

Witness Name: Alex Chisholm

Statement No.: WITN7247001

Exhibits: WITN7247002 -

WITN7247007

Dated: 21/10/2022

INFECTED BLOOD INQUIRY

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF ALEX CHISHOLM

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 dated 08 September 2022.

I, Alex Chisholm, will say as follows: -

Section 1: Introduction

1. My name is Alexander James Chisholm. My date of birth is GRO-C 1968. My address is C/O The Government Legal Department, 102 Petty France, Westminster, London SW1H 9GL.
2. In terms of my professional qualifications relevant to my current role, I completed a Master's degree in business administration following my education to graduate level.
3. I first joined the Civil Service in 1990, working in the Office of Fair Trading and the Department for Trade & Industry, before spending a number of years in

the private sector and as a regulator in Ireland. I re-joined the Civil Service in 2013 to establish the Competition & Markets Authority, going on to serve as Permanent Secretary in the Department for Energy & Climate Change and then the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. Since April 2020 I have been the Chief Operating Officer for the Civil Service and Permanent Secretary for the Cabinet Office.

4. I was appointed by former Cabinet Secretary, Sir Mark Sedwill, to *“lead the ongoing transformation of the civil service to further enhance its efficiency, effectiveness and agility, creating the high performance, innovative and digitally powered service we need for the times we are in”*.
5. As Chief Operating Officer (“COO”) for the Civil Service I work with Ministers, colleagues in the Cabinet Office, Permanent Secretaries across government and public service leaders, to deliver for the government and the public sector together. I lead the ongoing transformation of the Civil Service to further enhance its efficiency and performance. I respond to challenges requiring a ‘whole-of-government’ approach, such as helping to manage the Covid-19 response, preparing for the end of the transition period (exiting from the European Union) and strengthening management of cross-cutting risks.
6. I can confirm that I am not a member of, nor have I been involved in any committees, associations, parties, societies, groups or organisations relevant to the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference. I do not have any business or private interests which are relevant to the Inquiry’s Terms of Reference. I am aware that a member of my family once worked for a government relations company which I believe acted for the victims of infected blood. I never discussed the matter of infected blood with them, nor was I ever given any information by them. I mention this for the sake of transparency.
7. I have not provided evidence to, nor have been involved in, any other inquiries, investigations or criminal or civil litigation in relation to human immunodeficiency virus (“HIV”) and/or hepatitis B virus (“HBV”) and/or

hepatitis C virus (“HCV”) infections and/or variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (“vCJD”) in blood and/or blood products.

8. Whilst I have not been directly involved with the matter of infected blood in any way, I am very willing to assist this Inquiry as requested. At the outset I want to express my deepest sympathies to all those who have been affected by the events being examined by this inquiry.

Section 2: Candour and objectivity

9. I can confirm that I have reviewed the Expert Group reports provided to the Inquiry **EXPG0000003** and **EXPG0000042**. I understand that the Expert Group is an independent expert group appointed by the Inquiry’s Chair on behalf of this Inquiry. I have also considered the transcripts of the oral evidence given on 24 and 25 February 2020 by the Expert Group **INQY1000050** and **INQY1000051**.
10. I note that the Expert Group made various recommendations to reduce the likelihood of the multifaceted failures that have been found to have contributed to the negative psychosocial experiences of the infected and affected and I have been invited to comment upon those recommendations.
11. I have also reviewed the extracts I have been directed towards concerning the evidence given by Jeremy Hunt **INQY1000235**, Andy Burnham **INQY1000228** and Lord Waldegrave **INQY1000221**.
12. As Chief Operating Officer to the Civil Service since April 2020, I can provide evidence to the questions as they apply to national-level decision makers. Matters relating to healthcare workers are a matter for DHSC to comment upon.
13. I was disappointed by the evidence presented regarding groupthink, a lack of candour, and institutional closing of ranks within parts of the Civil Service. The Civil Service prides itself on its commitment to public service, working to

provide high quality advice to the Government and to deliver outstanding public services. An integral element of that commitment to public service is to present and analyse information in an open and candid manner, so as to support effective policy development and delivery. It is also essential to reflect, to learn and to apply lessons. Civil Service leaders will want to reflect, learn and apply lessons revealed by this inquiry, and the government has committed to responding to this inquiry and its recommendations with the utmost urgency.

