

WMS – Infected Blood Inquiry

On 24th September, I attended the commemoration that preceded the preliminary hearings of the Infected Blood Inquiry, and watched the moving and powerful testimony from those infected and affected by the infected blood scandal. The commemoration brought home the terrible human cost of this tragedy, and emphasised to me the importance of this Inquiry, to get to the truth of what happened, and provide the answers that the people infected and affected so desperately need.

When the public Inquiry was launched in July this year, I deferred making a decision on whether to appoint a panel to sit with Sir Brian until he was able to take the view of core participants. Sir Brian Langstaff wrote to me this week following the preliminary hearings, and has advised me that he has now done so, and there has been no demand for a panel. In the place of single experts, sitting as panellists, Sir Brian is establishing expert groups to provide openness and transparency across a range of truly expert opinion. He recommended that I should not appoint co-determining panel members. I accept his recommendation.

In his letter Sir Brian also called for action in relation to financial and psychological support for the affected and infected. The Government will consider those comments and Sir Brian's recommendations carefully and will respond as soon as possible.

The Cabinet Office takes seriously its role as sponsor to the Infected Blood Inquiry and is determined to do all it can to support the Inquiry with its work. Regrettably, an administrative error earlier this year has come to light, which had delayed the circulation of an instruction to government departments about the retention of records. I can reassure the public that this has resulted in no actual harm, but it is an error for which I apologise to the Inquiry, and most importantly, to the people infected and affected.

The facts are these: Cabinet Office official circulated a Government-wide notice on 3rd April this year, instructing departments to preserve all information relevant to the Infected Blood Inquiry. A further, more comprehensive message was issued to departments by Cabinet Office on 11th June.

However, following a query from the Inquiry about the notice, Cabinet Office officials discovered that the 3rd April email containing the retention notice did not reach its recipients, due to the failure of the collective IT address used. My officials have provided a detailed explanation to the Inquiry which will be published on the Inquiry's website.

Since the error was discovered, all relevant departments and relevant areas within departments have worked urgently to confirm that they have not destroyed any documents relevant to the Inquiry during the period between 3rd April and 11th June. Because of their size and the complexity of some of the records they hold, HM Courts and Tribunals Service and the Legal Aid Agency are continuing to work to provide this assurance and have committed to doing so as urgently as possible.

The Department of Health and Social Care put in place a moratorium on the destruction of historical records as soon as the Inquiry was announced in July 2017. No material damage has resulted from this administrative error, but I am very sorry it occurred, and I would like to reassure the public that the Cabinet Office will learn the lessons from this to avoid such an error occurring in future.

David Lidington MP
Minister for the Cabinet Office