

Anne Longfield CBE - Submission to the Covid-19 Inquiry

SUBMISSION TO THE COVID-19 INQUIRY

Anne Longfield CBE

Children's Commissioner for England March 2015 - February 2021.

September 2023

1 Introduction and overview

1. I am pleased to respond to the Request for Evidence from the UK Covid-19 Inquiry under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006.
2. I understand that the Inquiry wishes to understand what involvement I, as Children's Commissioner for England at the time, had in the UK Government's core political and administrative decision-making between January 2020 and February 2021. The Inquiry has defined "core political and administrative decision-making" as those decisions that were taken by the Prime Minister/No.10, the Cabinet and Cabinet Committees (including Ministerial Implementation Groups 'MIGs') and the Lead Government Department ("LGD"), supported by senior officials and advisers, to manage the emergency response to the Covid-19 virus.
3. I understand that the Chair of the Inquiry wishes to understand the role that the Children's Commissioner for England played within that decision-making process between the beginning of January 2020 and February 2021 and has made an initial request for the provision of a witness statement to set out key aspects of my involvement in core political and administrative decision-making relating to the UK Government's response to Covid-19.
4. During the pandemic, I made it the mission of the Children's Commissioner's Office to highlight the risks and impact of the pandemic, and the measures to contain it, on children, particularly the most vulnerable. My office pushed for the interests of children and young people to be a top priority for the Government as it responded to Covid.
5. It is my view that although children had fewer health risks from Covid-19, they suffered disproportionately from the nation's efforts to contain the virus. Sadly, the impact on children was sometimes overlooked when decisions were taken over this period. While the initial school closures were necessary, the decision to keep schools closed for most children from March 2020 to September 2020, while at the same time increasing social interaction in other parts of society, was a major mistake. Pubs, restaurants, and non-essential shops reopened in June, while the majority of children were still not able to attend school. Playground and sports

fields also remained closed for many months. In England, children were not exempt from the “rule of six” arrangements, unlike their peers in Scotland and Wales, and so they were unable to play with friends or spend time with grandparents.

6. Many studies since the first lockdown have shown the damage the pandemic caused to children - from education loss, and a growth in poor mental health, to the delay of social development in infants. This includes a report in June by the World Health Organisation on the impact of the pandemic on children and adolescents [AL/ 01 INQ000268036] and a 2022 NSPCC statistics briefing on the impact on children [AL/ 02 INQ000268039] . The experiences of vulnerable and disadvantaged children were often vastly different to those of their less vulnerable and more affluent peers.

In March 2022, the Education Endowment Foundation reported on the impact of Covid-19 on pupil attainment. COVID-19-related disruption has negatively impacted the attainment of all pupils, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Research showed that COVID-19-related disruptions have worsened educational inequalities: the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers has grown since the onset of the pandemic [AL/03 - INQ000236895].

In October 2022, in a study into the impacts of the pandemic on young people’s life chances, the COVID Social Mobility & Opportunities (COSMO) study, led jointly by the UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies and the Sutton Trust showed 80% of young people said their academic progress has suffered as a result of the pandemic and half reported feeling less motivated to study and learn. State school pupils were more than twice as likely to feel that they have fallen behind their classmates than independent school pupils. Nearly half (45%) of all pupils didn’t believe they have been able to catch up with lost learning. Almost half of young people had accessed no catch-up education and a large majority had not accessed tutoring [AL/04 - INQ000267955].

In April 2022, Ofsted reported that the pandemic and lockdowns had resulted in delays in learning speech and language; problems with social interaction and confidence, such as not knowing how to take turns and struggling to make friends; and delays in walking and crawling, with more obesity as a result. Children were also not at the expected level in developing vital self-care skills, such as being

potty trained, tying their shoelaces and taking their coats off [AL/05 - INQ000267956]. [AL/06 - INQ000268037]

In January 2022, the Centre for Social Justice warned of a lost generation of children not attending school. They reported that 100,000 children had almost entirely disappeared from education since schools returned. The report said that the existence of these so called “ghost children” was nothing short of a national disaster. “These children are at risk of abuse after failing to come back to school. The tragic case of five-year-old Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, who was cruelly poisoned then beaten to death by his parents, is a painful case in point. Gang-related and other safeguarding risks abound when children disappear from schools. This has been confirmed by charities who work with these children who have seen an alarming spike in safeguarding referrals.”. The number of children absent from school has continued to rise. 22% of children are now persistently absent from school with 125,000 severely absent for more than 50% of the time. [AL/07 - INQ000267957].

In July 2021, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health reported that services across the NHS, child health services were under significant pressure due to the impact of the pandemic. Paediatric beds were also under significant pressure due to an increase in children and young people with serious mental health problems - doubling compared to 2019 [AL/08 - INQ000267958]. A further report from the college on services November 2020 - February 2021 was published [AL/09 - INQ000268033].

A record 1.4 million children and young people sought NHS help for mental health problems in 2022. The number of school-age children being referred to child and adolescent mental health services (Camhs) soared by 76% from 2019, according to NHS figures. 2022 was the second year in a row in which referrals topped 1m, amid the continuing impact of Covid on young people’s wellbeing. Anxiety, self-harm, anger or aggression, problems with school, including them refusing to attend, behaviour management and eating disorders were reasons for referral. The figures came from an analysis of NHS Digital data by Young Minds [AL/10 - INQ000268038]. The NFER also produced a report in 2022 on the impact of the pandemic on children’s wellbeing and mental health [AL/11 INQ000268040].

- 7 For some children, certain aspects of the pandemic initially brought benefits. Families who were able to work at home or whose incomes remained stable, perhaps as a result of the furlough scheme, often found that they had more quality time to spend with one another. For others, those children in poor cramped accommodation, those living on low income whose parents needed to go out to work, those living in vulnerable households with poor mental health, addiction and domestic violence, those living in poverty, those without access to the outdoors and those without access to the digital technology to access education or socialise with friends, this was a very difficult pandemic heightening existing vulnerabilities and laying the foundation for long term problems.
- 8 Whilst the pandemic, and our country's response to it was a major challenge for most children, it was a disaster for many disadvantaged children who were already living with risks and vulnerabilities in their lives. As Children's Commissioner for England, I was particularly concerned about these children and focused much of my advice on reducing and mitigating the risks they faced. Whilst Government appeared on occasions to understand the risks to the wellbeing of children, at least in part, their approach on too many occasions lacked coherence, was indecisive, and at times appeared indifferent to the impact of policy decisions.
- 9 Throughout, I was concerned about the impact of the response on children and young people, and whether the full extent of the harmful effects of some of those interventions were being sufficiently assessed and balanced against any proven advantages. I wanted to know whether the particular needs of children and young people had been considered and whether the measures for children that were introduced were proportionate. This included national and regional lockdowns, social distancing, household 'bubbles', access to outdoor space and arrangements for health and children's social care.
- 10 I was also concerned about the impact of pandemic measures on specific groups of children - particularly those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, those with social workers, those from disadvantaged backgrounds and those in custody - who suffered disproportionately due to the lockdowns and other high-level government decisions, which often amplified existing inequalities.

- 11 It is not clear whether the potential negative impact of lockdown and social distancing, along with other measures and decisions affecting children on children's social care, health and family support services were heard and fully understood by those making decisions, or whether they were heard but were ignored and overlooked. It is not clear to what extent the advice and involvement of child protection specialists was sought during the decision-making processes, or the extent to which evidence of increased harms in the first months of the pandemic resulted in changes to measures which were subsequently introduced or re-introduced at later stages (for instance in the lockdowns of autumn 2020 and January 2021).

The government's 2020-21 data on serious incident notifications found that from April to September 2020, there was a 31% rise in incidents of death or serious harm to children under 1 when compared with the same period in 2019 [AL/12 - INQ000267959].

The NSPCC published a statistics briefing on the impact of coronavirus on children and their families in February 2022 which showed increased vulnerability of some children. [AL/02 - INQ000268039].

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that in mid-May 2020, there was a 12% increase in the number of domestic abuse cases referred to victim support. Between April and June 2020, there was a 65% increase in calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, when compared to the first three months of that year. Domestic abuse is the most common reason for children to be judged to be at risk of harm The ONS published a report on the prevalence of domestic abuse during the pandemic in November 2020 [AL/14 INQ000267960].

