

Guidance on producing evidence for the National Covid-19 Inquiry

This guidance is intended to set out how we will respond to requests for evidence from the Covid 19 Inquiry.

Key points of note

- The Lancashire project team is here to support as needed. The National Inquiry does not intend to apportion blame to individuals but rather serves as a learning exercise.
- The Inquiry wants to focus on lessons learnt and consider our response and the impact of Covid 19. It would also be prudent to focus on what arrangements are in place currently as a result of lessons learnt and preparedness for any future waves.
- This was an unprecedented event that affected everyone to varying degrees, with no way of knowing how the situation would develop. In hindsight, we know that some services feel that alternate decisions could have been made. This is fine and completely understandable, and we just need to demonstrate how those decisions were reached. It will be beneficial to try and recollect what we knew at that time. Time & events moved on quickly and what was known in the second wave for example, was different from the first.
- It is important to capture any deviations from central Government guidance and policy and/or our local policies as there are many instances where our local knowledge has resulted in different actions being taken in the best interest of Lancashire residents. It is equally important to note that we may have followed Government guidance to the letter even though on reflection we think we may have taken different decisions.
- If anything has been inadvertently lost / deleted, we need to be honest and explain why that has happened.
- We wouldn't normally advocate duplication, but we take the pragmatic view that in this instance it's better to provide information twice than not at all and it can be filtered out if needed.

Your role as a lead contact

- If you are named as the current lead contact but you feel that you are not the correct contact for the request, please do let the Project Team know and we can identify who the query should be redirected to.
- Don't panic – we don't want managers and staff to panic but we do ask that you:
 1. know where your information is
 2. that it is accessible, and
 3. if needed know who will be able to provide it.

Lancashire Resilience Forum

- The (LRF) are preparing their evidence and there is a possibility that some requests, especially if high level and relating to policy decisions, may be able to be answered by the LRF.

Timescales

- We currently have no exact date for the first requests being sent but now the Terms of Reference have been finalised, this could be any time now. There is also no time limit on the length of the Inquiry as of yet although Baroness Hallet has stated she wants the Inquiry to be timely. Media agencies will be briefed around May 2023 which suggests some initial findings may be released at that time. It's important to note that due to the sheer impact of the pandemic, this is likely to run in to a number of years. Tighter timelines will be provided if/when these are received.
- Baroness Hallet has emphasised that her focus will be on people and the impact on our communities.

What might we be asked as Evidence?

Key decisions – for your service area relating to Covid 19, how the decision was made and importantly how it was communicated.

Policy Changes – what was the reason for the change? Who was involved? How did we communicate?

Emails – key decisions and policy changes which were agreed over email rather than in a formal meeting setting due to the need to respond quickly.

WhatsApp/Text – the Inquiry have referred to WhatsApp or text messages being included as evidence but we have no further information on whether this level of detail will be required from Local Authorities although we believe it would not get to the level for us.

What happens next?

The Scottish Covid Inquiry have given more details about how the information will be requested. This includes:

- "Where a request is made or a notice is issued in respect of information sought by the Inquiry, the party it is addressed to should undertake comprehensive, thorough and rigorous searches for all relevant information.
- Once information has been identified, every care should be taken to ensure that it is preserved in its original form.
- All information provided to the Inquiry must be in original form, or if not available or appropriate, in the best available copy, intact and in unredacted form. Production must not be delayed on the ground that redactions are desired.
- All information should be accompanied by an inventory listing the information and signed by or under the authority of the party or person providing the information.
- All information should be provided electronically unless otherwise requested by the Inquiry. The Inquiry will be using an online document management review system and electronic information should be provided in Adobe PDF. If asked for by the Inquiry, specific documents should be produced in their native format, for example Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, MSG email files/PST email containers."

As yet we do not have this level of detail for the UK Covid 19 Inquiry, but it is expected to follow similar lines.

In terms of Lancashire County Council, our information will be supplied through a central point of contact so you will not need to send anything directly to the Inquiry.

Support

Our Covid 19 Project Team will co-ordinate the responses. Each service has been asked to provide a key contact/contacts and we will contact them directly if evidence is needed from that service area.

If you are unsure about any requests, please contact the project team by email:
recordsmanagementcovid19@lancashire.gov.uk

The Project Team are here to provide you with as much support as possible. If you are a lead contact and are unsure about what information you should be keeping for the Inquiry, please contact us on the email above.

If you are requested to attend the Inquiry, this will be at a senior officer grade, and whether a current or previous employee, you'll be supported by our Legal Team and Records Management Service.