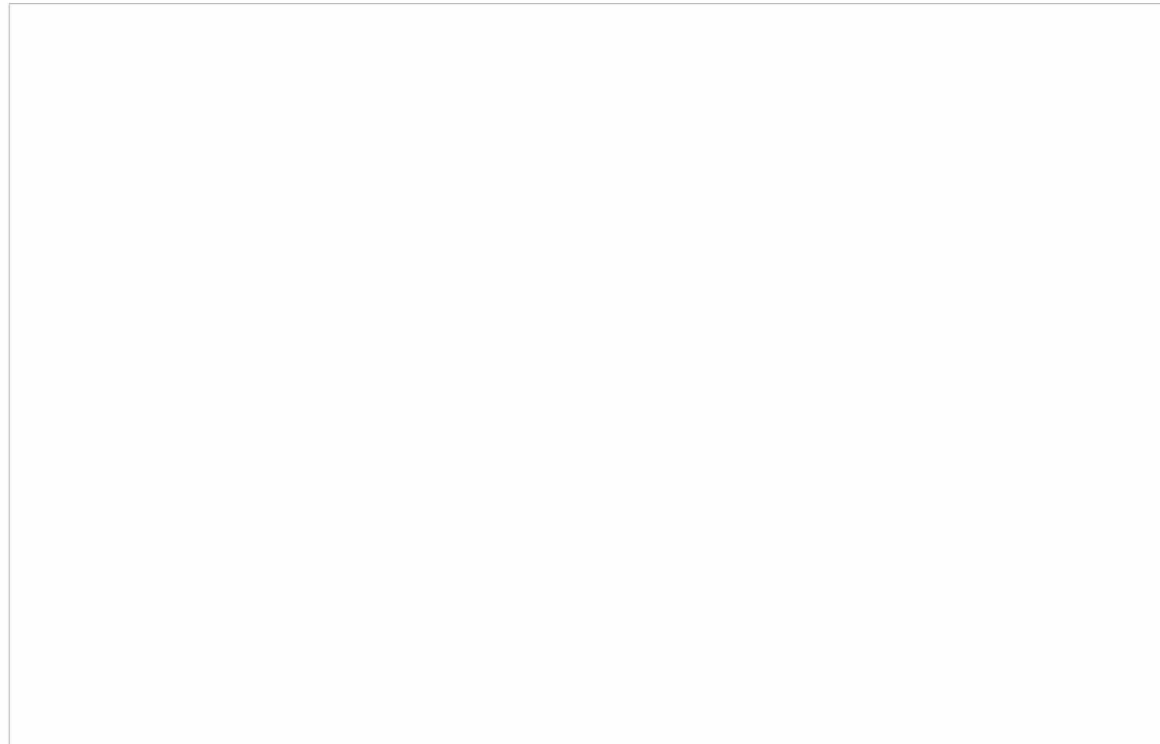


The lockdown files: Rishi Sunak on what we weren't told

[Fraser Nelson](#)



When Britain was being locked down, the country was assured that all risks had been properly and robustly considered. Yes, schools would close and education would suffer. Normal healthcare would take a hit and people would die as a result. But the government repeatedly said the experts had looked at all this. After all, it wasn't as if they would lock us down without seriously weighing up the consequences, was it?

Those consequences are still making themselves known: exams madness, the NHS waiting list surge, thousands of unexplained 'excess deaths', judicial backlogs and economic chaos. Was all that expected, factored in, and thought by leaders to be a price worth

someone involved in making the policy would figure it out.

This was the crux: no one really did. A cost-benefit calculation – a basic requirement for pretty much every public health intervention – was never made. ‘I wasn’t allowed to talk about the trade-off,’ says Sunak. Ministers were briefed by No. 10 on how to handle questions about the side-effects of lockdown. ‘The script was not to ever acknowledge them. The script was: oh, there’s no trade-off, because doing this for our health is good for the economy.’

If frank discussion was being suppressed externally, Sunak thought it all the more important that it took place internally. But that was not his experience. ‘I felt like no one talked,’ he says. ‘We didn’t talk at all about missed [doctor’s] appointments, or the backlog building in the NHS in a massive way. That was never part of it.’ When he did try to raise concerns, he met a brick wall. ‘Those meetings were literally me around that table, just fighting. It was incredibly uncomfortable every single time.’ He recalls one meeting where he raised education. ‘I was very emotional about it. I was like: “Forget about the economy. Surely we can all agree that kids not being in school is a major nightmare” or something like that. There was a big silence afterwards. It was the first time someone had said it. I was so furious.’

One of Sunak’s big concerns was about the fear messaging, which his Treasury team worried could have long-lasting effects. ‘In every brief, we tried to say: let’s stop the “fear” narrative. It was always wrong from the beginning. I constantly said it was wrong.’ The posters showing Covid patients on ventilators, he said, were the worst. ‘It was wrong to scare people like that.’ The closest he came to defying this was in a September 2020 speech saying that it was time to learn to ‘live without fear’ – a direct response to the Cabinet Office’s messaging. ‘They were very upset about that.’

But his victories were few and far between. One, he says, came in May 2020 when the first plans were being drawn to move out of lockdown in summer. 'There's some language in there that you will see because I fought for it,' he says. 'It talked about non-Covid health impact.' Just a few sentences, he says, but he views the fact that lockdown side-effects were recognised at all at that point as a triumph.

He doesn't name Matt Hancock, who presided over all of this as health secretary, or Liz Truss, who was silent throughout. As he said at the outset, he doesn't want to name names but rather to speak plainly about what the public was not told – and the process that led to this. Typically, he said, ministers would be shown Sage analysis pointing to horrifying 'scenarios' that would come to pass if Britain did not impose or extend lockdown. But even he, as chancellor, could not find out how these all-important scenarios had been calculated.


'I was like: "Summarise for me the key assumptions, on one page, with a bunch of sensitivities and rationale for each one",' Sunak says. 'In the first year I could never get this.' The Treasury, he says, would never recommend policy based on unexplained modelling: he regarded this as a matter of basic competence. But for a year, UK government policy – and the fate of millions – was being decided by half-explained graphs cooked up by outside academics.

'This is the problem,' he says. 'If you empower all these independent people, you're screwed.' Sir Gus O'Donnell, the former cabinet secretary, has suggested that Sage should have been asked to report to a higher committee, which would have considered the social and economic aspects of locking down. Sunak agrees. But having been anointed from the start, Sage retained its power until the rebellion that came last Christmas.

remember telling him: have the cabinet meeting. You'll see. Everyone will be completely behind you... You don't have to worry. I will be standing next to you, as will every other member of the cabinet, bar probably Michael [Gove] and Saj [Javid].’ As it was to prove.

Is Sunak exaggerating his own role? For what it's worth, his account squares with what I picked up from his critics in government: that the money-obsessed Sunak was on a one-man mission to torpedo lockdown. And perhaps the Prime Minister as well. 'Everything I did was seen through the prism of: "You're trying to be difficult, trying to be leader,"' he says. He tried not to challenge the Prime Minister in public, or leave a paper trail. 'I'd say a lot of stuff to him in private,' he says. 'There's some written record of every-thing. In general, people leak it – and it causes problems.'

GettyImages-1207527047.jpg



Rishi Sunak and Boris Johnson during a coronavirus press conference, 17 March 2020 (Getty Images)

At any point, Sunak could have gone public – or even resigned. I ask him if he should have done. To quit in that way during a pandemic, he says, would have been irresponsible. And to go public, or let his