

Witness Name: Tracey Burke

Statement No: 1

Exhibits:171

Dated: 20 October 2023

UK COVID-19 PUBLIC INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF TRACEY BURKE

I provide this statement in response to a request under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 dated 12 January 2023 and referenced M2B-EPSP -01.

I, Tracey Burke, will say as follows: -

Preface

1. I extend my sympathies to those that have lost loved ones, friends, colleagues, and neighbours during the coronavirus pandemic.

Background

2. My statement is intended to provide an overview of the education and childcare structures within the Welsh Government, with particular focus on education and childcare arrangements that were put in place to enable the organisation to support the Welsh Ministers and respond to the pandemic.
3. In preparing this statement I have relied on advice and information from several members of the senior civil service, including:
 - Owain Lloyd, Director of Education and Welsh Language who has provided information and documents in relation to statutory primary and secondary education (5-16 years);
 - Nicola Edwards, Deputy Director of Early Years, Childcare and Play Division who has provided information and documents in relation to childcare, play and early years provision;

- Huw Owen, Deputy Director Special Projects; Ruth Conway now Deputy Director for Public and Integrated Transport but was Deputy Director for Operation of Schools during Covid and Georgina Haarhoff, Deputy Director for Curriculum who collectively provided information and documents in relation to schools;
 - Huw Morris, who was former Group Director of Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning and who provided information in relation to higher education, further education, apprenticeships and adult learning;
 - Sinead Gallagher, Deputy Director for Higher Education
 - Rhian Edwards, Deputy Director, Further Education and Apprenticeships Division;
 - Andrew Slade, Director General of Economy, Skills and Natural Resources (ESNR) until April 2022 (responsibilities included Further and Higher Education, through the Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning (SHELL) Directorate).
4. Before my employment with the Welsh Government, I worked across the UK and internationally. I have been directly involved in regeneration and public service reform in Wales and Ireland for over 25 years, working for the Welsh Government, Welsh Development Agency, the Irish Government, the UK Government as well as the European Commission and OECD.
5. I first began working for government throughout 1993-1997 as a policy evaluator for the Irish Government, I then worked for the Welsh Development Agency. From 2001-2003 I worked in the UK Government and then returned to the Welsh Development Agency as Executive Director of Strategy Development and Director of Planning.
6. I joined the Welsh Government in 2006, as Director of Strategy and Review, Enterprise Innovation and Networks Department, and have worked in many areas since this time. From 2008–09 I was Acting Director, Infrastructure, Policy, Strategy and Corporate Services, Economy and Transport Department; 2009-2010 Director, Economic Renewal Programme, 2010-11 as Acting Director, Operations - Economy and Transport Department; 2011-12 as Acting Director, Business Enterprise, Technology and Science; from 2012-15 I was Director, Strategy – Economy, Science and Transport, then from 2015-17 I was Director, Strategy – Economy, Skills and Natural Resources Group.

7. I was appointed to my role as Director General for Education and Public Services in November 2017, this was an overarching management role covering a range of government policy. I had line management responsibility for the Director for Local Government, Director of Housing and Regeneration, Director for Education (primary and secondary education), Director of Communities and Tackling Poverty and the Director for Digital. Health Inspectorate Wales (HIW) and Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) were also part of the group although I had no management responsibility for any officials within either inspectorate, the Welsh Ministers recognise the importance and necessity of professional independence and judgment in exercising these functions on their behalf. I understand that statements have been prepared for both Inspectorates.
8. In April 2022, I took up post as Director General for Climate Change and Rural Affairs with an equally broad leadership span, with line management responsibility for the Director for Transport and Digital Connectivity, Director for Climate Change and Energy, Director for Rural Affairs, Director for Environmental Sustainability, Director for Housing and Regeneration and the Chief Veterinary Officer for Wales.
9. I have also held other roles such as Chair of the Tax Policy Co-ordination Group, Chair of the Welsh Government's Committee for Strategic Investment and I remain a Senior Sponsor for the Women's Together staff network.

