

Witness Name: Roger Hoare

Statement No.: 230330

Exhibits: 30

Dated: 03.07.2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF WEST OF ENGLAND COMBINED AUTHORITY

I, Roger Hoare, Head of Environment at the West of England Combined Authority, will say as follows: -

1. A request has been received from the Module 2 Lead Solicitor of the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry for a witness statement from the Mayor of the West of England with regards to understanding the role which they played in the UK Government's decision-making process during the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The period of interest is specified as being between 1st January 2020 and 24th February 2022.
2. The current Mayor of the West of England, Dan Norris, has been in office for only part of the specified period of interest, having been elected to office in May 2021. Therefore, the lead solicitor of Module 2 of the inquiry altered their request, asking that the West of England Combined Authority prepare and submit a corporate statement to provide as much information to the inquiry as is possible for the specified period.
3. It is important to note that the current Chief Executive is on long term sick-leave and there has been notable staff turnover in terms of those working within the West of England Combined Authority since the period of interest, therefore it is difficult to provide a comprehensive account of events during that time. Information has been provided with as much detail as is possible to assist the inquiry.
4. The West of England Combined Authority is the devolved regional government body responsible for economic growth in the West of England. The Combined Authority does not possess a health department – it's core functions are broadly around skills and employment, planning and housing, business support and development, environment, and transport. In terms of the Combined Authority's

involvement in the response to Covid-19, this largely centred around economic aspects inclusive of business support and transport.

5. The table below sets out the organisational roles of key individuals in senior leadership positions active between 1st January 2020 to 24th February 2022 who are relevant to this inquiry.

Individual	Role	Period in Post
Tim Bowles	Mayor of West of England	May 2017 – May 2021
Dan Norris	Mayor of West of England	May 2021 – Present
Patricia Greer	Chief Executive	Sept 2017 – Present
Jessica Lee	Head of Strategy	Jan 2017 - Present
Stephen Bashford	Director of Business and Skills	Oct 2018 - Present
Helen Iles	Senior Policy Manager	Jun 2019 - Present
Rachel Pykett	Head of Policy	Apr 2020 - Present

6. The West of England Combined Authority was not notified of the first lockdown which came into force on 23rd March 2020. The Combined Authority was aware of this lockdown and its restrictions when it was announced in the national press.
7. Communication was generally improved for later lockdowns and tiered restrictions which were imposed. This is elaborated on below.
8. The M10 is a group of all the English Metro Mayors who meet regularly and work together on shared priorities. This group was previously known as the M9 (changing its name when a 10th Metro Mayor was elected in May 2021). The West of England Combined Authority provides the secretariat to the M10.
9. A list of meetings held with government officials and/or ministers is provided as part of the evidence pack accompanying this statement running from 9th March 2020 to 1st February 2022. This list is not exhaustive and does not reflect any meetings individual Mayors or MCAs may have had with Government during this period.
10. Numerous meetings took place over the roughly two-year period including discussions with the Secretary of State for Transport, representatives from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, mayoral discussions with the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, government officials, the Vaccine Minister, the Health Secretary, the Minister for Employment, the Minister for Sport, and the Minister for Intergovernmental Relations.

11. We have provided documents for the following key meetings which took place:

Meeting Detail	Date
M9 Meeting with Prime Minister (RH1-INQ000198883/RH2-INQ000198885/RH3-INQ000198889)	1 st May 2020
M9 Meeting with Chancellor of the Exchequer (RH4-INQ000198873/RH5-INQ000198874)	18 th June 2020
M9 Meeting with Secretary of State for Health (RH6-INQ000198879)	5 th October 2020
M9 Meeting with Minister for Sport and Tourism (RH7-INQ000198862)	27 th January 2021
M9 Meeting with Minister for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (RH8-INQ000198888)	1 st February 2022

