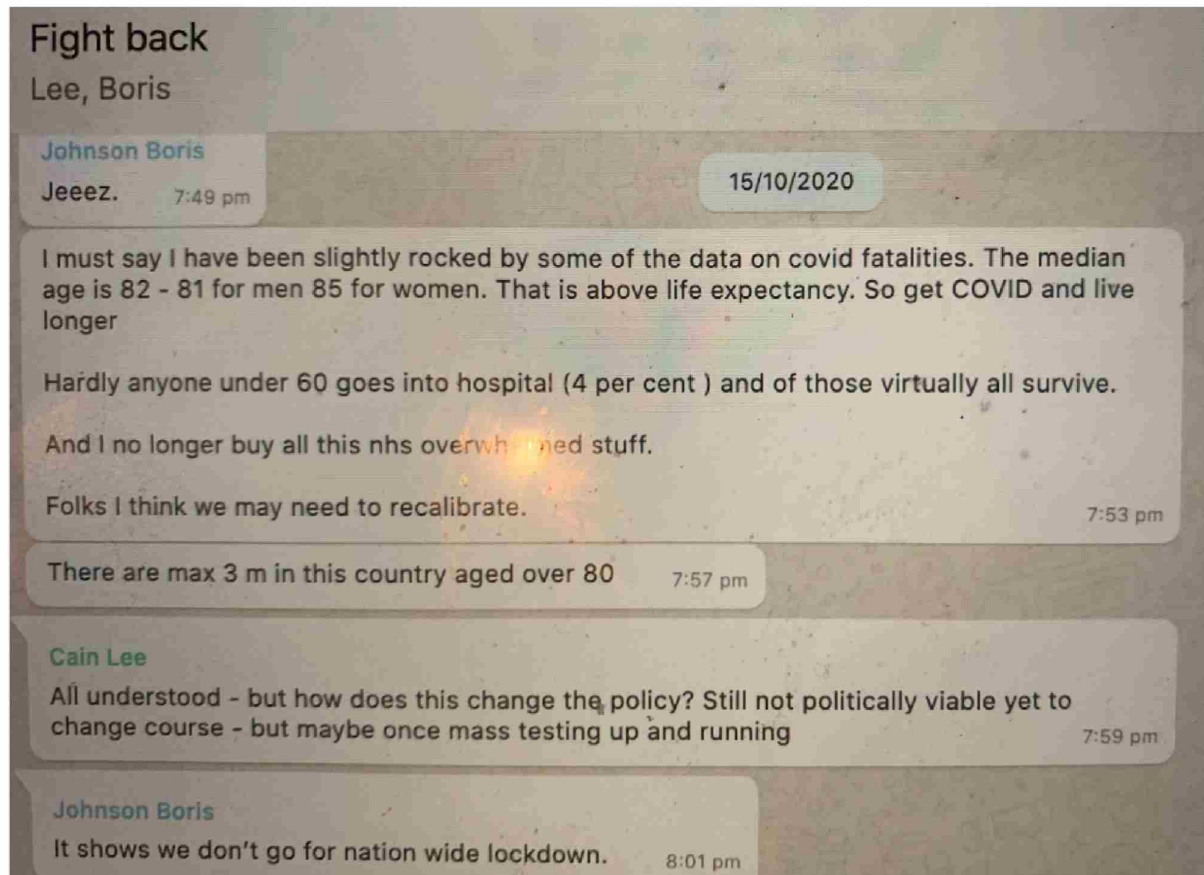
487. The Whitty-Vallance argument was simple: the lesson of exponentials and the first wave is – if you're going to have to act then act now because it saves more people and doesn't have to last so long, so it minimises disruption to the NHS and the economy, and unless we have some great luck we will have to act or else accept the NHS being overwhelmed. Others who had been ahead of the game in February-March made the same argument to me.
488. The PM didn't want to. He was under pressure from a set of MPs and from the *Telegraph*. He didn't have an argument and didn't challenge the data. He just said he didn't want to, other supposed experts outside government 'like Gupta and Heneghan say there won't be a second wave' and his judgement was we should 'wait and see', or 'hit and hope' as he sometimes expressed it around then.
489. I thought that what would happen was exponential growth per the graphs we were looking at, then he would fold and not stick to 'this time I'll be the Mayor of Jaws', so we'd have a repeat of the spring with more deaths and a longer/deeper lockdown than needed so also more economic damage. In the summer he had folded repeatedly on relatively trivial things: e.g he had picked a fight with the footballer Rashford over school meals then folded (then repeated the same thing). I said to officials 'if he'll fold with Rashford, there's no way he'll stick to his Mayor of Jaws line when thousands are dying and the NHS is overwhelmed'.
490. At the end of the meeting on 18/9 I suggested that we we have a further meeting after the weekend at which we would present the data *as if we were weeks in the future*. My hope was to put him into the mental state the data suggested he would be in at the end of October, and make him realise what he would then do. The Cabinet Secretary agreed with me (cf. his text of 2245, 18/9) [INQ000048313/55]. I asked the No10 data science team, including Catherine Cutts and Ben Warner, to work on it over the weekend.
491. On the Sunday we had a meeting with some external people the PM wanted to listen to including Gupta and Heneghan. Some of them argued there would be no second wave, or that there was *already* herd immunity. I remember John Edmunds forcefully rejecting their arguments and putting the case for immediate action. People who had been right repeatedly told me that Edmunds and Vallance were making better arguments than Gupta and Heneghan. The PM wanted to be convinced it would all be fine. (It's been stated in thousands of media reports that instead of tougher action in the autumn we should have 'followed Sweden'. Nowhere is it mentioned that Sweden's chief scientist, Tegnell, advised us in this meeting to act, said Sweden should have done more, and did not side with those who were more passive.)
492. On the Monday (possibly Tuesday) we had the hypothetical future meeting in the Cabinet Room. I structured the meeting so it was introduced as 'hello PM it's the X October, we're looking at today's data'. Catherine Cutts, one of those who had left highly paid private sector jobs to help in the emergency and did an excellent job, presented the most accurate picture we could of what it would like in late October. It was clear we would be facing, again, the NHS overwhelmed and having to explain to people that there would be no non-covid NHS. The PM did not change his mind. The phrase he used was 'hit and hope' – i.e no action, hope the data turns out different. Many of us were depressed and angry because we were convinced that he would end up ordering another lockdown in a month or so which would hit

the economy harder after more deaths, while if we got a grip immediately we would have a window to get mass testing going and this could hold the line until the vaccine hopefully could be deployed. The nightmare had a feeling of tragic inevitability.