Overview of the functions, structures and responsibilities of the Education and Childcare functions of the Welsh Government

Functions

10. The Welsh Ministers have policy responsibility for children and education in a range of sectors: childcare, primary education, secondary education, further education and higher education, as well as work-based learning and training.
11. The Education Act 1996 ("the 1996 Act") remains the consolidating Act for much of the earlier legislation in England and Wales in relation to education provision and provides that children should receive full-time compulsory education between the ages of 5 and 16.

12. The 1996 Act defines three main stages of education:

- Primary education - widely understood to be from age 5 to 10, but the statutory definition at section 2 includes education for children over two but under compulsory school age up to those aged 10 years and six months;
- Secondary education - widely understood to refer to education between the ages of 11 and 16, but section 2 states that it is education for those aged over 10 years and six months but under the age of 19;
- Further education - full and part-time education for those who are over compulsory school age. Qualifications obtained during further education form part of the admissions criteria for higher education.

13. Other stages of education include:

- Nursery education for 3-4 year olds. Under the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, local authorities must secure the provision of sufficient nursery education for children in their area who have not attained compulsory school age. Teaching and learning is through the Foundation Phase curriculum which provides a developmentally appropriate play-based curriculum for 3-7 year olds and is delivered in schools and non-maintained childcare settings spanning nursery and primary education;
- Higher education - generally the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 and Higher Education (Wales) Act 2015 are the principal legislative frameworks.

14. Further Education (FE) covers both the statutory FE sector, namely 'institutions within the further education sector' within the meaning of section 91(3) of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and also any provider of post-16 education or training in respect of which funding is provided by, or under arrangements made by the Welsh Ministers, or a local authority. This includes, for example, apprenticeships and employability programmes delivered by organisations including independent training providers, and adult learning in the community delivered by local authorities.

15. Under the Higher Education (Wales) Act 2015, the Welsh Ministers' powers essentially relate to its relationship with the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales ('HEFCW'), which in turn regulates certain higher education providers in Wales. This means that the Welsh Ministers do not generally have a direct relationship with higher education providers themselves. In large part this is because of the long-standing principle of institutional autonomy.

16. The statutory duty to provide primary and secondary education falls upon local education authorities. Funding is provided to the local authorities by the Welsh Ministers for the provision of education. The Welsh Ministers have high-level statutory duties in respect of the curriculum and school organisation. The Welsh Ministers have duties to ensure a sufficiency of provision in respect of nursery education and further education, where local authorities have sufficiency duties for childcare. In that regard, the Welsh Ministers provide funding to children and young adults to ensure sufficient provision in the private sector.
17. Matters relating to childcare and play provision are set out in the Childcare Act 2006 and the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010. Also relevant are the Child Minding and Day Care Exceptions (Wales) Order 2010 (amended in 2016) and the National Minimum Standards for Registered Childcare.
18. The Childcare Act requires local authorities in Wales to secure sufficient childcare for working parents and those making the transition to work. It enables regulations to be made requiring the local authority to regularly assess demand for, and availability of, local childcare provision. These Regulations were last made in 2016. The Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 includes statutory provision with regards to play and participation and child minding and daycare regulations.
19. Unlike education, there is no statutory requirement for local authorities or others to provide, or for children to attend, childcare or play settings. The majority of provision in this sector is provided by private and third sector organisations and paid for by parents. The Welsh Government does, however, provide some funded childcare for children aged 3-4 under the Childcare Offer for Wales, where their parents meet the definition of a working parent or are undertaking relevant education and training courses, and for children aged 2-3 under the geographically targeted Flying Start programme. Both the Childcare Offer for Wales and Flying Start operate under the powers in Section 60 of the Government of Wales Act 2006. Some local authorities operate childcare settings directly, particularly in relation to the delivery of Flying Start childcare.

