

Witness Name: Carol Homden CBE

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits:

Dated: 8 February 2023

## UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

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### WITNESS STATEMENT OF DR CAROL HOMDEN CBE

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I, Dr Carol Homden CBE, will say as follows: -

1. I am the Chief Executive Officer of Coram and speak on behalf of the charity throughout this Witness Statement.
2. This Witness Statement is made following the request of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry dated 3 January 2023 for Coram's contribution to Module 1 of the Inquiry.

#### Scope of Module 1

3. This Module 1 is concerned with the period between 11 June 2009 (which is when the World Health Organization (the "WHO") announced that the scientific criteria for an influenza pandemic had been met for what became known as the 2009-2010 Swine Flu Pandemic) and 21 January 2020 (which is the date when the WHO published its "Novel Coronavirus (2019 nCoV) Situation Report – 1").
4. The focus of this Module 1 is on the state of the UK's pandemic planning, preparedness and resilience during the relevant period (as set out above) and whether this adequately took into account pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities – such as those represented by the majority of users of Coram's advice and facilities.
5. As part of this Module 1, the Inquiry is looking at lessons which can be learned for future pandemics and the preparedness required – particularly to avoid increased

difficulties and suffering by those already challenged by pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities.

### **Background to Coram's work and client base/users**

6. Coram is the UK's oldest children's charity, supporting children and young people since 1739. Originating as the Foundling Hospital, today Coram works as a group of specialist organisations – the Coram Group – helping hundreds of thousands of children, young people, families and professionals every year.
7. Coram supports children and young people from infancy to independence, creating change that lasts a lifetime through our range of activities. These include:
  - Free legal advice and representation for thousands of children and families every year;
  - Adoption, fostering, kinship and therapy services;
  - Life skills, drama and volunteer reading programmes for school children in 2,000 schools nationwide;
  - Advocacy for children and young people in and leaving care;
  - Best practice support for children's services professionals, teachers and families; and
  - Research based on our experience to support front line professionals deliver better services for children and young people.
8. Coram's daily work enables it to better understand what works for children and young people, and Coram uses that experience to engage with government, local authorities, social workers, teachers and families – all those in a position to make a difference - to help deliver better practice, systems and laws.
9. I set out below more specific detail about the different areas of expertise within the Coram Group:
  - a. **Coram Children's Legal Centre** is the country's leading provider of specialist legal support for children, providing in-person, phone and online advice to

hundreds of thousands of families every year who could not otherwise afford legal support. Coram work to influence the UK's legal framework and work in countries around the world to ensure that children can access their rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

**b. Coram Voice** is the leading advocate for all children in care and care leavers, providing a safety net for children through our advice and advocacy service. Coram's young ambassadors ensure children's voices are heard in and influence public debate and attitudes, along with the improvement of services on which they depend.

**c. Coram Adoption** is an outstanding voluntary adoption agency which provides adoption services for nine local authorities across London through our regional adoption agency *Coram Ambitious for Adoption*.

Coram provides information for potential carers, informs **policy and practice** and runs adoption activity days across England, enabling available adopters and children to meet each other through face to face direct contact

**d. Coram's Creative Therapies** team provides a range of therapeutic support to children who need it, offering art and music therapy supported by psychologists and psychotherapists.

**e. Coram Life Education** is the leading provider of health, wellbeing, relationship and drugs education to hundreds of thousands of primary school children across the UK, developing programmes to support schools to deliver the mandatory new RHSE requirements on the national curriculum.

**f. Coram Beanstalk** supports children experiencing reading difficulties by recruiting, training and supporting volunteers to go into schools and read with children one-to-one.

**g. Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation** enables thousands of young people to perform in the world's largest youth drama festival, building their

confidence, teamwork and willingness to learn through performing Shakespeare live.

**h. Coram-i** works with local authorities and partners Microsoft, EY and PA Consulting to deliver better children's social care services through the Coram Innovation Incubator.