Candour

14. On the question of candour in the Civil Service, I fully support the spirit of the recommendation of the Expert Group that the duty of candour, effective and sensitive communication and the policies and practice to ensure no harm should be included in the training of all national level policy makers. Indeed these requirements are closely reflected in the Civil Service Code (“the Code”) **RLIT0001797** which applies to all civil servants¹, and is core to induction and other foundational training of civil servants. Under the Code, civil servants must act with integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality. Among other things, the Code specifically requires that civil servants:

- always act in a way that is professional and that deserves and retains the confidence of all those with whom you have dealing
- deal with the public and their affairs fairly, efficiently, promptly, effectively and sensitively, to the best of your ability
- set out the facts and relevant issues truthfully, and correct any errors as soon as possible

15. Civil servants must not:

- ignore inconvenient facts or relevant considerations when providing advice or making decisions.

¹ The statutory basis for the management of the Civil Service was established by the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. This includes the Civil Service Code and Civil Service Management Code.

- act in a way that unjustifiably favours or discriminates against particular individuals or interests.

16. The Code prescribes how civil servants should raise an issue if they become aware of actions by others which they believe conflicts with the Code.

17. Creating a culture as well as a duty of candour is something that the Civil Service is committed to and continues to work on. On 15 June 2021 HM Government published the Declaration on Government Reform (“the declaration”), signed by the Prime Minister and the Cabinet Secretary, at an extraordinary meeting of all Cabinet Ministers and Permanent Secretaries **WITN7247002**. This declaration sets out a collective vision, from Cabinet Ministers and Civil Service leaders, for the reform of government and public service delivery. Within that vision the Government has affirmed its commitment to more transparency, better working and data sharing across government departments, and to increasing the diversity of views and expertise involved in decision-making. This included both a commitment to ensuring that; “*all data is as open as possible to public and third parties*” and that Ministers and officials needed a greater “*willingness to challenge each other candidly, co-operate intensively and be open-minded about what needs to change.*”

18. The Government continues to progress the reform agenda. The most recent report to Parliament was given in September 2022 in a letter from the Minister for the Cabinet Office to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee **WITN7247003**.

Groupthink

19. The business of government requires collective action, and the consistent and steady application of established principles and practices, within the framework of the law. Ministers need to abide by the collective responsibility principle of Cabinet government, and civil servants need to respect and follow

decisions made by elected representatives. But none of this should lapse into uncritical or overly defensive thinking, such as may be implied by 'groupthink'.

20. The risks and harms of 'groupthink' were brought to public attention in The Iraq Inquiry (Chilcot) Report. The Ministry of Defence, with input from the Cabinet Office and others, subsequently published *The Good Operation*² **WITN7247004** which includes much useful guidance on mitigating the risk of groupthink. Chilcot is still often referred to as a shorthand reminder of the need to guard against 'groupthink'.

21. The Civil Service has taken action to embed the understanding of these mitigations more broadly across government and to address the drivers of groupthink. However, further efforts and constant vigilance are required. One of the most effective ways we have found - both in the pandemic and during the preparations for EU exit - for addressing groupthink is to widen the range of voices involved in the development, decision-making, and implementation of public policies or services that the government provides. We have found that the best decisions are often made when Ministers, officials and advisers contribute to discussions in mixed fora, so we have made much more extensive use of these, notably in relation to Brexit work and Covid.