493. I said to him that I thought this was a big mistake even from the narrow perspective of the MPs and *Telegraph/Mail*: yes they'll go crazy if we act now but they'll go *even crazier* if we have to do a bigger and longer lockdown in a month. I did not succeed. (Of course, if he had not started saying 'working from home should end, covid is over' to MPs in summer then he would not have had such a big media/political problem.)

494. I now think I should probably have threatened to resign at this point and go public if he did not act. I could perhaps have forced him to act. My relations would have been ruined but they were already doomed anyway. The useful things I managed to do between 20/9 and 13/11 probably do not outweigh the potential gains because if we'd acted in September then we could have kept the next wave at bay with mass testing until the vaccine arrived in December. But he probably would have accepted my resignation. (From his perspective, a) the MPs and media would have been delighted and it would have made his political problems with them easier, b) the media would not have listened to my alarms because they hated me so much.)

495. Discussion about lockdown continued in October. We had the same trolleying as in spring. E.g this message 'get covid and live longer'. [INQ000267902]



496. At the end of October we'd run out of road. We again faced the NHS being overwhelmed. In the Cabinet Room I asked whether anybody wanted to challenge the data or disagree with

a four week pseudo-'lockdown' (weaker than before). My memory is only Ben Warner openly disagreed arguing that given where we now were this weaker version of lockdown would not solve the winter problem unless it was tougher. This was correct and I agreed with him (and suggestions of new variants meant some suspected things might get even worse) but I did not press it then as it was hard enough to persuade the PM to do anything. (At one point around this time I organised a much smaller meeting at Chequers, which happened in the little study there, to try to get through to the PM as he was better in smaller meetings. I don't remember the date (possibly the weekend before this No10 meeting?) or much about it other than I found it very depressing, the only other person I'm sure was there was James Phillips who may remember more.)

497. He finally accepted he would not make the argument to the country that we'd just have to accept the NHS being overwhelmed and he'd have to order another sort-of-lockdown. Enraged, he made his comment directed at me, in his study, 'no more fucking lockdowns – let the bodies pile high in their thousands'. (The Inquiry has asked me 'why' he said this. My impression at the time was that it was a mix of rage, frustration and fear. He'd been telling himself and others week after week we would avoid it, he'd gone after Starmer on the subject, he'd given assurances to many MPs and journalists. So he knew he was very politically exposed. And he knew that I and others were thinking, 'we told you in September this is what would happen and you didn't want to face it'. He knew all the main advisers (me, CMO, CSA etc) had said to him in September effectively, 'get on top of it now, you won't tough it out in a month or so whatever you say now'.)
498. Almost immediately (within minutes) this decision leaked to Peston and we had to rush out the announcement the next day. This leak was another damaging blow to confidence and trust in the government. .
499. Part of the problem in the autumn was that Starmer had called for early action and the PM had rejected it aggressively. He knew that a u-turn would leave him trapped in the Commons between Labour saying 'told you so, you've blundered' and many of his own MPs opposing the u-turn.
500. Re what became known as the 'chatty rat' leak. The PM and Cabinet Secretary confirmed in writing in 2020 that the inquiry had cleared me.
 - After the leak the PM was understandably furious. So was I, so was Lee Cain. We authorised the Cabinet Secretary to investigate much more aggressively than normal leak inquiries, including the police and electronic methods.
 - The Cabinet Secretary asked me to ensure the PM would not 'trolley' if the suspect was found or it would be highly damaging. I spoke to the PM. He promised not to.
 - The Cabinet Secretary came back saying the evidence suggested it was a Gove spad.
 - I told the PM. The PM panicked: 'if I've got to sack Newman, Carrie will go crackers, arghhh, can you speak to Case and get him to pull back on this?'
 - I was angry and refused. I said to him that we had had this exact conversation just days earlier and we could not possibly now pull the rug from under Case. He was cross. This was at a time when he was cross with me generally and saying 'I'm the PM why can't I do what I want?' I said, Yes, you are the PM but that doesn't mean you can send the cops to interview people then abandon it because your girlfriend might 'go crackers', if you do stuff like this then people will be appalled and start resigning. (This was simultaneous with his argument

that Carrie wanted him to ditch the appointments process for a new spokesman to appoint her friend.)

- This leak was highly damaging and it became known in the building that the PM tried to stop the inquiry because of its implications for Carrie. This worsened the already rotten culture of leaking.

569. After I'd gone he thought he could use this leak to undermine me with the media and tried to blame me for it. I have text messages from the PM and the Cabinet Secretary after the inquiry confirming they knew it was not me. I showed these messages, including a message from Peston to me in which Peston said that I obviously was not his source, to a Cabinet Office security official in 2021 (and could show them to the Inquiry if it's deemed useful). As a sign of the dysfunction in No10 in 2021, the Cabinet Secretary asked me to meet this official secretly without the PM's knowledge as his previous discussions with the PM about this leak inquiry had immediately leaked to Alex Wickham, the godfather to the PM's new child. This is a good example of the insoluble problems the Cabinet Secretary was faced with.

570. As far as I know the inquiry was (improperly) dropped. But this does *not* mean 'Newman was guilty'. It's possible the original clues were false. I do not know the final conclusion if one was ever reached. I was assured by Case that he would publish the results. This has not happened.

