



House of Commons
Public Administration
and Constitutional Affairs
Committee

**Government transparency
and accountability during
Covid 19: The data
underpinning decisions:
Government's response
to the Committee's Eighth
Report of Session 2019–21**

**First Special Report of Session
2021–22**

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Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration and the Health Service Commissioner for England, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith; to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service; and to consider constitutional affairs.

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Publication

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The current staff of the Committee are Gavin Blake (Clerk), Victoria Cummings (Committee Specialist), Mark Doyle (Media Officer), Iwona Hankin (Committee Operations Officer), Gabrielle Hill (Committee Operations Manager), Dr Philip Larkin (Committee Specialist), Xameerah Malik (Senior Committee Specialist), George Perry (Media Officer), Sibel Taner (Second Clerk) and Dr Patrick Thomas (Committee Specialist).

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You can follow the Committee on Twitter using [@CommonsPACAC](https://twitter.com/CommonsPACAC).

First Special Report

The Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee published its Eighth Report of Session 2019–21, *Government transparency and accountability during Covid 19: The data underpinning decisions* (HC 803) on 15 March 2021. The Government's response was received on 17 May 2021 and is appended to this report.

Government Response

1. Graphics used by Government, for example slide packs and briefings, should meet Government Statistical Service good practice guidelines on data visualisation. They should always meet the accessibility regulations, which are now law. (Paragraph 34)

The Government is committed to ensuring vital public health information is accessible to all communities across the UK. The Government has overseen a significant effort pulling together data on COVID-19, and has made much of this data and analysis available to the public, primarily through the coronavirus.gov.uk dashboard hosted by Public Health England. Digital teams across departments routinely receive training on how to produce high quality and accessible content, including those with a strong data element. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Cabinet Office has brought in additional experts from ONS to lead on the data visualisation of slides for COVID-19 ministerial press briefings, which are subsequently made available to the public via publication on GOV.UK alongside comprehensive statistical notes. These experts have ensured our data visualisation meets accessibility regulations standards, where possible, and applies best practice from the Government Statistical Service. The Cabinet Office and other departments are now adopting this approach across all our digital communications.

We have also worked with the BBC to establish British Sign Language interpretation at all No.10 press conferences via the BBC News Channel and iPlayer, available on all TV packages as part of Freeview as well as on our social media channels. We have reissued guidance to every government department reminding them that all communications must be fully accessible. This guidance was deposited in the House Library on 20 May 2020. COVID-19 guidance is provided in alternative formats, including Easy Read, British Sign Language and Audio.

2. When Ministers or senior officials quote statistics, the underlying data must be published. This is already an Office for Statistics Regulation expectation, and OSR should continue to inform this Committee—as it has throughout this inquiry—when it finds examples of statistics that are quoted without published data to back them up. (Paragraph 45)

3. Going forward, Ministerial statements published on Government websites must include hyperlinks or footnotes directing to the detailed data underpinning any numbers or statistics quoted. This should apply to all areas where data is used, not just in relation to this pandemic. (Paragraph 46)

The Government is committed to transparency and will endeavour to publish all statistics and underlying data when referenced publicly, in line with the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

4. The Ministerial Code needs to be strengthened so it is clear that Ministers are required to abide by the UKSA Code of Practice in their presentation of data. The UKSA Code includes the principle of trustworthiness that builds “confidence in the people and organisations that produce statistics and data”. Abiding by the UKSA Code of Practice is a statutory requirement for Government Departments. It is simply not enough to ask Ministers to be “mindful” of the UKSA code. (Paragraph 47)

The Government agrees that statistics should be used in a way that builds confidence and upholds the three pillars of the Code of Practice - trustworthiness, quality and value. Ministers and their departments are subject to the Code of Practice in respect of National Statistics, as required by the Statistics and Registration Act 2007. The Ministerial Code states that Ministers should be mindful of the good practice in relation to all official statistics, including those not covered by the statutory requirements of the legislation. There will be occasions where it is in the public interest to utilise emerging information, such as to provide a more accurate and up to date response to Parliament. As such, the Government does not agree that a change is necessary to the Ministerial Code.

