

Witness Name: Iona Colvin

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: IC

Dated: 27 December 2023

## **UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

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### **WITNESS STATEMENT OF Iona Colvin**

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**In relation to the issues raised by the Rule 9 request dated 20 June 2023 in connection with Module 2a, I, Iona Colvin, will say as follows: -**

1. I, Iona Colvin of Saint Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh, EH1 3DG have been the Chief Social Work Adviser (CSWA) to the Scottish Government (SG) since April 2017 (BA Honours in Social Sciences, Post Graduate Diploma in Social Work). Before joining the Scottish Government, I worked in local government and health boards in Scotland for 34 years and ultimately held senior posts for ten years including Director of Social Work and Director of Health and Social Care. As Chief Social Work Adviser I provide advice to Scottish Ministers and senior policy officials and work with the social work and care sector to develop and implement policy and services across Scotland. In Scotland this role covers adults, children and families and criminal justice social work and these functions are discharged in practice by local government.
2. From the 23 March 2020 until the end of September 2020 I was also asked to take on the role of interim Director of Children and Families within the Scottish Government when the existing director, Michael Chalmers was moved to cover the role of Director for Shielding. This responsibility was in addition to my role as Chief Social Work Adviser. From October 2020 I returned to my substantive role as Chief Social Work Adviser and continue to hold this role to date.

3. I have prepared this statement myself by reference to records and material provided to me by the Scottish Government. I have also received assistance from the Scottish Government Covid Inquiry Information Governance Division.
4. Unless stated otherwise, the facts stated in this witness statement are within my own knowledge and are true. Where they are not within my own knowledge, they are derived from sources to which I refer and are true to the best of my knowledge and belief.
5. References to exhibits in this statement are in the form [IC/number - INQ000000].

**Pre-Lockdown (January 2020 – end March 2020)**

6. The first time I really became aware of Covid-19 was late January 2020 when the Scottish Government Resilience Room (SGoRR) called a meeting of officials to consider issues relating to the Coronavirus and the Director for Children and Families was invited but could not attend and asked for someone to deputise. This followed the WHO declaration of a public health emergency of International Concern and the UK Medical Officers increasing the threat from low to moderate. During this time, I had no involvement in discussion directly with, or the provision of advice, to the UK Government.
7. From then on, I became increasingly involved in various meetings where Covid-19 was raised including:
  - 21 February 2020, Integrated Joint Board Chief Officers with the Cabinet Secretary for Health where Derek Grieve provided a short update relating to Coronavirus.
  - Various discussions with Deputy Director for Adult Social Care, Jamie MacDougall to consider how we should respond to the increasing threat of a pandemic in relation to social care arrangements.
  - At the beginning of March 2020 there was discussion around actions required in relation to Care Homes and the Director General wrote to local authority and health board chief executives on the 13 March 2020 regarding admissions to Care Homes and visiting arrangements. I was not involved in direct discussions with Ministers regarding this advice.

8. We were also considering the implications of a possible UK Covid-19 Bill for social work duties within Scotland, particularly the duty to assess need and to increase the social work workforce by the establishment of a temporary social work register.
9. Submissions to Ministers providing advice in relation to the social services workforce included:
  - The inclusion of a temporary social work register as part of the UK Covid-19 Bill (SGLD submissions)
  - Proposed suspension of Social Work Student Practice Placements, following similar announcements in teaching [IC/001-INQ000222986]
  - Submission on letter of advice to local Chief Social Work Officers (CSWOs) on service prioritisation (issued 18 March 2020) [IC/002-INQ000249489]
  - Specific Ministerial advice regarding the registration of social workers and changes in regulatory practice for social services workforce [IC/003-INQ000222987, IC/003a INQ000222988]
  - Submission on the easement of Local Authority Social Care Assessments on the 31 March 2020 (submitted via DG Health). I discussed this latter submission with the Deputy First Minister (DFM) and the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport on the 2<sup>nd</sup> April by telephone [IC/004 INQ000222989, IC/004a INQ000222990].
10. On the 23 March I was asked to take over as Director of Children and Families when the existing Director, Michael Chalmers, was moved to become Director of Shielding. I undertook this role on an interim basis while continuing as Chief Social Work Adviser. To help me fulfil both roles we appointed a Deputy Chief Social Work Adviser (DCSWA), Bill Alexander, who led the Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser (OCSWA) team and I worked with the Deputy Directors in Children and Families to cover this policy area. However, I did retain overall responsibility across both policy areas.
11. During the week beginning 23 March 2020 we began to increase our contact with partners across local government and the children's care sector as well as the social work sector. Key partners where we instigated regular and at least weekly contact included the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA), Social Work Scotland

(SWS) who represented Chief Social Work Officers of Local Authorities, Scottish Association of Social Work (SASW), Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) and the Centre for Excellence in Children's care and Protection (CELCIS), the Care Inspectorate (CI) and the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC).

