# Baroness Harding claims stronger financial support for self-isolation could have cut Covid deaths



Baroness Dido Harding, former head of NHS Test and Trace, has made a compelling case regarding the UK government's handling of financial support for self-isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Speaking during the ongoing Covid inquiry, she asserted that increased financial aid for individuals required to self-isolate could have significantly reduced infections and fatalities. This assertion comes at a critical moment as the inquiry delves into the policies surrounding testing, tracing, and isolation that shaped the pandemic's trajectory in the UK.

In her testimonies, Baroness Harding expressed frustration at what she described as an "intransigence" from then Chancellor Rishi Sunak regarding her repeated calls for enhanced financial support, claiming she faced consistent rejection of proposals aimed at expanding the financial resources available for isolating individuals. During this period, in September 2020, the government did implement a £500 self-isolation payment targeted at low-income workers, yet the restricted eligibility meant that many were unable to access this support. Additional discretionary funds were also made available to some local authorities, but these measures remained inadequate.

The former NHS executive highlighted that, by international standards, the UK allocated disproportionately little to support disadvantaged individuals in isolating effectively. "If we had allocated more of the NHS Test and Trace budget to isolation support, I strongly suspect that fewer would have died and infection rates would have been lower," she stated during her evidence session. This commentary aligns with findings from various studies that underscored the importance of financial assistance to enhance compliance with public health measures. A briefing from the Nuffield Trust and the Resolution Foundation pointed out that the lack of adequate financial safety nets deterred individuals from isolating, with many fearing economic hardship above health risks.

In the face of Harding's claims, it's notable that a senior civil servant from the Treasury, Dan York-Smith, indicated that measures such as extensions to statutory sick pay and the furlough scheme were introduced as part of a broader economic response to support workers. However, concerns that such payments might create "perverse incentives" were cited by Sunak, suggesting a fear that some workers could end up financially better off by isolating than by working.

The recent disclosure of diary entries by the government’s then chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, adds another layer to the narrative. Vallance's entries reveal that there was significant contention over whether financial incentives should play a role in encouraging self-isolation, with a prevailing indication that policymakers favoured enforcement tactics over supportive financial measures. He noted that, despite pressing from Harding, Chancellor Sunak's resistance to financial support was strong. Vallance himself reflected that the government's instinct was to focus on enforcing isolation rather than supporting it financially.

The ongoing inquiry continues to unravel the tapestry of decisions that were made during the pandemic, with Harding's testimony serving as a poignant reminder of the potential impact of economic support in managing public health crises. Despite the various forms of assistance that were eventually rolled out, many, including Labour Party officials, believe these measures fell short of what was necessary for effective public compliance. In February 2021, the Labour Party highlighted that only a minority of workers qualified for the £500 self-isolation payment, revealing a significant gap in support that likely hampered public health efforts.

As the inquiry progresses, the focus on financial support for isolation appears increasingly critical, especially given the stark comparisons to measures taken by other developed nations. The findings so far could shape future policies, ensuring that lessons from this unprecedented health crisis are heeded to prevent similar mistakes in the future.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://asianleader.co.uk/cash-to-isolate-would-have-cut-covid-deaths/), [[4]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/10/31/rishi-sunak-rejected-calls-pay-poorest-isolate-pandemic/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://asianleader.co.uk/cash-to-isolate-would-have-cut-covid-deaths/), [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-increases-support-for-those-self-isolating), [[5]](https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/research/tackling-covid-19-a-case-for-better-financial-support-to-self-isolate)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/feb/21/labour-urges-rishi-sunak-extend-covid-self-isolation-payment-anneliese-dodds), [[6]](https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2020/march/economic-update/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://asianleader.co.uk/cash-to-isolate-would-have-cut-covid-deaths/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-increases-support-for-those-self-isolating> - In March 2021, the UK government announced an additional £12.9 million per month to local authorities to support individuals self-isolating due to COVID-19. This funding aimed to assist with access to food, caring responsibilities, and overall well-being. An extra £3.2 million per month was allocated for a free medicines delivery service for those without support in collecting prescriptions. These measures were part of a broader effort to enhance support for individuals required to self-isolate during the pandemic.
3. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/feb/21/labour-urges-rishi-sunak-extend-covid-self-isolation-payment-anneliese-dodds> - In February 2021, Labour Party officials urged Chancellor Rishi Sunak to extend the COVID-19 self-isolation payment scheme. At that time, only about one in eight workers were automatically eligible for the £500 payment, with approximately 70% of applicants being rejected. The Labour Party emphasized the need for broader access to financial support to ensure individuals could afford to self-isolate, thereby aiding in controlling the virus's spread.
4. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/10/31/rishi-sunak-rejected-calls-pay-poorest-isolate-pandemic/> - In October 2023, it was reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chancellor Rishi Sunak blocked proposals to pay individuals to self-isolate, despite evidence supporting the need for such financial support. This information was revealed through the diaries of Sir Patrick Vallance, the government's former chief scientific adviser, who noted Sunak's resistance to the idea of paying people to isolate, even though it was deemed necessary to control the virus's spread.
5. <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/research/tackling-covid-19-a-case-for-better-financial-support-to-self-isolate> - A briefing by the Nuffield Trust and the Resolution Foundation highlighted the importance of self-isolation in controlling COVID-19 transmission. The report emphasized that financial barriers, such as low statutory sick pay, deterred many individuals from isolating. It advocated for expanded financial support, proposing schemes similar to furlough, to ensure workers could maintain their income while self-isolating, thereby enhancing compliance and public health outcomes.
6. <https://www.parliament.uk/business/news/2020/march/economic-update/> - In March 2020, Chancellor Rishi Sunak delivered an economic update addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. He announced that statutory sick pay would be available from day one for individuals required to self-isolate due to the virus. Additionally, the government introduced a loan scheme to support businesses affected by the pandemic, aiming to mitigate economic disruptions caused by the health crisis.
7. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/10/31/rishi-sunak-rejected-calls-pay-poorest-isolate-pandemic/> - In October 2023, it was reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, Chancellor Rishi Sunak blocked proposals to pay individuals to self-isolate, despite evidence supporting the need for such financial support. This information was revealed through the diaries of Sir Patrick Vallance, the government's former chief scientific adviser, who noted Sunak's resistance to the idea of paying people to isolate, even though it was deemed necessary to control the virus's spread.