

Witness Name: Anna Fowlie

Statement No.:

Exhibits: None

Dated: 20/2/2023 updated 6/4/2023

## **UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

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### **WITNESS STATEMENT OF ANNA FOWLIE, CHIEF EXECUTIVE, SCOTTISH COUNCIL FOR VOLUNTARY ORGANISATIONS**

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I, Anna Fowlie, will say as follows: -

#### ***About SCVO***

1. The Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) is the national membership body for Scotland's voluntary sector.
2. We champion the sector, provide services and debate big issues.
3. We're passionate about what the voluntary sector can achieve. Along with our community of over 3,000 members, we believe that charities, social enterprises and voluntary groups make Scotland a better place.
4. We lobby governments on policy issues, promote good governance and support organisations to embrace and promote digital skills. We also provide practical day-to-day support services, like affordable office space, discounted training courses, funding opportunities and information and support to help people set up and run their organisations.
5. We have a longstanding reputation for delivery of programmes at a national level. As an umbrella organisation supporting charities who often work with the most excluded in society, SCVO reaches the most vulnerable communities in

Scotland, working through voluntary organisations who are experts in working with individuals and communities.

***About the voluntary sector in Scotland***

6. There are around 46,500 voluntary organisations in Scotland, comprising charities, community groups, social enterprises, community interest companies and credit unions. These organisations provide a wide range of services and support, from social care to community centres and children's services; they advocate and campaign on key issues; and support individual and community wellbeing through sports clubs and the arts.
7. The diversity of the sector means it contributes to responding to civil emergencies in a range of ways. Some organisations have a specific, dedicated role in responding to emergencies, including:
  - I. Organisations that have a role in prevention and mitigation of emergencies such as fire and flood
  - II. Specialist organisations that respond to emergencies, such as rescue services and patient transport
  - III. Health and social care and homelessness service providers
  - IV. Post-emergency support and recovery organisations, including counselling and mental health support
8. A wider range of local groups and voluntary organisations are likely to get involved in supporting people in local communities if and when an emergency situation occurs.
9. Having said this, the vast majority of voluntary organisations are unlikely to have been aware of or engaged in any form of formal civil emergency planning structures or process before the pandemic.
10. Voluntary organisations receive funding from the public sector, from independent trusts and foundations, from trading and through public fundraising.

11. At the start of the pandemic, we expected that many voluntary organisations would be forced to close as they were not able to operate, and thus to generate income. This was not the case.
12. The size of the sector has remained broadly consistent – in fact, between 2020 and 2022 there was a small net increase in the number of new charities, and a decrease in numbers of charities being wound up (although this is likely to be partly due to administrative factors and a lag in reporting to the Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator).
13. Voluntary organisations were kept afloat during the pandemic by emergency funding from Scottish and UK Governments and independent funders. This changed the funding profile of the sector. Income from the general public dropped during Covid, with donations and commercial trading taking the biggest hit. These are likely to make a recovery post-pandemic, but it's unclear to what extent and how they will be affected by the cost-of-living crisis. Public sector income was the most notable change, as it increased by over 50%, from £2,121m in 2018 to £3,265m in 2021. Although figures are not yet available, we understand anecdotally that funding from the public sector returned to roughly pre-pandemic levels when emergency funding ceased to be available.
14. Some voluntary organisations were not able to operate due to restrictions imposed during the pandemic. Where possible, the sector was quick to adapt to online ways of working, and the increase in digital confidence and access to digital are a positive legacy from the pandemic.
15. Many organisations reported that the pandemic fast-tracked long-planned internal organisational change programmes. There were also many reports of improved ways of working with the public sector, including reduced bureaucracy, increased pace of decision-making and greater willingness to take appropriate risks to try new things to make a positive impact on lives and communities.

16. NB: References in this paper to “national” refer to Scotland, not the UK. Anything at a UK level is specifically described as “UK.” Other than processing furlough claims for our payroll clients and lobbying with our sister organisations on UK-level funding, we had no involvement with the UK Government’s response to the pandemic.

### ***SCVO’s response to the pandemic***

17. SCVO’s three main areas of response to the pandemic were: voice and representation; information, resources and support; and support services.

18. From the start of lockdown, we worked to give a strong **voice and representation** to the sector. To do this, we:

- I. ensured the sector’s voice was heard in national discussions on the impact of coronavirus, the future we’d like to build and what the voluntary sector needs to help contribute to the future - including the Voluntary Sector Resilience Partnership, the Social Renewal Advisory Board and Advisory Group on Economic Recovery
- II. worked with the Scottish Government and independent grant-makers to create a Coronavirus Funding Hub offering a single entry-point to a range of emergency funds and information about others. At the same time, working with independent funders and third sector interfaces to try to ensure that funding being made available was co-ordinated, accessible and met the immediate and longer-term need of the sector and communities
- III. produced reports looking at the impact of the coronavirus on the voluntary sector in Scotland (updated quarterly) through the development of the Third Sector Tracker research project, which has become a broader piece of longitudinal research
- IV. kept regular contact with our sister organisations across the UK and Ireland (NCVO, NICVA, The Wheel and WCVA), co-ordinating support to the sector across the UK

