



*The Royal Society
of Edinburgh*

KNOWLEDGE MADE USEFUL

22-26 George Street
Edinburgh
EH2 2PQ
Tel +44(0) 131 240 5000
info@theRSE.org.uk

Mr John Swinney MSP
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery
Scottish Government
St Andrew's House
Regent Road
Edinburgh
5th October 2021

Dear Deputy First Minister

Aims and Principles for Scotland's Public Inquiry into the Handling of Covid-19

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE), Scotland's National Academy, welcomes the opportunity to contribute views on Scottish Ministers' plans for establishing a public inquiry into the handling of the Coronavirus pandemic in Scotland. Given the nature, scale and impact that the pandemic has had on the people of Scotland we agree it is hugely important that the Scottish Government commission an independent public inquiry. Individuals, families, organisations, businesses and communities have dealt with huge amounts of disruption, uncertainty, anxiety and loss, and the effects of Covid-19 will significantly affect our society and economy for a considerable time to come. At the same time, the crisis has opened the door to new ways of doing things and shone a spotlight on longstanding challenges, including poverty and inequality.

The response to the pandemic has demonstrated the need for transparent decision-making, accountability, communication and support structures so that all scales of society, from government to business and individuals to communities, are clear on their respective responsibilities, and that all those who require it receive the support that they need to play an active role in preparing for and mitigating future impacts. The public inquiry's focus should be on learning lessons for the future. It will need to advise and support Government and others so that recommendations for change and improvement are delivered.

The draft aims refer to 'learning lessons for future pandemics'. It is important that the inquiry does not only consider leadership and decision making in the context of future pandemics, but that the inquiry considers how Scotland can become fairer, and more resilient to, and better prepared for, future shocks which are likely to take a variety of forms, with pandemics being only one.

Last year, the RSE launched its [Post-Covid-19 Futures Commission](#). Drawing upon the RSE's breadth of expertise and practitioner experience, independence of purpose and convening power, the Commission has undertaken a wide-ranging programme of innovative engagement and activity to help identify and address some of the near-term policy implications and challenges arising from Covid-19, as well as stimulating thinking and discussions around some of the medium and longer-term questions the pandemic, and the responses to it, raise. This work has been focussed around the themes of: *Data, Evidence and Science*; *Building National Resilience*; *Inclusive Public Service*; and *Public Debate and Participation*. The key learnings from the RSE Commission will be launched on 25th October 2021. We will share these with the Scottish Government so that they can help inform the plans for the public inquiry. We will also be undertaking a range of post-launch activity and would be pleased to explore further how the RSE can contribute to the public inquiry.

We fully support the Scottish Government's commitment to a person-centred inquiry, and one that empowers people and organisations to take part. In defining its approach, the public inquiry will need to consider, among other aspects:

- how it will engage with disenfranchised groups;
- how it will make its inputs, communications and outputs accessible and inclusive;
- the range of knowledge, expertise, perspectives and practitioner experience that will be required on the inquiry panel;
- how the inquiry will tap into and utilise the breadth of expertise and experience outwith the panel. This will be a key consideration given the range of harms, issues and possibilities that the inquiry is expected to address; and
- how it will make a difference, ensuring that lessons learned are actioned and shared.

The plans for the public inquiry raise important questions about whom it engages with and how. These are also key questions that have been considered by the RSE Commission. Meaningful participation and engagement have been at the heart of the Commission's approach. It will be crucially important that the public inquiry engages first-hand with those most affected by Covid-19 to ensure it is grounded in the reality of lived experience. The inquiry will need to hear from those who are the furthest away from power and opportunity as Covid-19 and the responses to it have exacerbated and amplified inequalities.

The impacts of Covid-19 have been felt disproportionately by certain parts of society, including among different ethnic minority groups and by women, and it has highlighted existing structural inequalities. The public inquiry should consider how these disproportionate impacts can be addressed so that they are not further entrenched as Scotland continues its recovery from the pandemic. For this reason it is crucially important that the public inquiry engages with those who have been most adversely impacted by the pandemic.

An inclusive approach which secures a diversity of views is critical. The public inquiry will need to adopt a range of engagement and communication approaches, tailored to meet the needs of a wide range of voices and perspectives. It will also need to reach out to trusted intermediaries and practitioners, including community leaders, with direct experience of engaging with and supporting marginalised individuals and communities. It will be important to ensure that engagement with marginalised groupings is not confined to the public inquiry, and that successful approaches are applied much more widely to informing public and political discourse in Scotland. We would be pleased to share with the public inquiry and the Government our experiences of and, key learnings on, how inclusive and meaningful participation can be supported.

Both the UK and Scottish Governments have committed to conduct independent inquiries into, respectively, the UK and Scotland's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. It will be important that there be a level of connection between these two inquiries given the intergovernmental relations involved in guiding the UK and Scotland's responses to the pandemic, and to ensure effective, clear and transparent decision-making and public communication on issues affecting the nations of the UK. Connections between the two inquiries will also be key to sharing knowledge and experience on the lessons learned, and how these are to be actioned. With the Scottish public inquiry due to be established by the end of the year and the UK inquiry expected to begin its work in Spring 2022, ensuring open lines of communication between the two inquiry teams will be important to the phasing and linking of their work.

The public inquiry should also take into account other countries' responses to Covid-19, including other countries' inquiries into their handling of the pandemic. This would provide an opportunity for Scotland to draw on experiences and learn lessons from elsewhere, as well as enabling Scottish Ministers to share the findings from the Scottish public inquiry with international partners. Sharing of experiences and learnings at the international level will be important to improving the way in which countries, collectively, respond to major cross-border and societal challenges.

The RSE looks forward to continuing to engage with the Scottish Government and the public inquiry in supporting Scotland's continued recovery from the pandemic. We would be pleased to

discuss further the points raised in this letter, and we look forward to sharing with you soon the key learnings from the RSE Post-Covid-19 Futures Commission.

With all best wishes,



Professor Dame Jocelyn Bell Burnell
Interim President, RSE



Professor Dame Anne Glover
Chair, RSE Post-Covid Futures Commission