CONCLUSION: A 'SYSTEMS' FAILURE

571. Although my blogs and comments 2013-19 were seen in Westminster as 'far too harsh on the system', both the collapse of the system over Brexit 2016-19 and the response to covid in 2020-21 show that the system was even worse than even I said.
572. The failure of Whitehall over covid in 2020 was a systems failure. No single element was 'to blame'. The system of Whitehall's incentives and culture was programmed to fail and failed in predictable and predicted ways.
573. Like in past crises we had a combination of:
- A small group of people excluding practically all the smartest and most knowledgeable at the top of highly centralised and closed/secretive institutions.
 - Little access to great tools.
 - Talking in meetings that mostly missed the point and excluded those who actually understand the problems being discussed.
 - Overwhelmed by speed and scale and complexity.
 - Trying to micromanage as multiple systems failed and failures cascaded across systems but not knowing how or what to do.
 - Applying mostly wrong psychological theories and ideas about communication.
 - The dysfunction at the top cascades back through the centralised institutions to generate secondary crises which then cascade back up to the top demanding solutions.
503. Our system makes it extremely hard even for very able people prepared to make sacrifices to do what the public have a right to expect.
504. Radically improving the system is practically impossible because the system has a tendency to fight against learning and improvement like an immune system gone haywire.

Individuals failed: crucial individuals were in the wrong jobs and there was no mechanism to appoint someone suitable to run the response

505. Important individuals failed. The calibre of some key people was not good enough. Some crucial people lacked personal integrity.
506. Leaving aside his ethical flaws the PM was unable to do the basics:
- He could not chair meetings.
 - He could not resist chasing the newspapers therefore he could not stick to a plan.
 - He could not face the bottleneck problem that only he could replace crucial people therefore he doomed us to broken things continuing.
 - He could not build a high performance team or authorise someone else to do it.
507. In summer 2020 he refused to replace Hancock despite a) repeated requests from me, both Cabinet Secretaries, and many others and b) being told repeatedly that leaving him there guaranteed further disasters and deaths in the autumn/winter. His Political Secretary

(Gascoigne) told me that the PM wanted to keep Hancock as 'the sacrifice for the inquiry'. In my opinion this was one of his very worst and most unforgivable decisions. The PM knew and expressed often in the summer not just what a terrible job Hancock had done but how dishonest he was. If we'd replaced Hancock before August then things like rapid testing would have been smoother, planning would have been more honest and effective, and thousands would have survived.

508. Hancock lied to No10 about many things including:

- His claim to me on 23 January that he was interrogating all parts of the pandemic plan was clearly nonsense. For example, a cursory check would have revealed that there was no plan for shielding at all and many officials did not want to make one.
- Care home testing; my text to Numberten Action (3/5) 'I think we are negligently killing the most vulnerable' [INQ000236371/54]; my text to PM 7/5 'Still no fucking serious testing in care homes his uselessness is still killing god knows how many' [INQ000048313/16]. I don't remember the exact dates but Hancock said in the Cabinet Room repeatedly that DHSC would organise testing of patients discharged from hospital to care homes and organise testing in care homes including of staff. But through April it became clearer and clearer that crucial things were not happening, or were on a much smaller and slower scale relative to what was needed, that operational plans to do it were very far from what was needed and so on. In short, the impression Hancock gave in the Cabinet Room March-April was that he was all over this subject and there were serious plans to blanket care homes with tests but it became clear that he was exaggerating, misleading, and hiding the true state of affairs. Hence my increasingly aggressive messages to the PM and others as we realised the truth. Vallance also became increasingly concerned during April and supported me in meetings when I pushed for much more aggressive and fast action.
- 'We've got PPE covered' (March). This was totally wrong. A big part of No10's focus in April was the PPE emergency, trying to organise flights. He then lied about it after. The NHS issued guidance to reuse PPE if necessary which was obviously only done precisely because we did not have enough.
- He claimed, 'At no point was the NHS overwhelmed and everyone who needed care had access to that care' (July email CCHQ). He, the PM, and I were briefed by CMO/CSA (in May) that many patients did not get the treatment they needed in March-April.
- In one of the first meetings with the PM, Cabinet Secretary and me after the PM's return in April, the Cabinet Secretary said to the PM in front of me, "Prime Minister, the British system is not set up to deal with a Secretary of State who repeatedly lies in meetings, we can't operate like that."
- Rapid testing (cf. texts of 10/9 where it's accepted by the Cabinet Secretary that Hancock is lying in the Cabinet room; apologies for my language in this text in particular). [INQ000048313/55]
- On 14/10 the Cabinet Secretary referred to Hancock claims – 'so aim off, obvs' because it was normal for him to lie.
- In summer 2020 the problem of Hancock popping in to see the PM 5 minutes before PMQs was causing serious trouble. Hancock would give him false information. There was no time to argue. The PM would walk into the Commons and blurt it to MPs. The PM would resist correcting the record. The No10 press office would then have to spend the afternoon 'clarifying' the PM's comments. So I sent someone to the Commons to try to physically stop Hancock entering the PM's office before PMQs or at least tell the PM 'do not repeat that in PMQs'. (This was only partially successful.)

509. The first Cabinet Secretary of 2020 said himself that he had not sought the job, did not think he was the right person for it, and only took it out of a sense of duty. The dual role of Cabinet Secretary and National Security Advisor was a bad idea and became impossible in 2020 (this was May's fault, not Sedwill's). Mark was a decent public servant who did well in other roles but he was a diplomat and the way that the crisis exposed problems across Whitehall required different skills, training and experience.
510. The second Cabinet Secretary similarly did not seek the job and tried, with me, to get others to do it. We could not find someone who was a) obviously a big improvement for the job in the circumstances of covid and b) acceptable to the PM who was very nervous about 'upsetting the system' and did not want to look outside Whitehall (which I did — at least look and talk, was my argument). Others turned it down. The PM started suggesting ridiculous ideas (e.g a former diary secretary). So Case took the job in a rush partly to forestall a disaster. Case said to me in summer 2020 when he was appointed that he was obviously not the best person. While appointing him was fundamentally a PM decision, it's important to note that the Permanent Secretary cohort that had been cultivated for many years was very weak, many had to be removed in 2020, more should have been removed. The PM's behaviour in 2021-22 made the Cabinet Secretary's job impossible. The only solution to this in our Constitution was the Cabinet showing greater moral courage but this did not happen.
511. It would be a serious error to conclude 'the main problem was a rubbish PM and a rubbish Secretary of State, the system would have been basically fine if we'd had reasonably competent people in those jobs'. NO NO NO.
- The failures of key political figures guaranteed big problems even if the rest of the system had worked well.
 - But the rest of the system also failed and it would still have been a disaster even if a miracle had replaced the PM and Hancock on 1 March.

What was needed?