- 12 There are questions about the integrity of assumptions made around the impact that school closures would have on the transmission of Covid; the apparent lack of any serious recognition of the short-term and long-term harmful effects of prolonged school closures on children; and the apparent failure of the government to prepare realistically for the scale and duration of school closures, despite having been advised repeatedly by SAGE for several weeks that school closures may be required, and that such closures would need to be lengthy in order to have any beneficial impact on reducing transmission.

- 13 The position is well-summarised in a report from the Institute for Government Analysis which looked at school closures and the cancellation of examinations: “[the] most important conclusion is that the most significant aspect of what happened is not just the failure to make contingency plans in the summer of 2020 when it was already obvious that fresh school closures might well be needed, and that exams might have to be cancelled again. Lessons were not learnt from the first lockdown, with the result that, for both school closures and exams, the story from July 2020 to January 2021 was a case of “pause, rewind, repeat ... The single biggest issue has, however, to be the failure in the summer and autumn of 2020 to learn lessons from the first wave of the pandemic - and to make contingency plans.”. [AL/13 - INQ000231401]
- 14 The risks and benefits of measures that affected children were assessed in a document published by SAGE in October 2020 [AL/14 - INQ000231400], prior to the January 2021 lockdown and the decision to close schools for a second time. The document contains the following observations and findings on the non-Covid impacts of school closures: “Large impact on health and wellbeing...School closures associated with possible increases in school dropout, child injury, domestic violence, child abuse but reductions in referrals. Reductions in social interaction erode social development and harm general wellbeing, and mental health of children and parents. Risk of division and anger in community if education of children suffers, without convincing explanation of the need.”; “Substantial challenges for schools, further education and higher education with online teaching, including disparities between well-off and less well-off areas. Disruption of lab-based and medical courses (e.g. dentistry) will impact the graduate pipeline into health roles”; “... home schooling IT equipment [required] to minimise exacerbation of educational inequality”; “Disruption of education, wellbeing of children and parents.”; “Equity issues: Likely to have a higher adverse impact (education, physical and mental well-being) on vulnerable children and low income and BAME communities (e.g. less access to online learning/ less space at home to study)”; “Equity considerations in terms of impact on most vulnerable and BAME groups. Schools which are most likely to be sites of transmission (high poverty, low resource), may be those with the least capacity to take up additional interventions due to background stressors and resource constraints. Affected areas would suffer in terms of adequate preparation of public exams and therefore perceived fairness of the system.”

- 15 SAGE's assessment also noted the following in terms of the efficacy of school closures in preventing or reducing the transmission of Covid: "Overall, low confidence... unclear how much schools may contribute to community transmission."; "Low to moderate impact. Not clear the role that children play in transmission"; "Modelling suggests that resuming early years provision has a smaller relative impact than primary school, which in turn has a smaller relative impact than resuming secondary schooling."
- 16 In April 2020, the Prime Minister announced education was one of the top three priorities for easing lockdown. Unfortunately, his actions didn't live up to these words. Neighbouring countries like Belgium, the Netherlands and France opened schools earlier for all children, despite having had similar infection rates.. I published a briefing on children's safe return to school on 16 May 2020 which was sent to the Secretary of State for Education and I gave evidence to the Education Select Committee on 3 June in an inquiry into the impact of Covid 19 on education and children's services I also made a media intervention mid May urging Government and unions to 'stop squabbling' and agree a plan to get children back into school. Throughout I made it clear that I believed it unacceptable that Government saw opening schools as less urgent than opening theme parks, shops, pub gardens and zoos in June 2020 [AL/15 - INQ000231368, AL/16 - INQ000231404, AL/17 - INQ000231382].
- 17 There are three key areas where I believe Government failed most badly to act in children's best interests during the pandemic:
- The policy towards school opening and access to education.
 - Decisions about children's ability to socialise and use public spaces.
 - Decisions to reduce the safeguarding protection to vulnerable children in receipt of social care.
- 18 These decisions have increased the risk of reduced outcomes, wellbeing and life chances for children. All could have been managed very differently if there had been consistent will and commitment to put children first. Tragically, for some children who lost their life during the pandemic, not due to Covid, but due to violence, these decisions may have increased their vulnerability to harm.

19 I believed that Government needed to be more ambitious in its approach to protecting and supporting children during the pandemic. It was clear to me that schools would never have been 100 per cent safe, so risk had to be managed. Opening schools and ensuring access to education in my view needed a national creative effort on the scale of the Nightingale hospitals.

That would have meant using the engine of Government to find alternatives to school closure - use of neighbouring public buildings, rapid testing, temporary classrooms, hiring retired teachers and recruiting and marshalling an army of volunteers. Billions were spent on managing the impact on the economy and NHS - schools needed to be included too.

20 It would also have meant introducing an ambitious and generous recovery programme for education and wider childhood like that proposed by the Education Recovery Commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins in May 2021. Another opportunity to demonstrate a commitment to children's future was missed when a decision was taken to focus on a relatively limited tutoring programme as the primary focus for catch up.

Sir Kevan's plan was to extend the school day by half an hour with 100 hours of extra teaching a year for sixth formers. He proposed to widen the number of disadvantaged children eligible for childcare/early years education, fund a recovery premium that schools could choose how to distribute, increase pupil funding for early years and disadvantaged sixth formers and hire more highly qualified early years practitioners. Instead, Government funded an extra year of teaching for teenagers who fail their A-levels, extra funding for training teachers, including early years teachers and extended tutoring to five million pupils by 2024

Sir Kevan's plan was reported as costing £15bn. Under his proposals, £12 billion of the £15 billion would be paid directly to schools and used to help disadvantaged pupils. Ministers announced just £1.4 billion in funding at the time of refusing to fund the proposed recovery programme, £400 millions of which was earmarked for teacher development programmes. Government said that £3bn had been committed to catch up overall.

- 22 In some countries, children were clearly at the forefront of national concerns. The Prime Ministers in Norway and New Zealand held TV briefings for children at the start of the pandemic to reassure them and to thank them for all they were doing. We didn't have such an event in the UK, despite my requests to No 10 and the Prime Minister [AL/18 - INQ000239702]. In fact, children were not even able to submit questions to the daily TV briefings in the initial stages of the pandemic. My office clarified this restriction with No 10 and was informed that the over-18 rule for questions would remain.
- 23 The Covid crisis was an extraordinary time for children to live through and grow up in. I am grateful for the dedication and commitment of the many teachers, social workers, other professionals, and communities who, under extreme pressure, worked tirelessly to support children during this time. Parents, families and children themselves also did so much to help children through. This support provided a lifeline for many children and families during the pandemic and it built hope that the pandemic would pass eventually.
- 24 Of the series of Covid-related publications the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England produced during my tenure, two in particular were designed with the likelihood of an inquiry in mind: 'Childhood in the time of Coronavirus' dated September 2020, and 'Putting children first in future lockdowns. [AL/19 - INQ000231345, AL/20 - INQ000231356] I gave this advice and published this work in order to better identify vulnerable children who needed help both during the lockdown and once the crisis had passed.
- 25 In doing so, I believe we provided a roadmap for what must be done to enable children to recover from their experiences, as well as arguing how better to put their needs first in the event of future lockdowns.

I summarised the challenge as twofold; firstly, to respond to Covid-19 - lessening the impact on the most vulnerable children by providing a comprehensive recovery package for children to mitigate the damage caused by the crisis. Secondly, to put children at the heart of any future emergency and address the underlying issues which make disadvantage children and their families so susceptible to adversity.

I argued that there needed to be recognition of the long-term disadvantage the crisis has caused to children's education and mental health and that schools should target their catch up fund on vulnerable and disadvantaged children who had lost out the most. I also argued that there must be a focus on pastoral care, supported by accelerated implementation of the Government's Green Paper on mental health, so that every child could access counselling in school. I said that children's rights and protections should be upheld and where legal changes which have reduced children's rights were still in operation they should be reversed and never renewed.

