

Witness Name:

Oliver Coppard

Statement No.:

First

Exhibits: OC/1

– OC/6

Dated:

15/06/2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF OLIVER COPPARD - SOUTH YORKSHIRE MAYORAL COMBINED AUTHORITY

I, **OLIVER COPPARD**, Mayor for the area of the South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, will say as follows: -

1. I am the Mayor of South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority ("the Authority"), a position I have held since May 2022.
2. This statement has been prepared in response to a request dated 20th January 2023 from the Covid 19 Inquiry for a statement relating to Module 2 of the Inquiry.
3. It is important to note that I was not the elected Mayor at any time during the period January 2020 to February 2022 (the period relevant to the Inquiry, hereafter referred to as "Relevant Period"), nor did I have any role with the Combined Authority during the Relevant Period. Dan Jarvis MP was the Mayor during the relevant period. As such matters set out within this witness statement are not within my own knowledge.
4. In addition, there has been significant change in the senior leadership team at the Authority since July 2022 with the departure of the Chief Executive, Deputy Chief Executive and the Head of Mayor's Office. In addition, the Director General of the Passenger Transport Executive has also departed the organisation. This means that those persons within the organisation who were most likely to have been directly involved with matters that are within the scope of Module 2 of the Inquiry are not available to support the preparation of this statement.
5. Given the above, I have, in the preparation of this statement, relied on the assistance of Officers who were at the Authority at the time and who had a role in managing the Authority's response to Covid-19, but who generally had a limited role in the matters pertinent to the Inquiry. Additionally, I have relied on contemporaneous evidence; for example, emails/letters etc. that are available.

ROLE OF THE MAYOR AND COMBINED AUTHORITY

6. South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority was established in 2014 and the first Mayoral elections to elect a “metro” Mayor were held in 2018. I was elected at the subsequent election held in May 2022. The Authority’s area includes the Districts of Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham, and Sheffield, with a combined population of 1.4 million.
7. The primary statutory functions of the Authority relate to the provision of public passenger Transport services and facilities, and economic development/skills. Of relevance to the Inquiry, in respect of public passenger transport this includes financially supporting local bus and tram services; and in respect of economic development this includes providing financial support to business, the provision of funding to South Yorkshire’s District Councils and supporting the sub-regional economy.
8. Prior to the pandemic the principal modes of public transport in South Yorkshire were bus and tram. Bus services were provided on a de-regulated basis through commercial operations, with a limited number of services supported through public subsidy. Unlike other transport authority areas, the tram system in South Yorkshire was operated under a long-term concession arrangement by Stagecoach. The financial risk and reward of this concession was borne by the private operator, with assets controlled by the Authority. Accordingly, the immediate risk profile around tram operations was different to areas such as Greater Manchester, the West Midlands, and Nottingham where authorities were much more directly exposed to financial performance.
9. As Mayor I am the directly elected Leader of the Authority, chair of the Authority’s Board, a representative for South Yorkshire nationally and I play a significant sub-regional convening role across areas that are the Authority’s direct responsibilities and other wider areas of policy e.g. health, the environment, net zero, early years etc.

LIAISON AND COMMUNICATION WITH THE UK GOVERNMENT

10. With regard to the role of the Mayor during the Relevant Period, I am aware that Dan Jarvis, as you would expect, had liaison with the UK Government on a range of issues. Most of these would be common to all Mayors of Combined Authorities, but the unique aspect in relation to South Yorkshire was the Mayor’s role leading up to the agreement with the UK Government to place South Yorkshire in to Tier 3 Lockdown in October 2020. This aspect is covered in paragraphs [22] to [24] below.
11. I am aware that no representatives of the Authority were members of public health committees or scientific bodies e.g. SAGE.
12. The Authority was represented on the South Yorkshire Local Resilience Forum (“LRF”). The LRF is a multi-agency partnership made up of representatives from local public services, including the emergency services, local government, the NHS, the Environment Agency, and others. South Yorkshire Police (“SYP”) was one of the key stakeholders of the LRF, with a representative from SYP being one of the three co-chairs. The former Chief Executive of the Authority was the lead officer on the LRF for the organisation.
13. Dan Jarvis’ Covid-19 response was linked to the responsibilities the Authority has control of, primarily growing the economy and transport. Officers from the Authority chaired two ‘cells’ in the LRF:
 - a. The economic cell focused on gathering and sharing economic intelligence and data throughout the pandemic, as well as designing and distributing financial support that the UK Government offered for businesses. Primarily,

this was the Additional Restrictions Grant ("ARG"). This scheme provided local councils with grant funding to support businesses affected by restrictions that were not entitled to support from other grant schemes or where additional funding was needed.