512. Handling the covid response required someone much more in the mould of a successful startup CEO with a) experience of building fast and b) a great taste for duffers and talent. It is an indictment of our political *system* that there were almost no insiders who fit the bill, in Parliament or at the top of the civil service, and we had to pull in so many from outside in spring 2020. E.g it was highly telling that we had to ask the former commanding officer of **I&S** **I&S** to help lead on testing. But increasing reliance on the armed forces in emergencies is not a solution to our problems.
513. Some people are 100X or 1000X more effective than others in crucial roles. The system is built to ignore this, to exclude almost all such people, to put mediocrities in crucial jobs, and to ignore the consequences even in a huge crisis.

Institutions failed

514. **Cabinet Office / CCS / COBR.** The institutions responsible for central coordination collapsed in March and had to be rebuilt. The rebuild was patchy at best and failed again in autumn and again in 2021 with omicron. It remains dysfunctional. CCS was overwhelmed. COBR works adequately for small normal problems but was not designed for a pandemic and could not be used for it.

515. **No Red Team function.** There was no Red Team function in No10 or Cabinet Office other than the informal one I created with Gowers, Hassabis, Venki Ramakrishnan, and the Warners. There remains no Red Team function and this could be fixed for trivial money. I believe Parliament should mandate a Red Team with STRAP-cleared staff who can report not just to the PM but also to a handful of MPs including the leader of the Opposition. Such a unit must be isolated from normal HR and career structures with incentives that aim at one thing only: *being right and exposing dangerous errors*. This would not guarantee success. Red Teams have historically been shut down. Liz Truss removed the data science team from her own office on her first morning in the job. But it would increase the chances of success and given the trivial costs is clearly worth trying.
516. **Tools were poor or non-existent.** E.g no live dashboard until it was built by officials and Faculty during the crisis.
517. **Scripted meetings.** Normal Whitehall meetings involve ministers reading out scripts. This was hopeless in covid. It wasted time and fluffed crucial decisions. Those who really understood what was happening, often relatively young and junior, sat 'against the wall' while senior people confused each other. The normal culture of 'let's take it offline', a reflexive response to avoid socially difficult discussions, was disastrous.
518. **Responsibility and authority are fragmented by design.** Well run institutions ensure that responsibility and authority are in the same place. Our system deliberately does the opposite and goes to great lengths to stop this fact being discussed. Neither the Minister nor Permanent Secretary is 'in charge'. Ultimately they each report up to the Cabinet Secretary and PM. The Minister is 'responsible' to Parliament for the department but is unable to hire and fire, or train, or set incentives, for practically anybody other than a handful of spads. The Permanent Secretary controls HR therefore the advice and the team. Both are micromanaged financially by both HMT and Cabinet Office.
519. **The PM authority bottleneck.** Many bottlenecks could/can only be solved with a Prime Minister's authority. E.g me saying 'commandeer the grounded planes, fly the PPE, don't ship it' in March, or 'do a taskforce, ignore EU procurement rules'. This made the abilities and character of the PM much more important in the covid crisis than it should be. But *any* PM would have been unable to cope with the scale of the bottleneck problem in 2020 using conventional means – they could only have escaped it by radical use of a PM's actual constitutional powers and lack of legal constraints, e.g by appointing people from outside Parliament as ministers and instructing them to build what was necessary and leave legal responsibility to the PM.
520. This bottleneck problem is particularly important regarding **the crucial process of replacing people**. Only the Cabinet Secretary can replace Permanent Secretaries and order them to replace other people in key roles. This was (and is) a crucial bottleneck. The fact that most senior people in Whitehall had spent all/most of their career in a culture where almost nobody is ever replaced because they're not up to it, a culture in which failure is treated as normal, had a predictable effect in the extreme circumstances of 2020. Almost nobody had practice in rapidly evaluating people and rapidly replacing them. The normal bureaucratic resistance and HR culture kicked in instead. And the PM is the only political figure who can insist that key officials are moved. As the Cabinet Office proved unable to do this as we needed, this pushed the responsibility onto the PM. He could not do it.

521. **Normal speed, normal failure.** The inability of Whitehall to work at speed in normal times was a disaster in covid. It had no emergency speed so as it was forced to speed up it generated avoidable chaos.
522. **The planning system for crises like pandemics was terrible.**
523. **Lack of training and system for the biggest decisions.** In big crises there are really big fundamental questions where getting the right answers swamps almost everything else so it is crucial they are thought through with extreme clarity and honesty. For example, 'will we have to lockdown therefore the earlier the better for lives and for the economy?'; 'is the only realistic plan herd immunity by September because vaccines and treatments are too distant, or could we buy time with suppression so vaccines and treatments greatly diminish the damage?' 'Do we make clear to Germany that if they invade Belgium we will go to war or not?'
524. Getting such big questions right dwarfs almost everything else. The politicians didn't have the training to think about such questions, or even realise this was a critical part of their job, and the system didn't help them do it – it confused them more. What's needed is a trained ability to look both top-down and bottom-up. Using Alanbrooke's diaries as an analogy: he could look *top-down* to identify the critical issues (e.g a) early D-Day or b) this will fail so instead take North Africa then grab the Mediterranean and only then D-Day?) and look *bottom-up* to interrogate in detail whether the top-down answers were really right. This skill in shifting perspectives from the abstract to the detailed is not trained with Ministers or officials. This contributed to meandering discussions because in the complexity people had no map to figure out the crucial issues and their interdependence (e.g 'how do we think about the tradeoff between relieving pressure on the NHS and damage to the economy?').
525. **Whitehall is terrible at learning from other countries especially non-western countries.** Repeatedly I would ask things like 'what's Singapore doing, they're highly competent and everything is in English, a lot of things we can almost copy and paste', or 'why is Sweden doing things differently, is the media right or spreading nonsense about this'. Officials did not have 'check what the most obviously competent countries are doing' as a basic checklist. This is a profound cultural and long-term problem with the civil service in widely different fields. (E.g I found exactly the same with the Department for Education 2010-14 and the MOD 2019-20.) And there was a more specific groupthink attitude of 'what Asian countries do isn't relevant, they're not democracies, their culture is different' and so on. My impression was that there was a widespread unjustified sense of superiority in the British civil service viz Asia that did not reflect how countries such as Singapore now routinely have higher performance than we do. Ironically this was the case among a set of people who generally identified as 'cosmopolitan / open-minded / anti-racist' etc. In summer 2020 I tried to organise a small team to fly out to Asia to talk to people and see for themselves things like Taiwan and Singapore's border control systems (cf. emails over summer) but it was clear that Martin Reynolds and others did not want it to happen. It was impossible for No10, as it was set up in 2019-20, to make them do this and was one of dozens of reasons why I pushed for broader civil service reform in summer 2020. (I explicitly exclude Vallance from this criticism.)