I argued that disadvantaged families needed additional support to provide care for their children and asked Government to introduce a package of welfare and housing support for families, to retain the £20 uplift in Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit for families, due to expire in April 2021, and introduce an additional £10 per week child payment.

Looking to the future, I argued that children should be put at the heart of planning for further lockdowns and emergencies, local or national with schools the last to close and the first to re-open. The full range of services used by children should be prioritised, with children's centres and family hubs able to remain open and face to face visits from social workers and health visitors continued as far as possible.

More broadly, I argued for better help and support for struggling families with greater investment in local authority early help services, the Troubled Families programme and health visitors to resolve problems and prevent crisis.

26 Our politicians and institutions should commit themselves to ensuring that children's needs are never overlooked again in any future emergency.

2 Background to the Children's Commissioner for England role.

27 I held the role of Children's Commissioner for England from March 2015 until the end of February 2021, including the period covered by the Inquiry.

28 As the Children's Commissioner, I had statutory responsibility for promoting the rights, views and interests of children in England on matters which affect them. The Office of Children's Commissioner was created by the Children Act 2004. The

Act conveys a statutory duty on the Commissioner to promote and protect the rights of all children in England in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). The Commissioner has a legal duty to advise the Government and decision-makers nationally on children's issues. It is an 'arms-length' body of the Department of Education, accountable to Parliament and involving regular accountability sessions with the Education Select Committee. The Office operated on a budget of £2.5m in 2020/21 and employed approximately 25 staff.

- 29 It is self-evident that in discharging this role during the COVID pandemic the Commissioner would be directly involved in high-level discussions with decision makers and provide national-level analysis of the same decision-making from the perspective of children. Throughout the process, I had the statutory data gathering powers that come with the role to inform my views, and a statutory power of entry to enable me to meet any child living away from home.
- 30 As Children's Commissioner for England, I liaised with my counterparts in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland throughout the pandemic. I also organised and took part in a number of international discussions with Children's Commissioners across Europe. This enabled me to gain information on the Government response to the pandemic in other countries and international approaches to supporting children during this time. Whilst there were many similarities in the Government responses to covid in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and England, including school closures for most children, home learning, the cancellation of exams and the provision of some support for children eligible for free school meals, there were some notable exceptions.

Children under 12 were exempt from the 'Rule of 6' rules in Scotland and Wales. In Northern Ireland a direct payments scheme was established to ensure families eligible for free school meals received direct payments into bank accounts during the period of term time school closures (rather than vouchers). In Wales an Integrated Impact Assessment was undertaken to set out and consider measures and how they would impact on children. In general, my impression was that there was a greater, more open and more consistent debate about arrangements to mitigate the impact of covid on children - especially disadvantaged children from

the Wales and Scotland Government. The Children's Commissioner for Wales in particular was consulted with throughout.

31. During the pandemic, I had extensive involvement in analysing the decisions of government insofar as policies impacted children. I provided advice and proposals to government (and local authorities, public health, the police and other agencies), about the impact of policy and practice decisions on children, in order to protect and promote their best interests.

32. Throughout the period, I undertook research and published reports on education; children with special educational needs and disabilities; social care; child health; early years; youth justice; housing; and family life. I was particularly keen to represent the most vulnerable children in society and those in the more deprived areas of England. My findings and recommendations focused particularly on the impact of the pandemic on children and young people and measures and intervention that I believed should be undertaken to improve children's well-being and promote their best interests.

33. I was in regular contact with officials and Ministers including the Secretaries of State for Education; Justice; Work and Pensions; Housing, Communities and Local Government. I wrote to them openly throughout the pandemic to raise any concerns about the effects of Government's response on children. I was also an occasional attendee of the Cabinet Office Covid 19 Ministerial Group on public services and presented to the group on occasions.

34. I am currently Chair of The Commission on Young Lives, a national independent review of vulnerable teenagers, and for over 20 years acted as the Chief Executive of a national charity, 4Children. I was previously a Policy Advisor to the then Prime Minister Tony Blair on children and families/childcare. I believe that my experience is central to any forensic review of the decisions taken by government at the time.

- **My response to the pandemic**

35. In the week immediately prior to the first lockdown being announced on March 23, 2020, I was in Sweden and Norway with a small group of public servants undertaking a study of secure children's welfare homes, hosted by the Children's

Commissioners in Sweden and Norway respectively. Whilst Sweden did not introduce restrictions during the visit, Norway swiftly moved to full lockdown as we left the country to return to the UK. I closed my office immediately and most staff set up working arrangements from home following the advice of the Department for Education whose offices we leased. Whilst arrangements were made for a very small number of staff to work from the office if they had particular reasons for doing so, and occasional activities required some staff to attend the office, most staff remained primarily working from home until my tenure came to an end on February 28, 2021. From the outset, a CCO pandemic response group was formed, comprising of senior staff. The group met virtually each weekday at 9am for 30 minutes to assess emerging evidence, developments in Government's response to Covid 19 and to agree priorities and actions in response. The group remained in contact out of office hours as necessary.

36. My assessment was that the pandemic was a period of extreme risk for children and knowing that children's needs and views can often be difficult for Government and public bodies to understand, I and my team, worked throughout the pandemic to provide a significant volume of analysis and advice; consulting with children and families; providing new analysis of data and briefing senior government ministers and officials; as well as taking part in public debates in the media.
37. The Children's Commissioner's office was widely recognised as having exerted significant influence on high level decisions during this period, and I was often one of a small number of voices making the case for children to be a priority. We produced a sizeable body of work to support this during the period. I communicated regularly with the Secretary of State for Education, the Health Secretary, and other Secretaries of State on children's issues that they were responsible for, as well as with relevant ministers, in particular, the Children's Minister. These reports and communications are set out in Appendix 1.

- **Vulnerable children at heightened risk**

38. Throughout the pandemic I sought to raise awareness of the impact of Government's response to the pandemic on children and young people, with a

particular concern for vulnerable children who all the evidence suggested were at heightened risk.

39. My research showed me that hundreds of thousands of children in England were living with a cocktail of secondary risks that Covid-19 may exacerbate - lack of food in the house, homelessness, sofa-surfing or living in cramped living conditions, neglect, domestic abuse, substance abuse and parental mental health problems.
40. The coronavirus crisis brought into sharp focus both the dangers of vulnerable children falling through gaps in services and policy, and the value of good data from the front line in order to identify where help is needed.
41. The lockdowns removed most of the usual ways of identifying children at risk. This included attendance at school, doctor's surgeries, youth centres, children's centres and libraries - all of which for the majority of children were closed - and contact with professionals such as health visitors, teachers and social workers which were often only working through screens.
42. I believed that with the right will, government - local and national - could ensure that all vulnerable children were seen and contact maintained, harnessing, if necessary, the efforts of suitable volunteers, those from services which were closed or who were recently retired from child-facing work. I believed that it was essential that children who needed help during the pandemic were identified and that all efforts were made to give them the help they needed.
- **My actions and interventions during the pandemic.**

43. During the period from March 2020 to February 2021:

- I met on a fortnightly basis with senior officials with responsibility for vulnerable children, including at the Ministry of Justice; met monthly with the DfE Minister for Children; and every six weeks met with the Secretary of State for Education.
- Before most major Government announcements affecting children, I was briefed personally by either senior civil servants, the Minister for Children or the Secretary of State for Education..