5. We are certainly not calling for SAGE advisors to be silenced, but for some expectations to be laid about the appropriate way to communicate considering, amongst other things, the potential for the politicisation of their commentary. Civil Servants advising Government are expected to abide by a code of conduct, and there should be a similar code for SAGE advisors. The SAGE secretariat should produce guidance for members on how to engage with the media, in line with the 2012 Cabinet Office Guidance. This should not be overly restrictive as to prevent individual advisors from undertaking their normal work or from outlining the capacity in which they advised SAGE if required. This should be made public. (Paragraph 54)

In certain emergency circumstances the Cabinet Office and the Lead Government Department in consultation with the Prime Minister's office can activate the Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms (COBR) – for response, recovery or both. If required, scientific and technical advice will either be provided by individual experts or, coordinated via a Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), as appropriate. The SAGE secretariat sits within the Government Office for Science. In response to the long running nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, SAGE has now been activated for the longest continual period since its inception.

Most SAGE participants are independent and are free to discuss the science around COVID-19 in the media. If they do choose to do so, they are advised to be clear that they are speaking as individuals from an expert perspective and not on behalf of SAGE or HM Government. Participants have been provided with advice on how to engage with the media.

The principles of scientific advice, set out the rules of engagement between HM Government and those who provide independent scientific and engineering advice:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/scientific-advice-to-government-principle>

The principles offer a foundation on which independent scientific advisers and government departments should base their operations and interactions. The principles set out the roles and responsibilities of these advisers and cover issues of independence, transparency and openness.

6. Government communication needs to focus on informing the public openly and honestly. As we move into the next stage of the pandemic, the roadmap back to lifting restrictions entirely, this becomes even more pertinent. Previous recommendations cover clarity on source information, and adherence to the UKSA Code of Practice. (Paragraph 82)

The UKSA Code of Practice is a standard tool used in statistics and the Government strives to adhere to this.

The Roadmap to lift restrictions - 'COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021' - set out in detail the analysis and data that underpinned the decision making. This included a 48 page data annex and was accompanied by the full publication of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE), Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling (SPI-M) modelling.

Communication activity is a fundamental part of the Government's response to the pandemic - it has saved lives. As restrictions are lifted, it is essential that every citizen and every business knows what behaviours and measures are required to help keep us all safe and provide confidence in the UK economy as businesses reopen. The Government is committed to communicating the latest COVID-19 guidance as clearly and simply as possible via our national public information campaign, publications on GOV.UK, press conferences, televised addresses from the Prime Minister, Chief Medical Officer and Government Chief Scientific Adviser, and through the national news media.

Experts from academia, the public sector, and industrial and commercial communities who have all provided high quality research and information, which has been used to formulate advice given to the Government. The COVID-19 Communications Hub undertakes its own research, through a framework of vetted research agencies, which can provide quantitative and qualitative insights from our target audiences that help shape the creative messages and media channels to ensure that our campaigns are effective in delivering their messages and are acted upon. The data unpinning the slides presented at COVID-19 press conferences is made available to the public via publication on GOV.UK, including reference to source information and statistical notes. A quality and methodology information report has also been published providing further detail:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-press-conferences-quality-and-methodology-information-report>

Graphs which are presented to the public consistently apply best practice guidance from the Government Statistical Service and feedback on the presentation of the slides is also provided via a Public Data Advisory Group chaired by the Director General for Analysis in the Cabinet Office.

7. The Cabinet Office must clearly outline responsibilities for decision making, before the Coronavirus Act is considered for renewal after 25th March 2021. This must include clear lines of accountability at Departmental and Ministerial level, stating which Minister is accountable to Parliament for ensuring key decisions are underpinned by data, and for the data that underpins the decisions. (Paragraph 97)

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster wrote to the Chair on 24 March 2021, setting out the Government's response to this recommendation.

8. Time has passed for Ministers to explain to this Committee why the first lockdown was lifted when it was. It is clear that Ministers are unable to answer that question, and we are sure that this will be picked up by a public inquiry of the kind this Committee recommended in its previous report. It is vital, however, that lessons are learnt, and changes made during this ongoing pandemic. The Committee will ask similar questions when Ministers and officials appear before this committee in future and will expect complete and cogent answers. (Paragraph 145)

9. The Committee expects that the Rt Hon Michael Gove will respond to this report, clearly outlining his understanding of his own responsibilities, and the ways in which he should be held to account by Parliament. The Committee will put further questions to him at his next appearance in front of us. (Paragraph 100)

10. The Government's response to this report should state whether each recommendation is accepted or rejected and should state the next steps the Government will take or provide an explanation for those recommendations rejected. It is not sufficient for the Government to "note" a recommendation, as they have done in the past. (Paragraph 102)

The Government has always been clear that there will be opportunities to look back, analyse, reflect and to learn lessons on all aspects of COVID-19 - and that this would include an independent inquiry at the appropriate time. On 12 May, the Prime Minister confirmed that a public inquiry would be established on a statutory basis - with full formal powers - and that it will begin its work in spring 2022.

