

UK Covid-19 Inquiry public hearings: module 2, week 4 (30 October-2 November 2023)

The UK Covid-19 Inquiry (the Inquiry) public hearings for module 2 began on 3 October 2023 and will conclude on 14 December 2023.

Module 2 is focused on core political and administrative governance and decision-making for the UK. It will examine the initial response, central government decision making, political and civil service performance as well as the effectiveness of relationships with governments in the devolved administrations and local and voluntary sectors. It will also assess decision-making about non-pharmaceutical measures and the factors that contributed to their implementation.

This week the Inquiry heard from witnesses including Lord Simon Stevens, former chief executive of NHS England (NHSE), Sir Christopher Wormald, permanent secretary of the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), and Dominic Cummings, former adviser to the prime minister.

The Inquiry heard that the lack of diversity in the Cabinet Office and Number 10 directly impacted policy decisions, that NHS leaders were not consulted on the “stay home, protect the NHS, save lives” campaign, and that data indicating that the NHS was in danger of being overwhelmed in March 2020 led to the first lockdown.

Next week the Inquiry will hear from Lord Mark Sedwill, former cabinet secretary and head of the civil service, Lord Edward Udney-Lister, former chief of staff at Number 10, and Dame Priti Patel, former secretary of state for the Home Department.

This briefing summarises the proceedings most relevant to NHS trusts and is the fourth in the series of weekly briefings on the Inquiry’s public hearings on module 2. You can see our earlier briefings on the preliminary hearings and other public hearings on [our website](#), as well as a set of [frequently asked questions on rule 9 requests](#) we prepared with our legal partners.

Monday 30 October

Witnesses

Martin Reynolds and Imran Shafi.

Summary of witness evidence

Martin Reynolds

Martin Reynolds was the principal private secretary to then Prime Minister, Rt Hon Boris Johnson from July 2019 to February 2022.

Reynolds gave evidence on his role in supporting Johnson in the decision-making process and connecting him to advice from the government.

During a meeting on 13 March 2020, officials discussed data indicating that the NHS would be overwhelmed. He said that the prime minister's decision-making was "hot and cold". Reynolds said the government was not properly prepared for the scale of the Covid-19 crisis.

Imran Shafi

Imran Shafi was the prime minister's private secretary for public services. His remit covered the departments of health and social care, education, and sport and culture.

Shafi said there was too much focus within government on managing the narrative around excessive deaths and not enough focus on preventing those deaths. The Cabinet Office briefing room (COBR) meetings focussed on short term plans and did not plan for Covid-19 control measures. On 9 March 2020, modelling indicated the NHS would not be able to manage the level of predicted demand. By 14 March 2020, there was disagreement among senior government ministers and officials as to when a lockdown should be implemented to avoid the NHS being overwhelmed.

Shafi said that Johnson was "more sceptical than most" about long Covid.

The full transcript of the day's proceedings is available [here](#).

Tuesday 31 October

Witnesses

Lee Cain and Dominic Cummings.

Summary of witness evidence

Lee Cain

Lee Cain was Downing Street's director of communications from 2019 to 2022.

Cain dismissed the idea that the government had a Covid-19 action plan. He said that he didn't directly consult NHS leaders on the "stay home, protect the NHS, save lives" campaign and that NHS

concerns about the slogan were only brought to his attention after he left government. He had regular meetings with senior communicators in NHS England (NHSE) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), and issues around the impact of the messaging were never raised. Cain had few interactions with the [scientific advisory group for emergencies](#) (SAGE) or the scientific pandemic insights group on behaviours (SPI-B) when formulating government messaging and when he did, he didn't find them particularly helpful.

Cain said that during a meeting, with the prime minister and other officials, on 14 March 2020 there was collective agreement in the room that a lockdown was the only strategy that could suppress the spread of Covid-19 and save the NHS from collapse. A decision was not made in that meeting to impose a lockdown. Cain said the ten-day gap to the announcement of the lockdown was due to the need to put in place policies and the prime minister "oscillating between lockdown and other potential policy options".

Cain said that the lack of diversity in the Cabinet Office and Number 10 directly impacted policy decisions. Cain said it's quite clear that there were challenges of gender, socioeconomic and ethnic diversity in the prime minister's top team and that when you lack that diversity within a team "you create problems in decision-making, policy development and culture".

Dominic Cummings

Dominic Cummings was senior advisor to then Prime Minister, Rt Hon Boris Johnson, from July 2019 until November 2020.

Cummings said that vulnerable groups were entirely neglected in government planning. On 19 March 2020 he realised there was no shielding plan and the Cabinet Office tried to block his team from creating one.

Number 10 officials and the cabinet secretary raised concerns about the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP, claiming that his updates at morning briefing meetings were inaccurate. By April 2020, Cummings was repeatedly calling on Johnson to sack Hancock because he had misled them about the scaling-up of testing, the availability of personal protective equipment (PPE), and what was being put in place to protect the care home sector.

On 14 April 2020, Cummings messaged Hancock and other DHSC officials to say that hospitals needed to segregate Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 patients. Hancock said that those measures were already in place. Cummings was not satisfied with his reassurances and Sir Chris Whitty and Sir Patrick Vallance remained concerned.

The full transcript of the day's proceedings is available [here](#).

Wednesday 1 November

Witnesses

Helen MacNamara and Professor David Halpern.

Summary of witness evidence

Helen MacNamara

Helen MacNamara was deputy cabinet secretary in the Cabinet Office from 2018 to 2021.

MacNamara said that having people at the centre who understood how the NHS operated would have been useful.