- I attended and contributed to two high-level Cabinet Office ministerial groups (MIG), one of the implementation committees set up “to coordinate, prioritise and respond to the coronavirus pandemic across government” which fed into the daily C-19 meeting chaired by the Prime Minister, in the early stages of the pandemic to talk about the profiling work my office was undertaking to publish local area profiles of child vulnerability. We believed that this data was essential for local authorities and the DfE to be able to identify children’s needs and prioritise resources where needed. The meetings were attended by the cabinet and chaired by Michael Gove - then Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, who would attend the daily C-19 meeting. [AL/20 - INQ000231386]
- I met with senior leaders in the NHS, Public Health England (including the CEO) and other public bodies to make the case for children to be prioritised in their response to the pandemic. In particular, I sought to bridge what appeared to be a gap between health advice from PHE restricting use of schools and the Department for Education’s desire to open schools .I asked the PHE CEO and team to liaise closely with DfE officials to clarify any health concerns with the DfE and both parties to work together to collaboratively identify solutions that would enable children to stay safe and quickly return to school. These discussions followed my media intervention calling for a national endeavour to reopen schools in May which the PHE CEO responded to. [AL/17 - INQ000231382] (stop squabbling). Separately, I asked NHS to review their policy on the redeployment of health visitors to emergency practice in the first few months of the pandemic due to concerns over babies health and safety. Health visitors largely returned to their substantive role in the autumn.
- I produced a significant body of analysis from the early stages and throughout the progression of the pandemic including briefings and reports. These were submitted to Government, SAGE and other public bodies as well as disseminated in the media. The briefings and reports listed in the Appendix were sent to core decision makers (Ministers and above).
- The findings of these reports were summarised and updated in a report published in September 2020 - Childhood in the time of Covid. [AL/19 - INQ000231345]

- Concerned that some councils did not have the data needed to identify and support vulnerable children in their area, by April 2020 my Office had developed a series of **local area profiles of child vulnerability** which were offered to central government officials (as well as local authorities) as a framework to target additional resources at children falling into groups likely to be at risk under lockdown. This was presented to the Cabinet Office Inter Ministerial Group. The Children's Commissioner's local area profiles of child vulnerability provided a way for Government and councils to understand which groups of children were likely to be at risk under lockdown, and how many children in their area fell into those groups. It also provided a framework for central government to target additional resources at the areas most in need if it wished to do so. I believed that local authorities should be factoring this information into their decision making when it came to Covid-19 responses. [AL/21 - INQ000231369, AL/22 - INQ000231377]
 - I regularly wrote to cabinet ministers and other ministers, highlighting concerns about children's issues and urging action such as data collection. See Appendix 1 - Communication and publication timeline.
 - I attended and gave evidence to a large number of Parliamentary select committees during the period. See Appendix 2 - Evidence to select committees.
- 3 The Children's Commissioner's interventions and advice to protect and promote children's rights and best interests during Covid.**

Education

44. Children's education and schools in England experienced unprecedented disruptions due to COVID. In March 2020, the UK's 24,000 schools were closed for most children, and examinations scheduled for several months later were cancelled with two days' notice [AL/13 - INQ000231401]. These measures formed a major part of the measures implemented in the first national lockdown. In the months that followed, schools were re-opened and closed for most children multiple times - including a phased re-opening throughout June 2020; second national closures in

January 2021; and a phased return for primary initially and finally secondary schools in March 2021.

45. There were two periods during which in-person learning was restricted for the majority of pupils: first for 14 weeks in spring 2020; and then for eight weeks in winter 2021. During these periods of partial closure, many pupils experienced some form of remote learning. Even when schools re-opened fully, significant challenges remained due to high levels of staff and pupil absence.
46. Enforced absences due to infection (which was highest in the poorest areas) and other measures (such as the requirement for class 'bubbles' to isolate, which applied to all children and from which vulnerable children were not exempt) meant that many children missed significant amounts of school, even when schools had reopened. It has been estimated that on average each child missed 115 days of school in the first six months of the pandemic alone.
47. The long-term consequences of the disruption to children's learning and development as a result of school closures, the move to online learning from home, and the cancellation of examinations has been apparent since.
48. Whilst schools remained open for vulnerable children during school closures - a decision which I supported and encouraged- most vulnerable children did not attend school during the closures. This has been attributed to various factors, including the stay-at-home message from government and the fact that the policy was not backed up by consistent encouragement and support. This reflects a lack of understanding of the complex challenges and difficulties faced by such children and their families, and the barriers to attendance and engagement.
49. Those most detrimentally affected in the initial stages of lockdown were children who did not have access to online learning; the necessary resources (in terms of space and IT equipment) to receive their education from home; and the additional parental support required. I corresponded with the Schools Minister in November raising concerns about the roll out of digital support to disadvantaged children.
[AL/23 - INQ000239698]. [AL/24 -INQ000239699].

50. I highlighted the dangers of learning loss throughout. [AL/25 - INQ000231403]

- **Return to school**

51. In May 2020, I made a significant intervention in the public debate around school closures and called on the Government and the teaching unions to get children back into the classroom following a briefing which looked at the evidence base for decision-making about reopening schools and research undertaken by my Office [AL/26 - INQ000231407]. It is widely recognised as having led to a change in attitude within Whitehall and contributed to Government and teaching unions taking action to deliver a solution. [AL/17 - INQ000231382]

52. Another intervention widely regarded as influencing and changing the course of decisions that affected children's lives in the pandemic, was made when in June 2020 the government decided to keep schools closed while reopening pubs, theme parks, zoos, and shops. The Education Secretary Gavin Williamson then conceded that all primary schools would not reopen before the end of the summer term in July 2020. This was despite all the UK Chief Medical Officers stating that children were better off in school, and that the risks to children from missing school were higher than the risks they face from Covid-19. The World Health Organization also said schools were not significant drivers of Covid-19 transmission, and that closing schools leads to serious adverse consequences: educational, social, psychological, and physical.

53. Following my intervention, the Prime Minister adopted the mantra that education should be "the last to close and the first to open" and the Government made clear that it expected all children to be back in school full-time from September 2020, subject to local lockdowns [AL/27 - INQ000231373]. The Education Select Committee and many Parliamentarians backed my interventions to reopen schools. The Secretary of State for Education and Children's Minister both contacted me privately on different occasions to thank me for intervening in this way.

54. It is not apparent that alternatives to total school closure (apart from vulnerable children) were considered and, if so, the basis upon which they were

not taken forward. For instance, whether use of alternative venues for schooling, or allowing primary schools (where the risk of Covid transmission was determined to be lower) to open completely/ on a phased basis was considered. A Government Equality Analysis document dated May 2020 acknowledged low numbers of vulnerable children attending school and, in its conclusion, suggested that reopening primaries would be helpful in this regard [AL/28 - INQ000231333]. However, the full re-opening of primary schools did not take place until September 2020. The reasoning behind this delay was never clear and did not appear to be based on the evidence of experts, including myself as the Children's Commissioner for England.

55. In late 2020, I published new analysis of what had happened in schools since they reopened in September. It showed that in a challenging context of increasing community transmission and resources being stretched, schools had done remarkably well so that children were getting an education, while also limiting their risks from Covid. However, public health measures and a series of in school restrictions meant that many children were in and out of school during the term - particularly in disadvantaged areas where infection rates were higher [AL/29INQ000231357]. In November 2020, I wrote to the Schools Minister seeking clarification about the Department's work to support remote learning in the context of 14% of children still being absent from school [AL/24 INQ000239699]. In the same month the Schools' Minister replied assuring me that the Dept continued to do everything in their power to ensure that every child could attend school safely and where not have remote education.

A Temporary Continuity Direction was issued to make clear that schools had a duty to provide remote education with an extended support package for remote education in schools. In December I wrote to the Health Secretary - copying to the Education Secretary and No10 - urging him to prioritise vaccines for teachers to enable schools to stay open. [AL/30 INQ000239700].

56. However, confusion and indecision in response to rising cases of Covid in the community led again to the closure of schools in January 2021.
57. In early 2021, I made interventions and published reports that advocated an improved commitment, better planning and more creative, solution-based

approach to opening schools and resuming school education for all children [AL/31 - INQ000231397, AL/32 - INQ000231385, AL/33 - INQ000231399]

58. I sent a joint letter with Solace to the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, urging him to set-out a roadmap for the reopening of schools to all pupils [AL/34a - INQ000231388]. I also sent a letter from BINOC to the Chair of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation about the prioritisation of teachers and other key workers [AL/34 - INQ000231393].