12. During this period, we worked with our partners to develop guidance for the workforce and support to implement measures to protect vulnerable children and young people and adults for social work and social care in relation to the UK Coronavirus emergency legislation and the Scottish Coronavirus Emergency legislation. We also spent much of our time picking up issues from frontline colleagues around key workers guidance, face coverings, PPE, staffing concerns and workload issues which we ensured were raised at the appropriate SG-led group or raised with colleagues across SG and Health Protection Scotland (HPS).
13. We were specifically contacted at this time by the Scottish Association of Social Workers (SASW) regarding concerns about social worker access to PPE and human rights of vulnerable people [IC/005 INQ000222991, IC/005a INQ000222992 IC/005b INQ000222993].
14. Within the Scottish Government, I attended a growing number of weekly meetings including:
  15. Weekly Directors convened by the Permanent Secretary
  16. Weekly meetings convened by the Director General for Education, Communities and Justice
  17. DCSWA and Deputy Director (DD) from Child and Maternal Health attended weekly Health Directors
  18. Weekly meetings with Social Work Scotland and CSWOs
  19. Daily DCAF DD calls
  20. OCSWA colleagues attended National Contingency Planning Group on Covid, Social Care Workforce meetings to consider how to boost workforce numbers
  21. Weekly Ministerial conference calls started end of march, convened by DFM for public services.
  22. DCSWA attended the weekly Portfolio meetings for the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport where possible

- DCSWA also attended Covid 4 Nations Safeguarding meetings (starting on 15 April 2020)
- I arranged regular calls (at least twice per week) with the Minister for Children, Maree Todd, MSP.

### **Lockdown (end March 2020 – end June 2020)**

#### **Children and Families**

15. During April the focus of our work on supporting the workforce continued alongside a growing focus on the needs of vulnerable children, young people and families as well as advice and guidance for the childcare sector. This included:

- Over several meetings with SOLACE, CoSLA and SWS and the Third sector for children, we developed a proposal to establish a Covid-19 Children and Families Collective Leadership Group.
- We also developed a joint data collection proposal for Ministers and CoSLA Leaders and Chief Executives to allow us to monitor the impact of lockdown on the most vulnerable children and adults.
- A submission was provided to the Minister for Children and Young People on 12 May on establishing the joint data collection and Covid-19 Children and Families Collective Leadership Group [IC/006 INQ000222994, IC/006a INQ000222995]. (The Minister gave her agreement on 15 May [IC/007-INQ000222996])
- The Covid-19 Collective Leadership Group (CLG) was jointly chaired by me (until Michael Chalmers returned in September 2020) and Karen Reid, CEO of Perth and Kinross Council and met weekly from the 7 May 2020
- The weekly data collection began on 24 April 2020 and was provided to all local authorities and to the DFM and Ministers with responsibility for Public Services [IC/008-INQ000343876].
- The Leadership Group considered the weekly data, any available intelligence in relation to Covid-19 and any proposals to develop guidance or instigate mitigation measures [IC/009-INQ000222997].
- On the 1 June a deep dive on child protection was chaired by the DFM and attended by core members of the Leadership Group [IC/010- INQ000256778].

