

An Leas-phrìomh Mhinistear agus Ath -shlànachadh
Cobhid
Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid
Recovery
John Swinney BPA/MSP

T: 0300 244 4000
E: dfmcscr@gov.scot

Elena Whitham MSP
Convener
Social Justice and Social Security Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh
EH99 1SP

18 May 2022

Dear Convener,

Thank you for your letter of 21 April concerning the terms of reference of the Scottish public inquiry into COVID-19. In your letter you raise a concern about the extent to which equality issues, in particular violence against women and girls, are included in the terms of reference.

It is clear that the impact of the pandemic has not been felt equally. It has both highlighted the inequalities in our society and made them worse. I agree with you that the increase in harm done to women and girls during the pandemic, including violence against women and girls, is important to study and take action on as we recover from the pandemic.

The public inquiry terms of reference task the inquiry with considering the strategic elements relating to 12 distinct areas of investigation. We have not specified any groups or characteristics in the terms of reference so that all groups can be considered in scope of the inquiry.

You will appreciate that it would not be right for Ministers to specify how the inquiry should carry out its investigations as this is, in accordance with the Inquiries Act 2005, a matter for Lady Poole as Chair, independent of Government. However, as Ministers are responsible under the Act for setting the terms of reference, I can comment on whether they are thought by Ministers to be broad enough.

Ministers believe that the terms of reference, as they stand, provide adequate breadth for the inquiry to consider the elements that came through in our stakeholder engagement on Aims and Principles of the public inquiry that took place in autumn last year. This strongly featured equality issues. A common thread in that stakeholder engagement was the need for a human rights approach, how the Scottish Government and other public sector bodies

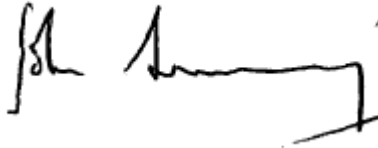
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St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
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considered equality in their decision making, and the impact of policy decisions on groups disproportionately affected by the pandemic.

I am reassured from my discussions with Lady Poole that the Inquiry will be undertaken in a way that ensures human rights and equality considerations are at the heart of it, and would expect that to include the specific matters you raise. I have absolute confidence that Lady Poole will pursue the inquiry in a way that is inclusive and fair.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Swinney', written in a cursive style.

JOHN SWINNEY