Structures

Key individuals and Responsibilities

20. Responsibility for education, including Schools, Further Education, Tertiary education, the Welsh language, and to the extent of policy and strategy for Higher Education, sit with the Minister for Education and Welsh Language. Responsibility for childcare and play, our vision for early childhood play, learning and care, and the operation of the Childcare Offer for Wales and Flying Start programmes sit with the Deputy Minister for Social Services.

21. The relevant Welsh Ministers for Education and Childcare during the specific period (21 January 2020 and 30 May 2022) were:

- Kirsty Williams MS – Minister for Education until May 2021 (stepped down as a Minister and a Member of the Senedd at the Senedd election in May 2021).
- Jeremy Miles MS – Minister for Education and Welsh Language (following Senedd Elections in May 2021).
- Julie Morgan MS – Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services, was the Welsh Minister with portfolio responsibility for childcare and play during this period (pre and post Senedd Election 2021).

Ministerial portfolio responsibilities as of January 2019, October 2020 and May 2021 are exhibited as **WG/EPSP/01-01-INQ000116485**, **WG/EPSP/01-02-INQ000066140** and **WG/EPSP/01-03-INQ000066141**.

22. Tom Woodward was the special adviser and Dewi Knight was the specialist policy adviser for education during the relevant period. The specialist policy adviser for children and childcare was Jonathan Scourfield until May 2021. Ian Butler was the special advisor supporting childcare from May 2021 to date.

23. The responsibilities for childcare and education spanned three Welsh Government Directorates and two Directorate General areas. Policy for childcare sat with the Communities and Tackling Poverty Directorate; and for pre-16 education with the Education Directorate (latterly the Education and Welsh Language Directorate. Both of these Directorates were part of the Directorate General of Education and Public Services (EPS). Policy for post-16 education sat with the Skills, Higher Education

and Lifelong Learning Directorate (SHELL), which was part of the Directorate General of Economy, Skills and Natural Resources (ESNR).

24. Despite the breadth of the work relating to childcare and education, the areas were considered collectively to ensure consistency of operations across all settings where possible; higher education by virtue of institutional independence from government was considered as a distinct and separate part of the education system which affected early decision making. This alignment was achieved through the establishment of a 'battle rhythm' of meetings involving key policy officials as outlined in paragraph 37. This approach also ensured the needs of and impacts on children and young people were considered in the round, and that consistent advice could be provided to parents and families that set out the arrangements for all of their children in one place. As a consequence of wanting to maintain simple and clear messaging during the pandemic, decisions were often announced by the then Minister for Education even when they spanned into the responsibilities of the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services.

25. In terms of Higher Education, as autonomous institutions, universities were responsible for their business operations and management of staff and students and as such were treated differently to other parts of the education sector. Subsequently, the HE Task and Finish Group was setup in May 2020 to ensure consistency of approach and aid collaboration between Welsh Government and the HE sector.

26. *Directors General*

- As noted above, I was the Director General of Education and Public Services until April 2022. During this time my responsibilities included: primary and secondary education and childcare; communities and tackling poverty; and housing and regeneration. I am now the Director General for Climate Change and Rural Affairs.
- Jo-Anne Daniels was appointed as Acting Director General of Education, Social Justice and Welsh Language in April 2022 and remains in this role.
- Andrew Slade was the Director General of Economy, Skills and Natural Resources (ESNR) until April 2022. During this time, his responsibilities included Further and Higher Education, through the Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning (SHELL) Directorate, which sat within Economy, Skills and Natural Resources during the pandemic period (to end-March 2022). As Director General of ESNR, Andrew's responsibilities also included economic

development, transport, planning, natural resources and sustainable development, agriculture and food, and animal health and welfare. He is now the Director General of Economy, Treasury and Constitution Group.

