

Covid inquiry: thousands of documents, millions spent — and hearings haven’t even begun

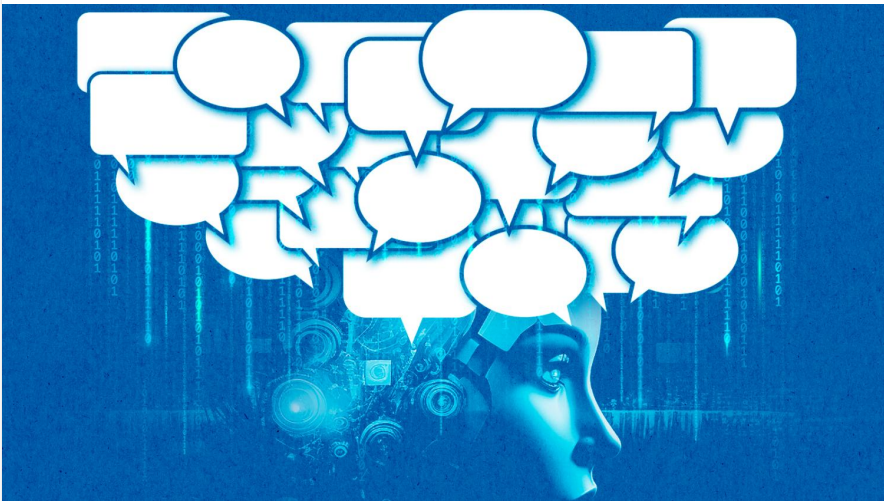


ILLUSTRATION BY JAMES COWEN

Tom Calver, Data Editor

Sunday May 14 2023, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

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Even before the first full hearings have started, the inquiry into the UK’s handling of the coronavirus crisis faces huge challenges. Costs are spiralling and delays are mounting.

Baroness Hallett, a coroner on the inquest into the 7/7 attacks in London in 2005, has the power to compel the production of

documents and call witnesses to give evidence under oath. But many potential witnesses are upset that they have not been called upon.

Saleyha Ahsan, an NHS doctor and campaigner with Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, put herself forward as a key witness but her services were declined. Her father died of Covid in late 2020 and she is desperate for answers.

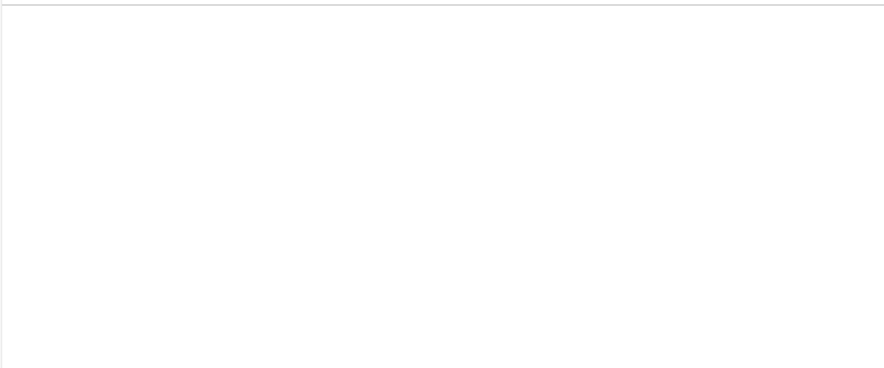
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“We were exhausted and having to learn on the job,” she said of medical staff using PPE for the first time in the throes of a pandemic. “Putting it on securely and taking it off in the right order — and in the right part of the ward — was vital to prevent infections.”

The inquiry will be split into modules, published one by one. The first will cover preparedness: whether we could have seen the pandemic coming. The second will look at government decision-making. The third will cover the impact of Covid on healthcare.

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More to investigate

Words in the Covid Inquiry's "terms of reference". The Inquiry's scope – and number of stakeholders – has grown



Chart: @TomHCalver | The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: Inquiry Website

Sir Keir Starmer wants the first module to report back by the end of the year. This looks unlikelier by the day. The first hearings, scheduled for this month, have been pushed back to June 13. Submissions from some government departments were “insufficiently rigorous”, according to Hugo Keith KC, lead counsel for the inquiry. Others swamped the inquiry with too much information. “They provided large numbers of what turned out to be largely irrelevant or wrongly directed documentation,” Keith said. One unnamed body sent more than 13,000 documents over three weeks.

Given the incomplete evidence, some want the first hearing pushed back further. Hallett has resisted. Even so, a spokesman for the inquiry said her recommendations might not come until late this year or “certainly next year”.

