Witness Name: Mark Norris

Statement No: 1

Exhibits: 0

Dated: 14 April 2026

Module 9 of the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry ("the Inquiry")
Reference for Rule 9 Request - M9/R9R/MN01

WITNESS STATEMENT OF MARK NORRIS

I, Mark Norris, say as follows —

Introduction

1. I am a Principal Policy Adviser at the Local Government Association (LGA) of 18 Smith Square London, SW1P 3HW. I joined the LGA in 2007 and took up my current role in 2015 During 2020 and 2021 I led the LGA's policy work on supporting vulnerable people and also assisted the LGA's policy work in relation to bereavement services. Since 2022 I have been coordinating the policy contribution to the LGA's Covid Inquiry work.

2. I make this statement in response to the Inquiry's supplementary Rule 9 request dated 9 December 2025. The Rule 9 request sought further information to the evidence given by Ms Joanne Killian, Chief Executive of the Local Government Association (LGA) at the Module 9 public hearings on 4 December 2025.

Proper preparations for a whole system civil emergency

3. The LGA agrees with the conclusion the Inquiry has reached in earlier modules that the UK was not prepared for a pandemic event such as Covid-19. National planning had not considered the economic impact of non-pharmaceutical interventions on the

economy, businesses, individuals and local government. As set out in Ms Killian's Module 9 witness statement and evidence provided by others to the Inquiry in this module have highlighted, because of this lack of preparedness, the speed and escalation of the Covid-19 pandemic did not allow time for the usual policy making process.

4. This lack of appropriate planning had consequences for the support of council finances, and the delivery of grant schemes by local government. It is worth repeating here, as highlighted in Ms Killian's Module 9 witness statement, that with proper pre-pandemic planning many of the issues councils experienced, for example in distributing funds to businesses, could have been addressed ahead of time.

5. It remains the LGA's case that in order to ensure the UK is better prepared for the next whole system civil emergency, we need effective plans in place to support the economy, businesses, individuals and local government before it occurs. Alongside those plans there also need to be the structures in place before and during a whole system civil emergency to enable central government to engage local government in planning, response and recovery.

6. In the LGA's closing statement to this module we outlined three changes that we believe need to be made to ensure the UK is better prepared for the next whole system civil emergency:

    a. There needs to be a culture change within central government so that ministers and civil servants better understand what councils do, how they do it and the vital role they play in any whole system response.
    b. Central government also needs to work with the LGA and the local government sector to design the measures and systems needed to respond to another whole system civil emergency before it happens.
    c. The LGA should be involved in the future decision-making structures for whole system civil emergencies developed in response to the Inquiry's Module 2 Recommendation 10.

7. To deliver these changes the LGA believes the Inquiry should make three recommendations, which I address below.

Culture change in central government

8. There are initiatives already underway, such as the GovXchange secondment programme between central and local government which will increase understanding within the civil service of local government and how local authorities work. However more will need to be done to ensure civil servants are exposed to and gain a greater understanding of local government. This could for example include: compulsory training sessions for all civil servants on local government, its role and how it works; shadowing opportunities for civil servants as part of the corporate peer challenges delivered by the LGA; or days shadowing relevant teams in local authorities.

9. Devising an effective programme to deliver increased understanding of local authorities across the civil service will require further work. The LGA believes therefore that the Inquiry should make a recommendation that:

    a. The Cabinet Office, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and LGA develop a programme (to be implemented across government by the Cabinet Office) to ensure existing and future civil servants have a sound and thorough understanding of the role, responsibilities and ways local authorities work through a mix of training and direct experience of working in local government.

Co-designing responses to a whole system civil emergency with local government

10. A point that the LGA has made consistently across its evidence to the Inquiry is that many of the measures introduced to respond to the Covid pandemic were designed without any input from the LGA and local government, which created a range of issues with the efficacy of the measures and the ability to implement them. For example in Ms Killian's Module 9 witness statement she highlighted the difficulties councils experienced in distributing grants to local businesses following the decision to introduce social distancing measures through a lockdown. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy lacked knowledge about how councils worked and did not engage with the sector about how to make the schemes they were designing work for councils to administer.

11. This lack of engagement continues. Part of the evidence submitted to the Inquiry for this module by the Department for Business and Trade was a playbook for use by its civil servants in designing future measures to support businesses in the event of another pandemic. It was drafted and circulated within the department in 2025. This mentions the important role councils played during Covid and could play in the future.

However, as the Inquiry has already heard on this point, this playbook had not been shared with the LGA or the sector.

12. To be really effective in a whole system civil emergency this co-design process must be completed before a crisis occurs. During Covid not only were measures designed by government departments without any input from the local government, they were also designed at pace in the midst of a whole system emergency. Moving to a position where measures are designed with local government ahead of, for example another pandemic, would ensure familiarity with them across central and local government. Ideally this would also allow time for their use to be exercised on a regular basis by those who would be implementing them.

13. In the LGA's view, any recommendation the Inquiry makes on these points has to be one that endures. Departmental plans about responding to risks in the National Risk Register will change over time as the range and nature of those risks evolve. Revisions to these plans will be drafted by different civil servants over time. In order to ensure central government departments do not forget the need to design measures in advance of a whole system civil emergency, and do so in consultation with local government, requires a formal structure.

14. This structure should bring together central government departments, the LGA along and senior local government representatives to consider the measures needed in specific areas to support the UK's response to a whole system civil emergency. Relevant professional, industry, business and sector representative bodies should also be invited to attend depending on the topic being discussed. In the case of the economic response to a future pandemic those invited could include the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy.

15. The LGA believes therefore that the Inquiry should make a recommendation that:

    a. A standing committee is established by the Cabinet Office to review and scrutinise government departments' plans for responding to civil emergencies to ensure measures to be implemented by local authorities have been designed with the local government sector. The committee is to be jointly chaired by the relevant Cabinet Office minister and the Local Government Association, with additional places being made available on the committee for

relevant local government experts to assist in the review and scrutiny of specific measures.

Local government involvement in national decision-making structures

16. Alongside the creation of formal structures to ensure UK preparedness plans are co-designed with local government, the LGA believes the sector needs to be involved in national decision making structures during a whole system civil emergency.

17. In previous emergencies the LGA has been able to represent the views of the sector alongside the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) at COBR meetings. The LGA attended most recently in the summer of 2024 during the civil disorder. Where the LGA has been invited to COBR there have been significant benefits in being able to raise issues from member authorities directly with government during the decision making process, and to also challenge where necessary the advice minsters may have received. It was notable during Covid that the LGA was not part of any of the national decision-making processes. This significantly limited the sector's ability to highlight issues and improve the design of responses to the pandemic.

18. As the Inquiry knows, its Module 2 report recommended that the UK government should set out in future pandemic preparedness strategies how national decision making will work in a future pandemic. This should include provision for COBR to be used as the initial response structure as well as longer-term decision-making structures consisting of a strategy group (to set the overall approach to each stage of the pandemic) and an operational group.

19. As government has yet to set out its views on this recommendation, it would not be appropriate in my view to specify a particular national decision-making structure the LGA should be part of in a future pandemic, especially as a different government might make changes to those structures in the future.

20. The LGA believes therefore that the Inquiry should make a recommendation that:

    a. In the event of a future pandemic the Local Government Association is invited to attend COBR and the strategic and operational longer-term decision-making structures introduced by government to manage the national response. Consideration should also be given to inviting the LGA to attend

COBR and other decision-making structures introduced to respond to other whole system civil emergencies.

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 by Mark Norris Principal Policy Adviser

Signator : Personal Data

Dated: ___14 April 2026_____