

Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP
Secretary of State for Justice

21 May 2020

Dear Robert,

Coronavirus continues to pose profound challenges for communities in every corner of the United Kingdom, with former coalfield areas in our country's industrial heartlands being no exception.

In our respective capacities as Chair of the APPG on Coalfield Communities and General Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), we are writing to raise awareness of a longstanding issue that we see as critical in context of the Covid-19 crisis, namely ensuring that the correct cause of death, including any underlying occupational diseases, is listed on the death certificate of former mineworkers to ensure proper compensation can be accessed by the bereaved widow and families.

As you will be aware, years of relentless work, in tough conditions, significantly increased the risk of health problems for mine workers. These included the prospect of severe respiratory conditions such as coal workers' pneumoconiosis – caused by the inhalation and retention in the lungs of coal dust – as well as silicosis, asbestosis and lung cancer.

These illnesses have an enduring impact for many older people in our communities, given that an estimated 82% of coal pneumoconiosis cases assessed over the last decade have been from those aged 65 and over. Sadly, the latest figures show an average of 130 deaths per year over the last decade from pneumoconiosis alone, and it is vital to stress that this number only reflects those who have been assessed as meeting the criteria for having the industrial disease. Crucially, it does not include those who were turned down because they did not meet the criteria or did not put in a claim while alive.

For those living and sadly dying with these underlying conditions, the importance of a full and precise diagnosis is absolutely vital, not least to treat it, but also to allow access to richly deserved and hard-fought financial support. Often however this is difficult to attain, and misdiagnosis or inaccuracy, for example where not properly listed in detail on the death certificate, can have a devastating impact on the individual, but also on the dependents; a problem which has been compounded by the Covid-19 crisis, particularly where a family's request for a post-mortem to determine if the deceased was also suffering from occupational diseases has subsequently been denied.

We know there are numerous cases of NUM members, for example, where the individual has suffered from pneumoconiosis prior to death, but it was not then recorded on the death certificate. One common reason given is that this was not thought to have been the cause of death and therefore not required to be listed on the death certificate, an occurrence we are afraid may increase due to Covid-19. Elsewhere, the cause of pneumoconiosis has been recorded as idiopathic, with industrial disease being recorded as a catch-all term, with no specificity as to it being pneumoconiosis or indeed any other industrial disease. It goes without saying, such instances make it extremely difficult and, in some cases, impossible to claim the just compensation, with Covid-19 complicating this matter further.

Whilst we appreciate the complexity of this issue, not least at a moment of grave national emergency, we are asking the Government to do all it can as we emerge from this crisis to improve and promote thorough diagnostics, research and better understandings of these

industrial diseases among officials and the public alike, while also ensuring existing support can be easily accessed by the families of those who have tragically lost loved ones.

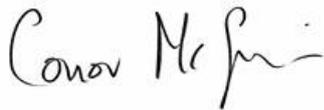
More broadly, we want Ministers to do more to support healthcare and wider regeneration in former coalfield areas which we know suffer disproportionately from poor health and lower life-expectancy. Given that recently released data from the ONS shows our communities as some of the worst affected during this pandemic, it is critical these issues are looked at in more serious detail.

Finally, we want to take this opportunity to extend on record our sincerest gratitude and support to all the country's selfless key workers, in our National Health Service and beyond, whose bravery from the frontline is keeping our communities safe and moving forward. We also send our thanks to officials across all levels of government for their response to these unparalleled circumstances.

We hope you take our concerns into consideration and we look forward to reading your response.

Yours sincerely,

Conor McGinn MP



MP for St Helens North
Chair, APPG Coalfield Communities

Chris Kitchen



General Secretary
National Union of Mineworkers