526. **The physical layout of No10 combines with the lack of a proper physical space for the management of a major emergency and poor tools.** The Cabinet Room failed as it did in 1914. The same failures have played out on Ukraine. (Cf. my 2019 blog.)
527. **‘10ds’ worked but the lessons haven’t been learned.** It is telling that it was political advisers who set up a data science team in the PM’s office, began recruiting, and started a wider Whitehall process of developing a general plan for data across government. (And that when I started this on 2 January 2020 the response from mainstream Westminster was ridicule, with former officials ignorantly attacking an obviously sensible upgrade in skills that the crisis proved was needed just weeks later.) It also revealed an important culture clash. Some of those recruited were very bright young women such as Catherine Cutts and NR NR. Many senior men, ministers and officials, had no experience of having things explained to them that they did not understand, and the technical details of which they could not understand, by very bright young people who were focused on trying to get the answer right rather than observing the meeting culture of Whitehall. E.g I asked Catherine to present the hypothetical data in September (above) and sometimes they had to explain in a meeting that minister or official X had misunderstood. They sometimes expressed resentment to me. I told them to suck it up. I think that this is an important problem, and (with other things) undermines the ability of government to attract great technical talent, but it is almost totally neglected while the media focuses on ‘bullying’ which is an overrated problem.
528. 10ds should be strengthened and return to being embedded in the PM’s office and able to look at all important papers. We set it up like this but it was downgraded by Johnson then Truss and has not been properly restored by Sunak. It should not be lost in the Cabinet Office labyrinth where it will inevitably succumb to bad incentives simply to survive. I said in 2021, ‘I think no one in their right mind would possibly get rid of it, and everybody involved with it knows it’s been a great success’. I did not account for Truss becoming PM and on her first day moving 10ds out of 10 Downing Street. It should be based in No10 as a basic foundation of a modern PM’s office. It has been partly restored but it does not have the oversight of data that goes to the PM that we envisaged in 2020 and this weakens the quality of advice to the PM. (Both Cabinet Office and HMT have an institutional interest in preventing the PM’s office getting much better data and having much better tools than them.)
529. **The procurement system was a disaster.** This is part of a larger story of the extraordinary growth in delays and costs to procurement and building infrastructure across the western world over the past 50 years. It is not odd that ‘concurrency’ used in the Taskforce and mass testing is so rare and unfamiliar in Whitehall. It was deliberately abandoned in America and elsewhere after the 1960s in the name of cost cutting and transparency. Successive reports for decades have pointed out the massive delays and cost increases in government procurement since (e.g Packard and Schriever re the Pentagon in the 1980s). They are all ignored in Westminster and Washington. (In a war politicians find creative ways around the normal system by funding things via black programs.) Even after covid and even after 18 months of the biggest land war in Europe since 1945, procurement and our ability to manufacture quickly at scale are non-subjects in mainstream Westminster among MPs or the media. After both of these historic events, Westminster has almost entirely continued with broken systems and hasn’t bothered even discussing it, never mind acting. This is connected to a central cultural problem of operational excellence being very low status while clever-sounding verbal skills in scripted meetings are highest status.

530. **There's a complex (and very poorly understood among MPs/media) interaction between a) the EU law underlying our procurement system including emergency procurement, b) weaknesses of the civil service and Cabinet Office, c) how judicial review has evolved, d) how civil service incentives push officials towards extreme risk aversion and swerving the outcome of judicial reviews in the future.** This crippled our response not just in spring but in the second wave and in 2021. The reluctance to discuss all this in Westminster is disastrous. People try to kid themselves about it. (Cf. detailed case study of JR viz polling above.) In a meeting on 10/6/20 officials from the IPA and Cabinet Office said that EU law was responsible for 'about 75%' of our procurement problems.
531. **'Evidence'.** There's a lot of talk about 'evidence based decisions' but little understanding of how to do this properly. Often RCTs are ignored but also sometimes the absence of RCTs is wrongly used as an argument not to do something. E.g Whitehall's approach to masks in spring 2020 had the theatre of 'evidence' but resembled 'there are no RCTs proving parachutes are safer'. In a crisis there is often not the data you want for a proper experiment and therefore rigorous thinking must adapt.
532. **Media obsession.** Ministers and officials spent far too much time worrying about the media, analysing 'communication strategy' (which they were rarely competent to do), and distorting policy on the basis of misunderstanding psychology and communication. The determination of the PM and SoS DHSC to focus on the media inevitably led to a crass short-termism, constant u-turns, and administrative chaos. Imagine if Alanbrooke's diaries were full of references to 'how do I get credit for Alemein given I put Monty in' and 'we'll have to pull forward D-Day because the *Telegraph* is going crackers'. This is effectively what happened on many decisions such as 'working from home' and border security. (It's hard to see how this can change other by eventually a government demonstrating a different model. I hoped that MPs would learn from the success of *Vote Leave* in 2016 and 2019 as we focused on strategy not the media. My hopes did not materialise.)
533. Almost all of the system focused too much on 'communication', and thought they had expertise to influence it. Much of the system vastly overrated the quality of 'behavioural science'. SPI-B described panic buying as an example of 'irrational' behaviour; it was actually rational. The most significant way in which behavioural science influenced policy was in encouraging senior people to think wrongly that people would not accept 'stay at home' in early March. Simple use of focus groups showed this 'expertise' was wrong. But Whitehall was very slow to absorb this. After the first wave, members of SPI-M said to No10 staff that they had little/no confidence in SPI-B; I don't think this issue was faced squarely. (I should have pushed much more aggressively on SPI-B / behavioural advice and earlier. I'd had experience dealing with bad behavioural science during the referendum and I understood the problem - but I was overwhelmed by so many issues I didn't get to grips with this until too late. I tried to stop meetings degenerating into discussions about communication among people who thought they understood it but didn't. I largely failed. This is a ubiquitous problem. I've never found a way to solve this in politics outside campaigns.)