**i. Coram International** works with governments and organisations in 29 countries to protect and build the rights of children and young people.

**j. CoramBAAF** is the membership organisation for professionals, foster carers, adopters, and all those working with or looking after children in or from care, sharing best practice, shaping policy and representing the sector on key issues of the day.

**k. Coram Family and Childcare** publishes the annual childcare survey, the reference for understanding cost and availability of childcare across Great Britain, as well as delivering parent-led programmes helping families understand and access childcare and other support and services.

#### **Coram's Awareness of Preparations being made by the UK Governments**

10. Coram had no advance notice of the commencement of the first lockdown despite being engaged by the Department for Education to supply services to various groups of individuals falling within the description of vulnerable and unequal in terms of their life chances and access to basic facilities.

#### **Indicators which should have led to a better state of preparedness by the UK Government**

11. At the time of lockdown, Coram was already witnessing the impact of ten years of growing demand and reduced resource for public services that directly or indirectly support some of the most vulnerable children. These services included local authority

children's services, Sure Start, CAMHs, schools and health visiting, along with tax and benefit policies which impacted on families.

12. A report prepared by the Institute for Fiscal Studies ("Living standards, poverty and inequality in the UK: 2022", Section 3, page 31) [CH/1], reported that relative child poverty rose to the highest level since 2007 immediately before the onset of Covid-19, as the incomes of poorer families with children fell further behind due to austerity measures brought in by the Government.
13. A report prepared by Coram in November 2013 ("Growing up in a Hostile Environment: the rights of undocumented migrant children in the UK, November 2013") [CH/2] highlights the huge impact of policies pushing migrant children and families into poverty.
14. These changes were largely brought about as a result of changes to benefits and tax credits from 2010 (when the coalition government came into power) through to 2020. A report prepared by Child Poverty Action Group in November 2017 ("The Austerity Generation: the impact of a decade of cuts on family incomes and child poverty") [CH/3] sets out the impact of these changes on families. Of particular note, is Table 1.1 at page 9 which clearly sets out the changes to benefits and tax credits at this time. Importantly, this report highlights:
  - a. **2010 - 2015 (coalition government)** - child benefit was frozen for three years, the Sure Start maternity grant was restricted to the first child, the entitlement to income support for lone parents was limited to parents of under-5s, while those with older children had to claim jobseeker's allowance, child benefit was reduced for households with earnings over £50,000 and removed completely for households earning over £60,000
  - b. **2015-2020 (Conservative government)** - most working-age benefits and child benefit were frozen for four years, the benefit cap was reduced from £26,000 a year to £20,000, or £23,000 in London, for couples and single parents, the family element of tax credits (payable to families with children) was abolished for new claims.

The report suggests that these changes to funding put up to a million more children in poverty and questions the move to universal credits. It confirms that the effects of changes to the tax credit and legacy benefits system brought about in 2010 amounts to a reduction in the income of a family regardless of the hours worked by the parent(s) in a family and identifies those most at risk of poverty as lone parents, families with very young children, larger families, those with a disability and those in low-paid work.

15. Availability of childcare to enable parents to work was sadly lacking even before the onset of Covid-19. In written evidence submitted by Coram to Parliament ("Written Evidence submitted by Coram (GRC0005), Covid 19 and childcare") [CH/4] it was stated as follows:

*"Even before the Covid 19 pandemic, there were persistent shortages in the availability of childcare. In Coram Family and Childcare's Childcare Survey 2020, it was reported that only just over half of local areas had enough childcare for parents working full time and the shortages were more acute for disabled children and parents working outside of the typical 9 to 5 day, where only a quarter of local areas had enough childcare to meet demand. There were fewer childcare places available in deprived areas, particularly settings providing full daycare that enabled parents to work. This issue was replicated for children placed for adoption or those placed with extended family members under a court order".*

Pre-pandemic opportunities for those already in deprived situations and trying to bring about change were limited.

