

UK Covid - 19 Public Inquiry

contact@covid19.public-inquiry.uk

28th February 2023

Dear Baroness Hallett,

We are writing to you on behalf of Just Treatment and STOPAIDS regarding the UK Government's COVID-19 Inquiry and steps that could be taken to improve the meaningful engagement of bereaved families and affected communities.

Our organisations welcomed your statements last year that bereaved families and people who suffered will be at the heart of the COVID-19 public inquiry, as well as the recently published update on the listening exercise. We are pleased to see that the Inquiry has responded to asks from groups such as the COVID-19 Bereaved Families group and taken action to improve engagement with bereaved families and other affected communities. However, we are concerned that there are still limitations to plans to further engage these groups.

We have worked closely with patient leaders over the course of the pandemic and beyond and have seen the devastating effects of the government's policies that have severely limited access to COVID-19 vaccines, treatments and diagnostics abroad. We have the example of Sakina who lost her father in Tanzania because of lack of access, Izzie a clinically vulnerable patient who is still shielding three years from the start of the pandemic, and Carole a nurse who was on the frontline and lost family members here and abroad to the pandemic.

You can read some of the stories here: <https://justtreatment.org/covid-stories>

The stories of affected communities need to be heard. Despite recent amendments, we remain concerned that there are serious flaws within the current strategy to engage bereaved families and affected communities. While you mentioned measures to mitigate potential conflicts of interest, we are specifically concerned by the continued contracting of 23Red, who worked closely with the cabinet office during the pandemic. Awarding the listening exercise tenders to companies that have played a role in the disastrous impact is grossly inappropriate and questions the Inquiry's role in scrutinising the Government while not meaningfully considering the lived experiences of our patient leaders.

Additionally, despite being pleased to see that the Inquiry has consulted affected groups, we would like to see better communication as to how groups can engage in these opportunities. Furthermore, we ask that - to improve transparency - the Inquiry publish a report on decisions regarding engagement with these groups, for instance which third parties are involved and why they were contracted, which groups have been consulted and any strategies for future engagement.

Lastly, while we note the addition of the tapestry and videos alongside the listening exercise, we maintain that this does not represent a meaningful opportunity for affected groups to contribute evidence to the Inquiry. We would like to see an additional route for engagement,

that enables greater depth than the listening exercise, and is widely accessible and available for communities to participate in.

We hope that you will consider the below proposals to help deliver on your commitment to put bereaved families and people who suffered will be at the heart of the Covid-19 public inquiry:

- 1) End the Inquiry's contract with 23Red and replace 23Red with a company that is experienced in consulting community groups and does not have any conflicts of interest in this work. When a third party is contracted in the Inquiry, information about the decision-making process should be made publicly available.
- 2) Improve the means by which information about the Inquiry is communicated to bereaved families and other affected communities to ensure that opportunities to engage in the Inquiry are not missed.
- 3) Create a more direct avenue for engagement of bereaved families and other affected communities, through which their voices are valued as evidence not merely representation.
- 4) Hire a Community Engagement Officer to ensure the Inquiry has sufficient capacity to deliver on the above recommendations.

We look forward to hearing from you and wish you the very best.

Regards

Aasiya Versi and Molly Pugh Jones

just TREATMENT 

STOPAIDS.