27. Key pre-16 Education Officials

- Steve Davies, Director of Education, led on statutory education in schools (primary and secondary) in response to Covid-19 until his retirement in May 2021.
- Owain Lloyd, Director of Education and Welsh Language, led on statutory education in schools (primary and secondary) from June 2021 following Steve Davies' retirement.
- Huw Owen, Deputy Director for School Effectiveness, led on school operations until May 2020, and is now Deputy Director for Special Projects.
- Ruth Conway, Deputy Director for Operation of Schools, led on school operations from May 2020 until March 2022, and is now Deputy Director for Public and Integrated Transport.
- Georgina Haarhoff, Deputy Director for Curriculum, from June 2020 led on school curriculum, exams 2020/21 and on the Renew and Reform education recovery programme developed from January 2021.
- Chris Jones, Deputy Director for Support for Learners, led on free school meals, and children with additional learning needs until July 2021.
- Kevin Palmer, Deputy Director for Pedagogy Leadership and Professional Learning, led on learning continuity and expectations throughout the pandemic.
- Bethan Webb, Deputy Director for Welsh Language, led on Welsh language provision and policy throughout the pandemic.

28. Key Childcare Officials

- Claire Bennett, was Deputy Director for Curriculum (in the Education Directorate) until May 2020 when she took up the role of Director for Communities and Tackling Poverty for the duration of the pandemic; and is now Director for Environmental Sustainability.
- Nicola Edwards, Deputy Director for Early Years, Childcare and Play, led on childcare, play and early years provision throughout the pandemic. She was also involved in some discussions around the early approach to schools.

- Karen Cornish, Deputy Director for Children and Families Division, led on the cross-government coordination of actions relating to vulnerable children. Karen retired in October 2022.

29. *Key Skills, Higher Education and Lifelong Learning Officials*

- Huw Morris, former Group Director of SHELL, led on higher education, further education, apprenticeships, and adult learning throughout the pandemic period. Huw is now on secondment from the Welsh Government to University College London.
- Alan Woods, Deputy Director for Further Education and Apprenticeships, led on further education until his retirement in May 2021.
- Rhian Edwards, Deputy Director for Further Education and Apprenticeships, led on further education from May 2021.
- Sinead Gallagher, Deputy Director for Higher Education, led on higher education throughout the pandemic.
- **NR** was Head of Special Projects for Post-16 Covid-19 Response & Recovery until October 2022.

Pre-pandemic preparedness

30. The Welsh Government's capability to plan, prepare for, deal with, and recover from disruptive challenges at national, regional, and local levels in Wales is coordinated by a dedicated Civil Contingencies and Incident Response Team, this is a central branch within the Welsh Government.
31. The Pan Wales Response Plan is the overarching response plan for emergencies in Wales. Risk specific plans set out response arrangements for specific emergencies within the framework of the Pan-Wales Response Plan. Welsh Government plans have been developed, tested and reviewed for many years for pandemic influenza. The plan is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-04/INQ000198754**.
32. In 2006, the Welsh Government issued 'Pandemic Influenza – Children and young people (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-05/INQ000299957**). Contingency planning for schools and other settings where children are educated'. In 2016, work was conducted to update this guidance, but this was put on hold whilst work was taken forward under the Pandemic Flu Readiness Board to create the draft Pandemic Flu

Bill, and then further delayed by the preparations for Brexit. The 2006 edition was therefore the guidance in place for schools and childcare settings when Covid-19 emerged.