Preliminary hearings for the second module will probably not begin until the autumn, while few expect the third module to start before summer 2024. More modules will then follow, meaning it may be some time before we get answers on what many consider to be the biggest failure of Britain’s pandemic response: allowing Covid to rip through care homes.

Charlie Williams, 55, lost his father in April 2020. He was in a Coventry home where 24 residents died. “They were thrown to the wolves,” Williams said. “Clearly, things have gone disastrously wrong. We have to be ready for the next pandemic. We have to uncover what went wrong to save lives.”

Waiting for justice

Length of selected inquiries and panels, past and present

Bloody Sunday		
Hutton		
Hillsborough Panel		
Iraq (Chilcott)		
Leveson		
Undercover Policing		
Grenfell Tower		
Manchester Arena		
Covid-19		
Post Office Horizon		

Chart: @TomHCalver | The Times and The Sunday Times • Source: [Gov.uk](#)

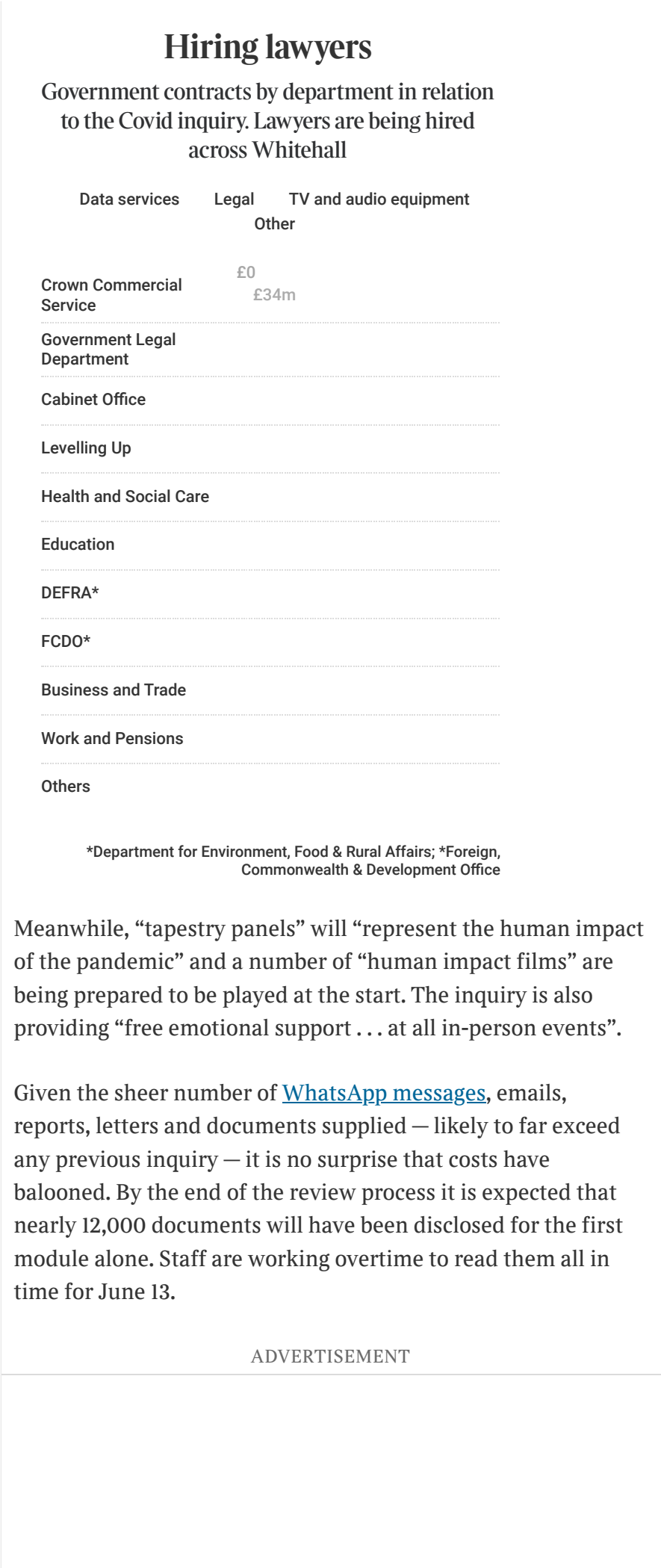
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Could equity

It took seven years for Sir John Chilcot to publish his report on the Iraq war, costing about £13 million. The Bloody Sunday inquiry took more than a decade and cost an estimated £400 million. But other countries have shown quick turnarounds are possible. In Sweden, a government-appointed commission gave its verdict on Covid as early as February 2022, concluding that the country’s no-lockdown approach was sometimes misguided and slow, but on the whole the country did fairly well.