- I also met weekly with the Children's Commissioner and the chair of the Promise Scotland to share intelligence and issues being raised.
- On 16 July 2020, the Children and Young People's Commissioner – Scotland (CYPCS), published the Independent Children's Rights Impact Assessment (CRIA) on the response to COVID-19 in Scotland [IC/012-INQ000343878], a copy of which was received by the Scottish Government on 15 July. In the introduction to the document, Mr Adamson stated that they commissioned the Observatory of Children's Human Rights Scotland (The Observatory) to undertake an independent assessment of what the legal and policy response to the coronavirus pandemic meant for children's human rights in Scotland, in the absence [in their view] of a comprehensive approach to ensuring human rights compliance by the Scottish Government.
- The Commissioner raised concerns about children's rights in relation to COVID-19 and the response to it. He stated that Scotland was facing a children's rights emergency in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. He indicated that he had grave concerns about the long-term impact of the virus lockdown on children and young people and suggested that lockdown had a "disproportionate impact" on children, particularly those "who were already at risk". He was concerned that children's rights and their views had not been properly taken into account in decision making on measures to respond to COVID-19. Specific concerns were raised in relation to mental health, child poverty, food insecurity, re-opening of schools and cancellation of exams, disabled children, digital exclusion, additional support needs and youthwork.
- Prior to publication, during June 2020, the Observatory engaged with the Scottish Government to inform the development of the CRIA. This request included a check that the report was giving full recognition to consultation and evidence that Scottish Government had undertaken and collected and for Scottish Government to update their evidence list.
- During the pandemic a number of child rights and wellbeing impact assessments (CRWIA) were prepared and published by Scottish Government where decisions had a direct impact on children and young people. These included, but are not limited to, the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act, the Coronavirus (Scotland) (No. 2) Act, the Education (Miscellaneous Amendments) (Coronavirus) (Scotland) Regulations 2020, the Coronavirus (COVID-19): closure and reopening of schools, the Coronavirus (COVID-19): restrictions on children and young people (including 2 further updates),

Coronavirus (Scotland) Act 2020 – Children’s provisions, Scottish General Election (Coronavirus) Bill, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) teacher and lecturer estimates - 2020 results, the re-opening childcare as part of the COVID-19 recovery process in Scotland, an update to the Children’s Provisions in relation to children’s hearings within the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act, and the Temporary closure of child contact centres at level 4 for in person contact. These CRWIA are provided in general disclosure.

16. During this period, we continued to be involved across the Directorate in developing guidance for frontline services in close co-operation with colleagues in HPS, and with those in Health leading on issues including PPE provision, use of face coverings and isolation policy across health and social care professions.

#### **Adult social care and social work**

17. On the Health and Care side there were growing issues around the support to Care Homes and we were approached directly by Social Work Scotland (SWS) raising concerns in relation to the human rights of those being cared for in Care Homes. As a consequence of these concerns a range of guidance was developed to cover social care settings, care homes and Adult Support and Protection duties. Work was undertaken on planning for Care Homes including a deep dive on Care Homes (14 April 2020), Care Home planning scenarios exercise (27 May 2020) and the ongoing development of data relating to Care Homes and multi-professional oversight arrangements (CSWO session with Care Inspectorate 3 June). During this period (and following lockdown) Professional SW Advisers and the DCSWA attended a number of Health focused meetings as follows:

- Clinical and Professional Advisory Group
- Care Home Rapid Action Group
- Pandemic Response in Adult Social Care Group.

18. I believe that copies of minutes from these groups have already been provided to the Inquiry by the Scottish Government.

### **Easing of restrictions – June 2020 – December 2020**

19. Throughout this period the meetings and communication arrangements previously referenced remained in place. From the end of September 2020, I reverted to my Chief Social Work Adviser post when Michael Chalmers returned as Director of Children and Families.

### **Children and Families**

20. Throughout the period the Covid-19 CLG continued to meet on a weekly basis and consider the weekly data reports and guidance being developed for the sector ranging from the protection of rights of young children and their right to play and socialize to the 'test and protection' arrangements for residential childcare sector.
21. On the 23 June 2020 the Covid-19 Advisory sub-group on Education and Children's issues met for the first time. This group was chaired by the Chief Social Policy Adviser for SG and had external representatives from across the academic and clinical sector for all children's services but mostly focused on Early Learning and Childcare, schools and Further Education arrangements. My role was to ensure the needs of vulnerable children were taken into account. This group met on a fortnightly basis and continues to this day on a less frequent basis. The current Deputy Chief Social Work Adviser, Joanna MacDonald attends. The group played a critical role in making recommendations to Scottish Ministers around restrictions and easing arrangements including the closure of schools and re-opening arrangements and the childcare hubs for essential workers and vulnerable families. I believe that copies of all minutes and papers associated with this sub-group have already been provided to the UK Inquiry by the Scottish Government.
22. The Coronavirus Act powers were reviewed on 27 July 2020 and Ministers recommended continuation of the arrangements for social work and social care with respect to adults and children.



