

**IN THE MATTER OF THE UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY
BEFORE BARONESS HALLETT**

**MODULE 2 – ADDENDUM CLOSING STATEMENT FROM THE FEDERATION OF ETHNIC
MINORITY HEALTHCARE ORGANISATIONS (“FEMHO”) FOLLOWING THE EVIDENCE OF
DR SIMON CASE**

Introduction

1. FEMHO is grateful for the opportunity to make this addendum statement to its closing submissions dated 15 January 2024 and to highlight crucial aspects of Dr Case’s evidence which correlate with, and build on, those submissions made previously. FEMHO considers Dr. Case's evidence to be of paramount importance due to its profound implications for public health, equity, and governance. As the Cabinet Secretary, Dr. Case's testimony offers critical insights into the adequacy of the government's response to the pandemic. His admissions regarding data inadequacy, delayed recognition of, and action to mitigate against, disparities, and systemic challenges within decision-making forums underscore the urgent need for reform and accountability within government institutions. From FEMHO's perspective, Dr. Case's evidence highlights systemic failures that must be addressed to ensure a more effective and equitable response to future crises, making his testimony crucial for informing policy decisions and driving meaningful change in healthcare and governance systems.

Lack of Early Attention to Vulnerable Groups

2. Dr. Case's testimony regarding the delayed recognition of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on ethnic minority communities, and his admission that “*this is one of things that not enough attention was paid to early on...it was one of the areas where I think we were too slow.*”¹, underscores the urgent need for proactive measures to protect vulnerable populations. The evidence presented reveals a systemic failure to promptly address the specific needs of ethnic minority communities, despite early indications of their heightened vulnerability to the virus. This failure highlights broader disparities in healthcare access and outcomes, which have long been overlooked and exacerbated during times of crisis. The lesson to be learned from this is clear: governments must prioritise the needs of vulnerable populations from the outset of any crisis, ensuring that resources and interventions are tailored to address the unique challenges faced by these communities. Proactive and targeted measures, informed by community engagement, are essential to mitigate disparities and prevent further harm.

¹[36/34/4-5] & [36/197/5-10]

Data Inadequacy and Decision-Making

3. Dr. Case's acknowledgment of data inadequacy, in particular his admission that it wasn't until "*really into the Autumn*"² that they had adequate data to understand the needs of socially vulnerable people, raises serious concerns about the government's ability to make informed decisions during a public health crisis. The reliance on incomplete information and the absence of robust data collection mechanisms hindered the effectiveness of interventions and undermined public trust in the decision-making process. The consequences of this data deficiency were far-reaching, leading to delayed and/or misguided responses that likely exacerbated the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable populations, including ethnic minorities. This highlights the critical importance of investing in comprehensive data infrastructure and surveillance systems capable of capturing and analysing real-time data from diverse populations. Furthermore, it underscores the need for transparency and accountability in data reporting and sharing, as well as the importance of utilising evidence-based approaches to inform policy and practice. The lessons learned from this experience emphasise the need for governments to prioritise data collection and analysis as fundamental components of crisis preparedness, ensuring that decision-makers have access to timely and accurate information to guide effective responses and mitigate harm.

Lack of Diversity in Decision-Making Forums

4. Dr. Case's admission of the lack of diversity in the Cabinet is indicative of broader systemic issues within government. The absence of diverse perspectives in key decision-making forums perpetuates inequalities and limits the government's ability to address the diverse needs of the population. This lack of representation not only undermines the legitimacy of government decisions but also contributes to policy blind spots that disproportionately impact marginalised communities, including ethnic minorities. The lesson to be learned from this is clear: diversity in decision-making forums is essential for ensuring that policies and interventions are inclusive, equitable, and effective. Governments must prioritise the recruitment and retention of diverse talent at all levels of leadership and governance, actively seeking out and amplifying voices from underrepresented communities. This is crucial for creating spaces where diverse perspectives are valued, heard, and acted upon. By embracing diversity in decision-making, governments can better address the complex challenges facing society and build trust with all segments of the population.

Toxic Culture and Leadership Challenges

5. The confirmation of a toxic culture within the Cabinet Office and central government that came out in Module 2 evidence is deeply troubling. Dr. Case's further description of the environment as

² [36/36/7-8]

dysfunctional and characterised by egos and fear highlights the urgent need for cultural reform and leadership accountability within government institutions. This toxic culture not only undermines morale and productivity but also hampers effective decision-making and policy implementation. It fosters an environment where dissenting voices are silenced, innovation is stifled, and individuals are discouraged from speaking truth to power. The lesson to be learned from this is clear: “organisational culture matters”. Government must prioritise building a culture of trust, transparency, and respect, where diverse perspectives are welcomed and constructive criticism is valued. Leadership accountability is paramount, with leaders held responsible for fostering healthy workplace dynamics and modelling ethical behaviour. By addressing toxic cultures head-on, government can create an environment where staff feel empowered to contribute their best ideas and work collaboratively towards shared goals.

Public Trust and Accountability

6. Dr. Case's recognition of the erosion of public trust due to breaches by senior officials underscores the importance of accountability and transparency in government actions. The failure to uphold these principles has significant implications for public health and safety and requires urgent remedial action. Public trust is a cornerstone of effective governance, essential for fostering cooperation, compliance, and social cohesion during times of crisis, and is particularly fragile amongst marginalised communities including ethnic minority groups. When breaches of trust occur, whether through ethical lapses, conflicts of interest, or failures of transparency, they undermine the legitimacy of government actions and erode confidence in public institutions. The lesson to be learned from this is clear: “accountability is non-negotiable”. Government must prioritise accountability mechanisms that hold leaders and institutions answerable for their actions, ensuring that decisions are made in the public interest and that trust is maintained with the communities they serve. Transparency in decision-making processes, clear communication with the public, and swift and decisive action in response to breaches of trust are essential for restoring confidence and rebuilding public trust.

Conclusion

7. FEMHO is committed to holding leaders accountable and advocating for policies that prioritise the needs of vulnerable populations and health care workers. Dr. Case's testimony serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need for reform and action to address systemic challenges. Moving forward, we must heed the lessons learned and collaborate to build more resilient and inclusive systems that promote health equity and uphold the dignity of all individuals. Sadly, the evidence presented highlights areas where such efforts were lacking, underscoring the importance of redoubling our commitment to effect meaningful change.

6 June 2024