1. The purpose of this volume

Introduction

1.1 Government Departments and Ministries exist to support the elected government of the day with policy advice. They also implement its decisions, and carry out executive and regulatory functions. They operate within a shared public sector culture and its conventions. Parliament holds the executive – ie, individual Ministers and their Departments – to account for their actions. The conventions under which the executive operated between 1986 and 1996 helped to determine the nature and quality of the response to the emergence and subsequent course of BSE.

1.2 This volume describes the system of government administration within which Ministers and their civil servants operated during this period. It focuses in particular on the process of decision-making in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) and the Department of Health (DH), and on those aspects of it that were relevant to the BSE story. It also looks at some of the managerial preoccupations of officials and Ministers during the period 1986–96 as policy on BSE was being made. Most of the systems are essentially the same today.

1.3 In addition, it describes how Departments drew on specialist expertise, and identifies the techniques available to them at the time to assess and manage risk. It reviews their resource planning processes, and the measures that were adopted during this period to reduce the size of the public sector. It explains how the performance of the executive is normally assessed, and how Ministers and officials are held accountable. All these matters influenced the way in which Ministers and officials responded to the issues raised by BSE. The volume concludes by briefly examining the operation of local authorities, which were responsible for enforcing many of the measures introduced to protect animal and human health.

1.4 There are three annexes. Annex 1 illustrates the structure of MAFF and of DH and how they changed between 1986 and 1996, focusing on the units that were involved in dealing with BSE and new variant CJD (vCJD). Annex 2 outlines the development of techniques of risk assessment, particularly those described in publications issued by Government Departments. Risk assessment itself is discussed in Chapter 5 of this volume. Annex 3 outlines the development of the Government’s Deregulation Initiative from 1983 to 1996, as discussed in Chapter 7.

1.5 A large number of people are quoted or referred to by name in this volume, many of them Ministers and government officials. In the text itself, we describe their role as briefly as is necessary in the immediate context, but we have added more details about them in the ‘Who’s who’ on page 143 (which is preceded by a Glossary of acronyms and other terms that we have used).

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1 The terms ‘civil servant’ and ‘official’ are used interchangeably in this volume. The three-fold role of civil servants – to advise Ministers, to carry out their decisions, and to manage and deliver government services – is described more fully in Chapters 2 and 8.

2 Prior to 25 July 1988, part of the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS).

3 The story of how BSE was handled is set out in volumes 3–11 of this Report.
Public administration

1.6 BSE presented baffling problems. It was not known how it was transmitted, whether it posed a threat to humans, or how best to contain it. Ministers and officials had to take decisions amidst considerable uncertainties in an area that straddled animal and human health, involved public and private sector interests and high economic stakes, and rapidly became the focus of continuing media scrutiny. It was a challenging test of the capabilities of the public administration process. Part of the remit of the Inquiry has been to consider whether the Government’s response to BSE was adequate.

1.7 A point repeatedly made by witnesses giving evidence to the Inquiry was that decision-making on BSE, as on other major matters, was a ‘collegiate’ process involving both Ministers and officials and generally combining the inputs of many people. Some witnesses went on to argue from this that no individual should be regarded as responsible for the decisions taken.

1.8 This is not a view we share. While collective consideration is indeed a feature of public administration, Government Departments invest considerable management effort in defining roles and tasks so that responsibility is clear, and in assessing performance in discharging it. Nevertheless, we fully agree that judgements about individuals’ responses to BSE require an understanding of the normal workings of government and of the expectations and constraints that these impose. This volume therefore describes these matters. It is not, however, being put forward as a benchmark defining standards against which individuals might be judged and criticised for the purposes of this Inquiry. That is dealt with in vol. 1: Findings and Conclusions.