

Witness Name: Jamie Driscoll
Statement No.: First
Exhibits: 4
Dated: 10/07/2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF MAYOR JAMIE DRISCOLL

I, Jamie Driscoll, will say as follows: -

1. As a directly-elected Metro Mayor I chair the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) and have done so since May 2019. The NTCA covers the local authority areas of Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, and Northumberland.
2. The NTCA is responsible for spending a £20 million a year Investment Fund, a £25 million a year Adult Education Budget, a multi-year £32 million Brownfield Housing Fund, and other smaller amounts of money passed to it by central Government.
3. The NTCA is not responsible for overseeing the local authorities within its geography, nor providing public services.
4. The NTCA does not have powers concerning the delivery of health services or public health.
5. Our response to the Covid-19 pandemic was primarily an economic one, concerned with supporting businesses and organisations through the various lockdowns and rebuilding the region's economy.
6. Government ministers did talk to me and other local authority leaders in the Autumn of 2020 regarding the proposed Tier system. Discussions continued on an ad hoc basis.
 1. Contact/meetings with Central Government
 - 6 April 2020 – Coronavirus briefing with MPs
 - 14 April 2020 – Minister Clarke met with the M9 mayoral group
 - 1 May 2020 – Conference call of Prime Minister with Mayors
 - 17 June 2020 – Newcastle Stocktake with Minister Clarke (see JD/1-INQ000213353)
 - 18 June 2020 – Chancellor meeting with the M9 mayoral group
 - 15 July 2020 – Mayoral Roundtable group A
 - 6 October 2020 – Mayoral Combined Authorities Roundtable meeting with Robert Jenrick MP
 - 12 October - Meeting with No. 10 (virtual) with Sir Ed Lister and Robert Jenrick MP
 - See <https://jamiedriscoll.co.uk/news/standing-up-for-the-north/> (JD/2-INQ000213357)
 - 13 January 2021 – MHCLG Ministerial Briefing with Robert Jenrick MP

7. I first became aware of Covid-19 in either December 2019 or January 2020.
8. From my position it seemed that the UK Government did appreciate the threat posed by Covid-19 but were slow to impose the first national lockdown.

This view is based on analysis based on subsequent reporting that has come to light and briefings from Public Health Directors over the period and the information they shared, rather than any insider information or otherwise.

9. Local restrictions were never imposed on a strictly North of Tyne geographical footprint. Instead, they followed the economic and public health geography of the region, using the footprint of the 'LA7' – the seven local authority areas that comprise the North East: Newcastle upon Tyne, North Tyneside, Northumberland, Gateshead, South Tyneside, Sunderland, and County Durham.
10. I had access to and briefings with the local authorities' Directors of Public Health. I had productive discussions with the Government's Deputy Chief Medical officer and found that where health experts could talk directly to each other sensible outcomes could be reached. The North of Tyne Combined Authority was represented at a senior officer level by Henry Kippin (executive director / MD) on the LRF Strategic Coordination Group (SCG). Henry Kippin also vice-chaired the Recovery Coordination Group (RCG).

RCG (Recovery Coordination Group) meetings were held weekly in the beginning (April 2020) and became less frequent towards the point of standing down (October 2020).

The SCG (Strategic Coordinating Group) was chaired by Assistant Chief Constable Scott Young and Paul Hanson, Chief Executive of North Tyneside Council, and Dr Henry Kippin, Head of Paid Service at NTCA, starting weekly in October 2020 and concluding in June 2021. See JD/3 – INQ000213352

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.

Signed

Personal Data

10th July 2023