- **Disadvantaged communities and regional disparities**

59. Throughout, I was very concerned about schools in the worst-hit local areas which were getting a ‘quadruple hit’: significant disruption to attendance, increased costs of supply teachers, on top of poorer educational outcomes before the pandemic, as well as poverty and economic deprivation. I wanted to see much more support for these schools and their pupils. I believed that schools needed more funding to bring in supply teachers and other staff, as well as mass testing and priority vaccine access for teachers. And in the summer, the children in these schools needed an exams system which recognised how they had been disadvantaged and which took steps to correct that. I highlighted regional disparities in access to education including children growing up in the North arguing that at least 450,000 children in Yorkshire alone would spend more than six months out of the classroom. [AL/35 -INQ000231361]

- **Communication with schools**

60. Between mid-March and May 2020, 148 new guidance documents or updates to existing material were issued to schools [AL/13 -INQ000231401] resulting in a barrage of information which proved difficult for institutions to decipher and implement. Many schools reported that communications were lacking in clarity, consistency and transparency, resulting in confusion as to which measures were mandatory; how they should be implemented; and how they would be regulated or monitored.

- **Changes to SEND duties.**

61. I also highlighted concerns about changes to duties and requirements for support for children with SEND [AL/36 - INQ000231371, AL/37 - INQ000231398]

Safeguarding

62. As is now accepted, the national and regional lockdowns (under the Tier system) and associated measures, such as those restricting household mixing, mandating the closures of schools and childcare services, affected all children nationwide to differing extents, though it was the vulnerable children in our society and those who required safeguarding who were some of those impacted most detrimentally.

63. These decisions have been seen as leading to:

- **Reduced visibility:** As a result of closures of schools, early years childcare, redeploying health visitors and a reduction in face-to-face social care, the visibility of vulnerable children was reduced enormously. As such, services and professionals who play an important role in identifying early signs of abuse and neglect were significantly hindered in their efforts to protect those children and referrals of vulnerable children to children's services dropped by 50% at the peak of lockdown. Many of these services were already under enormous pressure and struggling to cope with demand pre-pandemic. It is not apparent that the extent of the potential risk of harm to vulnerable children was understood by Government.
- **Increase in frequency and severity of risks and harms:** As a result of the national lockdowns, children living in cramped housing and in vulnerable family situations were left at increased risk. Between March 2020 and March 2021, local authorities reported increased concerns in relation to domestic abuse and violence; mental health difficulties among parents and children; neglect and emotional abuse; non-accidental injury; acute family crisis situations; and escalating risk in existing cases. This was highlighted in a report on domestic abuse I published [AL/38 - INQ000231343] and sent to relevant Ministers responsible for this portfolio.
- **Serious harm incidents:** The government's 2020-21 data on serious incident notifications found that from April to September 2020, there was a 31% rise in incidents of death or serious harm to children under 1 when compared with the

same period in 2019. The largest increases were seen amongst young children in the under 1 and 1-5 age groups. There was also an increase in serious harm incidents involving children with a disability as compared to the previous 6-month period [AL/39 - INQ000267963]. Social workers reported increasingly complex cases during this period [AL/40 - INQ000268029].

- **Vulnerable teenagers:** The disruption caused by Covid-19 was particularly worrying for teenagers ahead of critical exams and on the cusp of adulthood. In July, I highlighted that 120,000 teenagers - one in 25 of all teens in England - were already falling through gaps in education and social care provision even before Covid-19. These were young people who had experienced persistent absence from school, exclusions, alternative provision, dropping out of the school system in Year 11, or going missing from care. This was detailed in a published briefing in July 2020 and sent to relevant Ministers [AL/41 - INQ000231363]. A technical report was also published [AL/42 - INQ000231362]
- **Poverty, inequality and housing instability:** All were increasing pre-2020, and worsened as a result of the pandemic, resulting in significant psychological and behavioural implications on children. A July 2020 Association of Directors of Children's Services discussion paper, *Building a country that works for all children post Covid-19*, stated that the pandemic "exposed and heightened the impact of the stark disparities between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers." "Those who were already financially challenged and persistently disadvantaged have become more so, while many new families have been tipped into poverty for the first time due to job losses or reduced income. Food insecurity, unemployment, low wages, poor housing, no money for essentials such as shoes, coats and furniture, and insufficient money for essential bills. These challenges were already the norm for over four million children before the pandemic hit and these numbers have increased. We only need to look at the sharp upturn in free school meal applications to see the impact, and with a very uncertain economic future ahead of us, it's clear that the full effect of the pandemic is yet to be realised. Inequality has deepened, with differential impact in our diverse communities and areas where poverty was already rife. Those where poverty was already the norm have lives that are now even harder, and those who are facing challenges for the first time are going through the shock of the disruption this is having on their lives. [AL/43 - INQ000267961]. "

64. In March 2020, I wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and to Secretaries of State for the Department of Work and Pensions, MHLGC, and DfE, about plans to help vulnerable children through the crisis, and to ask for improved measures to get that help where it was most needed. I called for an increase in Child Benefit and automatic upfront payments for new Universal Credit claimants with children, temporary funding for food banks, alternative accommodation with families in B&Bs and suspended evictions for families renting private accommodation [AL/44 - INQ000231350, AL/45 - INQ000231351, AL/46 - INQ000231352].

Government responded to several of the issues raised in the communications during 2020 including emergency funding to support local authorities and support to help VCSE support communities during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Anecdotally, many local agencies raised concerns that emergency funding to local authorities was not being used proportionately for children and young people. In England, legislation preventing bailiff enforcement of evictions was in place from 17 November 2020 until 31 May 2021.

In relation to housing, I received a reply from the Minister for Housing in June saying Government has taken decisive action to support and protect families who are vulnerable to the economic impacts of Covid-19 [AL/47 - INQ000239690]

65. An uprating of child benefit by £20 a week in March 2020 was an important Government intervention to support vulnerable families with children. The Government's temporary ban on evictions also provided some security.

66. Whilst provision for free school meals was made in term time, there was less agreement over the provision of free school meal support in school holidays. In May, I wrote to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, about the supply of food during the coronavirus outbreak, particularly to vulnerable children. I received a reply from the Minister for Children reassuring me this was a priority [AL/48 INQ000239697].

I wrote to the Chancellor in June 2020 about children going hungry and the need to fund free school meals during the summer school holidays [AL/49 - INQ000231389]. The extension of the Holiday activities and food programme in 2021 provided further support for some children although it has been very focused on primary school children and only reaches a small portion of children living in low income households

67. In August 2020, I published a briefing on families in temporary accommodation during lockdown highlighting concerns about children who were homeless or at risk of eviction during the crisis [AL/50 - INQ000231355,AL/51 - INQ000231378]
68. In January 2021, I published a collection of essays on reducing child poverty highlighting that for the first time in decades, the education disadvantage gap between children in poverty and their peers had increased, while the disadvantage gap at age 19 had been increasing for several years. In short, for the first time in decades there was a double-whammy of rising child poverty and worsening life chances for children in poverty- brought on in part by Covid-19 [AL/52 - INQ000231392].
69. In March 2020, I wrote to the Home Secretary on the impact of Covid lockdown on migrant families [AL/53 - INQ000231390].
70. Whilst Government provided support to reduce risks for vulnerable families in a number of aspects, many families became increasingly vulnerable during this period .

Children in the public space

71. In March 2020, I wrote to both the Permanent Secretary for the Department for Education and the Permanent Secretary for the Department of Health and Social Care requesting additional safeguards for particular measures to ensure that children's rights and best interests were always upheld in relation to aspects of the Coronavirus Act. AL/54 - INQ000239683]

72. Whilst I appreciated that it was reasonable and necessary for the Government to seek emergency powers through the Coronavirus Act in order to protect public health, I was concerned that some of the legal protections for the most vulnerable children may be overturned in the enactment of the Act and therefore I requested additional safeguards for particular measures to ensure that children's rights and best interests were always upheld.
73. The Act introduced new powers to detain children on public health grounds, for a period of up to fourteen days. I was concerned that the Act allowed this to be done without consent from someone with responsibility for the child, and only required 'reasonable steps' to be taken to inform someone with responsibility of the detention. I asked to see protections for children in these circumstances strengthened, with timescales in place for when those with responsibility would be informed about a child's detention. I also requested that data was made available to me on all instances where a child was detained. I was assured that every effort would be made to ensure that the appropriate safeguarding was in place. Further to my request for clarification, government confirmed to me that the Public Health Officer's power to screen, assess, isolate or detain under the Coronavirus Act 2020 could only be exercised in the presence of a parent, carer or legal guardian. I have no records of any child being detained under this aspect of the Act.
74. As with many aspects to our country's response to Covid, my evidence showed that children's needs were not considered as needing special treatment when it came to children's use of public spaces. From the outset, we were allowed an hour of exercise a day and were not allowed to stop or stay in one place - something that children (who gain most of their exercise by playing) found difficult to relate to. In response to my request to Sage to clarify their focus on children's best interests, Chris Whitty Chief Medical Officer and Sir Patrick Valance, Government's Chief Scientific Adviser wrote to me in July to assure me that wherever possible SAGE discussions they sought to differentiate between the effects on children and adults. The potential for differential social distancing requirements for adults and children had not been considered by SAGE and no advice on the potential had been provided by SAGE to ministers. The advice from SAGE has been focused primarily on family groups and their interactions as opposed to the specific differences between adults and children [AL/55 INQ000239696].

