



27th April 2023

## **An open letter from Ben Connah, Secretary to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry**

As we move closer to the start of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry's first full hearings in June, I wanted to address some concerns and worries raised in some of the preliminary hearings in recent weeks.

The Inquiry exists to investigate the UK's pandemic response, finding out what happened and why. Baroness Hallett, the Inquiry Chair, has repeatedly made clear her commitment to run this Inquiry openly, thoroughly, fairly and efficiently. She and her team hope to make meaningful recommendations to ensure the UK is better prepared in the future.

The pandemic affected everyone in the UK and, in many cases, continues to have a lasting impact. Hundreds of thousands of lives and livelihoods were lost and millions of lives were changed forever. This is an Inquiry for the whole of the UK.

We will do our utmost to ensure the Inquiry answers as many questions as possible about the UK's response to the pandemic and we will create ways for people to tell us what happened to them during the pandemic. The Inquiry's listening exercise, called Every Story Matters, will provide a route for everyone in the UK who wishes to share their experience with the Inquiry.

We know that some of you who lost loved ones in the pandemic are concerned you won't be able to share your testimony directly to the Inquiry through the Inquiry's hearings. Some of you are worried that Every Story Matters does not carry enough weight. Concerns have also been raised about the appointment of companies to work with us on parts of it. Where worries and concerns exist we try to give you more information and put your minds at ease. We hear you when you say you want more information. Accompanying my letter today is a full update on Every Story Matters and I hope this helps you understand better what we are developing to ensure everyone in the UK can have a voice.

The Inquiry is not an inquest into deaths; that is the role of a coroner. The Inquiry's Terms of Reference make clear it should not investigate individual deaths in detail. But there are several ways in which Baroness Hallett plans to hear from those most affected by the pandemic, especially those who have been bereaved.

First, she has ruled that the Inquiry will hear directly from bereaved family members as witnesses where their evidence may shed light on failures of systems that could have served them better. This might include the ways in which emergency services, hospitals or care homes organised themselves to respond to the virus. The voices of those who suffered most will also be heard through films that will be played at the start of each public hearing.

Second, the Inquiry's later investigations that focus on the impact of the pandemic, rather than the nation's response to it, will hear from witnesses directly about the different impacts on them. Some will have been bereaved; others may give evidence on how restrictions or financial schemes affected them.

Third, and most extensively, Every Story Matters will provide a route for everyone in the UK who wishes to share their experience with the Inquiry. I want to reassure you on the importance of Every Story Matters to the evidence gathering process.

All public inquiries have the challenge of investigating quickly but thoroughly. Some have taken many years. Given the scale of the pandemic, this Inquiry cannot hear from everyone who would like to give evidence directly to Baroness Hallett. Given the possibility of another pandemic, she is determined to make swift findings and recommendations to make sure that the UK is better prepared next time. But she wants her reports to be informed by the experiences of people across the UK.

In designing Every Story Matters we have received the help of more than 120 organisations that we have consulted over the past year. We have also spoken to many individuals who experienced bereavement during the pandemic. I am grateful to all of them and you. These organisations included healthcare, equalities, social care, children and education organisations, faith groups, business, trade unions and those offering bereavement support. Many of you also joined our recent Every Story Matters webinars and told us it had helped to improve your understanding.

Hearing from as many people as possible, up and down the country, including those people whose voices were not heard during the pandemic, is a huge and important task. To do it properly we will need expertise that simply does not exist within the Inquiry team: expertise in large-scale social research and in engagement with people and communities who might have been hit hard by the pandemic, but who are not yet working with us. Their voices matter. Every story matters. So we will shortly be seeking bids from companies and I hope to sign contracts in the coming weeks with firms who share our ambition to run a wide-ranging and inclusive listening exercise that gives the Inquiry meaningful insight into the lives and experiences of people - especially bereaved people - over the past 3 years. These new contracts will replace the Inquiry's current contracts when they come to an end.

We are hugely grateful to all of you who have given us your time and have shared your experiences with us over the last few months. Your support and honest feedback is invaluable to us. As Secretary to the Inquiry it is a privilege to work with Baroness Hallett on an investigation whose outcome could save lives in the future and, through Every Story Matters, will provide a record of evidence of what it meant to live through - and suffer loss during - the Covid-19 pandemic. I am grateful to those of you who have helped us to improve our plans and I am honoured by the trust that so many people have put in us. We will strive to ensure we learn lessons for the future.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'BC' with a flourish extending to the right.

Ben Connah  
Secretary to the Inquiry

