

## **UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

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### **MODULE 2 WRITTEN CLOSING STATEMENT**

#### **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. During the pandemic the ONS informed decision makers and the public with regular data and analytical insights. They increased the level of insight provided within regular releases to reflect the needs of users and, where further insights were required, introduced and adapted surveys. For example, the ONS introduced in partnership with the University of Oxford and others, the gold standard Coronavirus Infection Survey (CIS).
3. The Authority is grateful for the opportunity that it has had to participate in the Inquiry, including the opportunity that the National Statistician had to give evidence in October 2023. The Authority remains committed to learning any lessons that arise from the handling of the Covid-19 pandemic ahead of any future emergencies or pandemics.

##### **Data Sharing**

4. A theme of much of the evidence heard during Module 2 has been the difficulties in accessing and sharing data at an early stage in the pandemic. Mr Cain spoke of a 'staggering' lack of data<sup>1</sup>; Mr Ridley referred to the 'enormous need' for 'clear, consistent data'<sup>2</sup>; and Sir Patrick Vallance referred to the fact that 'it wasn't easy' to get a lot of 'data flow early in the pandemic'<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> [15/25/15]

<sup>2</sup> [19/13/15]

<sup>3</sup> [22/34/15]

5. The need for timely, trustworthy and accurate statistics, in the face of an emerging crisis or threat is critical. As the National Statistician said when providing evidence to the Inquiry in October 2023, *‘sharing data or being able to link data together...has the potential to provide evidence to improve the lives of all our fellow citizens in a way that almost nothing else does, and that requires easy, ethical, privacy-enhanced data sharing’*.<sup>4</sup>
6. The report and evidence of Mr Gavin Freeguard explained many of the issues that can arise in relation to delivering effective data sharing [INQ000260629\_0005 - 0012]. Ultimately, there is a need to ensure that clear and consistent pathways for rapid data sharing exist. To fully maximise the potential of linked data and analysis, the swift and smooth provision of access to data across government, in ways that are fully mindful of individual privacy, is critical.
7. This can be facilitated through Trusted Research Environments such as the Integrated Data Service (IDS) platform currently being developed by the ONS. This allows departments to share their data in a secure infrastructure to facilitate research, analysis and visualisation which would be a valuable tool if used in the response to any future national emergency.
8. To ensure that the ONS can fully contribute to any future national emergency the Authority advocates for it to be involved from the very earliest stage to provide decision makers and the public with information and insights immediately. The Authority also welcomes support from the government to fully establish the secure sharing of data between government bodies for statistics and research purposes, which will be central to any future emergency response.

### **Effectively Communicating Data and Statistics**

9. Evidence heard during Module 2 has reiterated the importance of communicating and understanding data and statistics effectively. Professor Sir Patrick Vallance spoke of the importance of ensuring that those who did not have a scientific background understood the data they were being shown.<sup>5</sup>
10. The Authority has worked on initiatives to strengthen data skills across the civil service including the Data Masterclass, and the work of 2023’s One Big Thing Initiative to improve civil servants’ data skills and confidence with seven hours of learning.

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<sup>4</sup> [6/100/9]

<sup>5</sup> [22/62/13]

11. During the pandemic period the ONS proactively offered and provided support to the UK Government for the preparation and presentation of data at the daily press conferences. ONS colleagues supported by designing slides to clearly present data, creating analytical pipelines and ensuring statistical best practice to help users best understand the content.
12. It is also important to highlight and commend the excellent statistical and analytical capability across government departments, the devolved administrations, and public bodies. This analytical and statistical capability can bring great insights to every day policy making as well as in an emergency response, as it did during the Covid-19 pandemic.
13. This expertise must continue to be used as effectively as possible. As the National Statistician stated in his evidence to the Inquiry, the ONS stands ready to be involved from the beginning of any future emergency scenario.

### **Next Steps**

14. The Authority continues to work on Covid-19 related matters. The Winter Covid Infection Study has been established in partnership with the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) and the first results were published on 7 December 2023. This is a valuable surveillance tool which will help decision makers understand the impact of Covid-19 over the winter period. It will help identify potential winter pressures, act as an early warning system for Covid-19 prevalence and deliver insights regarding the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of individuals, the community and health services.
15. During the pandemic period, the Authority deployed colleagues into the Cabinet Office Covid-19 Taskforce to ensure that the data needs of departments were understood and that they had the benefit of statistical expertise. The success of this model led to the creation of the Authority's Policy Liaison Unit which continues to operate today, as a small team that works closely with government departments to better understand policy priorities, data gaps and highlight where ONS data and insights can help inform these areas.
16. Throughout the pandemic the ONS was agile and proactive in identifying the data, statistics and analysis that decision-makers and the public needed to respond to the pandemic. It introduced new surveys such as the Business Insights and Conditions Survey (BICS), Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) which are still ongoing and the CIS. The ONS also safely used new data sources such as financial transactions to

provide novel insights for decision-makers. The ONS continues to work closely with government departments regarding survey and questionnaire design to better reflect user needs. Given the frequency of data collection for these surveys, the ONS can adapt survey questions to reflect data needs and provide insights incredibly quickly.

## **Conclusion**

17. In his Module 2 Statement [INQ000268012] the National Statistician stated that, *'the ONS provided the statistics the country needed through both rapidly standing up new surveys and by bringing in new data sources to help understand the impact of Covid-19. We listened to what insights were required through increased collaboration with policymakers and maximised how our evidence was used and understood in Government by working with and seconding staff to key areas.'* And that *'I am incredibly proud of the extensive work that the ONS delivered during the Covid-19 pandemic, working at pace, in extremely challenging circumstances to deliver high quality insights for decision makers and the public'.*
18. The Authority looks forward to the Inquiry's report on Module 2. It will consider any recommendations relevant to the Authority with the greatest seriousness.
19. The Authority also undertakes to support any future modules of the Inquiry where it may be of assistance.