

JUSTICE writes to the Prime Minister on establishing a COVID-19 inquiry fit for bereaved people and survivors



JUSTICE Working Party Chair Sir Robert Owen has today written to the Prime Minister to draw his attention to the JUSTICE report *When Things Go Wrong: The response of the justice system* and its recommendations. This follows the Prime Minister's pledge to establish a statutory public inquiry into the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The letter was copied to the Lord Chancellor, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the First Ministers of the Devolved Administrations.

The letter calls on the Government to urgently begin a wide public consultation on the establishment of the inquiry. This is imperative if the inquiry is to gain the public's trust and if it is to begin in the Spring of 2022 as the Government intends. Public consultation should cover suggestions for the inquiry's chair, the possibility of a panel and the inquiry's terms of reference. The Government's proposed consultation with the Devolved Administrations must also immediately begin.

As Sir Robert observes in the letter, never before has a public inquiry been tasked with a matter concerning such a high number of deaths and survivors and affecting every part of society. Sir Robert underscores how survivors and those bereaved have often been let down by a system plagued by institutional defensiveness and calls on the Government to expressly adopt Bishop James Jones's *Charter for Families Bereaved through Public Tragedy*.

We hope the letter will help ensure that the inquiry begins quickly but that it is also effective, gains the public's trust and reflects the needs of all those impacted by COVID-19. Once established, the inquiry chair will need to consider carefully where and how the inquiry hears evidence and how it honours those who have passed away.

Notes to Editors:

1. JUSTICE is an all-party law reform and human rights organisation working to strengthen the justice system in the United Kingdom. For more information, please visit www.justice.org.uk.
2. The letter from Sir Robert Owen to the Prime Minister can be read [here](#).
3. JUSTICE hosted a webinar in June 2021 on the proposed COVID-19 inquiry. The webinar was chaired by Sir Robert and consisted of a panel of expert and informed speakers, including Pete Weatherby QC (Garden Court North Chambers), Professor Leslie Thomas QC (Garden Court Chambers), Marcus Shephard (Institute for Government), and Hannah Brady (Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice U.K.). The webinar can be watched [here](#).
4. The JUSTICE Working Party report *When Things Go Wrong: The response of the justice system* was published in August 2020 and can be read [here](#). The report made a series of recommendations aimed at reforming institutional responses to deaths or other serious incidents where a "systemic pattern of failure" is evident.

5. The Working Party, set up and supported by JUSTICE, was chaired by Sir Robert Owen and its members were: Michaela Bolton, Inquiry Lawyer, Infected Blood Inquiry, Paul Bowen QC, Deborah Coles, Executive Director, INQUEST, Sir John Goldring, Nicholas Griffin QC, Professor Carol Harlow QC, Professor Emeritus, London School of Economics, Charlotte Haworth Hird, Partner, Bindmans LLP, Matthew Hill, Barrister, D. Supt. Carwyn Hughes, Crime and Operations, West Sussex Police, Lee Hughes CBE, Emma Ireton, Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Trent University, Gill Kernick, Master Consultant, JMJ Associates, Thalia Maragh, Barrister, Lubka Mieresova, former Executive Assistant, Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, Una Morris, Barrister, Andrew O'Connor QC, Dr Sara Ryan, University of Oxford, Professor Phil Scraton, Professor Emeritus, Queen's University Belfast, Marcus Sheppard, Senior Researcher, The Institute for Government, Martin Smith, Partner, Fieldfisher, Robbie Stern, Senior Legal Fellow, JUSTICE (Rapporteur), Ken Sutton, Secretary, East Kent Maternity Services Independent Investigation, Professor Leslie Thomas QC, Sir Peter Thornton QC, former Chief Coroner, Sonya L. Van de Graaff, Partner, Morrison & Foerster LLP.

6. Please direct queries to Jodie Blackstock, Legal Director at jblackstock@justice.org.uk.