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Covid-19 investigations

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UK scientists condemn 'Stalinist' attempt to censor Covid-19 advice

Exclusive: report criticising government lockdown proposals heavily redacted before release

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Paul Lewis and David Conn

Fri 8 May 2020 14.26 BST

Government scientific advisers are furious at what they see as an attempt to censor their advice on government proposals during the Covid-19 lockdown by heavily redacting an official report before it was released to the public, the Guardian can reveal.

The report was one of a series of documents published by the Scientific Advisory Group on Emergencies (Sage) this week to mollify growing criticism about the lack of transparency over the advice given to ministers responding to the coronavirus.

However, large blocks of text in the report, produced by SPI-B, the Sage subcommittee providing advice from behavioural scientists on how the public

might respond to lockdown measures, were entirely blanked out.

Several SPI-B members told the Guardian that the redacted portions of the document contained criticisms they had made of potential government policies they had been formally asked to consider in late March and early April.

One SPI-B adviser said: “It is bloody silly, and completely counterproductive.” A second committee member said: “The impression I’m getting is this government doesn’t want any criticism.”

On Friday afternoon, after the Guardian revealed frustrations over the redacted report, another member of the government’s advisory committee took to Twitter to complain of what he said was “Stalinist” censorship.

“Personally, I am more bemused than furious,” said Stephen Reicher, a professor of social psychology at the University of St Andrews. “The greatest asset we have in this crisis is the trust and adherence of the public. You want trust? You need to be open with people. This isn’t open. It is reminiscent of Stalinist Russia. Not a good look.”

Members of the committee have been discussing among themselves how best to respond to the redaction, which they believe was a heavy-handed move that jeopardises their independence.

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At least one scientific adviser is understood to be considering resigning over the government's secretive approach to science around the Covid-19 outbreak, which they believe is undermining public trust.

[The report, from 1 April](#), summarised SPI-B's discussions about how to handle possible changes to the social distancing measures that had just been introduced to slow the spread of Covid-19.

In the version published on [Sage's government website](#), almost a page and a half of text was heavily redacted. The Guardian understands the blocked text related to SPI-B's criticism about possible government proposals around that time.

These included the idea of reducing the amount of time Britons could spend exercising or shopping, and stricter financial penalties for those found to be breaking the lockdown. A third proposal involved requiring people to self-validate their movements, as was occurring in France, where citizens were required to complete permits before leaving home.

Experts on SPI-B, which includes professors in psychology, epidemiology and anthropology, said they felt the proposals were too punitive and more likely to result in unfair treatment among people in deprived economic circumstances.

A spokesperson for the Government Office for Science said the redactions took place because the policies discussed in the document were still under consideration.

"The only redactions relate to comments made by a Sage subgroup where specific reference is made to policy still under consideration or to remove contact," the spokesperson said.

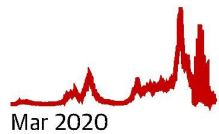
"Redactions were carried out by officials working for the Sage secretariat in consultation with the department developing the policy. All the subgroups were notified and given the opportunity to comment in advance of publication on the redactions being made to specific elements of any papers."

However, SPI-B advisers who spoke to the Guardian disputed that they had been consulted. "We weren't given advance notice and we still haven't been given a satisfactory explanation," the second SPI-B member said, adding they felt the redaction had been intended to stifle criticism.

"This government has failed to show any self-criticism whatsoever, when it is glaringly obvious to everybody that big mistakes have been made. If you want the trust of the population you hold up your hand and you say 'we've made these

mistakes, this is why they happened, we regret it, we're learning from it'. Rather than just keep saying 'we've done the most fantastic job' and not being open to criticism in any way."

Covid-19 in the UK



Daily cases

6,338
-254 vs last week ↓

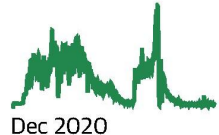
Daily deaths

87

Total deaths

177,977

Vaccination rollout



Received 1st dose

79.6%

Received 2nd dose

74.4%

Received 3rd dose

59.4%

LAST UPDATED: 20 May 2022, this graphic is no longer updating as gov.uk have ceased publishing daily data. Vaccinations as % of total population. Source: data.gov.uk.

A third member of SPI-B said they felt the redactions undermined the expert group's independence from politicians. "What is recorded in the redacted document is us criticising those proposals. They were just not particularly well thought out. Here we were being independent, and you can't see it [because of the redactions]."

A fourth member of SPI-B questions whether the heavy redaction might even have been a mistake, as the documents were summaries of the committee's discussions produced by civil servants.

Covid-19: help us investigate

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"Whether it was a mistake or deliberate doesn't matter; it should not have happened, it's deeply problematic," the adviser said. "The public needs to have trust and confidence in the scientific advice, which the government claims it is relying on, and to see sections redacted in published documents diminishes trust and confidence."

The committee's consideration of the government proposals is understood to have occurred during the first week of the lockdown, which began on 23 March.

The behavioural scientists said in their four-page report that there was a consensus that the high-levels of adherence to government guidelines "are likely to be maintained in the short-to-medium term, for as long as it is evident that Covid-19 poses a serious risk that cannot be managed in any other way".

However they were concerned that introducing more coercive measures, such as more draconian restrictions on movements, risked undermining the high levels of adherence, which they said was "likely based on a sense of community cooperation".

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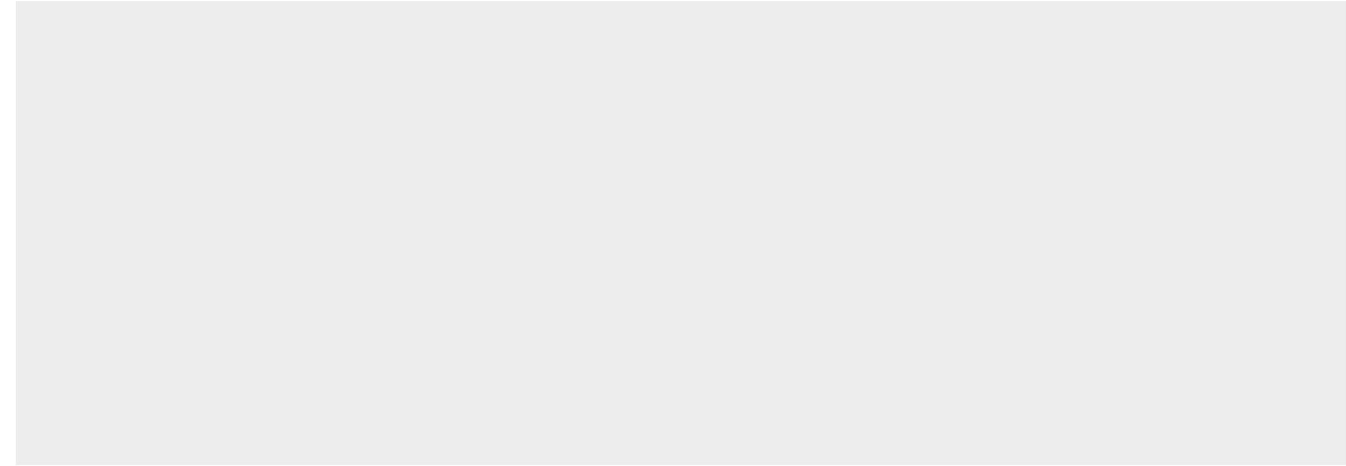
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