

Witness Name: Daniel Alexander Paskins

Statement No: 1

Exhibits:

Dated: 15-09-2023

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF
DANIEL ALEXANDER PASKINS
DIRECTOR OF UK IMPACT AT SAVE THE CHILDREN UK

I, Daniel Alexander Paskins, Director of UK Impact for Save the Children Fund will say as follows:

1. I am the Director of UK Impact at Save the Children Fund ("SCUK"). I joined SCUK in May 2020, shortly after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. I lead on SCUK's work to help children and families in all four nations of the UK with a focus on reducing child poverty and ensuring every child has the best start in life. SCUK is part of the global Save the Children movement which works to advance children's rights across the world, and to ensure all children can survive, learn and be protected. I am the Vice Chair of the End Child Poverty Coalition, an alliance of over eighty organisations campaigning for an end to child poverty. I am also a trustee of the Mayday Trust, a charity that campaigns using strength-based and person-led approaches to help people through tough times. Prior to this work, I worked for the UK's largest grant funder of community action for local and national anti-poverty charities and as a local councillor with lead responsibility for social inclusion.
2. This statement is written based on my own experiences in my role at SCUK. We work collaboratively with many other organisations concerned with children's rights and therefore at times I express views that I believe echo those of others working in the same sector.
3. In this statement I will first address some of the issues that SCUK identified prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, which have particular relevance to the high level political and administrative decisions taken during the pandemic. My view and the position of

SCUK is that children's rights and wellbeing are not considered as a priority by decision-makers in the UK government, and that this has been the case for many years. This is evidenced by the fact that 31% of children in England were growing up in poverty on the eve of the pandemic¹ a lack of consideration of the impact on children when making decisions or policies, and the lack of any kind of joined up, cross-departmental national strategy to advance children's rights and wellbeing.²

4. This resulted in little resilience for many children and families, especially those living in poverty to cope with, and to bounce back from the stresses caused by both of the pandemic itself, as well as the resulting measures taken by government such as the Non—Pharmaceutical Interventions (“NPIs”).
5. The second part of my statement deals with what we experienced at SCUK during the pandemic. This is set out in more detail in our Rule 9 response, and this statement does not seek to repeat or replace that. It is my view, and that of SCUK, that the Covid Regulations, lockdown rules, guidance, messaging and specific decision-making failed to recognise the impact on many aspects of children's rights or to consider their needs. This, in my view, was the result of a systemic failure that existed pre-pandemic to properly consider children and not just a failure of government to make fully considered decisions in a time of crisis.
6. Finally, I have read the statement of Louise King, Co-Lead for Just for Kids Law (JFKL) and Director of the Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE). SCUK, CRAE and JFKL are joint core participants in the Inquiry, have worked closely on a number of issues and share the same concerns about the children's rights both pre and post pandemic. Louise King's statement sets out in more detail the government structures that exist to consider children's needs, and addresses the importance of Child Rights Impact Assessments and the incorporation of key children's rights within government. I agree with Louise King's statement, and do not repeat the

¹ DWP Statistics on Below Average Income Families
<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2022>

² <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5802/cmselect/cmworpen/188/report.html>

points that she makes here, but rely on the matters set out in her statement to support the conclusions that I have drawn.

Children's Rights Pre-Pandemic

7. Austerity hit children and families the hardest, with many of the benefit cuts hitting children and families the hardest, such as the “two-child limit”, and the “benefit cap”. Almost a third of children were living in poverty in March 2020.³ Children from Black and minority ethnic groups are more likely to be in poverty: 48 per cent were in poverty in 2021/2022, compared with 25 per cent of children in white British families.⁴
8. Analysing the economic impact across households of over 40 cutbacks to, and changes in, benefits and tax credits introduced between 2010 and 2016, the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) and Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) found couple families with children are on average £2080 a year worse off with the figure at £1940 for lone-parent families. Families already at greatest risk of poverty — larger families, families with young children, families with disabled adults and/or children, and those in which parents are low-paid or work part-time — financially lose the most.”⁵
9. My experience of speaking to civil servants and politicians in my role at SCUK informs my view that we have very adult-oriented systems, institutions, and attitudes towards the issues that impact children in England. Discussions of high level political and administrative decisions between politicians and other decision-makers, and in the media, tend to focus on issues such as how children impact adult lives, and what is needed to ensure children can become productive workers and members of society once they become adults. For example, where children's needs are considered is mainly in education, and the focus is often on ensuring children pass exams, and develop the tools to become productive adults. Whilst these are laudable aims, it is a very narrow vision of childhood. There is no national strategy for play, the

³ <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/global/reports/advocacy/a-fair-start-for-every-child.pdf>

⁴ <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/child-poverty-facts-and-figures>

⁵ <https://social-policy.org.uk/50-for-50/austerity-children/>

importance of which is outlined further in Louise King's statement, and the only minister at Cabinet level with a portfolio including children is tellingly, the Secretary of State for Education.