Specific covid decisions

534. **Too late in March.** We should have 'locked down' – in the sense of household quarantine, work from home where possible, shielding etc (not the Wuhan sense) – in the first week of March at the latest. This would have stopped multiple doublings given it was doubling roughly every 2-3 days. It would therefore have stopped thousands of deaths. It

would have caused less damage to the NHS which would have bounced back faster. It would have been released much earlier therefore much less damage to the economy.

535. **Terrible decision on funerals etc.** I bitterly regret the restrictions imposed stopping family members being with people dying. We should have left this up to individual choices. It was unjustifiable to say effectively — you can go into your job but you can't say goodbye to your dying mum. It's the sort of error that happens when a system implodes — so bad that in retrospect it's hard to believe how it happened. It was even more indefensible to keep such restrictions after the government effectively gave up trying to enforce rules when the PM decided not to try to stop political demonstrations such as the BLM protests. I disagreed with the policy on relatives/funerals but did not speak out strongly and regret it deeply.
536. **Too slow on masks.** We were far too slow to move on masks given the efficacy of FFP3 and FFP2 masks. This was connected to the system being slow to absorb **asymptomatic and airborne** transmission. Public health authorities across the western world put out wrong advice not to use masks and No10 was told in Feb-March that wearing masks was dangerous. The government overemphasised hand-washing and under-emphasised masks and ventilation.
537. **Too slow on vaccines.** We could and should have pushed aggressively on vaccines in January instead of accepting they wouldn't come fast enough to affect Plan A. We should have pushed for more aggressive human challenge trials in January. We should have reinforced the Taskforce in 2021 and got it working on new vaccines for new variants instead of turning it back into a normal agency that failed to exploit the lead we'd grabbed in 2020. NB. We should have a permanent permanent ultra-serious Vaccine Taskforce (cooperating internationally) to get ahead of future pandemics and engineered bio-weapons including AI generated/augmented bioweapons (dangers of which have already been demonstrated to the White House and No10).
538. **Too slow on testing.** We should have ramped up testing dramatically from the first week of January. And we missed the chance with rapid testing in spring until No10 realised the potential in summer. If we'd built what was needed in Q2 then we could have used mass testing and hyper-local action to avoid further lockdowns in Q3-Q4 2020 while we waited for the vaccine without needing another lockdown.
539. **We got rules/advice on outdoors wrong (rule of 6 etc).** This was partly because of slowness in realising airborne transmission was much more important than 'washing hands' etc. Partly because of the mayhem of the summer where the system got sucked into massively overcomplex rules partly because of the PM and Hancock bouncing around in response to MPs and media.
540. **Vulnerable children.** Another example of the system failure leading to too much focus on some things and not enough on others was the lack of serious effort by senior people on issues around the most vulnerable children. They should have been prioritised but they were neglected. On 8 January 2020 I asked in writing for a serious review, including no-notice inspections, of various facilities responsible for looking after such children, care homes etc. I do not know whether this ever happened after I left but I am sure it remains a badly neglected area. It only gets attention when the media makes a big noise out of a lurid disaster but it is immediately forgotten when the media moves on. I regret not pushing on

this more myself. The PS, Alexandra Burns, did an outstanding job trying to get senior people to act on this.

The lockdown argument

541. With a disease like covid it is axiomatic that the less social contact there is, the less spread of the disease there is. If you keep reducing social contact towards zero, you will reduce the spread of the disease.
542. For many centuries countries have imposed strict restrictions on social contact to prevent diseases spreading.
543. The real question is not 'does restricting social contact lower spread of the disease?'. Obviously it does.
544. The real questions are:
- is it necessary in principle?
 - If yes is it best to do it now or later?
 - what are the tradeoffs?
544. A basic feature of exponential growth/decay is that if you act earlier in a doubling process and stop hospitalisations going from 100 to 200, establish control, and cases start dropping exponentially then fewer people are harmed and the action can be stopped quicker than if you act to stop hospitalisations going from 1,000 to 2,000 or 10,000 to 20,000 or 100,000 to 200,000 or a million to two million.
545. *If it's inevitable, do it now.*
546. The only argument for not doing it now is that *you're not going to do it all*.
547. This requires you to consider a counterfactual in which you do not act.
548. There were three lockdown debates: 1) spring 2020, 2) autumn/winter 2020, 3) winter 2021 (omicron).
549. **My attitude in retrospect is: #1 clearly right given the actual circumstances we found ourselves in (but could have been avoided by proper pandemic planning), #2 complex, could have been avoided IF we'd done some big things from spring, but given further failures plus the PM's character proved necessary, #3 clearly should never have been a need for discussion had the government used 2021 properly.**
550. #1 Clearly the right decision given the actual circumstances. It could only have been avoided if we had been 'the best prepared country in the world', as Whitehall told the PM but which turned out to be wrong. And if starting in the first week of January we had implemented a plan for proper border control, rapid building of testing infrastructure for mass deployment (tens of millions weekly) and so on. Or if we had accepted the NHS would be overwhelmed and there would have been effectively no health service at all for many weeks so many other people, including many children, would have died who would have survived if there had been a health system. The sight of NHS collapse would have had many knock on

effects including a huge economic shock as people who did go to work in this scenario would have sheltered at home (especially people with kids). In this scenario not only would more have died/suffered but also many more kids and the hit to the economy would have been worse. As people realised what was happening, I believe the PM would have buckled under the pressure to u-turn (as was proved repeatedly after this) so it would never have happened — the lockdown would just have been later therefore worse.

