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Covid-19: UK prime minister says he will only meet bereaved families when they drop threat of legal action

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Boris Johnson has backtracked on a promise to meet with bereaved families who have lost relatives to covid-19, saying that he will only do so when they drop their threat of legal action against the government.

This comes just days after the prime minister promised that he would meet with the Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice group and would respond to its letters requesting a meeting, after he initially resisted a call from relatives and the all party parliamentary group on coronavirus.¹

Last week, Johnson told Sky News, “I am not aware of those letters, but of course we will write back to every letter we get. And of course I will meet the bereaved who have suffered from covid, of course I will do that.”²

But on 1 September, the group, which represents more than 1600 people who have lost a relative to covid-19 and is demanding an immediate independent inquiry into the country’s handling of the pandemic, said that it had received a letter from Johnson declining to meet its representatives.

In the letter, the prime minister wrote, “I am acutely conscious that a letter will be of little comfort against the grief and heartbreak that families have suffered. As much as I would wish to be able to offer my condolences in person to all those who have suffered loss, that is regrettably not possible and so I am unable to meet with you and members of Bereaved Families for Justice.”

Jo Goodman, cofounder of Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice, said, “The prime minister has done a 360—dodging five letters, then agreeing on live TV to meet with us, and now quietly telling us he’s too busy. It’s heartless.” She added, “Of course we know the prime minister can’t meet every bereaved person, but we really feel he should be meeting one of the largest groups of bereaved families in the country.”

Johnson was pressed on the matter by Labour leader Keir Starmer during prime minister’s questions on 2 September. Starmer said, “The prime minister will understand the frustration and hurt that he said one thing to the camera and another to them. I urge the prime minister to do the right thing to find time to meet these grieving families.”

Johnson said in response, “I’m happy to meet with families of the bereaved, and I sympathise deeply with all those who have lost loved ones throughout this pandemic, and we all feel their pain and grief. But it turns out this particular group are currently in litigation against the government, and I will certainly meet them when this litigation is concluded.”

Although the group has instructed its lawyers to send a pre-action letter to the government,³ the group said that it was not “in litigation” against the government. It tweeted, “Our 5 letters make clear we want to meet to avoid that [litigation]. If he’ll ‘certainly meet with [us] once litigation is concluded,’ great: it never started. How’s Monday for you Prime Minister?”

In his letter to the group, Johnson reiterated his previous commitment to conduct an independent inquiry “at the appropriate time” but did not state when this would be.⁴

1 Rimmer A. Covid-19: Prime minister agrees to meet bereaved families. *BMJ* 2020;370:m3356. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m3356 pmid: 32855149

2 Sky News. Twitter. 26 Aug 2020. <https://twitter.com/SkyNews/status/129859503891464192>

3 Covid-19 Bereaved Families for Justice UK: <https://www.covidfamiliesforjustice.org/>.

4 Iacobucci G. Covid-19: PM promises inquiry but says it won’t happen during pandemic. *BMJ* 2020;370:m2869. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m2869 pmid: 32675059