"The NHS capacity is elastic", was a phrase she kept hearing. It was only later on that she realised that meant "people working in the NHS to work themselves into the ground to keep people alive". She said when the government talks about the NHS, the focus tends to be more on acute care and hospitals rather than public health or GPs. The government wasn't concerned enough about the actual overall health of the population.

The government didn't pay enough attention to addressing inequalities. MacNamara raised the inadequacies in PPE for women. After weeks of discussion in Number 10, the prime minister raised the issue with Sir Simon Stevens, then NHSE chief executive, on 30 April 2020. Sir Simon reassured the prime minister that the issues with PPE fitting women's bodies had been misreported and there wasn't a problem.

There were no women contributing to policy discussion documents and the dominant culture was "macho and heroic", which was unhelpful when the country needed thoughtful and reflective decision making. In an email to women in the Cabinet Office and Number 10 on 13 April 2020, MacNamara detailed her concerns about the culture and the policy areas that were suffering. Katherine Hammond, a senior civil servant in the civil contingencies secretariat, agreed and suggested having more female voices in the room, such as the chief nursing officer.

Professor David Halpern

Professor David Halpern is president and founding director of [The Behavioural Insights Team](#).

Professor Halpern gave evidence to the Inquiry on his involvement in February and March 2020 assisting and advising those at the government's centre. He also gave evidence on his understanding of social distancing from a behavioural perspective.

The full transcript of the day's proceedings is available [here](#).

Thursday 2 November

Witnesses

Lord Simon Stevens and Sir Christopher Wormald.

Summary of witness evidence

Lord Simon Stevens

Prior to being ennobled, Lord Simon Stevens was the chief executive of NHSE from 2014 to 2021.

During the Covid-19 pandemic most of his work was on operational issues and Sir Simon, as he then was, was not directly asked to contribute to debates on non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs). He attended most COBR meetings in February and March 2020 but he didn't feel those meetings were "optimally effective". The seniority of ministers in attendance varied between departments so the minister present didn't always have the authority needed. In his [written statement](#) he said that COBR meetings in the early stages were chaired by Matt Hancock and that some secretaries of state sent junior ministers instead of attending themselves. He felt that if the prime minister had chaired those committees, more secretaries of state might have attended. He explained that these meetings subsequently were dropped and replaced by Covid-19 operations committee and Covid-19 strategy committee meetings.

Lord Stevens said Hancock was not trying to get him to resign or to remove him from his job. He had intended to do five years at NHSE chief executive, but in 2019 there was a new government and then the pandemic arrived, neither of which were sensible points to go. He said he waited until the vaccine rollout had taken place and then decided to resign. Counsel read him various text messages in which both he and Hancock were mentioned in a derogatory way and asked if he had the impression that people in government were dissatisfied with him – he did not believe this to be the case.

Asked about whether Hancock was untruthful, he said he had not seen any evidence to support that claim. He said for the most part he could trust him.

A tabletop exercise called [Operation Nimbus](#) took place in early February 2020. The aim was to look at the reasonable worst-case scenario, including a scenario where there could have been 840,000 excess deaths over a 16-week wave of infection. In his witness statement, Lord Stevens said this presented a, "unresolved but fundamental ethical debate about a scenario in which a rising number of Covid-19 patients overwhelmed the ability of hospitals to look after them and other non-Covid patients". The secretary of state for health and social care thought that in that scenario he, rather than

the medical profession or the public, should ultimately decide who should live and who should die. The previous secretary of state, Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, had taken a different view during [Exercise Cygnus](#) and thought that these decisions should be taken by clinical staff. Lord Stevens said it would be "highly undesirable" other than in the most "extreme circumstances" for the secretary of state to take these decisions.

The prime minister's [written statement](#) stated that they were forced to take extreme measures to lock down the country and protect the NHS "because the NHS and social services had failed to grip the decades old problem of delayed discharges, commonly known as bed blocking". Lord Stevens said that Johnson had been right to say that there had been long-standing problems with the availability of social care. He disputed the impact that discharging 30,000 hospital inpatients would have on capacity, given that the government was being told that there could be as many as 200,000 to 800,000 hospital inpatients. He also pointed out that the issue of discharging patients was addressed early on but that did not prevent further lockdowns.

He disputed reports that he told the prime minister there weren't any issues with PPE not fitting women. He said that there was ongoing work undertaken by NHSE to look at the suitability of PPE for women, those from ethnic minority backgrounds and those with facial hair, and that specific action was recorded and being taken. He acknowledged that misfitting of PPE did persist as a problem, citing supply issues and the difficulty in getting a range of masks to different locations across the country.

Sir Christopher Wormald

Sir Christopher Wormald has been permanent secretary at DHSC since May 2016.

He said Matt Hancock could sometimes be seen to be over optimistic and would over-promise on what could be delivered. He said he could not find evidence that Hancock had misled Johnson on whether patients being discharged from hospitals were going to be tested for Covid-19. He knew there were some toxic relationships between Number 10, Cabinet Office and Hancock but that it was worse than he had realised. He said at official level, he felt things were good, that DHSC was being listened to and things they asked for seemed to be happening.

He did not agree with others who thought that DHSC was not structured for a public health crisis, had responsibilities scattered over too many areas, was generally overwhelmed, and was dysfunctional. He said that there were no restrictions on borders and no test and trace system because the government was following the [UK influenza pandemic preparedness strategy 2011](#) in January 2020.

Sir Christopher thought that if NPIs were in place earlier, a lockdown might have been avoided but at the time these decisions seemed rational and in line with scientific advice. He did believe that the lockdown of November 2020 was implemented too late.

The full transcript of the day's proceedings is available [here](#).