16. Issues of homelessness for children were also of great concern prior to the start of the pandemic. A report prepared by Coram in December 2014 ("The Door Is Closed") [CH/5], highlighted this issue. The report navigates its way through the experience of 40 children and young people who were helped by Coram Voice to challenge the decisions which had been made by the Government Children's Services departments which had brought about the homelessness of these children. The key findings of this report were as follows:
  - a. The Local Authorities were failing to comply with their legal duties to protect teenagers, leaving this vulnerable group with issues of homelessness and at risk from abuse;

- b. The Children's Services departments were often advising children to go back to their families or "sofa surf" rather than providing adequate and acceptable advice and assistance;
- c. Local Authorities were passing homeless children to housing departments to find them accommodation in hostels for vulnerable adults rather than dealing with them as part of Children's Services – placing these children in threatening situations;
- d. Cases were frequently closed as soon as a child turned 18 and bureaucratic brick wall was built to prevent the cases being re-opened.

At the time of this report, Coram Voice requested the Government place pressure on Local Authorities to comply with their obligations in relation to homeless children to ensure that these children are properly assessed and placed in appropriate accommodation whilst this process is being undertaken. As this report, "The Door is Closed" points out, 13% of homeless children and young people in this study were not formally assessed under the relevant legislation – Section 20 of the Children Act 1989, when they presented to Children's Social Care.

- 17. However, despite this Coram Voice report in 2014, it was evident in a case taken up by Coram Children's Legal Centre against Essex County Council in 2017, that there were still issues with the system ("Essex County Council Admits Unlawful Practice in Turning Away Homeless Children from Care") [CH/6]. In this case, a child under the care of Essex County Council's Social Services Department was diverted away from significant protections and benefits of long-term social care support in breach of entitlements under sections 20 and 22 of the Children Act 1989 and in clear contradiction to the clear intentions of the legislative safeguards.
- 18. Children and young people facing such issues were clearly already disadvantaged and would be placed in far more vulnerable positions in the event that the UK was hit by a pandemic. Yet there seems to have been no planning or contingency to assist such teenagers as part of the UK Government's Covid-19 preparations.
- 19. The Government did recognize the issues they were facing with regards to homelessness in the event of a pandemic and invested £105 million in its attempt to provide safe and stable homes to get rough sleepers off the streets. However, this

focus on placing rough sleepers in secure accommodation did not stretch to moving vulnerable young people into more appropriate accommodation (“No Way Out”, the Children’s Commissioner) [CH/7] or anticipating that family stress would lead to more teenagers presenting as homeless which was the first impact to be seen by the Always Heard advocacy helpline delivered by Coram for the Department for Education. The issues the UK Government was facing and for which it should have been prepared prior to the onset of the pandemic are visible from the Always Heard data for 2019 where:

- **600** young people were provided with intensive Safety Net advocacy when no one else would help
- **6,000** signposting advice sessions or referrals were made to local advocacy services
- **15,000** information and advice sessions online or via our helpline service helping young people understand their rights

20. Coram Voice carries out an annual survey which gives an insight into life for care leavers on leaving care. Government surveys focus on objective criteria (such as whether a the local authority is still in touch with a care leaver, is the care leaver in suitable accommodation, does the care leaver have appropriate training or employment) whereas the Coram Voice survey assesses less tangible issues (such as whether a care leaver feels happy, safe and is doing well) – issues which the care leavers say themselves matter to them in their lives, thereby giving consideration to their subjective well-being. The relevant report from 2020 report (“What Makes Life Good”) [CH/8] which analysed responses from care leavers between 2017 and 2019 and a survey “Your Life Beyond Care” [CH/9], confirmed that care leavers are more likely than young people in the general population to struggle financially, lack a smartphone or access to the internet and suffer high levels of anxiety:

- 20% of care leavers find it difficult to cope financially compared to 9% in the same age group (16-24) of the general population.
- 17% of care leavers have no access to internet at home compared to 7% in the same age group (16-24) of the general population.
- 22% of care leavers reported feeling lonely often/always compared to 10% in the same age group (16-24) of the general population.



