

THE UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

**FOURTH WITNESS STATEMENT OF
RT HON. MICHAEL GOVE MP**

I, Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, will say as follows.

1. This is my fourth statement to the UK Covid-19 Inquiry. It is intended to clarify an aspect of my third witness statement, dated 14 December 2023, which has been drawn to my attention during the course of my preparation to give evidence in Module 2A of the Inquiry on Monday 29 January 2024.
2. When referring to my perception that on occasion during the pandemic the Scottish Government sought to make choices at variance with the rest of the UK to emphasise their “otherness” from the UK Government, consistent with their separatist political objective, I stated at paragraph 57 of my third witness statement:

“A particularly notable example is Nicola Sturgeon’s decision to brief the press immediately following the COBR meeting of 12 March 2020 to which she and the other DAs were invited. At the meeting – which, as the Inquiry has heard, was an extremely important meeting – mass gatherings were discussed. It was agreed that the CMOs should provide further advice as to what steps should be taken in relation to mass gatherings for further consideration by COBR. Despite this, the First Minister immediately briefed the press about the matters discussed in the meeting – prior to UKG public communications – and banned gatherings of more than 500 people in Scotland. She had not communicated that intention during the meeting and it came as a surprise to the UK Government. It was not, in my view, consistent with a coordinated approach, undermined the UKG’s communications strategy (which was designed to save lives) and, more generally, reduced trust that the Scottish Government would put the best interests of the UK population above its own political aims.”

3. In that paragraph I referred the inquiry to the minutes of the COBR meeting in question, which I produced as exhibit MG2/28. It was noted at the meeting that the response to the pandemic should be science-led; that the scientific advice was that there was low confidence that cancelling mass gatherings would be an effective intervention; that the scientific advice relating to mass gatherings was not well understood by the public, and more consistent public messaging across the UK was necessary; and that the timing of any interventions was key. In conclusion, it was agreed that the CMOs “for all Four Nations” would prepare advice for consideration by COBR on the approach to mass gatherings, and that COBR would keep under review the approach to mass gatherings.
4. My recollection (in accordance with paragraph 5 of the minutes) is that whilst Nicola Sturgeon indicated during the COBR meeting that the Scottish Government was “minded” to ban (or, strictly speaking, and to clarify my last statement, to issue guidance against) mass gatherings, she did not indicate that this was a settled intention, nor that she intended to issue any such guidance immediately following the COBR meeting.
5. Similarly, the First Minister gave no indication that she intended to hold a press conference to tell the media what had been discussed during the COBR meeting.
6. It is therefore right to say that I and, I believe, colleagues in the UK Government were surprised at the First Minister’s media briefing. It remains my view that her actions were not consistent with a coordinated approach, undermined the UK Government’s communications strategy and reduced trust that the First Minister would put the best interests of the UK population above her separatist political objective.

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: 25/1/2024