12. As secretariat we have provided meeting minutes/agendas for these key meetings listed above where possible. If further details are required for other meetings, this can be investigated further at a later date.
13. Whilst there was a fair amount of engagement during this period, there was significant frustration across the network with regards to the approach which the government took to discussions.
14. A number of staff who had significant direct engagement with the UK Government during the Covid-19 pandemic period of interest have now left the organisation. However, diary records do suggest engagement on a range of topics. The focus of Combined Authority work in response to Covid was largely in relation to the economic impact and public transport challenges, complementing the responsibilities held by other local partners.
15. An example of this was the submission made by the Combined Authority to the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee (RH9-INQ000198863), which held a call for evidence regarding 'the impact of Covid-19 on business and workers inquiry' in June 2020 and focused on the high-level impacts of coronavirus on businesses and workers across the West of England. The paper produced as part of this committee meeting indicates that representations were made to the UK government from personnel within the West of England Combined Authority. The paper describes an appreciation of the government's response to these representations and welcomes the government's flexibility and responsiveness with regards to economic support packages, particularly the 'Top-Up Grant' scheme. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to gather written evidence of the 'representations' from the Combined Authority alluded to above at this time but this does suggest that communication was attempted early in the pandemic from the Combined Authority to UK government.

16. This BEIS Committee paper from June 2020 (RH9-INQ000198863) described above also called for a response which works in partnership across multiple levels of government and for partnership between Combined Authorities and all government departments. It also states that advanced notice of government's future intentions to ease lockdown and stimulate the economy 'are welcomed'. This suggests that there were some early frustrations at lack of communication between UK government and the Combined Authorities nationally and this frustration was certainly felt within the West of England Combined Authority.
17. The Combined Authority also submitted weekly business returns to the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy through the Growth Hub Service to keep government updated on local business conditions throughout the pandemic.
18. Around this period of summer 2020 the Mayor of the West of England established a regional recovery taskforce, made up of a cross-section of our region's economy, to drive planning. The taskforce considered how to use the region's strengths in innovation and collaboration, and highly skilled workforce, to accelerate the region's economic renewal. It brought together employers, innovators, educators, trade unions and community champions to identify the challenges and opportunities that businesses and workers across the region faced. This action was in response to a letter received from the Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government in June 2020 which called upon the mayor to lead on economic recovery incentives across the region. This letter is included in the evidence pack (RH10-INQ000198857).
19. The Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) mentioned above published the 'West of England Recovery Plan' in September 2020 (RH11-INQ000198895). These plans and other strategies similar to this, were formulated and actioned internally. Although they did draw upon statistics published by the Office of National Statistics (ONS).
20. As the Covid-19 pandemic progressed, information from Government was more structured. However, the ability to use local information to inform national decision making remained challenging.
21. A range of forums were established to strengthen collaboration and information flows between different elements of the national governance system. For example, the West of England CA was invited to join The Local Economic Recovery Group (LERG), led out of MHCLG, brought together officials from a range of Whitehall departments, a number of MCA CEOs, Local Authority CEOs and LEP CEOs. These meetings were often attended by the chief executive of the West of England Combined Authority. LERG met regularly throughout the period of interest. The first recorded meeting was on 29th April 2020. A list of these meetings with dates is provided in the evidence pack (see RH6-INQ000198879). A number of task and finish groups were established through the LERG process, which produced recommendations for Government on action that could be taken to support

economic recovery. A Government response to the recommendations of the task and finish groups was produced, highlighting where action would be taken forward or where Government would look at recommendations at the next Spending Review. The LERG group stopped meeting after the Government response to the task and finish groups was provided.

22. The West of England Combined Authority regularly monitored data which was published by Public Health England and analysed how this data was being used by the UK government to determine appropriate tier restrictions in December 2020. The impact of these tiers was also analysed and presented internally in terms of the number of businesses within each sector which would have to close, and the number of individuals employed within that sector. An example of this analysis is shown in Figure 1:

Impact of tier restrictions on regional businesses



Type of business	Tier 2: Bath & NE Somerset			Tier 3: Bristol, N Somerset, S Gloucestershire		
	Impact	Businesses	Employment	Impact	Businesses	Employment
Pubs & bars	Closed (unless serving food)	140	2,250	Closed	540	8,250
Accommodation & food	Open but no indoor mixing	370	6,655	Closed	1,455	24,980
Entertainment venues	Open, limited capacity & curfew	240	1,785	Closed	800	8,295
Leisure centres, gyms	Open	95	1,700	Open but no indoor classes	360	6,960
Event Organisers	Events limited	25	90	Closed	105	770
TOTAL		870	12,480		3,260	49,255

Source: [Nomis](#), WECA Calculations

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23. Further economic briefings on the impact of Covid-19 on businesses were undertaken internally which drew upon data released from Department for Transport (DfT), ONS and Public Health England, however it is understood that this data was not directly communicated to the Combined Authority by UK government. Data was sourced and analysed internally. The West of England Covid-19 Economic Briefing (December 2020) is provided in the evidence pack which demonstrates this (RH12-INQ000198870).
24. In September 2020, The Department for Business Energy and Industrial Strategy provided the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Businesses and Employers Bulletin - 18 September 2020 to the West of England Combined Authority Growth Hubs team (RH13-INQ000198875). This was provided to ensure that the team could access the latest information for employers and businesses on coronavirus (COVID-19) via the .gov website.