- b. The transport cell brought together partner organisations including local authorities and bus, tram, and rail operators to oversee and coordinate our response to local and national arrangements on public transport. This ensured that there was consistency in deployment of controls and restrictions, as well as coordinating local messaging to passengers, aligned to national activity.
14. Dan Jarvis was a Member of Parliament as well as the South Yorkshire Mayor at the time, allowing him interaction with the UK Government through both roles. I am aware that meetings – both formal and informal – happened; for example, we were represented on the M9 (nine Mayoral Combined Authorities) meetings with the UK Government. The LRF and Directors of Public Health regularly verbally briefed Dan Jarvis outside of LRF meetings on the health impacts, pressures, and the South Yorkshire implications.
15. I am aware of meetings between senior officers and senior civil servants, especially in autumn 2020 concerning the Tier 3 negotiations. An example of this was the meeting on 19 October 2020 between Dan Jarvis, the South Yorkshire leaders and chief executives of the four local authorities, and the Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government at the time [OC/1 - INQ000128929]. There were also regular meetings between BEIS and officers on the economic impacts in South Yorkshire linked to Tier 3 restrictions. This aspect is covered in paragraphs [22] to [24] below.
16. Throughout the Relevant Period, the Authority provided weekly returns to BEIS on the economic impacts, including reports detailing the progress made in delivering the South Yorkshire ARG programme of business support. For public transport, senior Transport Officers in the Authority maintained a regular dialogue with senior officials in the Department for Transport. This included regular (often weekly) briefing sessions with DfT Deputy Regional Directors, ensuring that they had access to local intelligence as well as provide direct feedback on regional issues which were in turn fed into national level-level considerations where necessary. UK Government officials were also regular attendees of the LRF meetings.
17. The Authority first considered its response from a transport perspective in January 2020, with the risk being added to the corporate risk register during this month. Initial plans for customer awareness activities (advertisements in our interchanges) and provision of hand sanitiser were put in place in February 2020. The LRF Strategic Response & Recovery Coordinating Group was stood up through a strategic assessment face-to-face meeting of Covid-19 on 12 March 2020. The LRF declared a major incident for Covid-19 on 17 March 2020. Meetings at the height of the pandemic were daily, including weekends. Meeting regularity was related to the impacts on South Yorkshire, and eventually this was reduced to fortnightly before being stood down. There was an LRF administration function, which shared agendas and minutes from the meetings [OC/2 - INQ000128923]. Senior officers fed into the decision-making process by providing data and insight. Some of this was used by the Chair of LRF to feed into the UK Government's decision-making process.
18. The first national lockdown was announced on 26 March 2020. At that point there was no emergency funding for either bus or light rail services, but there was an expectation that a level of service would continue to support the movement of key workers. This was particularly important in South Yorkshire given the makeup of our

economy, where there is a higher reliance on manufacturing and care services alongside a low propensity of professional services and car ownership.

19. Regular engagement with officials from DfT commenced through the Urban Transport Group (UTG) of which the Authority is a member. We note that the UK Government took a modal approach to funding, with different funding packages for bus and light-rail (tram) operations. The first agreed bus support funding (Coronavirus Bus Services Support Grant) was confirmed on 9 April 2020. This funding did not cover light rail and as such the Authority participated in with discussions with the UK Government that resulted in a funding agreement for light rail (relevant for South Yorkshire), which was agreed on 23 May 2020. Between the first lockdown and that date, the MCA was required to underwrite tram operations from its own resources. This pattern of delayed funding announcements for light rail was repeated throughout the Relevant Period meaning that the Authority was require to underwrite the funding risk to prevent services being withdrawn by the private tram operator.
20. There were subsequently a range of issues as the new arrangements bedded in; an example was the national position in respect of vulnerable (elderly) people being allowed to shop from 08:00 in shops and supermarkets to reduce the risk of infection. However, the English National Concessionary Travel Scheme (ENCTS) only permitted free travel on bus (and at local discretion other forms of public transport) from 09:30 weekdays, so local arrangements had to be hastily agreed to allow those ENCTS passengers without access to a car to travel for free before 09:30.