33. Whilst this guidance advised on preparing business continuity arrangements and the use of remote learning, such planning was based on an anticipated pattern of spread and duration unlike the scale and duration of Covid-19.
34. Planning for schools was predicated on modelling data which highlighted the potential benefit of school closures in certain circumstances, both in terms of protecting individual children from infection, and in reducing overall transmission of the virus in the population. This was balanced against the risk that social mixing of children outside school would defeat the object of the closures. The principle was adopted that, working on advice that would be made available from public health officials, head teachers could take the decision to close individual establishments temporarily on a precautionary basis to reduce the initial spread of infection locally while gathering more information about the spread of the virus. Once the virus was more established in the country, the general policy would be that schools should not close – unless there are specific local business continuity reasons (staff shortages or particularly vulnerable children). This policy was to be reviewed in light of information about how the pandemic was unfolding at the time.
35. It was recognised that the impact of closure of schools and similar settings on all sectors would have substantial economic and social consequences and have a disproportionately large effect on health and social care because of the demographic profile of those employed in these sectors. Such a step would therefore only be taken in an influenza pandemic with a very high impact and so, although school closures could not be ruled out, it should not be the primary focus of schools' planning.
36. For Higher and Further Education, as autonomous institutions, individual Further Education Colleges and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) had business continuity plans in place prior to Covid-19, which were reviewed, updated and expanded as the full impact of Covid-19 on operations became clear. The advice was to ensure that these business continuity plans were maintained against emerging risks, based on the assumption that the establishment would remain open throughout the pandemic, although certain operations may need to be scaled down.

37. Developing the response to Covid-19 was rapid and dynamic which took account of changing circumstances and evolving scientific advice meant that many of the measures needed in response, including the repurposing of schools and the operational guidance produced to support education and childcare practitioners and settings, had to be devised and implemented as the pandemic developed. In this respect, Wales was no different to the other nations in the UK, or for that matter, nations across the world.

Initial response to emerging Covid-19

38. As the information and potential risk from Covid-19 began to emerge in period January to March 2020 the policy areas in the Welsh Government responsible for childcare and education responded with a number of initial actions that, over time, settled into a pattern for how the response to the pandemic would be managed over the longer-term. These included:

- Setting up regular 'stand up' or 'bird table' meetings between policy and communication officials, special advisers, and the Minister for Education. These meetings occurred daily for some time but later settled into a thrice weekly pattern;
- Setting up regular meetings between policy officials and the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services. These were framed differently to those for the Minister for Education, with the Deputy Minister meeting policy officials spanning childcare, play, children and families. These were held several times a week, but not daily, as the Deputy Minister was also covering a range of separate meetings in relation to wider social services and social care matters;
- Setting up regular online meetings with the trade unions for employees in schools and further education. Again, these meetings occurred sometimes daily initially but later settled into the twice and then once weekly pattern;
- A regular pattern of meetings with key delivery partners, such as local authority Directors of Education, childcare providers, the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), Qualifications Wales, and the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC);
- Regular meetings with senior leaders from the further and higher education sectors as well as their representative bodies, National Union of Students

Cymru and HEFCW and Joint Trade Unions, to agree the approach to safe operation and to ensure the sectors' support needs were met;

- A regular pattern of information sharing meetings with policy officials in the UK Department of Education (DfE) and other devolved governments. These meetings focused on information sharing and connecting relevant policy leads together initially and were often a pathway into the creation of policy-specific policy lead meetings and workshops that occurred throughout the pandemic period;
- Reaching out to begin data and information sharing with wider Welsh Government departments, Public Health Wales (PHW), DfE etc;
- Securing policy representation on emerging scientific and technical advisory bodies, such as the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) and its Children and Education Sub-group;
- Forming a dedicated administration team to support this meeting structure and deal with enquiries from the public, ministerial correspondence etc.
- Setting up a dedicated public mailbox to deal with education related enquiries and concerns from the public;
- Collating twice weekly briefing bulletins for Ministers and senior officials;
- Creating a dedicated policy function within the Education Directorate to lead on the provision of operational guidance and advice for schools and settings, and incorporating similar functions within the roles of childcare policy and Further and Higher Education teams;
- Repurposing the roles of some functions and teams within Directorates to better focus on pandemic related workstreams, such as hub provision and critical workers, free school meals etc.

Attached as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-06/INQ000300151** is a key meeting timeline.

