



UKACC PRESS RELEASE

Covid-19 Inquiry Reveals Scale of UK Pandemic PPE Procurement Failure

UK Anti-Corruption Coalition says the billions wasted, the VIP Lane, and the near-total lack of accountability must trigger urgent reform before the next crisis

London, 14 July 2026: The UK Anti-Corruption Coalition (UKACC), a coalition of civil society organisations working to strengthen the UK's response to corruption, agrees with the Covid-19 Public Inquiry's Module 5 findings into PPE procurement published today. The report lays bare one of the most expensive governance failures in modern British history: a botched pandemic procurement response that left frontline workers exposed, weakened the pandemic response and wasted £10 billion of public money.

The Inquiry has found that the VIP lane was a "misguided attempt" to give priority to the most credible offers that "heightened the risk of abuse". It asserts that the lane should never have happened and must never happen again. Companies referred through the VIP lane were 13 times more likely to receive a contract, and 15 out of the 36 offers had connections to the Conservative Party.

Gavin Hayman, Executive Director of the Open Contracting Partnership (and co-Chair of the UKACC), said:

"The British Government bought the wrong things, from the wrong people, in the wrong way. The Inquiry has shown what happens when emergency powers, weak controls and political access collide with disastrous results. Giving huge direct awards to untested companies [specialising in lingerie, drinking straws, confectionery and the like] recommended by politicians harmed the UK's Covid emergency response. Billions in public money was wasted even while nurses on the frontline had to use bin-bags for protection.

The government must now act on all Inquiry's findings, recover public money and make sure the next crisis is handled with transparency, fairness and proper accountability from day one."

How the procurement failure unfolded

No considered procurement strategy was ever articulated to the Inquiry. Lord Agnew, then the minister in charge of procurement policy, described the government as "rabbits in the

headlights," admitting they were "over-ordering by an order of magnitude" because "we had not got a clue what we had when we were ordering more."

The scale of UK spending stands out sharply against its European neighbours. The UKACC produced data showing that the UK spent approximately [£15 billion on Covid PPE contracts — more than the rest of Europe combined](#). Whereas most European peers stocked up on six months of supplies, in some cases the UK bought more than five years' worth of supplies. Some two-thirds of those were awarded without competition and UKACC data showed that these direct awards were for much larger amounts and went on for much longer than comparative European peers.

At the heart of the initial PPE response was the notorious VIP Lane, a formal system created by the then-government to fast-track PPE contracts based on political referrals from ministers and MPs of the ruling party, which the High Court later ruled unlawful. The VIP Lane prioritised who you knew over what you could supply.

Evidence presented to the Inquiry by Coalition members showed that VIP Lane contracts were more expensive, had a higher failure rate, and crowded out experienced suppliers who could have been more effective.

Transparency International UK identified 135 contracts worth £15.3 billion, almost a third of total Covid contract value, carrying three or more red flags for corruption risk or conflicts of interest. The Covid Counter-Fraud Commissioner [found](#) that there was £324 million of PPE fraud committed. Of the 195 referrals made to the Serious Fraud Office for PPE and test kit fraud, the SFO has so far prosecuted none of them.

Daniel Bruce, Chief Executive at Transparency International UK, who gave evidence to the Inquiry, said:

"The inquiry's report lays bare the failings of the so-called VIP lane for PPE contracts. It confirms our earlier findings that there was systemic bias in awarding contracts to those with connections to the party of government and that, in a majority of cases, there was no objective assessment of those firms' ability to actually deliver PPE.

"The inquiry underscores the damage done to public trust by a prolonged and unnecessary failure of transparency in public spending.

"It also challenges the new government to go further to guard against the risk of corruption in future emergencies."

Total write-downs and write-offs from failed and unusable PPE were nearly £10 billion, with [over 500 lorry loads of unwanted stock being incinerated every month](#) at one point.

Where is the accountability?

Five years on, the government has taken only one supplier to court.

Sue Hawley, Executive Director of Spotlight on Corruption, said:

“While the inquiry couldn’t identify cronyism or corruption, what is plain to see is that the VIP Lane was at the very least misguided. It’s right there in the name, a ‘VIP Lane’. Its ongoing use, beyond the very early stages of the pandemic, undermined trust in government, and trust in government is never more important than during a public health emergency.

