

Managing your wellbeing as a witness in the COVID-19 Inquiry

Thank you for taking the time to give evidence as a witness for the UK Covid-19 Inquiry. We are aware that providing evidence and answering questions in the Inquiry can be emotionally challenging. It is also understandable to feel upset when remembering and describing stressful experiences that happened during the Covid pandemic. Often, these feelings are temporary. Please find below suggestions for strategies to attend to your wellbeing during your participation in the Inquiry, as well as information relating to the emotional support sessions you are eligible for.

Strategies ahead of the hearing

- Allowing yourself enough time to prepare for your testimony, including practising what you will say and reviewing key documents, will mean you are in a good position to manage any understandable stress on the day and deliver your experience with confidence.
- Taking enough breaks in your preparation and continuing to engage in healthy activities will help maintain your wellbeing.
- Eating and sleeping well will mean that your brain and body will better manage the emotional and physical effects of stress.
- Maintaining your usual social contacts and engagements with friends and loved ones will help maintain your connection to routine and provide emotional reassurance.

If you have a mental health problem

- It is anticipated that a number of witnesses will have mental health problems, formally diagnosed or not. These difficulties may relate directly to your pandemic experiences, for example, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, health anxiety and prolonged grief disorder. If you have a mental health problem or are concerned about how your mental health may affect you giving evidence, or that giving evidence may worsen your mental health, please let your legal representative know.
- Your legal representative should inform our witness liaison team so that we can work together to consider what adjustments we can make to reduce the impact on you.
- Your legal representative may also submit a request for you to be excused from giving evidence on health grounds.
- The Inquiry has a specialist team of mental health practitioners who are able to advise in these circumstances. Any information relating to your health will be treated with the strictest confidence and managed in line with the Data Protection Act.

Strategies on the day

- On the day of your hearing, you will be shown around the hearing room by members of the Inquiry. Familiarising yourself with the immediate environment will help reduce any feelings of stress or disorientation. Use this opportunity to ask any questions that

you may have: our members of the team will be happy to help and try to make this experience the most comfortable as possible. You will also be shown where to find refreshments and where the toilets are.

- Regulating your breathing and taking movement breaks will help manage feeling stressed in the moment.
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- Remind yourself that your objective is to provide a truthful and accurate testimony of your experience. If you notice feeling overwhelmed, take a moment to ground yourself in the present moment and orient yourself back to the questions being asked.
- Hestia emotional support workers are available on the day if you need support to manage your emotions. There is protected and private space onsite which has been made available for this purpose.

Strategies after your participation

- If possible, accessing a debriefing session with the organisation you are representing shortly after your attendance at the hearing will help you decompress.
- Planning a non-work related “wind down” time in the afternoon or evening after your hearing attendance will help you further relax and process the experience of the day.
- Returning to your usual daily routine will help you further process the experience of your participation and will remind you that your participation has drawn to a close.

What emotional support is available?

The Inquiry has contracted Hestia to provide confidential telephone and face-to-face emotional support sessions. This support is provided by qualified emotional support workers and is available to witnesses for the duration of their engagement as a witness in the inquiry, meaning sessions can be scheduled in the lead up to giving evidence, on the day of giving evidence, and after hearing attendance. If you are a core participant, more frequent contact can be made available to you.

What do emotional support sessions involve?

Emotional support sessions can involve discussing any concerns and feelings related to the Inquiry in a safe and confidential manner, learning a range of techniques and skills for managing difficult emotions and memories, and developing personal strategies to help you maintain your wellbeing as you engage with the enquiry.

You can refer yourself to the service by sharing your name and contact details with Hestia by:

- calling 0800 2465617.
- Request an appointment by email to covid19inquiry.support@hestia.org.

A member of Hestia staff will then contact you within 48 hours to schedule an appointment. We recommend that you access a calm, quiet and private space for your scheduled appointment. This will help you to talk openly with the counsellor and get the most out of your emotional support session.

What happens if I need further support?

If you think that you would benefit from additional support for your emotional wellbeing after your involvement in the Inquiry, the emotional support worker you have worked with can signpost you external services. You can also consult the Inquiry support webpage for organisations that provide support here: <https://covid19.public-inquiry.uk/support/>.

If you are concerned that your participation in the Inquiry will significantly affect your mental health, please discuss this with your legal team who can then consult with the Inquiry's Support and Safeguarding team to consider how best to support you.