39. During the few days preceding 18 March 2020, uncertainty and concern was escalating apace about Covid-19. As context, on 11 March 2020, the World Health Organisation declared the Covid-19 outbreak a global pandemic, and on 16 March 2020, the four UK nations adopted a range of measures in response to the emerging situation, including advice on minimising contact, working from home if possible, and households staying at home for 14 days if any person developed a persistent cough or fever. More broadly, there was also heightened media coverage.

40. The impact of developments such as these began to impact school settings, within Wales as across the UK. There was concern from some parents that children could be at risk from attending schools, some individuals were beginning to self-isolate, and attendance levels, as well as the ability of some schools to operate and stay open, were being impacted. Some schools in Wales began closing or partially closing because of staff and pupils needing to self-isolate in line with Welsh Government communications.
41. Universities also took action to cancel planned field trips, placements, and work related travel, to signpost students and staff to public health advice and support students on international placements who wished to return to the UK. Soon after they moved to remote working where possible, and phased out face to face teaching. There was also a significant movement of students travelling to family homes at this time. Universities did not fully close. Some essential research activity continued, and many students and some staff remained living onsite in university accommodation.
42. During this early part of the pandemic, the Welsh Ministers had three powers available to them in respect of providers of education and childcare:
- a. Powers to issue directions under the health protection legislation;
 - b. Powers to issue directions/discontinuation notices under the Coronavirus Act 2020 ('the 2020 Act') (as of 25 March 2020);
 - c. Powers to issue statutory guidance under the 2020 Act.
43. On 18 March 2020 - when it was announced by the Minister of Education, Kirsty Williams MS, that the Easter break for schools would be brought forward and that some schools would be re-purposed, remaining open for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers - the 2020 Act had not been passed. That announcement was a policy decision taken by the Welsh Ministers, after consultation with stakeholders such as local authority Directors of Education, WLGA and trade unions, but the decision had to be implemented by local authorities who had the powers to change school term dates. The closure of schools as of 20 March was agreed at COBR on 18 March 2020, exhibited **WG/EPSPG/01-07-INQ000056210**. The advice relating to this decision is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-08-INQ000299995** and **WG/EPSPG/01-09-INQ000299046**.
44. There was no announcement from the Welsh Government requiring childcare settings to close in March 2020 or at any point during the relevant period. In the

initial announcement regarding schools, dated 18 March, it was stated that childcare settings would remain open pending advice from the Chief Medical Officer and Public Health Wales. This is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-10/INQ000300024**. In a further statement of 20 March, parents were asked to keep children at home wherever possible, and childcare and play settings were asked to limit access to the children of critical workers and vulnerable children, working in coordination with local authorities. This statement is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-11/INQ000299031**.

45. Over the following weeks large numbers of childcare and play settings voluntarily closed, taking up schemes such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (furlough) and other financial assistance from the UK and Welsh Governments. It was also confirmed that funding under the Childcare Offer would continue to be paid to childcare settings even where the setting was closed or the child was not attending as a consequence of the wider public advice regarding Covid-19. Funding for the childcare of the children of critical workers and vulnerable children was also made available via the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme. Childcare settings were able to open for all children from June 2020, though they were asked to follow Welsh Government guidance on safe operations that introduced a range of NPIs. That guidance was updated at regular intervals until the removal of all restrictions in Wales. Advice submitted to Ministers relating to these decisions are exhibited as in **WG/EPSPG/01-09** (referenced above) and **WG/EPSPG/01-12/INQ000299968**.

Decision-making and 21-day Review process

46. From April 2020 onwards, the Welsh Government's decision-making processes around Covid-19 settled into a regular process and pattern built around a 21-day review process. Regulation 3(2) of the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (Wales) Regulations 2020 placed a duty on the Welsh Ministers to review the need for the requirements and restrictions in the Regulations every 21 days, the first review was undertaken on 12 April 2020.
47. I understand that the Welsh Government's approach to the imposition and relaxation of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs) has been set out in some detail in Andrew Goodall's statement in response to M2B-WG-01, in the section headed 'Approach to 21-day review process'.

