

Expert Report for the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry

Module 2: Political and administrative decision making in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic

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Author statement

I confirm that this is my own work and that the facts stated in the report are within my own knowledge. I understand my duty to provide independent evidence and have complied with that duty. I confirm that I have made clear which facts and matters referred to in this report are within my own knowledge and which are not. Those that are within my own knowledge I confirm to be true. The opinions I have expressed represent my true and complete professional opinions on the matters to which they refer.

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enough, or in enough detail, who was responsible for which parts of the delivery process.

Challenges posed to scientific advice and input into decision making

120. The scientific advice structures developed and adapted in response to previous crises, felt the strain during Covid-19. There was a blurring of policy decisions and expert advice, with ministers' mantra that they were "following the science" very damaging. The repeated assertion undermined the importance of ministerial judgement, and the accountability of ministers for decisions. It made it harder for experts to set out their view. And "the" science implied that there was one single view, which was rarely the case. From the start, ministers and other government communicators should have been talking about being "informed by", not "led by", science.
121. There needed to be more clarity about the questions being asked of scientific experts and what the answers meant. Our research indicates that at times questions to experts were poorly formulated, and that the process did not always work well, for example questions about the return of students to universities in the new academic year in autumn 2020, were asked too late. The channelling of questions at the start of the pandemic was ad hoc, with no single channel to direct the agenda for SAGE.
122. SAGE ended up filling a gap in government strategy and decision making. That meant that government decisions were held off until the scientific advice was overwhelming, rather than using scientific inputs alongside other analysis to take decisions at the most appropriate time. Our research also finds that decision making at the centre was chaotic, certainly until things settled down into a clearer strategy and operations committee structure, and ministers did not communicate their priorities to science advisers.
123. We also concluded that SAGE, as an ad hoc group, was not designed to take on such a prolonged role through the pandemic. After COBR meetings were wound up, we heard that the Prime Minister wanted SAGE to continue. That caused staff burnout, and prolonged the media scrutiny of scientists and medics, until the resourcing of SAGE caught up with the demands being placed upon it – which was perhaps unavoidable but should be considered for future crises.
124. The SAGE sub-groups worked effectively, and it was sensible to bring its sub-groups SPI-M, SPI-B and NERVTAG into the structure. But there was a lack of definition of the role for all of these groups. There was confusion about what SAGE advice meant and the extent to which the scientists on it were speaking on behalf of the government.
125. All this put a lot of pressure on the personal skills of the CMO and GCSA. They needed to be credible publicly, and to make clear where their advice suggested stronger action was needed, while maintaining the confidence of the Prime Minister and other ministers. This, with a very regular rhythm of press conferences, put civil service experts at times in an impossible position – for example during the furore about Dominic Cummings' reported breach of lockdown rules. This incident put