21. Given these above statistics, it should have been apparent to the UK Government that an already prejudiced group of young people would need far greater support in the event of the onset of a pandemic and a lockdown. Coram is not aware of any special consideration being given to this group of vulnerable individuals with pre-existing inequalities.

#### Issues Arising from Lack of Preparation by the UK Government

22. The issues arising from the lack of preparation by the UK Government broadly fall into the following four categories, each of which I shall describe in more detail below:

- 22.1. Access to justice and court backlogs prior to January 2020;
- 22.2. Delays in transitioning to remote hearings for court proceedings prior to January 2020;
- 22.3. Failures in children's services and social care in the run-up to the pandemic;
- 22.4. Lack of preparation or anticipation relating to school closures.

23. It is highly foreseeable that a lack of preparedness by the UK Government in relation to each of these issues was always going to cause far greater deprivation and suffering amongst those with pre-existing inequalities or vulnerabilities. Looking at each of these categories individually, I comment as follows:

#### Court backlogs

24. Statistics published by HM Courts & Tribunal Services (HMCTS) ("HMCTS management Information – September 2021 -September 2022") [CH/10] show there is currently a backlog of over 110,000 open cases within the family law courts. Whilst this figure is not relevant for the purposes of Module 1, Covid-19 was simply the tipping point for a system with deep running issues dating back to long before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and January 2020. An example of such legislation is the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 ("LASPO") which came into force in April 2013.

25. This legislation removed many family cases from the scope of legal aid which led to a huge increase in litigants in person ("LiP") who have to self-represent in court without the assistance of a barrister or solicitor. Examples of this in practice are as follows:

25.1. The Access to Justice Act 1999 previously provided that work was in scope for legal aid unless specifically excluded by Schedule 2 of the Act, e.g. boundary disputes 1(c), the making of wills 1(d), and matters of trust law 1(e). This is in contrast to LASPO, which says only work explicitly included in Schedule 1 is in scope. This is far more limited.

25.2. In the year before LASPO came into force, civil legal aid was granted in 925,000 cases; the year after it came into force, assistance was given in 497,000 cases, a drop of 46% ("Ministry of Justice: Legal Aid Statistics in England and Wales, Legal Aid Agency, 2013-2014", page 63) [CH/11].

25.3. The volume of calls to the Child Law Advice Service almost doubled in the year following changes to legal aid coming into effect. The total volume of callers to the line rose from 23,017 in 2012/13 to 40,192 in 2013/14.

25.4. The change seen in the pattern of legal representation is also demonstrated in private law cases with at least one hearing, where the proportion of parties with legal representation stood at 59% in 2012 (pre-LASPO) compared to 28% in April to June 2022 ("Family Court Statistics Quarterly: April – June 2022") [CH/12].

26. It should be noted that the increase of LiP causes additional delays because a LiP requires more time and support as a result of not being familiar with the legal process.

27. A report prepared by Coram in February 2018 ("Rights without remedies: Legal aid and access to justice for children") [CH/13], provides details on the impact of LASPO since coming into force in April 2013, stating that at least 6,000 children each year have been left without access to free legal advice and representation and that without

funding, these children have been left homeless, without legal status and often excluded from education and separated from their family.

28. Further, pressures on the family courts meant that Local Authorities were unable to issue care proceedings and protect children. In addition, Local Authorities have found it harder to return children home or move them out of care ("COVID-19 series: briefing on children's social care providers, October 2020") [CH/14].
29. By the time of the pandemic, these services were already in decline and in need of re-modelling. Within the context of any preparation carried out in anticipation of the onset of a pandemic, the UK Government failed to recognize these failings and how these pre-existing failings in the system would impact upon those already struggling within society as vulnerable children and/or families. No consideration of these pre-existing inequalities ever took place insofar as Coram is aware.