48. The Directorates and teams responsible for education and childcare were members of the 21-day review group and fed into the 21-day review process in the same way as other policy functions within the Welsh Government:

- Liaising with key stakeholders and delivery partners, such as local authorities and trade unions, to ensure that their views and practical issues 'on the ground' were considered;
- Seeking and commissioning scientific and technical advice and information from advisory groups, such as TAG, as required;
- Liaising with colleagues in the UK Government and other devolved governments to ensure that decisions were informed in relation to what other parts of the UK were doing at that time;
- Ensuring that issues, considerations and information relating to childcare and education, and workforce, were taken into account in terms of impact assessments and the advice documents provided to Cabinet and Ministers;
- Briefing the Minister for Education and Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services on portfolio specific considerations ahead of Cabinet discussions.

49. The Childcare, Play and Early Years Division and Children and Families Divisions sat outside the Education Directorate and within the Communities and Tackling Poverty Directorate during this period. However, at the very outset of decision making in relation to the operation of childcare and education, and later on NPIs affecting children, there was collaboration and integration between the officials responsible. For example, both the Deputy Director for Early Years, Childcare and Play, for childcare, and the Deputy Director for Operation of Schools from the Education Directorate, were members of the TAG Children and Education Sub-group. The Deputy Director for Children and Families Division was also a member of that group in their capacity as cross-government lead for vulnerable children. There was also an overlap between the Health and Social Services Directorate Group and the Education Directorate, not least because of the impact of NPIs on vulnerable children, and many pieces of advice to the Welsh Ministers were co-drafted for both Ministers. The former Group Director of SHELL was also a member of Education TAG subgroup as were policy officials from FE and HE. As the scientific advice focused more on children and the impact of Covid on under 18s, HE policy officials were invited to attend TAC instead.

50. Decisions on the consideration of the balance of harms caused to children by not allowing them to attend school compared to the risk of Covid-19 and serious illness were made by reference to a framework of considerations which were designed to ensure that the best interests of the children were balanced against the risks emerging from the scientific and medical advice. For education, they were usually made by Cabinet or the Minister for Education sometimes in conjunction with the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services. Decisions relating to childcare were also considered at Cabinet but came under the purview of the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services, taking account of the views of the Minister for Health and Social Services where appropriate. Decisions usually followed the submission of a ministerial advice by officials, which would normally set out the scientific and medical context. I attach the written statement and framework document (dated May 2020) as exhibits **WG/EP SG/01-13/INQ000300066** and **WG/EP SG/01-14/INQ000299284**.

Guidance for childcare and education settings

51. As mentioned previously at paragraph 37, a key element of our initial response to Covid-19 was the creation of a dedicated Operations of Schools Division within the Education Directorate and the incorporation of similar functions within the roles of childcare and post-16 education policy teams. A key element of these functions was the interpretation of NPIs into advice and guidance to enable the safe operation of schools and settings.

52. The first iterations of these guidance documents were published on 10 June 2020 and they were reviewed and updated on a regular basis throughout the pandemic period. These updates were often on a weekly basis initially as we worked with stakeholders and delivery partners to review their effectiveness 'on the ground'. Later however, these reviews and updates would generally be undertaken in line with and alongside the 21-day review process. Key dates and iterations of these guidance documents are listed in the chronology section later in this statement.

Engagement with stakeholders

53. As mentioned at paragraph 37, engagement forums with key stakeholders, such as local authorities, childcare providers, education trade unions, policy teams across the other four nations etc, established at pace at the start of the pandemic, soon settled into an established rhythm that enabled ongoing input both in terms of what was

happening 'on the ground' and how prospective changes to NPIs might best be interpreted into workable, practicable advice and guidance for settings and practitioners. In parallel to the engagement forums, regular conversations took place with head teachers which contributed to the policy thinking.

