

# IN THE MATTER OF THE INQUIRIES ACT 2005

## THE UK COVID-19 INQUIRY - MODULE 1

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### OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE UK HEALTH SECURITY AGENCY

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1. The COVID-19 pandemic is the single most significant public health emergency for a century with nearly seven million recorded lives lost globally to date and almost certainly many more unattributed. Infectious diseases always have more significant health impacts and bring greater adversity to those populations least able to respond, and the risks to us all from future pandemics are growing.
2. The UK Health Security Agency was established during, and in response to, the COVID-19 pandemic and carries with it a clear mission to support the nation to better prepare for, respond to and build technical capacity and capability to underpin future emergency preparedness and response.
3. For these reasons particularly, the Public Inquiry led by Baroness Hallett is welcomed by us. It is not only of critical significance to the country and to those individuals and communities deeply affected by the impact of COVID-19, but also to us as an organisation. UKHSA fully supports the UK COVID-19 Inquiry and its wide ranging lines of enquiry, so we can better protect future populations by building an organisation which is cognisant of both the opportunities and challenges which the Inquiry will lay out in its findings – findings which can become the fundamental building blocks of an exemplar health protection agency for the nation for the future.
4. From its origins in 2021 the Agency has highlighted its commitment and determination to transparency of information and to addressing preventable differential inequalities in health protection outcomes. We will do whatever we can to assist Baroness Hallett in her examination of the preparations for, and response to, the pandemic, so that she may answer the many questions her Inquiry will raise about how our nation as a whole responded to Covid-19 and will do so with dedication to these same articulated principles.

5. We are acutely aware of the importance for this Inquiry to be able to conduct its work and produce its modular reports and recommendations as speedily as possible so that full and frank explanations of what occurred, and why, are given promptly. UKHSA will be open, constructive and honest, and will assist Baroness Hallett in her substantial task to the best of our abilities.
6. The Inquiry will be active over many years. As the Inquiry proceeds UKHSA must continue to carry out its extant health protection work including ongoing surveillance, responding to more than 10,000 health protection incidents each year, ensuring appropriate specialist training and capacity is available to the nation and supporting the development of new vaccines, therapeutics and diagnostics.
7. The Agency has therefore ensured that it has a fully focused and dedicated, significant resource available to assist the Inquiry alongside our clinical, scientific and operational duties as a public health agency.
8. The Agency is a new organisation and has been asked to provide evidence of the preparation, experience and expertise of its predecessor organisations and staff dating back to 2009. These predecessor organisations include Public Health England (PHE), NHS Test & Trace (NHS T&T), and the Joint Biosecurity Centre. Many staff working during this period have retired or are no longer working in the organisation. Additionally there have been thousands of staff movements during the acute phase of the pandemic. We have therefore worked diligently to collect and collate robust detailed information and insight on these earlier years wherever possible.
9. UKHSA has provided the Inquiry team with evidence in response to two rule 9 requests via corporate statements and the disclosure of over three thousand documents, either as exhibits or part of general disclosure for Modules 1 and 2. We will continue to assist the Inquiry in every way we can throughout Module 1 and in respect of the multiple modules to follow that touch on the work of UKHSA and its predecessor organisations.
10. We reiterate our absolute commitment to honesty, openness and transparency to assist the Covid-19 Inquiry ultimately to reach robust and fair conclusions and to ensuring the UKHSA as the nation's new standing body for health protection, can responsively turn relevant findings into actions for our nation's security for the future.

Professor Dame Jenny Harries,  
Chief Executive of the UK Health Security Agency (“UKHSA”)