

NEWS RELEASE

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00:01 on Wednesday | 23 | May 2018**

HC 836 | 2017-19
Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

Investigation into government-funded inquiries

The government has spent more than £200 million on inquiries completed since 2005, but it is not always clear to taxpayers what action government has taken in response to recommendations and whether inquiries have had the intended impact, according to an investigation carried out by the National Audit Office (NAO). The focus of the NAO's investigation was on completed inquiries, not those that have yet to conclude.

The government can decide to hold an inquiry in response to public concerns about a particular event. Inquiries often investigate complex issues and their nature, size and subject matter can vary significantly. However, all inquiries face the challenge of maintaining public confidence and accomplishing what they set out to achieve within an acceptable timescale and cost.

The NAO found that the government has spent at least £239 million on the 26 inquiries which have concluded since 2005, and that the average duration of these inquiries was 40 months. Departments were not able to provide the NAO with evidence that they had consistently monitored and scrutinised the cost and progress of the inquiries they have sponsored.

No single department is responsible for running inquiries across government and there are no formal criteria to determine the type of inquiry. Since 2014, the Cabinet Office and the Ministry of Justice have committed to various actions to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of inquiries originating from two parliamentary select committee reports. None of these commitments have been fulfilled. For example, they have not acted on recommendations to share best practice from inquiries, or update and publish guidance for inquiry chairs and sponsor departments.

There is no overall oversight across government for monitoring and tracking whether inquiries have achieved their intended impact and whether recommendations, where made, have been implemented. Departments vary in how transparent they are about actions taken in response to recommendations. For example, of the eight inquiries examined by the NAO that made recommendations, readily accessible information on progress was only available for half of these.

The scale of these inquiries is much larger than other forms of inquiry, such as select committee inquiries. The costs for the ten inquiries examined by the NAO ranged from £0.2 million to £24.9 million, and the nature of expenditure varied significantly. Overall, legal staff costs were the largest item of expenditure (an average of 36% of an inquiry's cost, although this varied from less than 1% for the Morecambe Bay Investigation to 67% for the Mid Staffordshire Inquiry). The ten inquiries also varied in length, from 16 months (the Harris Review and Leveson Inquiry) to 84 months (for the Iraq Inquiry). For those inquiries for which information was available, teams spent an average of 102 days hearing testimony from 200 witnesses and considered more than 52,000 documents.

Notes for Editors

1. The NAO conducts investigations to establish the underlying facts in circumstances where concerns have been raised with us, or in response to intelligence that we have gathered through our wider work. This investigation focuses on government-funded inquiries completed since 2005 when a new legislative framework for conducting inquiries was established. It looks at the framework for conducting inquiries and the responsibilities for establishing and sponsoring inquiries across government, as well as the scale, cost and duration of inquiries established since 2005. It does not assess the overall value for money of inquiries.
2. This investigation does not look at inquiries that have been established but have yet to conclude, such as the Grenfell Tower Inquiry and the Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. We have identified 11 government led inquiries which are currently ongoing.
3. For the purposes of our investigation, we have defined inquiries as government-funded inquiries, announced by a minister or the Prime Minister to investigate issues that have caused public concern, or circumstances that could give rise to public concern.
4. Our investigation focuses on 10 of the 26 inquiries started and concluded since 2005. This sample equates to two inquiries by each of those government departments that have sponsored the most inquiries during this period (Cabinet Office, Department of Health, Home Office, Ministry of Defence, and Ministry of Justice). We undertook a more detailed examination of one inquiry sponsored by each of these departments. The 10 statutory and non-statutory inquiries included in our sample were: The Iraq Inquiry, The Al-Sweady Inquiry, The Detainee Inquiry, The Baha Mousa Inquiry, The Mid Staffordshire Inquiry, The Azelle Rodney Inquiry, The Morecambe Bay Investigation, The Litvinenko Inquiry, The Leveson Inquiry and The Harris Review (see Figure 1 in the report).
5. Press notices and reports are available from the date of publication on the [NAO website](#). Hard copies can be obtained by using the relevant links on our website.
6. The National Audit Office scrutinises public spending for Parliament and is independent of government. The Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), Sir Amyas Morse KCB, is an Officer of the House of Commons and leads the NAO, which employs some 785 people. The C&AG certifies the accounts of all government departments and many other public sector bodies. He has statutory authority to examine and report to Parliament on whether departments and the bodies they fund have used their resources efficiently, effectively, and with economy. Our studies evaluate the value for money of public spending, nationally and locally. Our recommendations and reports on good practice help government improve public services. Our work led to audited savings of £734 million in 2016.

Press Notice 26/18

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