Aside from the inquiry, the Government of course continues to learn lessons and apply them to its response to COVID. The 'COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021' publication applied all the experience of the pandemic to this strategy to cautiously lift restrictions, not least in the transparent use of data, analysis and modelling used to inform decision making.

Our response has also been subject to extensive independent scrutiny, including seventeen reports by the independent National Audit Office and fifty parliamentary inquiries to date.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster agreed to appear before PACAC to discuss the review into COVID-status certification, and will answer the Committee's outstanding questions answered during this appearance.

11. The Government must share all the available data with local areas in as much detail as possible, ideally to patient level. Data which will be key to decision making on the road map should be shared immediately, and ahead of the potential renewal of the Coronavirus Act. The Government should publish a comprehensive list of all data that is available and at what level. (Paragraph 132)

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care wrote to the Committee on 24 March 2021, setting out the Government's response to this recommendation.

12. The Department of Health and Social Care, with support from UKSA, should undertake an urgent review of health data systems in England. The review should include consideration of the role of the Department of Health and Social Care in

bringing together health data from across the different health bodies. The Cabinet Office, with its overarching responsibility for data across Government, should peer review this work and look for lessons learnt to share with other Government departments for future. The Committee will ask for updates from the Cabinet Office at its regular sessions with the Permanent Secretary and for advice from the National Statistician at his regular appearances before the Committee. (Paragraph 133)

We agree that cross-organisational working is more important than ever given the large number of organisations across health and social care and the nature and impact of COVID-19. As a result of the Government's actions and those taken by our partners during the pandemic, several ways of accessing and sharing data have either been strengthened or established. Internal and public-facing central dashboards have been set up to show joined-up, UK wide data on a number of COVID-related metrics, ensuring analysts from within and outside government have access to the same key information on which to give advice and make decisions; and the Office for National Statistics (ONS), NHS Digital and the devolved administrations have built data assets within trusted research environments.

We are building on these measures to ensure that health and social care organisations routinely share data, when it is appropriate to do so, for the benefit of the wider health and social care system. NHSX will shortly publish a draft Data Strategy for Health and Social Care to seek views on using the power of data to improve health and social care. The strategy will set out how we can build on the lessons of COVID-19 and include several measures to enable timely access to data for a range of purposes, subject to appropriate protections beyond the pandemic response.

We have already established a Data Alliance Partnership comprising the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) and several of its Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs), which aims to make data accessible in a timely and efficient way for legitimate purposes and within existing legislation. In addition, we plan to make legislative changes which are intended to complement other measures to address structural, cultural, and behavioural challenges to the effective, secure and appropriate processing, use, and sharing of data to benefit individual care and the wider health and care system, and to inform coherent and consistent decision making. More information on our plans can be found in [Integration and Innovation: working together to improve health and social care for all, published by the Department of Health and Social Care in February 2021](#) (para. 5.34). We will also work with the newly established Central Digital and Data Office in the Cabinet Office to ensure that any best practice that is developed from our work, particularly on the adoption of common data standards, is utilised and shared with other organisations.

Dr Ben Goldacre has been asked to lead a review focusing on the more efficient and safe use of health data for research and analysis for the benefit of patients and the healthcare sector. This review is expected to publish its findings and recommendations in late spring 2021.

The future structure of the health landscape is also changing, with the establishment of the UK Health Security Agency, the dissolution of Public Health England and the transfer of some of its functions to other bodies, including a stronger analytical presence within DHSC, which will deliver enhanced analytical capability and greater transparency.

Throughout the pandemic, statisticians across the health and care sector have worked collaboratively to ensure the application of the Code of Practice for official statistics – and its three core pillars of trustworthiness, quality, and value. This has resulted in a significant increase in the statistics and insights published. Teams in DHSC, its ALBs, ONS and the devolved administrations have come together to create a joined up narrative, most notably on the public-facing coronavirus.gov.uk dashboard hosted by Public Health England, which has been a crucial part of the Government's clear and transparent presentation of COVID metrics to the public, presenting clear visuals and UK-wide comparisons. Prior to the pandemic, ONS had brought statisticians together through an English Health Statistics Steering Group which was established to address a set of coherence and capability challenges. We recognise however that there is more to be done and so we have agreed that the Office for Statistics Regulation will carry out a lesson learned exercise from the pandemic, once the immediate challenges of pandemic response have passed, specifically focussed on the coherence across the health statistics landscape.