75. The requirement for children to follow the same rules as adults continued with the introduction of the 'Rule of 6' in September 2020. The 'Rule' came into force across the UK, with restrictions placed on the number of people meeting up both indoors and outdoors. However, only England counted younger children as part of the six, with Wales and Scotland both ruling those under-12 exempt.
76. I intervened with a report which called for children under-12 to be exempt from the rule of six in England as well. Despite my, and many parliamentarian and expert's calls to exempt, government chose to continue to include them meaning that children were unable to play in groups and many were unable to see their grandparents or extended families for many months. This continued to have a major impact on children's mental and physical health.
77. In addition to exempting young children from the "rule of six", the report recommended excluding children under 12 from restrictions on individuals mixing with different households so they could continue to play together [AL/56 - INQ000231379]. This was also disregarded by decision makers.
78. I published a briefing on the potential and need for a major programme of summer scheme support in response to Covid. In June 2020 I wrote to the Prime Minister highlighting concerns about the continued closure of sports clubs, play schemes, holiday clubs and youth spaces, saying that children faced a chronic lack of safe and structured activities which would have an impact on mental and physical health and vulnerability to exploitation. I asked the PM to intervene to remove the bureaucracy and delays in giving clearance for summer schemes to proceed [AL/57 - INQ000239695]. Despite some interest from Ministers, only limited activities took place over the summer. [AL/58 - INQ000231365,
79. I also published a report on vulnerable teenagers at risk drawing particular attention to the dangers of teenagers in the public space being preyed upon by those wishing to exploit them. Overall, these warnings were not heeded by Ministers and we saw increased levels of teenage vulnerability. [AL/41 - INQ000231363].

Even before Covid hit in March 2020, almost 15,000 children had been referred to social services where gangs were a factor in their assessment in the previous year, a rise of 4,000 in twelve months. Those working with vulnerable children have

since reported the level of severity of problems become even higher - including a resurgence in knife crime and in teenagers turning up at A&E with stab wounds, more children struggling with mental health problems, with some unwilling to get back in to school. They have warned that safeguarding incidents have become more extreme. Youth workers who before the pandemic were dealing with weekly new cases involving teenagers and serious violence, or in danger of exploitation, now talk about daily increases in demand.

Children's social care

80. The pandemic also affected children who lived away from their parents - the 75,000 children in care. Many local authorities, foster carers and providers worked tirelessly during the pandemic to ensure that children in their care were well looked after and thriving. However, there was also a major risk that some children in care would fall out of sight. Lockdown restrictions meant that these children were cut off from seeing families and trusted professionals in-person for months on end. Care leavers and children living in unregulated accommodation were often at risk of loneliness and isolation, as well as not having the right support if they became ill or had to self-isolate. In March 2020, I wrote to the Permanent Secretaries of DfE and MHLGC regarding Covid and children in care [AL/59 - INQ000231353].

- Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020.

81. One Government decision I opposed strongly was the introduction of reduced regulations for social care during the pandemic.

82. It was clear to me that the potential risks and harm to children in care ought to have prompted government to strengthen children's social care safeguards during the pandemic in relation to services which were already under immense strain pre-2020. I therefore intervened when government chose to introduce reduced regulation for children's social care in relation to the Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020. I believed these significantly eroded the protection afforded to the most vulnerable children in care, Government figures show there were 223 child deaths involving abuse or neglect in 2020-21, up from 188 the previous year - a figure that also includes looked-after children. Contacts to the NSPCC's helpline from adults with concerns

about the wellbeing of a child increased by 23% from the previous year to a record high of almost 85,000 in 2020-21. In 2020-21, there were 536 serious incident notifications relating to children, up by 87 on the number for 2019-20, with the largest increase recorded in the first half of the year, when lockdown conditions were tightest [AL/02 - INQ000268039]

83. The passing of these regulation amendments in April 2020 made significant temporary changes to the legal protections for children in care. Under these amendments, the timescales for social workers to visit children in care were relaxed, along with timescales for care review meetings, independent visits to children's homes and Ofsted inspections (among other amendments). At a time of heightened anxiety, some of the most vulnerable children in the country could not be confident of seeing their social workers and Independent Reviewing Officers at regular intervals as they had previously.

I wrote to the Minister for Children a number of times and to the Secretary of State for Education raising concerns about the regulations downgrading the duties of councils towards children. [AL/60 - INQ000239691, AL/61 -INQ000239687]

I went on to ask the DfE and DHSC to require LAs and CCGs to report their use of the 'reasonable endeavours' duty which was set as a critical test for the level of services to be delivered during restrictions. The Minister, Vicky Ford, replied that it was for LAs and their health partners to apply this duty and to be held to account through the usual redress processes where they fail to do so. In a separate letter she told me 'I am clear that supporting children's social care services to ensure that, while they are under pressure from COVID-19, they have the right framework to enable them to prioritise safeguarding of children in the most effective way is hugely important. While the changes introduce greater operational flexibility for local authorities, they do not reduce or remove any responsibility that local authorities have towards children, nor should they be at the expense of the rights and protection of all children, and especially those that are most vulnerable.'" I received a number of responses from the Minister for Children reassuring me that decision were being taken in children's best interests [AL/62 - INQ000239684, AL/63 - INQ000239685, AL/64 INQ000239689]. I continued to believe that these arrangements placed vulnerable children at too great a risk and that they contributed to the increase in safeguarding incidents during the period

84. My intervention informed an application for judicial review which led to the Court of Appeal upholding the principle that the Government is under an obligation to consult the Children’s Commissioner in matters relating to the welfare of children at all times, including during the Covid pandemic (something they did not do) [AL/65 - INQ000231395]. That intervention informed challenges to the Regulations in parliament and led to pressure to repeal the decisions, some of which were ended earlier than originally planned. My statement on changes to regulations affecting children’s social care contained a detailed breakdown of the changes in practice to children living in care. The full statement and breakdown of changes demonstrated how risks to children were not adequately regarded. [AL/66 - INQ000231402]

There is evidence to suggest that the Covid-19 lockdown significantly hindered the ability of services to protect children from harm. In August 2023, speaking of the death of Jacob Crouch, a 10-month-old killed by his stepfather on 30 December 2020 after sustaining dozens of injuries, including at least 39 rib fractures, the NSPCC said:

“Jacob was one of 36 children who died in England following abuse and maltreatment at home in 2020. For large parts of the year, due to lockdowns, children were cut off from their usual support systems and the wider community, making those at risk of abuse more vulnerable to serious harm,”

Furthermore they said: “We are now starting to see the impact that lockdown has had on children’s social care and vulnerable children. What these cases show is that our deepest fears did come to fruition for some children and harm was taking place behind closed doors.”

Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, Star Hobson, Finley Boden and Jacob Crouch were all killed during a seven-month period in 2020 after being subjected to sustained abuse by adults who were supposed to be caring for them. In May 2022, Government published the findings of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel into the murders of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson. Both young children died during the period of lockdowns and reduced regulations. [AL/67 INQ000270156]

Serious case reviews into the deaths of Finlay and Jacob have not yet been published.

85. I continued to monitor and put forward advice on children's social care during 2020. In June I wrote to the Children's Minister with concerns over children in secure children's homes. In her response the Minister assured me was a priority [AL/68 - INQ000239694].