#### Transition to Remote Hearings

30. The UK Government had since 2014 been considering digitizing the courts as part of a broader reform programme for HMCTS. With the onset of Covid-19 in early 2020, these plans were brought into action far sooner than had been planned. Whilst it could be argued that the UK Government had tried to achieve a state of preparedness prior to the onset of the pandemic, the reality was that there had been repeated delays to the reform programme being progressed which meant that the court was not fit for purpose in January 2020 or at the time of the onset of the pandemic. Whilst the introduction of remote hearings in 2020 was important to ensure that the principle of "access to justice" was protected, the fact that this facility was introduced only in the aftermath of the lockdown is testament to the fact that UK Government had not foreseen the potential issues and did not have a system in place that was up and running and fit for purpose at the outset.
31. In addition, Coram has experienced through its legal casework that the lack of preparedness for the change to remote hearings had the biggest impact on the most vulnerable of its clients, for example, clients whose first language was not English, clients who had limited digital access and who were thereby digitally excluded.

Children's services, care leavers and safeguarding referrals

32. In the run-up to the pandemic, the waiting time for children to gain access to mental health professionals and suitable placements in care had over time increased hugely. Data evidencing this position is as follows:

32.1. Whilst nationally, the average median waiting time to begin CAMHS treatment had fallen by 11 days since 2015, children still waited an average of two months (56 days) to begin treatment in 2019 – double the Government's four-week target which had been set out in the Government's 2017 green paper on children's mental health ("Access to child and adolescent mental health services in 2019") [CH/15]

32.2. Almost half of councils (44%) had either no publicly available or no up-to-date strategy to secure sufficient local accommodation for looked-after children, found in analysis by What Works for Children's Social Care ("Are Local Authorities achieving effective market stewardship for children's social care services? A Synthesis of sufficiency strategies for children in care in England") [CH/16]. This is despite this being a requirement of statutory guidance on councils' Children Act 1989 duty to, as far as reasonably practicable, take steps to secure enough suitable accommodation locally for children in care, consistent with their welfare. Given an important feature of the strategies with regards to social care is to communicate information about expected demand on providers, such lack of availability of information is not acceptable and does not facilitate the efficient running of an already struggling system – in place to support the most vulnerable in society. Whilst the attachment referred to in this paragraph relates to the situation in 2022, it has been an ongoing failing within the social care system. Such ongoing failings prior to January 2020 did not aid the UK Government in preparing for

a pandemic in an area where those affected already faced pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities.

33. During lockdown, families were placed under considerable strain with increased pressure on such units on a range of fronts including strains on relationships, mental and emotional health and wellbeing with the inevitable knock-on impact on physical health. It was highly foreseeable that families in disadvantaged circumstances would face far greater deprivation than those from affluent backgrounds with far more facilities available to them.
34. Looking at statistics for the years 2018-2020 at page 8 of the report by What Works for Children's Social Care ("Are Local Authorities achieving effective market stewardship for children's social care services? A Synthesis of sufficiency strategies for children in care in England") [CH/16], it is clear to see that the reason the vast proportion of children are taken into care is as a result of abuse or neglect. It should have been highly foreseeable by the UK Government that families with pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities which lead to children being taken into care were going to be significantly adversely impacted by the period of lockdown. Visibility and access to these vulnerable children and families would be severely compromised, yet, insofar as Coram is aware, no account was taken of this in the UK Government's planning and preparations. Regard should be had in later modules of the Inquiry as to the number of referrals to social care logged during the pandemic and whether this was a significant increase/decrease on pre-pandemic referrals.
35. Insofar as Coram is aware, the UK Government was not in a state of preparedness to support and intervene on behalf of these disadvantaged, vulnerable children and/or families. With the introduction of a system which was inevitably going to increase the pressure on already highly vulnerable people, it is hard to justify why the UK Government should not have foreseen the extreme likelihood of increased suffering for these persons with pre-existing issues and vulnerabilities.
36. Faced with an already weakened machine operating public services, the capacity, capability and preparedness of the UK Government to respond to the demands created by the onset of a global pandemic was already behind the curve and not fit for

purpose. As one would expect, those who would usually sit within the remit of public sector support, were the class of individuals most hard hit by the onset of the pandemic and the impact of the UK lockdown. This should have been highly foreseeable.