25. In March 2020, the Department for Transport (DfT) issued a letter to local authority transport officers via email regarding the supporting of the bus and coach sector and its passengers (RH14-INQ000198853). The letter outlined initial financial support which the government had agreed to in the form of the Bus Service Operators Grant. The letter also urged local authorities to continue to pay bus and coach operators for tendered services and home to school transport. The letter also set out bus operators ability to change timetables at short notice.
26. In the same month, prior to the above letter being received, the mayor held a call with the Secretary of State for Transport. On the call bus services were discussed, with a general update provided by the mayor including a call for greater clarity from government on what support was available in terms of powers to allow the Combined Authority to cashflow payments to bus operators. Clarity was also sought on the likelihood of recent funding bids proceeding. Other modes of transport were also briefly discussed.
27. In April 2020 a further letter was sent via email from the Director of Local Transport at DfT to all local authority offices outside London. The letter detailed the Covid-19 Bus Services Support Grant (RH15-INQ000198854). A further letter was received from the Deputy Director of the Buses and Taxis Division from DfT providing further details of the grant (RH16-INQ000198855).
28. Various correspondence is recorded in May 2020. The Director for Roads, Places and Environment for DfT issued a letter to all combined, local transport and local highway authorities in England, outside London which detailed plans for the restart of local transport following the government's announcement outlining the roadmap for the gradual easing of lockdown restrictions (RH17-INQ000198876). The letter offered guidance to the Combined Authority on key issues which should be considered including green infrastructure, e-scooters, data, public transport the role of the car and travel planning.
29. The government also released the Covid-19 Safer Transport – Guidance for Operators in May 2020 (RH18-INQ000198868) as well as the Covid-19 Recovery Strategy (RH19-INQ000198892).
30. In July 2020, an M9 meeting with Baroness Vere was held (RH20-INQ000198881/2). The meeting covered bus and light rail funding, the potential devolution of bus funding to local transport authorities rather than operators, funding for school transport and cycling measures.
31. A further M9 meeting with Baroness Vere was held in August 2020 (RH21-INQ000198880). During this meeting issues were raised with regards to communication. Several speakers emphasised the need for government to be proactive and consistent in messaging about public transport still being safe to use, including to schools. 'Whilst local campaigns are happening these do not have the same effect as a national high-profile message'.

32. During the August 2020 meeting there were also concerns raised as to the clarity of funding for the bus service operators grant in terms of how/who decides on the length of time for which funding is available. There were also concerns with regards to lack of ministerial engagement in the e-scooter trials as this appeared low despite government asking authorities to deliver these trials quickly.
33. An internal meeting on bus strategy in the West of England was held by the Combined Authority in December 2020 (RH22-INQ000198864). There were also numerous internal social distancing meetings which took place throughout 2020 between the Combined Authority and Unitary Authorities (RH23-INQ000198859/60/61).
34. Various evidence pertaining to transportation is included in the evidence pack and listed in the table in Section 7.
35. The Chief Executive held numerous meetings relating to Covid-19 and the Combined Authority's response to it throughout 2020. The majority of those meetings were internal. However, there were also meetings with the Environment Agency, Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and a representative of the government. A list of the meetings relating to Covid-19 is provided within the evidence pack (RH24-INQ000198865).
36. The M9 group of Mayoral Combined Authorities produced a paper on 15th April 2020 which summarised the gaps in the design and implementation of government support to businesses as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic (RH25-INQ000198856).
37. The paper is critical of the timing in terms of delays in businesses getting support which were already facing cashflow crises. There was also concern with regards to the lack of clarity as to whether the furlough support scheme would last beyond 3 months, for example. Various grant support gaps were identified as well as gaps in support for self-employed personnel.
38. In the paper produced by M9 in April 2020, specific groups who missed out on support were identified, and concerns were raised regarding procurement during the pandemic – specifically a suggestion was put forward that smaller businesses should also be engaged in government emergency procurement. Challenges with universal credit were also discussed.
39. The M9 secretariat supported officers from across the M9 network to regularly meet with Whitehall officials. The secretariat also supported the scheduling of ministerial meetings with the M9 group of Mayors. This included a meeting with the Prime Minister on 1 May 2020, and meetings with a range of other Ministers. The secretariat did not support any engagement with individual areas, which was managed via each MCA themselves. The meetings which took place in April involving the M9 group are listed below. A summary of when meetings which took place can be found in RH6-INQ000198879.

