



4 September 2020

PUBLIC SERVICES COMMITTEE

Dear Michael,

Thank you for your letter of 31 July 2020. Naturally, the Committee and I are disappointed with your response to our invitation to give evidence to the ‘Public services: lessons from coronavirus’ inquiry. However we are concerned that your decision derives from a misunderstanding of our intention. The inquiry has not considered how the pandemic has been managed, not least because, as you suggest, now is not the moment to do so. Others will be better equipped for that task.

Our Committee was established to consider the future of public services, not to review past performance. But it is very difficult to achieve this without an assessment of how existing arrangements have coped with the ‘stress test’ provoked by the pandemic, and the lessons that recent challenges have taught us all. Should we, for example, revisit the arrangements for sharing information between public services? Do we, as I think you were suggesting in your fascinating Ditchley Annual Lecture on 27 June, now require a more thoughtful approach to devolution, allowing local communities to take more control?

The answer to such questions will need to take account of recent events, but we seek to do so only to contribute to the debate that your Ditchley address seemed to encourage. Significant decisions about public services have already been made in the light of the pandemic – not least the decision to replace Public Health England – and it is our wish to engage constructively with the Government as it reshapes public services in the months and years to come.

The evidence that we have already heard from a range of stakeholders at every level of public service delivery, and from across the country, will be of significant benefit in ensuring that public services withstand any second wave of the pandemic, and to the future public inquiry that the Government has proposed. Your decision not to give oral evidence, the decision of other Ministers to do the same, and the Government’s refusal to provide written evidence, mean that the Government will be the only major public service provider whose voice will not be reflected in the Committee’s final report.

The Committee was established at the beginning of this year to provide much-needed cross-Departmental Parliamentary scrutiny of public services. We will therefore engage frequently with the Cabinet Office and its Ministers in future, and had conceived of this evidence session as an important first step towards a productive ongoing relationship.

You have clearly reflected a great deal on the issues that we need to address, and have much to offer our deliberations. We believe that we can assist you as you further develop your ideas. I do hope, therefore, that you will reconsider our invitation. If not, I would be very grateful if you could request that the Cabinet Secretary or Cabinet Office Permanent Secretary appear before the Committee instead.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Hilary Armstrong". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style. The first name "Hilary" is written in a slightly larger, more prominent script than the surname "Armstrong".

**The Rt Hon. the Baroness Armstrong of Hill Top
Chair
House of Lords Public Services Committee**