### School Closures

37. The Department for Education's planning, in part based on the findings of Exercise Cygnus in 2016 (which tested how the UK would respond to a pandemic flu outbreak), failed to make any assessment of or place any focus upon the position if schools needed to close. Planning was based around the school system remaining open and dealing with high staff sickness levels. As a result, the Department for Education was totally unprepared for dealing with the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic presented.
38. The UK Government placed no requirement on schools to consider the means by which remote teaching could be facilitated such that learning could continue in the event of school closures. Schools were largely under-prepared for there being closures in the event of a pandemic. It should however be noted that some schools did remain open throughout the pandemic (eg the National Autistic Society Schools) and welfare checks and relationships with parents were often maintained or enhanced by remote means.
39. However, some parents chose to keep their children at home even when the relevant institution remained open and the evidence of this anxiety and impact was seen early in the Child Law Advice Service.
40. No consideration was given by the UK Government to the possibility that students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds would not have access to the necessary equipment (such as laptops, desktops or tablets), a means of connecting such devices to broadband/3/4G to facilitate online learning or would have a suitable environment in which to study.

41. Ofcom (2020) data ("Ofcom Nations & Regions Technology Tracker 2020") [CM/17] on UK households from just before the pandemic (9th January - 7th March 2020) found that approximately:

- 9% of households with children lacked access to a laptop, desktop, or tablet;
- 2% had no access to the internet and 4% had smartphone only access.

Children in lower earning households were more affected by these issues with:

- 21% of households with children where the main earner was in semi-skilled or unskilled work had no home access to a laptop or a desktop or a tablet;
- 6% having no access to internet at home; and
- 9% having smartphone only internet access.

Consequently, going into the pandemic, children in households where the main earner was in less skilled and lower paid work were far more likely to be affected by digital exclusion during the switch to remote learning.

42. Inadequate consideration had been given by the UK Government to those within society with pre-existing inequalities and vulnerabilities who would be left without support during any lockdown unless special provision was made for these sections of society. These sections of society were already positioned on the periphery and in need of the most assistance.

43. No preparations had been made by the Department for Education in terms of assessing how and to what standard education would be provided during a lockdown. The Department of Education's guidance in this regard was very limited in the initial stages of the lockdown. The Coram Child Law Advice Service developed a Covid-19 FAQ's page in March 2020 which contained information on schools and home education more specifically. This was the most downloaded page on the website in April, May and June 2020 with just under 65,000 unique downloads during this period.

44. Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities ("SEND") were disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 Pandemic. Whilst the pandemic might be seen as the tipping point for this group of disadvantaged individuals, there had been

long-standing problems in the SEND system which were identified prior to January 2020.

45. The Children and Families Act 2014 brought about the most significant education reforms in a generation for children and young people – particularly those with SEND. It was claimed by the UK Government that these reforms would offer far more straight forward, improved and more consistent help for pupils with SEND. However, this was not the reality of these reforms which instead made obtaining assistance for this group of individuals far less attainable. The following quotes will support this position:

45.1. "But despite examples of good practice in implementing the 2014 reforms, this is not the norm and too often the experiences and outcomes of children and young people are poor. There are growing pressures across the system that is increasingly characterised by delays in accessing support for children and young people, frustration for parents, carers, and providers alike, and increasing financial pressure for local government." ("SEND Review – right support, right place, right time") [CH/18].

45.2. "The reforms were the right ones. But their implementation has been badly hampered by poor administration and a challenging funding environment in which local authorities and schools have lacked the ability to make transformative change. The Government has recently taken initial steps to rectify the latter of these two challenges, but there is much left to be done." (House of Commons Education Committee, first report 2019).

