

Was the UK well prepared for the pandemic?



The Inquiry held its first public hearing on “Pandemic and Resilience Preparations” at its specially created hearing base in Paddington, London on 13th June 2023. Work has been going on for months behind the scenes collecting statements from those called to give evidence. The first week sees opening statements from Bruno Keith KC, the lead Counsel and from core participants for this module of the Inquiry work. These include government departments and organisations such as the TUC, BMA and the Association Directors of Public Health. They all get early access to written submissions and evidence as well as legal support. We will also hear from seven public health experts.

Lady Hallett, in the chair, conducts business with a light touch after everybody watches a very emotional video as patients and bereaved families share their losses. This was a sharp reminder of the tragedy that is about to unfold.

Up to May 2023 in the UK there had been 226,977 deaths where Covid19 was recorded on death certificates.

Bruno Keith KC then takes the Inquiry through the timetable of events from December 2019 when a cluster of cases of pneumonia of unknown origin was detected in Wuhan City and sets out the questions the Inquiry has to answer. He is, by all accounts, a legal superstar. Politicians in particular will find his calm, methodical approach a challenge. No broad brush for him.

He has previously appeared before the Levison Inquiry into the Media representing News UK Chief Executive

Rebekah Brooks and represented the late Queen at the inquest of Diana Princess of Wales.

One early question is whether the contingency planning and response in England should have been managed by specialist teams in the Cabinet Office rather than the Department of Health. We shall hear soon from a former Head of the Cabinet Office Civil Contingencies Secretariate.

The Inquiry will also examine the policy variations between England and the devolved governments. Should local resilience forums have played a greater role than they did? Why was Public Health England abolished?

Was pandemic planning squeezed out by Brexit planning?

Counsel for Bereaved Families claims that there was no

overall system plan for dealing with a pandemic despite the fact that the risk of one had been assessed as high by the government itself.

Essentially, the families contend, the Inquiry had to address three questions:

- what happened,
- what went wrong,
- and how do we ensure that everything reasonably possible is done to prevent it happening ever again?

“Three words: facts, accountability, change”.

Where does the buck stop for civil resilience, preparedness, and planning? A whole system plan. the families argue, would include PPE procurement and stockpiling, surge supply of equipment and oxygen, antiviral and vaccine development as well as economic policies to cope with lockdowns if they were determined.

Counsel for Northern Ireland families talked about families “still picking up the pieces from the clinical

estrangement in the final phase of their loved one's lives: no wake, human remains treated like toxic waste". Emotive stuff !

Wales is not to have its own Inquiry to the dismay of the Welsh patient group.

The Welsh government was after all, they explain, responsible for pandemic planning.

The Welsh CMO has apparently accepted that the Welsh plans were "inadequate for a two- or three-year shock to the system".

Scottish patient groups hope that the Inquiry will reject any "with the benefit of hindsight" defence. The risk had been known for years.

The BMA blame the government for under resourcing the NHS. The NHS entered the pandemic with too few hospital and intensive care beds and no capacity to surge up to the number needed.

This was, they asserted, the "elephant in the room". Some of their members had used bin liners for personal protection as they were studier than the equipment provided.

Austerity policies had led to a sharp decline in the size of the public health workforce.

The TUC followed with the same line. Austerity they claimed had a lot to answer for.

The Association of Public Health Directors agreed that the UK was inadequately prepared for the Covid 19 pandemic.

Planners had been too preoccupied with preparations for dealing with a flu emergency.

The Directors offer advice on the future which will, in their view, need to include a greater degree of local involvement. Local Authority Associations make similar comments.

Various government departments follow including the Government Office for Science who will give evidence about Sage.

They appear to think it did heroic work, but we will see what happens when they come under serious challenge.

Counsel for the DH approaches the Inquiry with "humility" although she continues the line that the UK was "world leading" in pandemic preparation.

She and the Counsel representing the devolved governments offer the Inquiry their full support in the search for lessons.

We also hear briefly from the Cabinet Office who had over 300 staff working on their Covid task force.

Much of the early evidence indicates that the UK was not well prepared for the pandemic.

We will hear whether the public health experts agree in our next report.

Does it need a lengthy and very, very expensive Public Inquiry to learn the lessons from the Covid 19 pandemic?

The question will keep coming up as three years of evidence accumulates!