In November I delivered a major speech on the future of children's social care [AL/69 - INQ000231335]. The speech was delivered alongside the publication of a number of reports on stability in the care system, unregulated accommodation and private provision of children's homes. [AL/70 - INQ000231364, AL/71 - INQ000231383, AL/72 - INQ000231367].

86. In January 2021, I published a briefing on children invisible to social care during lockdown drawing attention to the children who were living with major risk factors and highlighting an inconsistent and varied approach from local authorities - with some taking insufficient action to find children who were suffering behind closed doors, despite statutory expectations to do this. Local authorities had access to emergency funding for social care, but much of it was focused on adult social care [AL/73 - INQ000231366].

Health. and well being

87. While children were less at risk of becoming seriously ill due to Covid-19, the secondary impacts of the pandemic severely affected children's health. Even before the Covid pandemic, it was understood that the country was experiencing an epidemic of children's mental health problems and a children's mental health service that, though improving, was still unable to provide the help hundreds of thousands of children required.
88. It is widely accepted that lockdown and school closures had an extremely detrimental effect on the mental health of many children. In a study undertaken in July 2020, the NHS estimated that one in six children in England had a probable mental health condition, an increase from one in nine. Mental Health of

Children and Young People in England, 2020: Wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey - NHS Digital. [AL/74 - INQ000270155].

89. In the early days of the pandemic, in response to a survey, over a quarter of children told my office that they had felt more stressed about their mental or physical health since the start of lockdown [AL/75 - INQ000231359]. The withdrawal of structure and support in many children's lives, the closure of schools, reduced physical activity and wider family stress as well as the loneliness caused by the inability to see friends had a severe impact on some children's mental health.
90. Throughout, I argued for measures and interventions to reduce the impact of the pandemic on children's mental health and wellbeing. In the longer term, I argued that the Government's 'building back better' plans must include a rocket boost in funding for children's mental health, to expand services and eliminate the postcode lottery of services. As an absolute minimum, I proposed that all schools should be provided with an NHS-funded counsellor, either in school or online. A report I published in January 2021 set out the scale of the challenge and put forward recommendations for ambitious improvements to the children's mental health support [Exhibit AL/76 - INQ000231380].
91. The scale of the damage to children and young people's mental health has been well evidenced since.
92. Lockdown also had an impact on wider public health. A survey of 14-19-year-olds in July found that 40% were snacking more. This, combined with the loss of PE lessons and cancelled sports meant that children's physical as well as mental health was suffering.
93. Health support for babies and new parents faced particular reductions. In some areas, birth registrations were cancelled during the initial lockdown which created practical problems for some families. Furthermore, many new families faced significant reductions in support. Public health guidance meant reduced contact with family, friends and informal support networks, as well as changes to formal support services. The guidance for health visitors was for new birth visits to take place over the phone, and visits to older babies and toddlers to stop, unless families had been identified as vulnerable. Face-to-face contact can be a vital time

to pick up on additional needs and provide help, or to make a referral to other services. I shone a light on these issues in 2020 in a report on lockdown babies which advised that a much stronger support offer for babies and their families was required [AL/77 - INQ000231354]. Some changes were made to health visiting practice in the latter part of 2020 to reflect initial concerns and experiences. There was also less capacity in the system to treat children for conditions other than Covid-19.

Children in custody and inpatient mental health wards

94. From the start of the pandemic, I raised serious concerns about the care of children living in secure accommodation, particularly those in inpatient mental health wards and youth custody. In March 2020, I wrote to the Lord Chancellor asking him to review the status of all children due to be released in the next six months, children aged under-14 and children in custody for non-violent offences to consider who could be safely managed in the community, reduce the number of children on remand in the secure estate, introduce a temporary moratorium on short sentences for children, reduce solitary isolation and urgently push through the technological capability to facilitate skype/Whatsapp/zoom family visits for children to further support their wellbeing [Exhibit AL/78 - INQ000231339].

In May I published a report on children in custody during lockdown writing to the Lord Chancellor raising concerns about conditions for children in Young Offenders Institutions (YOIs) and Secure Training Centres (STCs). I wrote to the Lord Chancellor in May raising these concerns [AL/79 INQ000239688].

In June, the Minister of State for Justice responded stating that whilst safety remained their paramount concern, work was underway to look at 'recovery' from Covid-19. She went on to reassure me that over the coming weeks and months, they would look to restart aspects of daily life for children and young people, such as social visits and increased education, with adaptations where necessary to ensure safety [AL/80 - INQ000239692]

95. During the first lockdown, many of these children were forced to go months without seeing their families or loved ones or receiving face to face education. In youth custody children were in some cases only spending an hour or two a day out of their cells. I was deeply shocked by this situation and raised immediate concerns

with the Government, Youth Custody Service, and the NHS. Despite NHS England, DfE guidance and the Youth Custody Service guidance stating that all children were entitled to receive family visits (albeit with a preference for virtual visits), and to receive face to face education, this was often not happening in practice. In July 2020, I expressed concerns about amended statutory regulations for STCs [Exhibit AL/81 - INQ000231376].

96. In February 2021, I published a briefing [Exhibit AL/82 - INQ000231346] raising concerns about children living in secure accommodation, particularly those in inpatient mental health wards and youth custody. I wrote to Vicky Ford MP, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, Lucy Frazer QC MP, Minister of State, Ministry of Justice and Nadine Dorries MP, Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health raising concerns and asking what the Government's plans were for ensuring vulnerable children in secure settings have access to education in person, family visiting, and time outside [AL/71 - INQ000231383].

It was clear to me that the youth custody service was operating under emergency arrangements designed first and foremost for the adult prison population. Research undertaken by Manchester Metropolitan University on young people's experience of custody during Covid, shows that whilst there was some incremental progress over the course of the pandemic crisis, many of these issues remained with a devastating impact on children in custody.

Manchester Metropolitan University identified a consistent theme about the lack of information, understanding and focus on children during the pandemic. "The majority of children in penal establishments have been subjected to awful conditions for months on end, deprived of education, visits and contact, and amounting to solitary confinement. The harms experienced by children in custody, and the impacts on their longer-term health and wellbeing must be fully assessed and supported effectively." The daily experiences of children in custody during the COVID-19 pandemic have been described by secure estate inspectors as 'bleak'.

The MoJ and Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) published a national framework for the easing of restrictions, but concerns were raised that

the specific needs of children had not been clearly articulated and a clear, separate plan for the children's estate was lacking.

Witness Name:
Statement No.:
Exhibits:
Dated:

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ANNE LONGFIELD CBE

I, Anne Longfield, will say as follows: -

1. The UK Government did not give adequate regard or priority to children's best interests in the response to the covid pandemic.
2. Government did not adequately heed advice or evidence on the impact of the pandemic on children's wellbeing or life chances in its decision making.
3. Government did not provide adequate resources to mitigate the impact of the covid pandemic on children, or help them recover from the negative impact of the emergency. This is especially the case for disadvantaged children.

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: 18th September 2023

Appendix 1

COVID CORRESPONDENCE AND PUBLICATIONS TIMELINE

Date	Correspondence/Publication
16/03/20	Letter from AL to Permanent Secretaries of DfE and MHLGC regarding Covid and children in care. INQ000231353
19/03/20	Letter from AL to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, copied to SoS for DWP, MHLGC, DfE, calling for an increase in Child Benefit and automatic upfront payments for new UC claimants with children, temporary funding for food banks, find alternative accommodation with families in B&Bs, suspend evictions for families renting private accommodation. INQ000231350
24/03/20	Letter to SoS MHCLG and SoS for DfE calling for families in temporary accommodation/B&Bs to move to more suitable accommodation, and to commit that any hotel or property business receiving Government support, or wage subsidies, in the next few months will have to commit to housing families at cost. INQ000231352
25/03/20	Letter to Lord Chancellor to review the status of all children due to be released in the next six months, children aged under 14 and children in for non-violent offences to consider who could be safely managed in the community, reduce the number of children on remand in the secure estate, a temporary moratorium on short sentences for children, reducing solitary isolation, urgently push through the technological capability to facilitate skype/Whatsapp/zoom visits for children to further support their wellbeing. INQ000231339
26/3/20	