- V. launched the #NeverMoreNeeded campaign to capture and highlight the impact of coronavirus on Scotland's voluntary sector and to stimulate debate about the sector's future

19. We also provided **practical information, resources and support**. We:

- I. created an online Coronavirus Hub with information and resources on areas including funding, running your organisation, governance, fundraising, volunteering and much more, attracting 850,000 visits across the year 2020/21
- II. upscaled our existing activity on digital capacity-building in the voluntary sector with a particular focus on digital services, digital inclusion and remote working
- III. designed and delivered the Connecting Scotland initiative – with over £48m in funding provided by the Scottish Government to provide digital devices, internet connectivity and skills support to 60,000 digitally households across the country. We also offered every care home devices and connectivity to keep their residents connected during the restrictions
- IV. hosted a range of practical and discursive webinars for around 5,000 attendees including 40 Digishift zoom calls to talk about all things digital and 38 Opendoor webinars where we discussed the big issues for organisations with key stakeholders and subject experts
- V. harnessed our digital development capacity to support other organisations to respond to the pandemic. For example, building the 'Scotland Cares' volunteer data entry form for Volunteer Scotland to allow people to enable over 20,000 people to sign up and offer time to support the pandemic response
- VI. launched an HR and Employment Support Service to help voluntary organisations manage the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and support best HR practice across the voluntary sector.

***Pandemic preparation (pre-January 2020)***

20. Prior to January 2020, the only substantive engagement SCVO had in work surrounding civil emergencies and pandemic planning was as a member of the Scottish Government's Voluntary Sector Resilience Partnership.
21. This partnership brings voluntary organisations involved in emergency planning, response and recovery together with public sector bodies such as the fire service and police. The aim of the partnership is to input into national resilience planning and identify ways the voluntary sector can support resilience at local, regional and national levels.
22. Prior to January 2020, the membership was primarily organisations with a specific remit related to emergency response, such as the British Red Cross or 4x4 Rescue organisations.
23. SCVO was not a significant contributor to the group, and often simply a correspondence member. While I am aware that a pandemic was one of the top risks identified in national reliance strategies and plans, I do not believe SCVO staff were directly involved in any specific discussions or exercising related to pandemic planning. Given our level of involvement, other voluntary organisations may have had more involvement in this area, but I cannot provide any specific examples.
24. However, in 2019 SCVO and the Scottish Government began discussions on how to increase awareness and engage the wider voluntary sector in resilience planning generally, recognising that more organisations could play a role in responding to and recovering from emergencies at a local level than the traditional 'responder' organisations.
25. We supported the Scottish Government to develop communications to help engage the wider sector. This included the Resilience Team having a presence at our annual sector conference, The Gathering, which took place in Glasgow in February 2020.

26. This awareness-raising work coincided with greater levels of engagement around resilience planning for the impact of the United Kingdom leaving the European Union. We are aware that some local resilience partnerships had involved voluntary sector partners beyond the traditional emergency response organisations, given the impact was likely to be more wide-ranging than a traditional emergency.
27. This engagement – while not directly related to pandemic planning – did help when the scale of the impact of the pandemic, and the first lockdown in particular, began to require a whole-country response to keep people safe and supported during an unprecedented time of crisis. The relationships and trust developed earlier between Scottish Government, national bodies and voluntary sector organisations enabled discussions to happen quicker and fast action to be taken.
28. However, the engagement of the sector at a local level was variable, with some local level resilience partnerships having good engagement and others having very little. The main challenge identified by organisations in relation to resilience planning was being able to identify who was making decisions about what things, and at what level (e.g. Scottish Government, a local resilience partnership or a local Council).

### ***Learning lessons on preparation***

29. It is difficult for us to comment on the extent to which Scotland's pandemic planning and emergency preparedness adequately took into account pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities.
30. Our members which represent vulnerable groups, such as Inclusion Scotland, have produced evidence and briefings which talk about how the pandemic and the response disproportionately affected vulnerable groups.

31. Clearly some of these disproportionate impacts could have been reduced or avoided had discussions and planning taken place in advance, without the need for governments to take action at the scale and pace they did in 2020.
32. However, as discussed earlier, to our knowledge, resilience planning mostly involved responder organisations. Voluntary organisations that support and advocate for the most vulnerable have a significant task in highlighting the immediate issues affecting the people they support. Operating on limited resources, it would therefore be difficult to imagine them having much capacity to get involved in resilience planning, particularly for an event such as a pandemic which would not have felt urgent or immediate prior to 2020 without dedicated resourcing.
33. The same is true for the wider voluntary sector. While work had started to engage more organisations in planning, it would be unrealistic to expect most organisations to get involved given how small they often are, the significant demands they face in providing day-to-day services and the constant challenge of securing income. However, it is possible that the scale of the covid-19 pandemic may have changed how organisations may prioritise involvement in these very long-term strategic planning issues.

### **Statement of Truth**

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

**Personal Data**

**Signed:** \_\_\_\_\_



31 January 2023

**Dated:** \_\_\_\_\_