

# A Covid-19 inquiry is not inevitable

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So likely is a judge-led public inquiry into the Covid-19 pandemic will be held in Britain, runs the consensus view, that it is often described as inevitable.

Yet nothing is certain until it happens. While a public inquiry is desperately needed, there are worrying signs that it will not occur, or that any inquiry will not have the wide-ranging remit necessary to establish all the facts about the government's handling of the pandemic.

The problem for anyone seeking the truth about how Britain came to have one of the worst coronavirus death tolls in the world is that under the Inquiries Act 2005 only the government can fire the starting gun, but it may have much to lose in doing so.

A full inquiry into the government's handling of the crisis will help us to learn urgent lessons for the future

The prospects for accountability are not good. In April Sir Ed Davey, the joint acting leader of the Liberal Democrats, first pressed the prime minister to commit to a public inquiry. Two months on and Boris Johnson has not given a commitment, despite Nicola Sturgeon, the first minister of Scotland, promising to hold a statutory inquiry north of the border.

The main way in which Westminster may seek to avoid an inquiry is by claiming it would needlessly replicate investigations being done elsewhere.

For example, it could point to parliament's health and social care committee, which has already heard witness evidence in its investigation into the UK's coronavirus response. It may highlight a similar House of Lords committee investigation into the impact of Covid-19 on public services, or Public Health England's recently completed review of the disproportionate impact of the virus on ethnic minorities.

Public inquiries are, by far, the most politically independent means we have of establishing facts in events of significant public concern. Once ministers set their terms of reference they are more or less free to interpret and add flesh to their scope, gather evidence, call witnesses and make recommendations.

The multifactorial nature of the pandemic means that the terms of reference for any inquiry should be drawn as widely as possible. Here too the government could seek to circumscribe its investigation.

One tactic would be to exclude examination of how people died in hospitals and care homes by arguing that coroners already do this. Even if this were reasonable, the numbers of Covid-19 deceased are so great that the coroners' court system will require significant additional funding and a unified approach that includes grouping similar deaths together so that cases can be dealt with simultaneously, while fully involving bereaved families.

Individual fact-finding processes may indeed provide useful insights into aspects of the handling of the pandemic, but anyone interested in knowing the full picture about how Covid-19 wrought such damage should focus their attention on urgently obtaining a full public inquiry.

Smaller "victories" may undermine this objective, depriving the public of a real chance to learn urgent lessons and better prepare for a precarious future.

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