23. Work was undertaken with the Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) to develop a recovery plan [IC/013-INQ000343877]. This involved addressing the significant backlog within the Children's Hearing System to ensure the emergency legislation had allowed for continuation of statutory orders. Overall, the number of children and young people coming to the attention of social work, police and referred to SCRA had significantly reduced – particularly as the schools were closed. The Covid-19 Collective Leadership group kept this in view as they considered the data and anecdotal evidence from the sector. Alongside this the group were also concerned about the impact of restrictions on children with disabilities and their families – many had lost care packages and direct support during Lockdown.
24. On the 18 August 2020 we sought approval for funding from the Immediate Priorities Fund to provide the Family Fund with additional funding to meet a rise in need and to provide grants to low-income families of disabled or seriously ill children.
25. In October 2020 the Covid-19 CLG held a 'lessons learned' session. This reviewed the support required by individuals and organisations based on Public Health Surveys and other evidence. The resulting actions included improving public communications on access to services, and better analysis and presentation of data and intelligence. The Lessons Learned session continued to inform the Leadership Group's work including the 10 point action plan issued in early 2021 [IC/014-INQ000222998].
26. On the 18 December 2020 Ministers approved a Winter Plan for Social Protection [IC/015-INQ000242060] with £23.5m to support services for vulnerable children (£9m for residential care, £6m for vulnerable families and £8.5m for the Children's Hearing Recovery plan).
27. At the end of December 2020, we provided the Deputy First Minister with a submission to suspend the emergency powers for reduced assessment for Children's services by the end of March 2021, whilst continuing their use over the winter months [IC/016-INQ000222999].

### **Adult social care and social work**

28. Social Work Scotland issued a letter on 11 June 2020 regarding Care Home assurance and oversights which we discussed with Chief Social Work officers and responded on 16 June 2020 [IC/011-INQ000223000], [IC/011a-INQ000223001], [IC/011b-INQ000223002] with further joint response with the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) on the 24 June 2020 [IC/018-INQ000223003].
29. On 29 June we issued a joint letter with the CNO with resource allocation for oversight of care homes [IC/019-INQ000223004].
30. In essence CSWO were concerned about the balance between infection control measures and the impact on mental health and well-being for the people who lived in Care Homes and their families. The resources allocated were designed to ensure CSWOs had a clear view of arrangements across Care Homes. This was an important discussion and one which continued throughout the pandemic. The benefit of hindsight will be important in planning for any future pandemics.
31. Throughout this period work continued to support Care Homes and social care recovery in direct dialogue with the care sector. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport chaired the Mobilisation Recovery Group (MRG) with representation from across the sector. I believe that minutes for this group have already been provided to the Inquiry by the Scottish Government. On 21 September 2020 the powers within section 16 and 17 of the UK Coronavirus Act 2020 were suspended for adults and the requirement for full assessment of need was reinstated.
32. During this period Professional SW Advisers and the DCSWA continued to attend a number of Health focused meetings including:
- Care Home Rapid Action Group
  - Older Adults monthly Subgroup
  - Turas Care Management
  - Safety Huddle Tool and Near Me development.

33. On the 13 November 2020 a joint letter from my office and the Chief Nursing Officer was issued confirming further funding for CSWO's for Care Home oversight [IC/020-INQ000223005].
34. On the 30 November 2020 the First Minister announced the payment of a £500 bonus for NHS and social care workers, and my team were involved in the ongoing discussion around eligibility for this payment. On the 3 December 2020 the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport introduced the Winter Plan Oversight Conference to consider how the sector would meet the coming challenges around winter pressures and on the 15 December additional funding of £640k for social work capacity was agreed from Health [IC/021-INQ000223006].
35. During this period and during the second lockdown my role as Director and as CSWA had no direct contact with the UK Government, nor was I involved in the provision of advice on lockdown, data or modelling, public health communications or non-pharmaceutical interventions other than those referred to directly in this statement.

**Second Lockdown 4<sup>th</sup> January 2021 – 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2021**

36. During this period my statement relates solely to my role as Chief Social Work Adviser to SG.
37. From January 2021 until April 2021 the focus of our work was around ensuring those who were most vulnerable were protected in a way that balanced the impact of Covid-19, other health impacts, societal impacts and economic impacts. Alongside this we were involved in the vaccination strategy as it related to the social work and social care workforce and looking at how we could support the workforce. The pressures on services across adults and children and families were significant.
38. On the adult social care side, we were involved in working around Care Homes in the development of the safety huddle tool – which provided up to date information on care home residents, admissions, discharges and infection rates. We worked with frontline services to pilot the 'Near Me' approach [IC/022-INQ000242021] in Care Homes – using digital tools to hold care reviews involving people who live in Care

Homes, their relatives and care workers and social workers. While not suitable for everyone it did increase the number of reviews and allowed better participation for relatives. Between PSWAs and me we attended Health led groups as follows:

- Open with Care Oversight Group
- Care at Home Expanded Testing
- Delayed Discharge Expert Group.