10. This can further be evidenced both through the lack of specific approaches such as Children's Rights Impact Assessments (CRIA) for policy development, and the absence of analysis of impacts on children in the key documents that officials prepare for ministerial decision-making. Although Equality Impact Assessments do sometimes include aspects relating to children, they are not sufficient. Louise King's statement covers CRIA in more detail.
11. There are approximately 14 million children⁶ in the UK, forming nearly a quarter of the population, and the needs and considerations for children in policy making are quite distinct from those of adults.
12. The lack of consideration of children's needs is problematic at any time, but is particularly harmful during a crisis when major decisions are being taken at speed and based on imperfect information, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 Pandemic

13. It was clear to me and others I spoke to, who work to support children and families throughout the pandemic, that key political and administrative decisions taken were seriously flawed, because children and young people's rights and wellbeing were not sufficiently considered by decision-makers.
14. One example of this was the lack of clarification in the early days of the pandemic around the right of children to play outside. Whilst exercise was permitted, it was not sufficiently clear for some time that exercise included play and many families were discouraged from allowing their children outside or even reprimanded by the police for doing so. I have read the Rule 9 response from the organisation Playing

⁶ <https://data.unicef.org/how-many/how-many-children-under-18-are-there-in-the-uk/>

Out that sets out the necessity of play for children in more detail and endorse its response.

15. This lack of consideration of children and young people's rights and wellbeing caused unnecessary harm during the pandemic which could have been mitigated. It continues to cause harm which will last for decades if action is not taken and will undermine responses to future crises unless lessons are learned and changes made.
16. Children's experiences of the pandemic were universal, but not uniform. Every child suffered disruption to their learning, and made sacrifices to slow the spread of the virus. However, those who were already affected by structural and societal inequalities were much more likely to experience greater hardship during the pandemic. Key political and administrative decisions failed to consider the intersections between different kinds of disadvantage, and hence the response to the pandemic widened pre-existing inequalities.
17. This is not about individual decision-makers, but is a structural and systemic issue. Module 1 of the Inquiry highlighted numerous examples where decisions taken before the pandemic undermined preparedness.
18. Our experience of the Covid pandemic reflects the comment by Professor David Alexander in the Module 1 hearings that a pandemic "*is half a medical epidemiological problem and half a socio-economic one*"⁷. However, we also heard from him that the UK Government Resilience Framework of December 2022 has "*no mention of gender, of people with disabilities, of the elderly, or of ethnic and cultural minorities, and yet all of these are essential issues.*"⁸
19. Further, in Module 1 we heard that we had bad outcomes from Covid due to pre-existing health inequalities, and the lack of resilience in public health. Dame Sally Davies pointed out that 25% of children in year 6 are obese. It is not just health inequalities, but inequalities across the board, that meant that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to have access to green spaces, to

⁷ Professor David Alexander, page 200 transcript 15th June 2023

⁸ Professor David Alexander, page 118 transcript 15th June 2023

computer equipment/internet, that simply were not sufficiently taken into account, and this affected the resilience of families.

20. These matters (explored in Module 1's public hearings) together with the lack of engagement with the government's own Equality Hub when considering how the NPIs impacted different groups, as explained by Marcus Bell in his evidence, clearly demonstrate the deep-rooted problems which contributed to poor quality political and administrative decisions in times of crisis.
21. This goes beyond poor quality political and administrative decision-making in general, but it is my view that the structural problems relating to children, which I have addressed in paras 7-15 above, meant that in addition to poor quality decision-making, children were especially ignored.
22. Nor is this a matter of hindsight – there are numerous examples of decision-makers ignoring the advice of experts and campaigners raised during the pandemic. To take just three examples, if it was clear to footballer Marcus Rashford that more support was needed to prevent children going hungry, clear to Sir Kevan Collins that £15bn needed to be spent on education recovery, and clear to teachers that allocating exam results by algorithm would reinforce inequalities, then there is no real justification why decision-makers were not aware of all of these issues at the time.
23. I recognise that decision-makers had to make decisions quickly, acting from imperfect information and weighing up a balance of risks. This makes it all the more important to have proper and consistent processes for considering children's rights and ensuring that people who are experts in children's wellbeing are "in the room" when decisions are taken.
24. Over the next two months, we will be hearing from those decision-makers and experts whose decisions did most to shape the UK's response to the pandemic. It is revealing that the Inquiry team have decided that the Secretary of State for Education is not included in those key decision-makers.
25. Some of the specific examples that illustrate the concerns raised above include the lack of consideration as to how child protection concerns would continue to be

identified and addressed – which may then have fed into e.g. a 20% fall in referrals to children’s social services during the first months of the first lockdown ([LGA 2020](#)).

26. The impact of lockdown on children began at the very start of life, and impacted on babies and their families as outlined by Kirsty McNeill⁹ in her chapter “The Movement of Good Childhoods: How Can We Put Children at the Heart of Our National Life?”, in “Children’s Experiences, Participation and Rights during Covid-19, edited by Ruby Turok-Squire:

“Starting at the very beginning of life, the implications of coronavirus restrictions for maternity services have been enormous. According to research (Pregnant Then Screwed, 2020) conducted with 15,000 pregnant women by campaign group Pregnant then Screwed, 90% of expectant mums say that hospital restrictions around partner accompaniment have had a negative impact on their mental health. The ‘But Not Maternity Alliance’ found that 75% of services in England (Birthrights, 2021) prevented partners from attending antenatal services.

