

We must scrutinise the government's handling of the pandemic

A judicial inquiry will take years, but memories are already being collected

Michael Mansfield

Thursday April 15 2021, 12.01am, The Times

There has been an increasing demand over the past 50 years by different communities throughout the world for a way to challenge the shortcomings of government and corporate bodies — especially where clear moral and legal obligations have been shirked in relation to systemic deficiencies.

This need has been met by voluntary inquiries variously described as citizen's or people's tribunals or commissions of inquiry. They perform a vital role where there is a significant democratic deficit.

And that is precisely the situation with the Johnson government in relation to its handling of the coronavirus pandemic — absent effective scrutiny in parliament or accountability through the courts. There is a consensus favouring a public inquiry to learn lessons and address the health emergency and to circumvent another.

This was readily picked up by the prime minister in July, followed by a studious silence until he was recently reminded. But nothing has been done, no timeline has been mooted — worse still, it has been booted into the long grass,

The fundamental problem facing a judge-led inquiry is logistical. It would involve an enormous amount of time and resources to establish, and even if Johnson were to announce its initiation tomorrow it would take at least a year, probably more, to determine the terms of reference, gather the research, the witnesses, the documentation, the High Court judge and panel, the venue and so on. All that before a word of evidence is heard.

Nevertheless, it has a crucial place in the annals of public health and is a categorical imperative for the longer term. However, a fast-track rapid response version is long overdue

While memories are fresh and dilemmas arise on every front, they need to be addressed urgently and, most of all, independently, by evidence adduced from those with experience, expertise and commitment to public health.

In the forefront are the bereaved. The UK has one of the worst death rates in the world. How has this come about and how can it be redressed? What's next?

These issues are being canvassed by the People's Covid Inquiry. There have been four hearings and six more are to come.

Despite the restrictions, the semblance of an inquiry format has been achieved. Impressive and moving testimony has been presented by inquiry counsel to a prominent expert panel of adjudicators.

The next session on April 21 concerns the effect on frontline staff and key workers.

Michael Mansfield, QC, is the chairman of the People's Covid Inquiry