39. I believe that copies of minutes and papers for these groups have already been provided to the Inquiry by the Scottish Government.

40. In March 2021 funding was approved to extend the CSWO role in care home oversight arrangements and an additional £4.688m for assurance visits and care home plans. This was to try and address the backlog of care reviews for those who lived in Care Homes including people without capacity [IC/023-INQ000223007], [IC/023-INQ000223008].

41. On workforce issues my team were involved in the discussion around prioritisation of the social work and care workforce within the vaccination strategy (submissions via DG Health). It was agreed that frontline health and care staff would be included as priority 2. This did not include foster carers – our team advocated for the inclusion of foster carers and the DFM asked the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport to consider this. On the advice of the Chief Medical Officer the Cabinet Secretary decided not to include foster carers on 17 February 2021. The emails relating to this are provided within general disclosure.

42. As part of the Covid-19 CLG for Children and Families I was asked to lead some work to look at data on children and young people and we established a short-life working group reporting to the main group. Work was led by CELCIS and encompassed data from local authorities, the Children's Reporter, third sector agencies, the Care Inspectorate, Police Scotland, Public Health Scotland and the NHS. We were asked to triangulate data to confirm the continuing low numbers of children being recorded through the Child Protection and Care system. Members were concerned that the pandemic had masked 'hidden harm'. While our conclusion at the time was that this was very likely to be the case, the numbers in Scotland

(against the UK-wide trend) have remained low. This is something we continue to monitor and remain curious about [IC/017-INQ000223009].

**Recovery: April 2021 – April 2022**

43. From April 2021 until April 2022 my work and that of my team focused around three areas incorporating recovery from Covid-19.
44. The first of these is the workforce. The situation around the social care and social work force worsened over this year with many staff deciding to retire and many others suffering from exhaustion and mental health wellbeing issues. Health and well-being resources and support have been made available to the frontline workforce across Scotland. Despite this many staff have left the sector to work elsewhere. As a team we have participated in the Scottish Government Fair Work strategy and work with the sector to look at recruitment and retention issues from student social workers through to advanced practitioners. Our Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP) met regularly throughout the period of the pandemic and have worked on mitigating measures to help students and newly qualified staff who have had interrupted education and training. I believe that copies of minutes and papers for SWEP have already been supplied to the Inquiry by the Scottish Government.
45. The second area of focus has been around the arrangements for the provision of social work and care. In September 2020, the First Minister announced there would be an Independent Review of Social Care, chaired by Derek Feeley. This was in response to the impact of the pandemic on care arrangements and the issue of accountability for care. The report was published on 3 February 2021 [IC/026-INQ000324508]. The review focused on the needs and rights of people who use care. My team contributed advice around the review and particularly the implications for social work. Clearly this work is linked to the ongoing situation around the workforce.
46. The third area of work has been around children's services. Working with 'The Promise Scotland' – the body set up following the independent review of children's services and policy officials from the Directorate of Children and Families – we have

contributed to the ongoing work to reform children's services. Once again, the workforce is a key issue. In 2021 Scottish Government launched the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund to help localities to deliver earlier intervention and family support services [IC/027-INQ000223010].

47. More broadly, we have been working closely with partners to improve children's services planning to better safeguard, support and promote the wellbeing of children, young people and families. (Crucially, children's services plans include "related services" – adult services provided to parents/carers in relation to e.g., drug or alcohol use, mental health needs, disability or offending, and community-based supports such as housing, welfare advisory services and recreation facilities).

48. These three themes remain the dominant ones today and the experience of the pandemic has been critical in shaping the development of future care arrangements in Scotland. To this day the Covid-19 Children and Families Collective Leadership Group – now renamed the Children and Families National Leadership Group – meets monthly and has been reframed to focus on the priorities of embedding Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) and Getting It Right For Everyone (GIRFE); UNCRC Implementation; Keeping 'The Promise' (including Whole Family Wellbeing Funding); and Tackling Child Poverty. The data collection for vulnerable children and families and adults has developed but continues to report on a monthly basis. The relationship with Social Work Scotland and the Chief Social Work Officers has been strengthened through our shared endeavours throughout the pandemic and we now meet on a fortnightly basis to shape the policy and service provision landscape across Scotland.

### **Statement of Truth**

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

**Personal Data**

**Signed:**

**Dated:** 27/12/2023