22. Increasing the diversity of backgrounds, expertise, and experiences of those who work within the Civil Service supports those efforts at improving the quality of decision-making. The Government recently published the Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy: 2022 to 2025³ **WITN7247005**, which sets out a series of practical ways to encourage a broader range of people into the Civil Service. The Civil Service has long used multi-disciplinary teams and external reviews by bodies such as the Infrastructure & Projects Authority and Government Internal Audit Authority to help bring expert professional challenge. In more recent years, extensive use has been made of reviews by

² The Good Operation, MOD 18 July 2018

³ Available online at

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/civil-service-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-2022-to-2025/civil-service-diversity-and-inclusion-strategy-2022-to-2025.html>

Non-Executive Directors, other independent persons and ‘Red Teams’⁴ to bring alternative perspectives and to challenge received wisdom. There has also been an increased emphasis on science and engineering cadres within the Civil Service, including through the work of Chief Scientific Advisers, and of secondments from industry and academia, to help access specialist skills and knowledge.

Memory illusion and information management

23. Evidence presented to the Inquiry refers to the risk of “memory illusion” whereby “people remember things as they would like them to have been, rather than as they actually were”. This is a psychological trait which is by no means confined to civil servants or Civil Service institutions, though the Civil Service may possibly be more susceptible by virtue of its public service mission. There is no general purpose safeguard against such tendencies. Civil servants are bound by the Civil Service Code to “keep accurate official records”, and each department must “understand, manage and use its information in a way that enables it to understand its value, in order to make effective decisions for the benefit of society.”⁵ However, the challenge of achieving this at scale and over time is significant. Having a mature, long established workforce may guard against loss of institutional memory, but may also limit the challenge from new joiners bringing fresh perspectives. Having information in electronic form has made it more searchable but also more voluminous and disaggregated. The government continues to work on its information management policies, to make use of new technologies and to embed good practice through training and daily example.

Learning lessons

⁴ Red teaming is defined as: the independent application of a range of structured, creative and critical thinking techniques to assist the end user make a better-informed decision or produce a more robust product. [Joint Doctrine Publication (JDP) 0-01.1, *UK Terminology Supplement to NATO Term*]. Published on 26 January 2022 **WITN7247006**.

⁵ [Code of Practice on the Management of Records](#) (issued under section 46 the Freedom of Information Act 2000) published 15 July 2021. **[WITN7247007]**

24. As described above, it is important there is a culture of continuous improvement and learning lessons as we go. Whilst I can confirm this is normal practice within government, it is often useful to have an external perspective to complement this.

25. I have also considered the evidence presented to the inquiry in respect of the government's approach to learning lessons. Of course one important way this is done is through public inquiries themselves. The UK Inquiry into Covid-19 - established by the former Prime Minister with formal powers and a broad remit - offers a good illustration of the importance placed by the government on learning from experience to better prepare for the future. Public Inquiries are an increasingly common and welcome feature of our public life, bringing transparency and clear recommendations for the government and others in public life to act upon, notwithstanding that Public Inquiries are only required in circumstances where there is public concern about a particular set of events. The 2005 Inquiries Act strengthened and clarified their role and since then 32 inquiries have been established, with 15 currently open (as of March 2022), including this one.

26. As well as such formal public inquiries, the Government is able to benefit from the work of Parliamentary Committees, aided in the case of the Public Accounts Committee by the National Audit Office, and from the large number of external reviews commissioned by ministers. External reviews have been important to establish facts independently and draw out lessons in a timely way, as for example the three reports produced in 2021-22 by Nigel Boardman, which are published on gov.uk.

27. Efforts to address the various issues identified above remain ongoing. The Civil Service continues to improve and iterate its approach on each. I am sure the results of this inquiry and its recommendations will add a great deal of value to our approach.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true.

GRO-C

Signed _____

Dated _____ 24 October 2022 _____

Table of Exhibits

Date	Description	Exhibit number
15 June 2021	Declaration on Government Reform	WITN7247002
2 September 2022	Letter from the Minister for the Cabinet Office to the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee	WITN7247003
18 January 2018	The Good Operation	WITN7247004
24 February 2022	Civil Service Diversity and Inclusion Strategy: 2022 to 2025	WITN7247005
January 2022	Joint Doctrine Publication (JDP) 0-01.1, <i>UK Terminology Supplement to NATO Term</i>	WITN7247006
15 July 2021	Code of Practice on the Management of Records (issued under section 46 the Freedom of Information Act 2000)	WITN7247007