

From (joint) Deputy Secretary,
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Services Group
Brian Doherty / Fiona McCandless



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DATE: 17 November 2023

TO: SCSG

UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY – RECORD RETENTION – MEMO FROM HOCS

I refer to previous memos in July and November 2022 regarding the importance of retaining all relevant departmental records falling within the scope of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry.

The Inquiry is due to commence its Module 2C preliminary examination of the actions taken by all NICS Departments from January 2020 to March 2022, and it is likely that the management of Covid related documents in the NICS will come under intense scrutiny.

The Head of the Civil Service (HOCS), Jayne Brady, has written to Permanent Secretaries (**Annex A**) with a timely reminder that, under section 35 of the Inquiries Act 2005, it is an offence to alter, destroy or prevent relevant documents from being provided to the Inquiry.

In the letter, HOCS reiterates the importance of ensuring that documents relevant to the Inquiry are securely retained and kept accessible in case they need to be disclosed to the Inquiry. This applies to a wide range of documentation, including:

- Note pads and paper.
- Electronic documents.
- Personal Diaries / calendars.
- Emails.
- Text messages.
- Social media (including WhatsApp).
- Audio and visual recordings.
- Material contained on Content Manager and Knowledge Network.
- Material on desktops and shared drives.
- Material saved on cloud system (such as TEAMS).

All staff must continue to save any documents in any of the above formats which could be

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considered potentially relevant to the Inquiry. If in doubt, err on the side of caution and store them.

Senior Civil Service staff are asked to pay particular attention to text messages and WhatsApp messages held on your mobile phones and notebooks or diaries that were used during the pandemic – it is vital that these are retained and saved appropriately and are not destroyed. These principles also apply to the Arm's Length Bodies for which DAERA is responsible.

DAERA Business Areas should suspend any routine document destruction policies that are in place for any Covid related documents for the lifetime of the Inquiry. All relevant information should be identified in the normal retention and disposal review process and extension arrangements should be made with the DAERA RecordsNI Team Records.NI@daera-ni.gov.uk

DAERA staff who may have relevant material on any mobile device due for replacement are advised to either retain the device for the duration of the Inquiry, or, if the device needs to be returned, provide a written statement to the Information Asset Owner (Grade 7 or equivalent) in their business area, providing an assurance that all official information has been securely transferred to Content Manager before the device is handed back. Staff permanently leaving the Department will also need to provide a similar assurance statement to their Information Asset Owner when handing devices back.

Information on the UK Covid-19 Inquiry, including the Department's Preparedness and an outline of the roles and responsibility expected of all staff in relation to this can be found on the DAERA Covid-19 Hub pages of the intranet.

If you have any queries, please email Covid19Inquiry@daera-ni.gov.uk.

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