551. NB. The NHS came under huge pressure, many died without proper treatment, and it was only one more doubling away from greater and more widespread collapse.
552. If we'd done it sooner fewer would have died, fewer other patients would have had healthcare disrupted, *and* it would have been released quicker and less economic damage would have been done.
553. #2 If Whitehall hadn't dropped the ball on rapid testing in spring 2020 we could have built a massive rapid testing system with hundreds of millions of tests and domestic manufacturing over summer, *avoided the need for a lockdown in autumn*, and used rapid tests until the vaccines arrived.
554. This chance having been missed it was clear by 18 September that the sensible move was aggressive action to buy time for rapid testing, which by then we were pushing extremely hard, which could keep the NHS afloat and the economy largely open while we waited for the vaccines.
555. I thought it was obvious that if we did not, then the PM would fold in a month's time and we'd have to do lockdown anyway but after condemning thousands more to death and a lockdown would then have to be longer and deeper causing worse economic harm.
556. That is what happened. After lots of bluster he collapsed. This was the final straw for our relations which deteriorated rapidly because he knew I and others blamed him for the fiasco.
557. If we'd acted in September we'd have saved thousands, damaged the economy less, and avoided the January nightmare.
558. #3 Clearly there should have been not only no need for lockdown but not even need for it to be discussed.
559. Many pundits have written versions of the argument: We could have avoided lockdown and the NHS being overwhelmed because people were staying at home without being told to by the government.
560. This argument relies on the implicit logic: the failure of government to act was so scary that people out of fear retreated to their homes, therefore the government didn't need to tell them to retreat to their homes.
561. What do you think of this logic: An engineered version of smallpox has been released by terrorists, it is more contagious than covid and will kill 70% of all people and 99% of children but the government shouldn't tell people to stay at home because people will be so terrified they'll do it anyway.

562. Arguing that *reasonable public fear of the government's incompetent slowness to act actually solves the problem so negates the need for the government to act* is such a twisted logic it's weird to think it has become a mainstream view among many pundits and MPs. Yet it has.

Failure to learn after 2020

563. The lack of Parliamentary scrutiny in 2021 of 2020 decisions and plans meant that there was no public scrutiny of new plans for winter 2021/22. This directly contributed to further disasters such as:

- the government failing to order enough rapid tests
- shutting down sewage monitoring
- downgrading the Vaccine Taskforce instead of reinforcing it and seeking nasal vaccines, non-spike-targeting vaccines etc which could stop transmission, not just mitigate illness
- failing to build a distribution network and last-mile logistics to get anti-virals couriered early to people for winter 2021.

564. The combination of a) hundreds of millions of rapid tests and b) anti-virals plus distribution would alone have crushed hospitalisation and eliminated any need for another lockdown argument over omicron. (This is not 'hindsight', I said this repeatedly in 2021 before omicron.)

565. I believe senior officials in No10 and the Cabinet Office should have spoken out much more forcefully in 2021 about the need to prepare for variants and winter.

566. Since covid there has been an astonishing lack of focus on biosecurity in labs, on gain of function research (still funded and happening!). And omicron may also have been a lab leak.

567. The lack of learning and facing errors is connected to a wider culture, e.g the closing of libraries in departments (including Foreign Office and DfE); the convention of forbidding ministers to read the papers of previous governments (only the permanent government, the officials, are allowed to look at these papers and decide what the rest of us are allowed to see).

568. I will not go into the parties in any detail here. I did not attend/witness any parties. I thought the BYOB event in the garden was an error and told the PPS and PM this after I saw the invitation. Junior staff ordered to attend were fined for attending while the PM was not, which was disgraceful. The picture of me, the PM, PPS etc in the garden was not a party. We rightly encouraged staff to use the No10 garden for meetings and I used the garden as a second office for months. I was told about the party celebrating my departure and there was a reference to it in the newspapers at the time but because the media was so happy I'd left, this open signal was ignored and only returned to a year later. I was told in 2021 by No10 officials that after we'd left the management of No10 collapsed and parties became routine for some. From December 2021 the PM lied repeatedly and told the No10 press office to tell the media things he knew were untrue. This obviously damaged trust in government. Senior Cabinet Office officials allowed the most junior staff to be blamed for events while they, with actual responsibility, escaped punishment. This was as disgraceful as the PM's behaviour but has been unpunished. I was never interviewed by the police about parties. I do not know why. The police did not investigate written evidence of PM lies. I do not know why. It's

important to stress that some junior staff were fined for attending events they were told to attend and did not think of as 'parties'. Further, the media often says 'they acted like different rules applied' but different rules literally did apply to No10 because it was the PM's home and a government building and rules for it were explicitly changed to do some experiments, e.g on use of mass tests. Junior staff were told the PPS was liaising with the Taskforce and legal advice to ensure No10 worked within a unique set of rules that applied to it. Junior staff were entitled to believe that if the PM's office asked them to attend an event then that event was lawful. Obviously, this caveat does not extend to *actual parties* such as the one before the royal funeral but the only actual parties I'm aware of were after I'd left No10.

My worst errors

1. I made many mistakes. The worst were arguably:
 - a. Not insisting on a Red Team in January. I worried about diverting efforts but this was stupid and I should have known better.
 - b. Not being more aggressive sooner on the 'behavioural science' / 'fatigue' arguments.
 - c. Almost everything I did in Feb-March I should have done faster.
 - d. In retrospect I should have threatened to resign, and tried to get others to do the same, when the PM decided to 'hit and hope' as he put it in September. I was encouraged to stay by others and I hoped efforts on mass testing, the ISR etc would make it worthwhile. But given how things turned out it's clear now I should have forced the issue in September. My relations with him were already knackered and it was worth a gamble.
 - e. The handling of the stories, mostly false, around me, Durham, Barnard Castle etc was a disaster. Given the PM's handling of it internally, and veering from 'say nothing' to 'I'll do a press conference' because of media pressure, I do not know what else I could have done. If I had not done a press conference he would have done and it would have been not just a disaster but he'd have said many untrue things causing further chaos. (Initially, for reasons I never understood, he had various extraordinary theories about 'the truth'. He also suspected I was lying when I said the Durham Police statement was an error and would be corrected. This gives an idea of how difficult it was to discuss such problems.) Arguably I should have resigned immediately. I was urged not to, partly because so many people were worried about what the PM would do if my influence was removed. But perhaps I should have done. My fundamental problem was that I did not want to discuss openly or have media discussion about the security problems I'd had since 2019 and which were the main (but not sole) reason for getting my family out of London. Many people said 'why didn't the PM fire him?' The reason was he knew he could not fire me for moving my family out of London and we had discussed me doing this after armed police had been called to my house. The best alternative to not resigning was moving my family out again then explaining the entire background in the Rose Garden. I explained the details of this to MPs in 2021.

