

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

OPENING STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE UK STATISTICS AUTHORITY

Introduction

1. The UK Statistics Authority ('the Authority') is an independent statutory body. It operates at arm's length from government as a non-ministerial department and reports directly to the UK Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Parliament and the Northern Ireland Assembly. It has responsibility for the Office for National Statistics ('ONS'), and for independent regulation (through the Office for Statistics Regulation). The ONS is the UK's internationally recognised National Statistical Institute and largest independent producer of official statistics in the UK.
2. The National Statistician, Sir Ian Diamond, who will be giving evidence to the Inquiry, is the Chief Executive of the Authority, Permanent Secretary at the ONS, Head of the Government Statistical Service ('GSS') and Head of the Government Analysis Function

The wider context

3. It would be wrong not to begin this statement with an acknowledgment of the adverse effects of Covid-19. The Authority and its staff are all too aware of those effects. They have collected data and evidence throughout the pandemic and seen its impacts on lives, society and the economy. All Authority staff wish to extend their sincere condolences to the bereaved and their great sympathy to all those otherwise affected.
4. The Authority also wish to particularly acknowledge the willingness of the wider public who contributed to ONS surveys and work during the pandemic period and beyond. By participating in this way, many thousands of

participants, across all four nations of the UK, meaningfully assisted the ONS to understand the effects that Covid-19 was having. It really would not have been possible without them. Recognition is also due to those who worked to deliver surveys, data collection and analysis.

5. Finally, the National Statistician wishes to place on record his gratitude to Authority staff for their commitment and work at a time of exceptional challenge.

The Authority's approach to the Inquiry

6. The Authority welcomes the opportunity to participate in this inquiry. There are two aspects to this.
7. First, the ONS produced extensive statistics and insights during the pandemic period, many of which will have informed policy making decisions. The ONS can help the Inquiry to understand what their statistics showed decision makers.
8. Second, the Authority is determined to learn any lessons that arise from the handling of Covid-19 ahead of any future pandemics or other like emergencies. The Authority is resolute in its desire to learn lessons and preserve best practice.

The ONS's role and experience

9. As the UK's National Statistical Institute, the ONS's role during the pandemic was to inform decision-makers and the public with regular data and analytical insights. This was across economic, social and health themes.
10. The role of the ONS remained constant throughout the pandemic in line with its statutory objectives. The context in which the ONS was working, of course, changed profoundly.

11. The pandemic posed unique challenges to the accuracy and quality of data, particularly in relation to survey data collection. Social distancing affected the ability to conduct in-person surveys. Without the ability to knock on doors and interview in homes, public response to ONS surveys became more difficult, as it did for other international national statistics offices.
12. A suite of measures were put in place to minimise limitations with data collection. The ONS also adopted alternative methods, including the re-weighting of results to manage the impact. The transformation towards online data collection was accelerated.
13. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, there was an increased demand for (and awareness of the need for) timely, insightful evidence to inform policy development and the public alike. The ONS adapted and increased the level of insight that was provided within releases, such as those concerning mortality. For example, the ONS linked data to provide new insights on Covid-19 deaths against different characteristics (such as ethnic group, disability and occupation).
14. Where further insight was required, new surveys were introduced and adapted at pace to inform decision makers and the public about the pandemic. This had to be done with rapidity. For example, the ONS established the Coronavirus Infection Survey (CIS). This was a world leading survey set up in rapid time to measure Covid-19 infections and antibodies in partnership with the University of Oxford and others. The survey was the largest of its kind across the UK. It collected some 400,000 samples each month at its peak. It formed a critical evidence base for the Government's ongoing surveillance of Covid-19 across the UK, delivering data for all four nations, with breakdowns by age, region and other characteristics.

15. ONS worked with colleagues across government departments, the devolved administrations, and public bodies throughout the pandemic. This included working constructively to share expertise, provide methodological support and seconding colleagues to government departments. Efforts were made to understand what insights were required through increased collaboration with policymakers.

Future considerations

16. The experience of Covid-19 had confirmed the need for the provision of trustworthy and accurate statistics, with speed, in the face of an emerging threat. The ONS was able to produce statistics which could inform policy makers on the different manner in which Covid-19 affected particular groups, on rates of infection and on potential immunity.
17. In these circumstances it is paramount that the ONS is involved in any future health emergency from the very first. Contingency planning ought to reflect the need for early discussion with the ONS and should be supported in advance by the secure sharing of data between government bodies for statistics and research.
18. In addition, approaches the ONS used to deliver insights during the pandemic, such as regular flexible surveys, are proving their value in tracking current societal and economic issues, such as the rising cost of living, and will do so in any future emergency situations. The availability of this data must not be overlooked.
19. Finally, another feature of the Authority's role through its regulatory function, being that concerned with ensuring that public bodies used statistics appropriately, was also of great importance at a time when the public had a profound need for accurate information.

Conclusion

20. The Authority will listen to the evidence which emerges in Module 2 with great care. It looks forward to the Inquiry's report and recommendations in due course.