

UK Covid-19 Inquiry

Equalities roundtable - opening remarks

15 March 2022

Cardiff and online

Ben Connah (Director, UK Covid-19 Inquiry): Good morning everybody, and welcome to this, our first consultation event in the process that we've just begun to consult on the Terms of Reference for the Covid-19 Inquiry.

It's very, very nice to see you all whether you're here in person – thank you very much for joining us, those that are here or on screen. And I can see that we've got a very good turnout virtually as well. So, thank you for that.

This is an independent Inquiry. It's been set up to look at the United Kingdom's response to the pandemic and a huge thanks to all of you for joining us today.

We recognise that everybody here today will have had both a personal and a professional response to the pandemic and that today's meeting might be difficult for some people.

Martin Hogg is joining us today from Citizen Coaching and Counselling and he is available today for anybody who needs support during or after the meeting. His contact details are on the first page of the agenda that we sent to you. And if at any point today you need any support, you can either just raise your hand and step away from your screen and he'll give you a call or you can call him directly.

For those of you who are attending in person, you'll be pleased to know that there are no fire drills planned today. So, if we do hear an alarm, then it will be a real one and please follow members of the team out to the congregation point.

There are bathrooms, which are signposted just outside the room. And colleagues from the Inquiry team will be available throughout the day to those of you here or online to assist.

Over the coming weeks, we are going to be meeting with a number of bereaved families and with organisations, including your own, of course, that have been affected by the pandemic or who have supported people through the pandemic. These meetings are to consult on our draft Terms of Reference, which set out what the Inquiry will cover and were published last week by the Government, in draft, ahead of this consultation programme.

We've grouped organisations according to specific themes or sectors of impact. So, for example, we are running sessions that deal with business, that deal with arts and culture, and today, that deal with various aspects of equalities issues.

We've scheduled the equalities meeting as our first roundtable because equalities cut across so many of the themes and the sectors that we're going to be visiting over the next few days and weeks.

So, we really, really welcome your views today on how different groups, and especially those groups that you speak for, have been impacted, in many ways disproportionately, and can have their voices heard as we progress through both this consultation exercise but crucially, through the Inquiry as a whole.

Any member of the public or organisation can also give their views via our consultation website, details of which are available in your packs. And can I ask you at this stage, and I may do so at the end of this session as well, to encourage your members, the people that you work with and the people that you support or represent to take part in that consultation? We sincerely hope that we will hear from as wide a cross section of the UK public as we can reach and your help in extending that reach will be greatly received.

This meeting is being recorded so that we can make sure that we have a transcript of what is said to feed into the consultation responses that we get overall and to inform the recommendations that the Chair of the public inquiry, Baroness Hallett, will make to the Prime Minister at the end of the consultation.

We will make the transcript available on our website so that it can be seen by all those who couldn't make it, but also by anyone else who has an interest. And as I say, this will be used to inform the outcome of the consultation.

As we said in the invitation that you received, we are planning to name all of the people who speak at today's event and a verbatim record of any contributions will be published as part of that transcript. Please do let us know if you would rather that your name didn't appear within the transcript.

Today's meeting has a couple of different elements to it and I'll just say briefly how we're planning to run it. So, the bulk of the meeting will be focused on discussion on the four different questions that the Chair has set as part of this consultation exercise. Those are contained on our website. They're within the consultation paper itself and they're within the material that we provided ahead of this.

Because we've got quite a large group today, we're going to break out into three smaller groups shortly and each one of those will be chaired by a senior member of the Inquiry team. And in those, we will work through, according to the themes that are represented by the groups involved, those four questions. The discussions will be facilitated by the Chair but we're really hoping to hear the voices of everybody who's in attendance today.

Those of you who are joining us virtually will automatically, through the magic of Zoom, find yourselves sent into those breakout rooms shortly. For those of you who are attending in person, we'll be able to show you exactly where you need to be.

We will just give ourselves five minutes to make sure that the logistics are working fine. So, we're aiming to begin the breakout rooms at quarter past ten.

Because we're doing these through Zoom, could I just make a few points of meeting etiquette, if you like? Please, for those of you that are joining online, can I ask that you raise your hand using the actions tab in Zoom so that the chair of the meeting knows that you're keen to speak or to make a point? When you are called to speak, please can you bring yourself off mute? Only you can do that; we can't, I'm afraid. So, we'll try and remind you to do so but it would help us hugely if you could do so. And when you come off mute, please could you introduce yourself and say which organisation it is that you're representing? That will help everybody else who's in the room or online to know who you are and where you're from.

I'm going to stop there and I'm going to ask colleagues in a moment to affect the breakout rooms. But can I just check whether we've got any hands up already? It doesn't look like we do. And so, in that case, I'm going to ask my colleagues to affect the breakout rooms now. And as I say, we will begin the sessions as close as we can to quarter past ten. So, very grateful for your participation and we'll see you in just under five minutes. Thanks very much indeed.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]