Meeting Detail	Date
M9 Meeting with CEOs and Representatives from Government	7 th April 2020
M9 Meeting with Minister for Housing, Communities and Local Government	14 th April 2020
M9 Meeting with Government Officials	24 th April 2020
M9 Meeting with Transport Minister	29 th April 2020

40. The West of England Combined Authority, as previously highlighted in other sections, does not have a health department and acts primarily as a strategic economic and transportation authority. Therefore, the Combined Authority's role with respect to involvement in any decision-making processes by central government in relation to protection of health, was limited.
41. There was no warning or pre-consultation with regards to the first lock-down in March 2020 and this is largely understandable given that the virus was unprecedented and considering its severity, impact, and speed of transmission.
42. As the pandemic progressed, more information was available to guide people through local and national restrictions and support. The Combined Authority received some briefings on changes being made to restrictions but had limited scope to actively inform Government decision making on the approach to restrictions.
43. As described in Section 3 the CA also had a role in coordinating the engagement of the M9 network with Government during the period covered by this inquiry - details for key meetings were taken and have been provided.
44. In addition, from 2021 onwards there were regular meetings between the Vaccine Minister and the M9/10 mayoral group.
45. The present Mayor campaigned to government to alterations to their strategy in 2021. Letters were sent to the Health Secretary (RH26-INQ000198878) and to the Prime Minister (RH27-INQ000198877) regarding mask wearing powers. These are included in the attached evidence pack.
46. In summary, the key challenge for the Combined Authority initially was to act largely reactively to government strategy rather than being involved in designing and implementing that strategy through policy. However, from roughly summer 2020 onwards, there were more structured routes to share information with Government.

47. A major public messaging campaign which took place in August 2020 was the 'Find the joy in the journey' campaign which encouraged walking and cycling by residents in the West of England and was launched by the West of England Mayor in partnership with Bath & North East Somerset Council, Bristol City Council, North Somerset Council and South Gloucestershire Council as well as many partner organisations across the region. The campaign drew upon the fact that there had been an increase in walking and cycling by the public during the pandemic and sought to reinforce that trend by encouraging long-term behavioural change.
48. The current Mayor launched a pro-mask wearing campaign in October 2021 to encourage mask wearing in all indoor settings following a sharp spike in cases in the southwest. This consisted of posters and local newspaper adverts. The Health Secretary was also sent a letter by the Mayor asking for extra funding for these efforts and this is provided in the evidence pack.
49. Both campaigns were initiated by the Mayor who was in office at the respective points in time and there is no evidence to suggest that they were directly encouraged nor instructed upon by central government. Both campaigns sought to positively affect the region in terms of health, wellbeing, and active travel. Whilst it is felt that the campaigns had a positive impact on the region and had some effect in encouraging behaviour changes, it is felt that they would have benefited from additional funding and resource from central government.
50. Nationally, mask wearing, social distancing and other measures were advertised and signed in alignment with government restrictions and legislation by unitary authorities. The West of England Combined Authority was not actively involved in this health intervention.
51. Unfortunately, the vast majority of staff who were actively involved in public messaging are no longer in the employment of the Combined Authority. Therefore, details of the amount of advice/correspondence with central government or government ministers is unavailable.
52. To the Combined Authority's knowledge, it is not possible to provide a valid insight into public confidence with regards to the Covid-19 response.
53. It is the Combined Authority's understanding that approaches were made for additional funding for the provision of Covid wardens and marshals to assist with enforcement by unitary authorities. There is no evidence to suggest that the Combined Authority was involved in these discussions.
54. From a Combined Authority perspective, liaison with local police forces was extremely limited as this was largely carried out by the unitary authorities. It is known that there were meetings which the Mayor was able to attend particularly in 2020, however there is no evidence that they were regularly attended. It is felt that more communication with police forces would certainly have been of benefit.