46. This 2014 legislation is currently under review for the failings it introduced. However, it undoubtedly exacerbated the issues faced by an already vulnerable group of individuals both prior to and at the start of the pandemic which, with better preparation, could have been prevented. Issues already highlighted as causing problems were:

46.1. Weaknesses in the form of joined-up education provided for children, health and care services, which result in children and young people failing to learn essential skills and knowledge;

46.2. The incorrect identification of individuals as having SEND and significant inconsistencies in identifying those with SEND;



- 46.3. A lack of joined-up commissioning and joint working across education, health and care;
- 46.4. A lack of clarity between organisations about who is responsible and accountable within a local area for the SEND system; and
- 46.5. Additional issues caused in relation to adoption.
47. Coram provided feedback into the review of the 2014 legislation which was published in December 2022 ("House of Lords, Children and Families Act 2014 Committee, Report of Session 2022-23: Children and Families Act 2014: A failure of implementation") [CH/19]. The review was particularly damning of the impact of race on chances of adoption and the failure of the 2014 legislation to combat this issue and the fact that, despite the intention of the legislation to bring about early intervention in cases to save money and lives, this remained absent across many areas looked at by the review team, thereby threatening the stability of families and the health of children and young people.
48. In a report published by Coram BAAF ("Children's Social Care Review: Submission of Advice CoramBAAF, March 2021") [CH/20], it was noted that:
- "The safety net that protects people from poverty, homelessness, illness and the impact of disability is frayed. Covid-19 has exposed this. This review must analyse and address the impact of austerity policies and cuts to welfare provision – including the Benefit Cap, reductions in disability benefit, the shrinking stock of social housing and the effects of the policies around No Recourse to Public Funds."*
- Whilst this report post-dates January 2020, it is a review of the impact of legislation from 2014 onwards – much of which fits in with the period under review for the purposes of Module 1.
49. Whilst Coram adapted quickly to the provision of as many services as possible remotely to ensure children continued to receive provision of vital services, the lack of preparedness brought about as a result of the lack of information flowing from the UK Government prior to January 2020 hampered such endeavours. The Government provided no foresight or vision with regards to the possibility of a lockdown and the

inevitable knock-on effects this would have on beneficiaries of charities and public support services.

### Conclusion

50. It can be seen from the above that the beneficiaries of support from Coram were left most vulnerable as result of the lack of preparedness and failings in the following areas:

50.1. Access to Justice: with pre-existing problems caused by legislative changes needing to be addressed prior to the onset of the pandemic.

50.2. Lack of basic facilities required for continued online learning: including provision of laptops/tablets, stable broadband facilities, quiet spaces in which to learn. For those with learning disabilities, the lack of direct access to teaching and/or teaching support meant that those who were particularly vulnerable were left without support and facing independent study.

50.3. Failures in child services: with pre-existing problems caused by legislative changes needing to be addressed prior to the onset of the pandemic.

50.4. Closure of support and community centres: vulnerable families were unable to access support and advice to access public funds. Whilst assistance was in part available via telephone calls and online access, many suffering the most hardship were prevented from accessing such assistance as a result of digital exclusion.

51. Researchers within Coram carry out gathering and analysis of data on Coram services, including child outcomes, and are commissioned to carry out research and evaluation of UK services for children and families more widely. Coram's Impact and Evaluation team are experts in data analysis, qualitative and quantitative research methods and participatory research with children, young people, parents and professionals. Between them, the team have decades of research experience. Much of this work includes analysis of the effects of the pandemic on children and young people.

52. For example, in early 2022, Coram's Impact and Evaluation team conducted an evidence review on the pandemic's effects on children and families, to inform a Department for Education funded covid recovery project for the childcare and early years workforce. This research has not yet been published.
53. Coram has a unique insight into the deprivation caused to those with pre-existing and vulnerable children and families as a result of the lack of preparedness of the UK Government. The deprivation stemmed not only from this lack of preparedness but the cutbacks in the provision of public services to the vulnerable sectors of society in the decade running up to the Covid-19 pandemic.

**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.

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

Personal Data

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

*21 February 2023*

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