Once babies came home, many of them did not meet aunts, uncles, cousins, neighbours and family friends who would normally be part of an extended network of support. We know in particular that grandparents can play a very important role in children’s wellbeing (University of Oxford, 2010) but nearly a million UK grandparents have been unable to meet a new arrival (Shaw, 2021). If they are a first-born, children may never have seen another child and the world visible from their pram is one of masked giants who hurry past one another and neither converse nor touch. Policy, long subject to the so-called baby blind-spot, was slow to catch-up, with 78% of survey respondents in First 1001 Days Movement/Parent-Infant Foundation research saying that the government in their nation had “not taken action to ensure that families with babies under two received the support they needed during lockdown” (Reed & Parish, 2021).

The suspension of playgroups and local classes hit new parents particularly hard. Royal Foundation research (Beaver et al., 2020) found that ‘parental loneliness’ went from 38% pre-pandemic to 63%, with parents in the most deprived areas more than twice as likely as those in the least to say they feel lonely often or always, while research published in the Lancet suggested that “being young, a woman, and living with children, especially preschool age children, have had a particularly strong influence on the extent to which mental distress increased under the conditions of the pandemic” (Pierce et al., 2020).”

27. School closures for the vast majority of children appear to have been at the forefront of the government’s mind when considering how to deal with a pandemic. Whilst a lockdown such as we had in March 2020 had not previously been seriously contemplated, school closures were mentioned in the 2011 Hine Strategy for Flu, and

⁹ Executive Director of Policy, Advocacy and Campaigns at SCUK

in Operation Cygnus there was a recommendation (never carried out) that planning be done at government level for school closures.

28. This demonstrates the readiness and willingness of government to close schools for most children, at a time when no such severe restrictions were contemplated for adult life. Whilst there may be occasions where this is appropriate or necessary, it is important that the implications for children's lives are properly considered before taking such a momentous step.
29. School closures along with the lockdowns and other impacts of the Covid pandemic were a deeply traumatic time for many children and families. Pre-existing inequalities were heightened or increased. SCUK are therefore supportive of extra measures to ensure that if schools are closed in the future as part of a crisis response, there should be much stronger oversight and scrutiny by parliament, and consideration and mitigation of the impact on children.
30. The lack of planning (either pre-pandemic when school closures had been contemplated or in the course of managing the response to the pandemic) coupled with the lack of proper consideration or focus early on in the pandemic on how children's learning could continue during the first lockdown exacerbated the harm done by those school closures. There were no expectations placed on schools about remote teaching; schools were not provided with any guidance, equipment or additional resources to support remote teaching; and efforts to ensure children had access to appropriate technology to facilitate remote learning was painfully slow and inadequate. There were significant variations in the proportions of children classified as "vulnerable" who attended schools, with no national strategy to ensure that every child who was entitled to attend school was able to do so.
31. Soft play centres for young children were one of the last sectors to receive advice about reopening, months after pubs for adults had reopened.
32. I acknowledge that there were times during the pandemic when political and administrative decisions needed to be taken for some wider purpose, which had a

negative impact on children. And, of course, children's experiences of the pandemic were not uniform either – what was good for some children was harmful for others¹⁰.

33. In July 2020, Save the Children brought together a range of people from business, government, education and charities to share their ideas for responding to the pandemic. The discussions noted that, “Just as we were able to build Nightingale Hospitals to give the NHS capacity at the height of the pandemic, so we could build Alan Turing catch up schools, requisition the spaces that we need to provide face to face education and learning opportunities in a safe way, and a National Education Broadcasting Service providing educational content which is accessible without requiring an internet connection”¹¹. The pandemic was a time when ambitious new ideas such as furlough were developed and implemented within weeks. Yet government lacked that level of ambition and creativity when it came to children.

34. However, in cases where decisions needed to be taken which had an adverse effect on some or all children, there was a failure to sufficiently consider what mitigations could have been implemented. There is increasing evidence of lasting harm to children's social, emotional, speech and language development in the early years; to levels of attendance at schools; to children's physical and mental health – all as a direct result of the decisions taken during the pandemic and the failure to take action to mitigate the impact of these decisions. Without action being taken, this will cause harm that will persist throughout children's lives and have an impact for decades to come. The findings of this Inquiry are not simply a matter of examining what happened in the past; but are critical to recognise the debt that all adults owe to children for the sacrifices they made, and as a call to action to make good and repair the ways in which children have been failed.

¹⁰ <https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/blogs/2020/life-during-lockdown#!>

¹¹ https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/content/dam/gb/reports/life_under_lockdown_report.pdf

Statement of Truth

35. I believe 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.

Dated:

Signed: _____

Daniel Alexander Paskins