A final thought

2. The core problem was a) our party-Whitehall system excludes almost all of our most able people by design and b) has extremely high friction institutions with incentives and culture that do not incentivise high performance. Our system is actively hostile to bringing in high performance outsiders and makes itself an extremely unattractive place for such people. Our

political parties and the civil service are extremely closed institutions with little place for people who can think and build. These problems are incredibly hard to change and persist unchanged despite Iraq, 2008 financial crisis, covid and Ukraine.

3. The normal process is for inquiries to find that all sorts of 'processes' were not followed and to focus on these and recommend many new processes, as if the core problem is a lack of processes. The government and Whitehall accept all suggestions with alacrity because they know the suggestions do not change the true power structures. Nobody cares about adding some more process however ludicrous, it's normal, they care about power. The system becomes even more high friction, with more processes added to the old processes all of which add friction and confuse people about what the actual priorities are, and guarantees further failures. It is a mistake to think that 'more process' can substitute for excellent people, moral courage, and good incentives. I urge this Inquiry to reflect on why the lessons of previous Inquiries were supposedly implemented yet the system was so bad in 2020 and remains so bad. Adding another long list of things and suggesting 'more process' will not substitute for facing the core problems which are deeper, more general and more important — and explain why 'processes failed' and will keep failing unless the people change. 'People, ideas, machines — in that order' as Colonel Boyd said.
4. It's no comfort to those who suffered or whose families suffered but I'm sorry for the mistakes I made, mistakes of acting and mistakes of failing to act.

Statement of truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed: __Dominic Cummings_____

Dated: __12 October 2023_____

ENDS

APPENDIX

Email from me, 29/7/20 about reorganising No10 (I have deleted email addresses, but the text is unchanged, only the appearance is different to original, bold is as in the original):

From: Dominic Cummings

Date: Wednesday, 29 July 2020 at 13:05

To: Simon Case, Martin Reynolds, Munira Mirza, Lee Cain

Cc: Stuart Glassborow, Clare Brunton, Cleo Watson, Ben Gascoigne, David Frost

Subject: Office shifts

The PM walked around No10 and CABOFF on Monday to finalise decisions on move.

He confirmed by Monday 31 August we shd affect shift of...

a/ We shift domestic Private Office + domestic Policy Unit + me and some other spads plus Kramer's Secretariat plus at least some of the legislation team (or an embed) to the EDS room in 70WH. [Name Redacted] (new DfE spad), and the best official we can find on education/skills should be sitting together in this room. Ditto health etc. Ill jot down how I see the room looking over next few days.

b/ Frosty to move in to Helen's office, as PM says he/her have agreed she's heading off to a department by 1 Sep. The room next to Helen's office will also be cleared out of PET, which will change anyway after Helen moves.

Irrelevant & Sensitive

Irrelevant & Sensitive

For obvious reasons it's vital that we use August to get this done so we start new term in a much better way than the last 7 months.

I've got operation/convalescence complicating my availability but will be available on phone and soon will be able to come in.

By Sunday Munira and I will have a definitive list of spads from different teams for the move. (Not all defined as PU now will move.)

I think the PO division is pretty obvious -- [Name Redacted] do NOT move to the EDS room. Arguably they move next to DF i.e the room next to Helen's which now has the PET gang in there -- who will be dispersed -- but this needs discussion with PM/Martin/Frosty. I think [Name Redacted] sits with them but hot desks with [Name Redacted] in the room. [Irrelevant & Sensitive] Imran, Malcom, [Name Redacted] etc shd be in the Room.

We will need careful thought re Cooky and Meg roles -- Ill speak to them next week.

There shd be an official who attends the Room's weekly priorities mtng and Frosty's NSC(O) to join that up too -- I will attend both but there shd be an official too.

We will obv need to connect to the covid team too. Ollie Illott is an obv person to do this -- he was terrific over past few months...

Please ensure people you talk to who want to unravel this realise that I will look with extreme unhappiness on any attempts to use my temporary absence to unravel this plan!

The failure to have proper modern working methods straight after the election was directly responsible for confusion and deaths in the covid crisis. We've discussed all this for 3 months -- senior people have agreed this plan and the PM has definitively signed it off and said 'I want to start the new term with this running'. So no more talk re the fundamentals with endless groups in August -- action and ironing out the details... **It would be unforgivable if we enter the autumn -- with covid waves and economic disasters -- in the same hopeless management/physical/informational structure as Feb...**

We have 4 weeks on Monday to get the beta version up and running from Monday 31/8. This plan is not very hard to implement given good will and the PM has been extremely clear -- and will be extremely clear with the new CABSEC re this plan...

The officials Ive explained this to -- in PU, PO, CABOFF -- seem to agree with logic and are 90% enthusiastic -- interestingly the few exceptions are those who WANT to preserve friction between no10/CABOFF (for hard to be sure about reasons).

The sooner we explain this the better -- people keep complaining about rumours but also saying 'don't talk about it'. We shd explain pronto. Im happy to do some sort of zoom next week with Simon/Martin...

I expect some will say 'keep Kramer's people out this room'. No. They must be there.

At Xmas we can re-evaluate.

Mark S obv is now in charge of EDS. We shd advertise for the job of 'lead official in this EDS+ room' and the 'lead delivery person'. There shd be open competition for the jobs – MarkS wd have high chance of winning such a competition but I think such a change requires a really deep serious process to ensure the lead official and the lead delivery person are the absolute best for the job AND, crucially, are willing to commit until Xmas 2023. The PM wants the officials doing this to be working extremely intensely from Sep to Xmas 2023 and not turning over, the usual churn. And as I discussed with MarkS the other day this imposes serious constraints on life-style for the poor sap who accepts the job! He is pondering this over the next week or so...

This new structure also imposes a clear obligation on Munira and I to upgrade various spads – we can't demand elite performance from officials and have beta people in critical roles ourselves...

Apols for this slightly random email but am unavoidably out of action for next few days on family matters and don't want days to be wasted, better everybody gets cracking...

Cheers

D