SOUTH YORKSHIRE RESTRICTIONS

21. Dan Jarvis' and the Authority's main interaction with the UK Government over restrictions in South Yorkshire focused on entering Tier 3 restrictions. The Authority and the local leaders were involved in negotiating the terms of entry to Tier 3 restrictions, including a financial support package. Part of the economic justification for that package was that national support was for rateable businesses only, leaving significant parts of the South Yorkshire economy unsupported.
22. It was announced that South Yorkshire would go into Tier 3 on 21 October 2020, with measures in place from 24 October 2020. The funding package was agreed on 12 October 2020 but there were ongoing discussions on detail. Whilst additional funding to mitigate the impact of additional restrictions was welcomed the local leaders are quoted on record expressing their dissatisfaction with the process [OC/3 - INQ000128925; OC/4 - INQ000128930; OC/5 - INQ000128931]. Following the entering of Tier 3 restrictions in South Yorkshire on 24 October 2020, a full national lockdown – with the same South Yorkshire financial package for all local authorities – was announced two weeks later on 5 November 2020.
23. Based on evidence and feedback from the private sector and public sector partners, the Authority prioritised using any ARG on supporting groups and individuals who were not supported by national schemes, such as businesses in supply chains of impacted but not supported sectors and self-employed people.

PUBLIC HEALTH COMMUNICATIONS AND PUBLIC CONFIDENCE

24. The local advice to Dan Jarvis at the time focused on the worsening health situation in South Yorkshire e.g. hospital capacity and admissions. Therefore, we recognised the need for further restrictions, but we understood the economic consequences, particularly for those sectors not supported by national schemes. This led to negotiations between the Authority on behalf of South Yorkshire and UK Government

in respect of an enhanced support package to mitigate the impacts of moving from Tier 2 restrictions to Tier 3 [OC/6 - INQ000128926].

25. The Authority worked closely with the Comms cell of the LRF, which received information from the UK Government throughout the Relevant Period. This Comms cell was responsible for the public health messaging and interventions reaching different religious groups or ethnicities. DfT provided the Authority with content on messaging and materials for us in relaying public health messaging in particular in relation to the use on public transport. These were supported by consistent national campaign messaging and were used both in transport-related locations (bus stations) and on vehicle with the support of operators. Communications guidelines on messaging supported this national position.
26. There were some instances when conflicting messaging by the UK Government impacted upon the clarity of messaging locally. An example of this was guidance in advance of pupils returning to school and education following the first national lockdown as very prescriptive as to how pupils should travel on public transport and avoid mixing between bubbles and year groups. This was deemed impractical and unachievable in South Yorkshire (as we are certain elsewhere also) as would require a fleet of buses and resources beyond the means of any transport authority to provide. This advice was shared with DfT and DfE officials.

PUBLIC HEALTH AND CORONAVIRUS LEGISLATION AND REGULATIONS

27. At times we did recommend to the UK Government a different approach to legislation or regulations that were enacted. An example of this is the was the enforcement of social distancing and the wearing of face coverings both on public transport and in transport interchanges. In practice, this was not possible; instead, it relied on the broad compliance of the travelling public to comply. Those not willing to comply could be asked to disembark or leave the premises but ultimately those employees involved with making these requests didn't carry the powers of enforcement and were not in a practical sense likely to call the police to enforce.

LESSONS LEARNED

28. On reflection of the interactions between the Authority and the UK Government during the pandemic, the following lessons have been learned:
 - A practical framework for decisions that was known and understood by all parts of the public services was missing and is required to respond to any future major national incidents such as pandemics.
 - Short-term funding – especially for transport, businesses, and public health – will only serve as temporary solutions to embedded problems. Long-term funding is required to address structural weaknesses in many Northern economies.
 - Moreover, the stop-start nature of emergency transport support funding – particularly for buses and light rail, often only being confirmed after the previous period had expired – was not helpful.
 - A modal approach to transport funding made little sense in multi-modal transport economies. Support for the network that could be managed by the Authority would have been more efficient and avoided perverse consequences in financial planning.
 - The postcode lottery of restrictions made little sense at the time, especially as South and West Yorkshire had different restrictions with many people living and working in different neighbouring counties, which meant had different restrictions at their home compared to their workplace.

- Whilst recognising the challenge of managing complex messages during a national emergency, the need for consistency and coherency in messaging is something that could be learned from. For example, initial messaging from the UK Government made clear the need to avoid public transport as it was deemed an unsafe means of travel which carried a greater risk of infection, yet key workers (which were not clearly defined) were told it was safe for them.
- The LRF illustrated how effectively local public sector bodies (with input from the private sector provided by the Authority) can work together. Better links have been created following the collaborative response, especially with public health colleagues.
- The impacts of the pandemic illustrated the inextricable link between health and the economy. Early in the pandemic, Dan Jarvis, informed by officers and health experts from the LRF, took the approach that a healthy population helped create a healthier economy, as well as a healthy economy helping to create better health outcomes for its people.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Personal Data

Signed: _____

Dated: 16/06/2023