



Permanent Secretary

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Rt Hon Rob Halfon MP
Chair, Education Select Committee
House of Commons
London
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Follow up to ESC 13th January 2020

Dear Mr Halfon,

I committed to check the record of events leading up to the issuing of a temporary continuity direction to the Royal Borough of Greenwich, and confirm at what point my Department became aware of the existence of the new strain of Covid-19.

During the session, I said that I thought that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care made his announcement about the new variant the day after the Direction, on Tuesday 15th December. You said that he made a statement to the House on the same day as the Direction, Monday 14th December, and I said that I would check our records and confirm the sequence of events. You were of course quite correct about the statement on Monday 14th December; it was the public press briefing on the new variant which was made on Tuesday 15th December. I apologise for making this mistake during the session.

This means that my Department became aware of the existence of the new variant of Covid-19 when the Health Secretary made his Oral Statement to the House of Commons. In that statement, he said “Over the past few days, thanks to our world-class genomic capability in the UK, we have identified a new variant of coronavirus, which may be associated with the faster spread in the south-east of England.” However, details on the new variant were limited; and the statement also said “Our strategy throughout, as set out in the winter plan, has been to suppress the virus while protecting the economy, education and the NHS until the vaccine can make us safe” – it did not propose or suggest that there be a change of policy on education. Discussions on the continuity direction to Greenwich took place during the 14th December, and it was issued after the Health Secretary’s statement; but at that stage the limited and early information about the new

variant was not such as to have an impact on the decision.

To reiterate briefly the points made by the Secretary of State on Wednesday, the decision to issue a legal direction to Greenwich on 14th December was taken after considering a range of factors. These included the rates of transmission in Greenwich at the time, which were substantially lower than in many other local authority areas (including other London authorities) – of the 151 upper-tier local authorities in England, Greenwich was ranked 55th by infection rate per 100,000. National public health advice at that point was that there was not a persuasive case for restricting access to education. Greenwich had not consulted the Department, taking action unilaterally in writing to schools on a Sunday night to propose closure. Councils that had seen significantly higher rates of transmission had continued to work with public health advisers, schools and the Department to keep schools open, recognising the importance of each day of education for children. The nearness to the end of term was carefully considered; but so too were the risks of setting a precedent for allowing unilateral closure of schools without good public health evidence.

I hope this letter helps both to correct the record on the sequence of events, and to set out the reasoning that lay behind the Greenwich direction.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'S. Acland-Hood', written in a cursive style.

**SUSAN ACLAND-HOOD
PERMANENT SECRETARY**