	Published letters to the Permanent Secretary for the Department for Education and the Permanent Secretary for the Department of Health and Social Care requesting additional safeguards for particular measures to ensure that children's rights and best interests are always upheld. INQ000231396
27/03/20	Published children's guide to Coronavirus. INQ000231347
27/03/20	Letter to Home Secretary on impact of Covid lockdown on migrant families. INQ000231390
02/4/20	Published briefing on impact of domestic violence on children including during lockdown. INQ000231343
27/03/20	Published briefing on the impact of school closure on learning loss and the educational gap of disadvantaged children. INQ000231403 INQ000231361
25/04/20 30/4/20	Published analysis of data by local area showing the extent of child vulnerability in each local authority area of England. INQ000231369 Statement in response to the 'Adoption and Children (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020' INQ000231402
02/4/20	Published briefing about children born during Covid lockdown and the impact of restrictions on families and their babies. INQ000231354

12/05/20	Published serious concerns about the regulations that came into effect on 1 May, downgrading the duties of councils towards children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs). INQ000231398
16/05/20	Published briefing on children's safe return to school following Covid lockdown. INQ000231368
17/05/20	INQ000231382 INQ000231407 Changes to SEND duties. INQ000231371
29/5/20	Published report into children in custody during lockdown. INQ000239688
02/6/20	Published briefing on impact of Covid on young apprentices. INQ000231370
08/6/20	Letter to the Chancellor regarding the funding of Free School Meals. INQ000231389
09/5/20	Published briefing on summer scheme support in response to Covid. INQ000231365
09/5/20	Published report on teenagers falling through the gaps. INQ000231363. INQ000231362
02/6/20	Statement expressing concerns about amended statutory regulations for STCs. INQ000231376
17/07/20	Publication of report into early years provision and technical reports. INQ000231342

	<p>INQ000231340</p> <p>INQ000231341</p> <p>INQ000231360</p>
05/8/20	<p>Published briefing setting out actions needed to ensure children are at the heart of planning future Covid lockdowns.</p> <p>INQ000231356</p> <p>INQ000231373</p>
16/08/20	<p>Joint letter to Universities UK from BINOC to honour places to students with reply.</p> <p>INQ000231405</p> <p>INQ000231406</p>
21/08/20	<p>Published briefing on families in temporary accommodation during lockdown.</p> <p>INQ000231355</p> <p>INQ000231378</p>
24/8/20	<p>Published back to school guide for children. INQ000231336</p>
Sept 20	<p>Published report on stress among children in the pandemic.</p> <p>INQ000231359</p>
10/9/20	<p>Published report on young people living in unregulated accommodation.</p> <p>INQ000231367</p>
29/9/20	<p>Publication of 'Childhood in the Time of Covid' report.</p> <p>INQ000231345</p>
21/10/20	<p>Published briefing on children on inpatient wards during Covid.</p>

	INQ000231349
22/10/20	Published briefing on school attendance. INQ000231357
11/11/20	Published reports on stability in the care system and private provision of children's homes. INQ000231364
24/11/20	AL speech on the future of children's social care. INQ000231335
22/10/20	Publish report into children living in secure accommodation. INQ000231346
24/11/20	Published briefing on school attendance since September. INQ000273637
22/12/20	Published report on the youth justice system. INQ000231338
06/1/21	Letter to SoS for Education following national lockdown of schools. INQ000231385 INQ000231397
18/01/21	Letter from BINOC to the Chair of the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation about the prioritisation of teachers and other key workers. INQ000231393
18/01/21	Published report on child poverty. INQ000231392 INQ000231372

24/01/21	Published briefing on at risk children invisible to social care during lockdown. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/too-many-at-risk-children-are-still-invisible-to-social-care/ INQ000231366
25/01/21	Joint letter with Solace to the Prime Minister Boris Johnson, urging him to set-out a roadmap for the reopening of schools to all pupils. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/news/our-joint-letter-with-solace-urging-the-pm-to-set-out-a-roadmap-to-reopen-schools/ INQ000231388].
25/01/21	Published briefing setting out a roadmap for reopening schools. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/roadmap-to-reopening-schools/ INQ000231399
28/1/21	Publication of annual children's mental health services report. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/news/damage-to-childrens-mental-health-caused-by-covid-crisis-could-last-for-years-without-a-large-scale-increase-for-childrens-mental-health-services/ https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2021/01/cco-the-state-of-childrens-mental-health-services-2020-21.pdf INQ000273638
05/2/21	Published briefing on the detention of unaccompanied child asylum seekers. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/detention-of-unaccompanied-children-arriving-in-kent-during-2020/ INQ000231348
05/2/21	Published report into county lines, gangs and keeping children safe from harm and exploitation. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/still-not-safe/ INQ000231358

	https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/news/children-will-keep-dying-on-our-streets-until-there-is-a-joined-up-public-health-response-to-gangs/ INQ000231375
17/02/21	AL final speech as Children's Commissioner. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/media-centre/building-back-better-reaching-englands-left-behind-children/ INQ000231337 INQ000231344
26/2/21	Letter to Vicky Ford MP, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, Lucy Frazer QC MP, Minister of State, Ministry of Justice and Nadine Dorries MP, Minister for Patient Safety, Suicide Prevention and Mental Health regarding concerns about children in living in secure accommodation, particularly those in inpatient mental health wards and youth custody. Published alongside a report into children in custody during lockdown. INQ000231346

Additional evidence

INQ000239683	2020-03-25_Letter to Jonathan Slater.docx
INQ000239684	2020-04-16_Vicky Ford MP.pdf
INQ000239684	2020-05-05_Vicky Ford MP.pdf
INQ000239686	2020-05-06_Chris Philp.docx
INQ000239683	2020-05-12_Letter to Vicky Ford MP.docx
INQ000239683	2020-05-20_Letter to Robert Buckland.docx

INQ000239689	2020-05-28_Vicky Ford MP.pdf
INQ000239690	2020-06-02_Luke Hall MP.pdf
INQ000239691	2020-06-04_Letter to Gavin Williamson and Vicky Ford MP.docx
INQ000239692	2020-06-12_Lucy Frazer QC MP.pdf
INQ000239692	2020-06-17_Grant Shapps.pdf
INQ000239694	2020-06-18_Vicky Ford MP.pdf
INQ000239690	2020-06-30_Letter to PM.docx
INQ000239690	2020-07-08_CMO.pdf
INQ000239690	2020-07-24_Vicky Ford MP.pdf
INQ000239698	2020-11-09_Letter to Nick Gibb.docx
INQ000239690	2020-11-16_Nick Gibb MP.pdf
INQ000239690	2020-12-03_Letter to Matt Hancock.docx
INQ000239701	2021-01-29_Nadhim Zahawi MP.pdf
INQ000239701	2021-05-20_Letter to PM.docx

Appendix 2

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER EVIDENCE TO SELECT COMMITTEES

Please find the links to the PDF files from Hansard below. Please note that the dates in the first column refer to the date where oral evidence was given where applicable. Where only written evidence was given, this refers to the date it was submitted.

Date	Select Committee	Topic	Oral	Written
15 April 2020	Home Affairs	Home Office preparedness for Covid-19	INQ000231387	n/a
30 April 2020	Housing, Communities & Local Government	Impact of Covid-19 on homelessness and the private rented sector	n/a	INQ000231387 INQ000231413
3 June 2020	Education	The impact of Covid-19 on the disadvantage gap	Link	INQ000231404
10 June 2020	Public Services	Public services: lessons from coronavirus	Link	INQ000231334
23 June 2020	Joint Committee on Human Rights	The Government's Response to Covid-19: human rights implications	n/a	INQ000231410
14 July 2020	Justice	Children and Young People in Custody	INQ000231384	n/a
30 September 2020	Women & Equalities Committee	Impact of Coronavirus on children's education	INQ000231408	n/a
6 October 2020	Education	Accountability Hearing	INQ000231384	n/a

6 November 2020	Education	Home Education	n/a	INQ000231412
9 December 2020	DWP	DWP's response to the coronavirus outbreak	INQ000231409	
6 January 2021	Education	Prison education	n/a	INQ000231411
21 January 2021	Petitions Committee	Child food poverty	INQ000231409	n/a
February 2021	Education	The impact of COVID-19 on education and children's services	n/a	INQ000231414