

Witness Name: John Burns

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: JGB

Dated: 19th October 2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JOHN BURNS

In relation to the issues raised by the Rule 9 request dated 08 August 2023 in connection with Module 2A, I, John George Burns, will say as follows: -

1. I am John George Burns of St Andrew's House, Edinburgh, EH11 3DG. I have worked in NHS Scotland for 40 years.
2. During my career I have held a number of roles in hospital and Health Board Management. From 1983 to 2001, I held a number of management positions and director roles. From 2004 to 2021, I held roles as Chief Executive of NHS Dumfries and Galloway (2004-2012) and NHS Ayrshire and Arran (2012-2021). I have held the position of Chief Operating Officer – NHS Scotland from 1 July 2021 to present date. I have a BA (Hons) in Business Studies, an MBA, a Diploma in Health Service Management and a Certificate in Health Economics.
3. I have worked as Chief Operating Officer, NHS Scotland from 1 July 2021 to present date. My responsibilities include Performance and Delivery, Health Emergency Preparedness, Resilience and Response ("EPRR"), Whole System Intelligence and Analysis and Planning and Sponsorship. Within my remit I provide advice in relation to planned care and unscheduled care as well as information and analysis on the impact of demand on hospital services.
4. From September 2021, I worked with COSLA officials in relation to winter planning and response as a key partner. I also attended the Scottish Government Resilience

Room ("SGoRR") meetings regarding the response to the 2021/2022 winter which included consideration of COVID. I believe copies of minutes and papers have already been provided as part of the Tranche 6 return to the Scottish Covid-19 Inquiry. These meetings took place on the following dates:

Scottish Government Resilience Officials ("SGoR(O)")

- 14/12/2021
- 17/12/2021
- 20/12/2021
- 24/12/2021
- 05/01/2022
- 11/01/2022
- 18/01/2022
- 25/01/2022
- 01/02/2022
- 15/02/2022

Scottish Government Resilience Ministerial ("SGoR(M)")

- 10/12/2021
- 15/12/2021
- 22/12/2021
- 06/01/2022
- 12/01/2022
- 15/02/2022
- 16/02/2022

5. As the Chief Operating Officer, NHS Scotland, I am part of the Health and Social Care Management Board and provide information and advice to the these Board meetings as required.
6. I did not participate in any UK wide committees, groups or forums.

Initial understanding and response to Covid-19 (January 2020 to March 2020)

7. I have been asked about my initial understanding and response to COVID-19 between January 2020 and March 2020. It will be recognised that I came into post in July 2021 and therefore I was not part of the Scottish Government in the period covering the questions in this section.

Role in relation to non-pharmaceutical interventions (“NPIs”)

8. I have been asked about my role in relation to non-pharmaceutical interventions (“NPIs”). These questions cover a period before I took up my role as Chief Operating Officer, NHS Scotland and also fall outside my area of expertise.

Divergence

9. I have been asked about divergence, however, when I took up the role as Chief Operating Officer, NHS Scotland my focus was on looking at recovery and renew and therefore I am not best placed to provide views on the questions of divergence not having been part of previous discussions.

Role in relation to medical and scientific expertise, data and modelling

10. I have been asked about my role in relation to medical and scientific expertise, data and modelling but I am unable to comment as the areas in question are outside my area of expertise. However, as Chief Operating Officer, NHS Scotland I would receive modelling scenarios and would use these to discuss with NHS Chief Executives the potential impact and mitigations that would be necessary to meet changing demand.

Role in Covid-19 public health communications

11. As the Chief Operating Officer, NHS Scotland I was not involved in or played any role in COVID-19 public health communications.

Role in public health and coronavirus legislation and regulations

12. I did not have any role in or involvement around public health and coronavirus legislation and regulations as these points fall out with my time in Scottish Government. I am therefore not able to offer comment or opinion on these matters.

Key challenges and lessons learned

13. Since taking up the role of Chief Operating Officer, NHS Scotland I have provided oral and written evidence at the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee and the Public Audit Committee however this has primarily been focused on the recovery and renew of services. I have provided copies of relevant transcripts to the Inquiry.

Informal communications and documents

14. On my appointment as Chief Operating Officer, NHS Scotland in July 2021, I was added to a Directors WhatsApp group chat which includes Directors and other officials from across DG Health and Social Care. This group chat exists as a forum for alerting senior colleagues to any urgent or emerging issues including those that were linked to COVID-19. While I have been a member of the group it has not been used as a decision making platform or to discuss information or advice relating to COVID-19. The group chat still exists. I am unable to advise what the group chat was used for prior to July 2021.
15. I am unaware of any other WhatsApp groups (or other forms of group chats) which key Scottish Government decision-makers and/or their advisors used to communicate about such decisions or to make such decisions.
16. I do not hold or have retained any written or electronic notes since my appointment as Chief Operating Officer, NHS Scotland in July 2021.
17. It will be recognised that given I came into the position of Chief Operating Officer, NHS Scotland in July 2021 there is a limitation on my answers to the questions

posed as they either cover the period before my appointment or are outside my area of expertise. I have therefore answered these questions to the best of my ability given these limitations.

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: 19th October 2023