VIP contracts failed at three times the rate of standard ones and cost 80% more per unit, even as nurses resorted to bin bags on the frontline. Five years on, nearly £10 billion has been written off, only one supplier has been taken to court, and the public is still owed a full accounting.

The Covid-19 Inquiry’s report on procurement should mark a turning point for accountability, transparency and reform.”

UKACC recommendations

The government should now set out how it will implement the Inquiry’s recommendations and prevent the same disastrous failures being repeated in a future crisis. Even in an emergency, buying fast and efficiently is possible, when basic public accountability and transparency measures are in place.

UKACC calls on the government to:

- Ban VIP lanes and similar politically biased referral routes in future emergencies;
- Publish an emergency procurement plan for future systemic crises, with clear limits, review points and sunset clauses;
- Strengthen conflict-of-interest rules, including due diligence and beneficial ownership checks before contracts are awarded;
- Lower contract publication thresholds and invest in modern e-procurement and open contracting systems so emergency spending can be tracked;
- Properly investigate all high-risk contracts carrying multiple corruption red flags and make effective use of exclusion and debarment powers;

- Strengthen the statutory offence of misconduct in public office as put forward in the Public Office (Accountability) Bill.

Rebuilding trust will require more than lessons learned: high-risk contracts must be properly investigated and those who designed, authorised and oversaw decisions that wasted so much money need to be held accountable. Behind every contract were frontline workers, patients, families and communities facing the worst of the pandemic. When protective equipment was scarce, unusable or delayed, procurement failures had devastating consequences. We owe them full accounting and public accountability for the UK's massive Covid PPE procurement failures.

ENDS

Notes to editors

- The UK Anti-Corruption Coalition is a coalition of civil society organisations working to strengthen the UK's response to corruption and protect public money, democratic institutions and the rule of law. UKACC members and independent experts [have been core participants in the UK Covid-19 Inquiry](#), specifically [giving evidence](#) on PPE procurement best practices and failures during the pandemic.
- As the UKACC testified to the Inquiry, perfectly sensible emergency procurement procedures like open frameworks and buyers lists were not used: a point also emphasised the Independent Expert Report to the Inquiry by Professor Sanchez-Graells of Bristol University.
- Transparency International UK's [Behind the Masks report](#) identified 135 high-risk contracts worth £15.3 billion - nearly a third of all pandemic procurement by value - carrying three or more corruption red flags.
- Spotlight on Corruption [found that 25 of the 50 'VIP-lane' companies](#) supplied PPE worth about £1bn that was not fit for purpose, amounting to 59% of all money awarded to VIP-lane companies for PPE, compared with 17% through the normal channel. The [National Audit Office](#) said in 2022: "Over half (53%) of 51 VIP suppliers provided some PPE that DHSC considers is not currently suitable for frontline services".
- Dawn Matthias-Jackson, a PPE VIP Lane caseworker seconded from the Department of Education, [captured the reality in an email disclosed to the Inquiry](#): *"Some days I feel like I am in a looney bin. I was promoted yesterday to the VIP Supplier Team, basically allocated to dealing with the suppliers who feel it is important for them to contact Boris, Matt Hancock, Gove, Gareth & other Minister [sic] directly. Only one so far has proved any use."*

- Open Contracting Partnership [has shown that emergency procurement can be fast, smart and open](#), and that other countries used more transparent, well-structured and data-driven approaches, including open dashboards, clear supplier requirements and real-time procurement data. [OCP shared comparative data on the extent of UK's runaway spending relative to other European countries on Covid PPE](#) and data on the delays in publishing UK's Covid PPE contracts. In 2019, the UK accounted for 14% of European PPE contract awards values, proportionate to its share of European GDP. By 2020 that figure had risen to 65% of the total European contract awards showing the sheer scale of UK purchasing. Most countries stocked up on six months of PPE, whereas the UK bought over 5-10 years' worth of supplies instead. As Lord Agnew also reflected to the Inquiry: "the fault was that too many were direct awards ... and we took too long to pivot to competitive tenders once the initial panic subsided."
- [Many UK Covid PPE contract notices were published over 100 days later than all other UK contracts](#), hindering coordination and supply chain transparency at a time of national crisis.
- For media enquiries contact: media@open-contracting.org