We will consider the merits of conducting a broader review once the draft Data Strategy has been published, the work of the Data Alliance Partnership has had time to embed, we have the outcome of the review from Dr Ben Goldacre, the new organisations have been established, and the Office for Statistics Regulation have gathered lessons learned across the health statistical landscape.

13. The priority now must be a clear and consistent framework for making lockdown decisions as a path back to normality is charted. The Committee, therefore, welcomes the roadmap. The Government should not make further changes to it, in terms of setting new tests or boundaries. It is concerning that the roadmap does not appear to contain any guidance for moving back into lockdown in the event of a new variant or other unexpected turn of events, even though the Government has taken the stance that this should be the last lockdown. (Paragraph 174)

The roadmap sets out the four tests that will be assessed at each of the four steps to determine whether it is safe to move to the next step. The assessment of these tests at Step 2 and associated data and modelling was published on 5 April 2021. This included an assessment of Variants of Concern at test 4.

14. The new roadmap must be updated to point to where data can be found under each indicator. The roadmap indicators should be added to the dashboard, with clear links through to the data at lower local authority level underpinning each one. (Paragraph 176)

The Government has set out the four tests that will need to be met to move between each step, with at least a five week gap between steps: four weeks to observe the impact of the previous step and a further week's notice to the public and businesses ahead of any further changes. This means that we will only move to the next step in the roadmap if it is safe to do so.

On 5 April, the Government set out its assessment of these four tests that had been met at Step 2 and published the data and modelling that underpinned that decision. On 10 May, the Government did the same for Step 3. The Government also continues to hold regular press conferences, supported by our scientific advisers, to present the latest data and continues to ensure that data is available and accessible to the public on the key metrics.

A list of all the metrics available in the public Dashboard by area type and devolved nations is attached and can be accessed here: <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/details/download>. The Dashboard has clear links to data at lower local authority level with a total of 101 metrics at an overview level for the UK. There are 116 metrics for England at a national level, 68 at a regional level, 17 at a NHS regional level and 11 at NHS Trust level.

15. The Government did not publish thresholds for tiering decisions which made it hard for local authorities and businesses to plan. This must be changed for the future. The Committee does not believe including thresholds in the roadmap will cause perverse outcomes (as James Bowler suggested in his evidence). It is, of course, possible that England progresses quickly against some indicators and more slowly against others, in which case the Government would need to make a judgement on whether to move to the next step on the roadmap. Increased transparency created by clear thresholds will increase public trust and confidence. (Paragraph 177)

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster wrote to the Chair on 24 March 2021, setting out the Government's response to this recommendation.

16. The Government must publish thresholds aligned to the roadmap in ranges or using minimum requirements, and with appropriate caveats if needed. This should be done immediately with the information available before decisions are taken to take the first steps. (Paragraph 178)

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster wrote to the Chair on 24 March 2021, setting out the Government's response to this recommendation.

17. The Government should publish the data that underpins the restrictions that will remain in place on businesses at each step of the roadmap as a matter of urgency. Hyperlinks to this data must be included on pages explaining the restrictions for maximum transparency. (Paragraph 192)

The 'COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021' update, published on 22 February, set out the detailed data and analysis that underpins the Government's approach to easing lockdown.¹ It included the impact on the economy and society including Gross Domestic Product and anxiety and depression levels. Each step includes an assessment of socio-economic analysis including the Gross Value Added of the sectors affected. A set of 4 reviews will assess the situation after Step 4 including on social distancing, travel, large events and Covid-status certification. They will include an assessment of the ongoing economic implications of restrictions.

The Government published a wide range of economic and social data in the roadmap and in the [data annex](#) supporting the roadmap publication. This formed part of the wide evidence base that contributed to the decisions on the order of easing and the overall pace of the roadmap. In order to inform the pace and sequencing of the roadmap, the Government also took scientific advice from SAGE. SAGE papers are also routinely released once any related policies are no longer in development; these are made available to all on GOV.UK, enabling scrutiny and challenge by academics and members of the public. On 22 February, alongside the 'COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021' update, 20 SAGE papers were released

1 [HMG, COVID-19 Response - Spring 2021 - Data Annex](#)

on GOV.UK with additional evidence underpinning the roadmap. All are available on the UK Parliament website: <https://depositedpapers.parliament.uk/depositedpaper/2282992/details>.