55. There were numerous challenges which the Covid-19 pandemic brought to the West of England in terms of public health and the economic impact on businesses and individuals within the region.
56. As previously mentioned, a key challenge at the beginning of the pandemic was being able to rapidly interpret and act upon government directives at the time. However, later from roughly summer 2020 onwards, there were a range of routes through which the CA was seeking to inform Government understanding of the economic impact of Covid 19 and the potential action that could be taken to mitigate impact.
57. In hindsight, it is clear that there could have been more communication and, crucially, consultation and engagement with the Combined Authority from government as opposed to simply conveying intentions. This could well have further aided the co-ordinated response by the Combined Authority and unitary authorities within the West of England.

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

Dated: 3rd July 2023

Summary of Evidence

REF.	EVIDENCE
RH1-INQ000198883	M9 updated paper for PM meeting.msg
RH2-INQ000198885	M9 - Briefing for PM Meeting v3.docx
RH3-INQ000198889	RE M9 meeting with PM.msg
RH4-INQ000198873	FW Briefing - M9 Chancellor call.msg
RH5-INQ000198874	M9 BRIEFING - Chancellor Mtg - 18.06.20 v1.docx
RH6-INQ000198879	List of Meetings Between M9.docx
RH7-INQ000198862	Agenda for meeting with Minister for Tourism 27 January.msg
RH8-INQ000198888	Michael Gove Meeting.docx
RH9-INQ000198863	BEIS Committee - WECA Submission v2_GM (1).docx
RH10-INQ000198857	200603 SC Mayor TB Economic Recovery letter 03.06.20.pdf
RH11-INQ000198895	West-of-England-Recovery-Plan-Sept-2020.pdf
RH12-INQ000198870	December-WofE-covid19-economic-briefing-17.12.2020.pdf
RH13-INQ000198875	FW Coronavirus (COVID-19) Businesses and Employers Bulletin 18 September 2020.msg
RH14-INQ000198853	200325 Official Letter to Local Authorities - FINAL.PDF
RH15-INQ000198854	200404 Letter from Stephen Fidler_Covid19 Bus Services Support Grant.pdf
RH16-INQ000198855	200409 Letter from Catriona Henderson CBSSG.pdf
RH17-INQ000198876	Letter from Emma Ward - Local Transport Restart.pdf
RG18-INQ000198868	Safe Transport - Guidance for operators V8.1 JD.pdf.accreport.html
RH19-INQ000198892	The UK Governments COVID recovery strategy.pdf
RH20-INQ000198881/2	M9 meeting with Baroness Vere 30.7.20 (1).docx M9 meeting with Baroness Vere 30.7.20.docx

RH21-INQ000198880	M9 meeting with Baroness Vere 26 Aug 2020.docx
RH22-INQ000198864	Bus Strategy post Covid-CEO paper Dec 2020.pdf
RH23-INQ000198859/60/61	2020.05.19_Social Distancing Meeting _Actions.docx 2020.06.23_Social Distancing Meeting _Actions.docx 2020.08.18_Social Distancing Meeting _Actions.docx
RH24-INQ000198865	Chief Executive Meetings for COVID.docx
RH25-INQ000198856	200415 M9 Covid19 business support gaps.docx
RH26-INQ000198878	Letter to Secretary of State for Health.pdf
RH27-INQ000198877	Letter to Prime Minister.pdf
INQ000198858	201208 WofE Covid cases & tier impacts.pptx
INQ000198866	Confidential - Mayor Advisor Responses to Qs.docx
INQ000198867	coronavirus-covid-19-safer-transport-guidance-for-operators.pdf
INQ000198869	COVID-19 Proposed Social Distancing Framework Briefing Aid.pptx
INQ000198871	Final Draft - M9 paper for Chancellor meeting.msg
INQ000198872	M9 - Regional Recovery priorities - v1.docx
INQ000198884	M9 - REGIONAL RECOVERY - V3.docx
INQ000198886	Draft M9 statement 30.4.20 v2.docx
INQ000198887	Meetings of Chief Executive of West of England Combined Authority - 2020.docx
INQ000198890	Regional Recovery Taskforce Terms of Reference.pdf
INQ000198891	SoS Transport briefing.docx
INQ000198852	07. BRP Board CRD Risk Register v8.2.2.xlsx
INQ000198893	West of Eland Combined Authority letter to Traffic Commissioner re Coronavirus.docx
INQ000198894	West of England Covid-19 weekly report 300320.docx