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Covid-19: Government was “grossly negligent” in its handling of pandemic, says people’s inquiry

Clare Dyer

The UK government’s handling of the coronavirus pandemic was “grossly negligent” and amounted to misconduct in public office, an inquiry set up by the campaign group Keep our NHS Public has concluded.¹

The group established the People’s Covid Inquiry, chaired by the human rights lawyer Michael Mansfield QC, to learn lessons quickly after the government rejected calls for a public inquiry. Boris Johnson, the prime minister, later relented and announced that a public inquiry would be launched in spring 2022 but has yet to name a chair.

In a foreword to the inquiry’s report Mansfield said, “From lack of preparation and coherent policy, unconscionable delay through to preferred and wasteful procurement, to ministers themselves breaking the rules, the misconduct is earth-shattering. The public deserves the truth, recognition and admissions.”

The inquiry, which took evidence in fortnightly sessions from February 2020 to June 2021, heard from 40 witnesses who included national and international experts, NHS staff and key workers, and bereaved families.

Other panel members were Neena Modi, professor of neonatal medicine at Imperial College London and BMA president, Tolullah Oni, urban epidemiologist at the Medical Research Council’s epidemiology unit at Cambridge University, and NHS consultant radiologist Jacky Davis.

Davis said, “We heard time and again how public services, including the NHS, public health, education, and social care, had been run down in the decade of ‘austerity’ prior to the pandemic. This meant health and social inequalities had widened and the pandemic exacerbated these inequalities.

“The government repeatedly put the economy before people’s health, made poor decisions too slowly, and outsourced critical work to private companies that had no experience.”

The report highlighted the government’s failure to prepare for a pandemic despite earlier modelling exercises that should have ensured it was ready; a failure to lock down early enough; and the decision to send elderly people back from hospital to their care homes without testing for the virus. An estimated 25% of covid deaths were among care home residents.

“Unforgivably,” the report said, there was a failure to provide adequate personal protective equipment to staff, with the result that frontline workers had a sevenfold higher risk of getting covid. The “corrupt” contracting system set up by the government resulted in contracts for PPE being awarded without tender to people who had no experience in providing it.

The inquiry pointed to the huge waste of public money spent on an ineffective system for testing and tracing people thought to have been exposed to the virus. “The disastrous decision to bypass the NHS and use the private sector to run the FTTIS [find, test, trace, isolate, support] system . . . has thus far cost the taxpayer £37bn without, according to the Public Accounts Committee, making a measurable difference to the pandemic,” the report said.

¹ People’s Covid Inquiry. Misconduct in public office: why did so many thousands die unnecessarily? Dec 2021. <https://www.peoplescovidinquiry.com>.

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