With virtually every government department hiring lawyers, procurement experts at Tussell have suggested the total amount of public money spent is already £123 million. The Cabinet Office has spent £17 million on lawyers; the Department for Education has awarded legal contracts in relation to the inquiry worth £5 million.



Yet there has been friction when it comes to exactly who the inquiry is listening to. About 330 groups applied to have “core participant” status, giving them special access to documents. They will also be able to supply multiple witnesses for interview and have a substantial influence on the proceedings. About a third of applicants have been chosen. Hospitality groups, for instance, were told the industry’s role was not “sufficiently significant”. St John Ambulance was refused core-participant status despite its volunteers providing more than 1.4 million hours of patient-facing service.

For the rest of us, the government is launching Every Story Matters, a “listening exercise” inviting everyone from grieving widows to vehement antivaxers to submit their view online, and has enlisted the PR firms M&C Saatchi and 23 Red. Given these firms worked with the Cabinet Office during the pandemic, their involvement sits uneasily with victims’ groups. Susie Flintham, of Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, called it a “conflict of interest that has put many families off participating”.

Instead of staff manually reviewing submissions, many will be analysed by software and artificial intelligence. Stories will be “collated, analysed and turned into themed reports” providing “trends or key insights”.

Recent inquiries, such as those that examined the Manchester Arena bombing and the Grenfell Tower fire, had easily identifiable victims. Not this one. “We are all disaster survivors now,” said Lucy Easthope, a disaster planner and the author of *When The Dust Settles*. The inquiry, she said, cannot logistically give a platform to every victim or relative. “I just don’t know how you get tangible, clear lessons from this,” Easthope added.

Excess deaths

Deaths above expected levels in 118 countries,
2020-21

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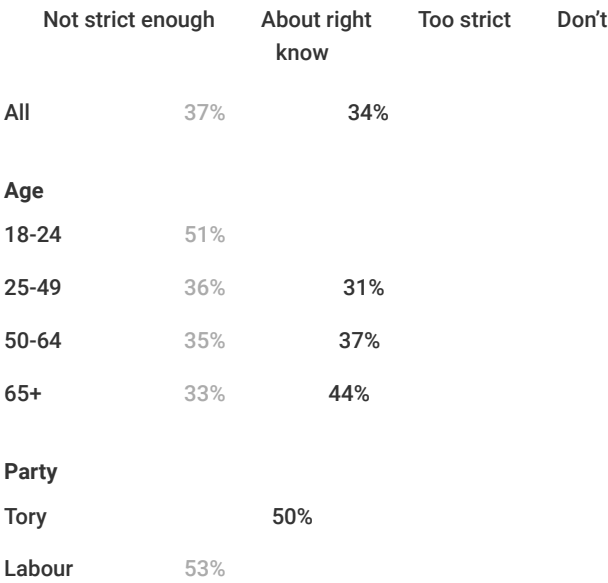
	Country	Excess deaths	% above average ▼
1	Peru	179,415	+110%
2	Bolivia	53,088	+101%
3	Kuwait	6,579	+89%
4	Ecuador	67,586	+88%
5	Mexico	635,761	+82%
6	North Macedonia	13,943	+70%
7	Nicaragua	17,284	+68%
8	Albania	14,656	+67%
9	Kosovo	6,396	+66%
10	Colombia	164,658	+66%
11	Paraguay	21,957	+64%
12	Iran	251,090	+64%
13	Armenia	15,882	+63%
14	Russia	1,076,822	+61%
70	United Kingdom	136,934	+22%

Yet victims want answers. When her 73-year-old father caught Covid days before the first lockdown in March 2020, Rivka Gottlieb, 51, struggled to persuade ambulances to take him to hospital. “A friend of ours who’s a doctor had to coach us on what to say to make them actually call an ambulance,” she said. He died days later, after what Gottlieb perceives as a catalogue of failings by health services.

“I was very angry. I knew there needed to be an inquiry, and I was looking for an outlet to that anger and to produce something constructive,” Gottlieb said. Like Ahsan, her witness statement was not chosen to be presented to the inquiry panel.

About right

In hindsight, thinking about the government's handling of the Covid-19 outbreak, do you think their approach was...



Poll conducted March 3, 2023

Source: Ipsos MORI for The Times and The Sunday Times

Disaster planners point out that even the best plans might not be followed. In 2016, Exercise Cygnus, a three-day simulation of how a swine flu outbreak might take hold, showed how the country’s health systems were at risk of collapse. Nobody acted on the devastating findings.

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Many useful findings may emerge from Hallett’s inquiry but that will not bring closure for grieving families. “We families don’t want anonymity,” Gottlieb said. “Part of this process is capturing the lives and the names of the people we’ve lost.”

Health

Coronavirus