54. This extensive work in relation to the development of guidance often involved difficult, complex and challenging conversations with stakeholders, including local authorities, schools, colleges, universities, headteachers and trade unions. The Welsh Government saw this ability to engage directly and collaborate with a range of different stakeholders including practitioners as a strength of the way it made decisions during the difficult and challenging developments of the Covid-19 outbreak. Stakeholders were able to inform and influence, share views and provide feedback whilst decision-making was happening at pace.

55. In respect of childcare the main external stakeholders were the local authorities and the six childcare and play umbrella bodies: Mudiad Meithrin; National Day Nurseries Association; Pacey Cymru; Early Years Wales; Clybiau Plant Cymru Kids Clubs; and Play Wales. In the initial period of March – June 2020, meetings were held on an ad-hoc basis and were used to inform stakeholders of emerging evidence and data and likely decisions regarding the operation of childcare and play settings. Following June 2020, the regular patterns of meetings were implemented. National meetings with local authorities were held quarterly and the Childcare and Play Stakeholder Reference Group meetings restarted. There are no formally agreed Terms of Reference for the National Meeting, which is generally accepted as being a forum whereby WG and the 22 Local Authorities meet to discuss and share information on a range of childcare issues. These meetings were not solely focused on Covid-19 but did include updates on the state of the childcare sector, evidence of impacts of Covid-19 and information on guidance and response arrangements. These were tabled alongside other more routine policy and delivery matters including the development of digital services for the Childcare Offer, the Ministerial Review of Play Policy and changes to routine legislation. Drafts of operational guidance for childcare and play settings were shared with stakeholders, and comments taken into account in finalising documentation and supporting FAQs.

56. In relation to higher education, regular engagement between the Minister and officials, and HEFCW, Universities Wales, the University and College Union (UCU) and individual senior staff within universities took place. On 27 March the Minister

wrote to Vice Chancellors (VCs) and Chairs on a range of issues including wellbeing of students onsite, rent cancellation, quality assurance of teaching and assessment, and concerns about a proliferation of unconditional offers being made across the sector. The Minister also welcomed the contribution of universities to tackling the pandemic through volunteers, equipment, research and facilities. I exhibit this letter as **WG/EPSPG/01-15/INQ000299095**.

57. On 12 May 2020 the Welsh Government established the Higher Education Task and Finish Group to ensure issues affecting the sector were being properly considered. The first formal meeting of the group took place on 01 June 2020. Minutes of this meeting are exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-16/INQ000300035** and the ToR (draft as they were on the date) as **WG/EPSPG/01-17/INQ000300007**. This was not a decision-making group but brought together sector leads from various stakeholders to help with engagement to understand the issues affecting universities, students, staff and trade union leaders. The group was used to gather insight and help contribute the groups response documentation to aid the 21-day review process. It was also used to discuss changes to the infection control framework scales as the Welsh Government moved through the various levels. The group allowed best practice to be used in decision-making to support students' continuation of learning. The group was used to contribute to decisions around test, trace and protect which included students testing before they travelled home and back to halls. This was done in collaboration with the international team for international students where UK Government guidelines applied.

58. In early May, the Education Minister reappointed David Allen as Chair of HEFCW and asked for his support in "guiding the sector through this difficult time and managing the impact of the pandemic on institutions". In response, the Looking Forward Group was established which brought senior leadership at VC and Chair level together along with NUS Wales, UCU, and Universities Wales. A Welsh Government official was present as an observer. In contrast to the Task and Finish Group which focussed on practical application of guidance and the immediate issues faced by the sector, the Looking Forward Group took a more strategic approach to the significant funding challenges facing the sector as a whole, and identifying how universities and HEFCW could work collaboratively with Welsh Government to address these.

59. Decision-making for the Further Education sector was supported by Further Education's 'Back to College' advisory group which was established by ColegauCymru which comprised college and union leaders who met regularly from autumn 2020. It was also supported by the Further Education Resilience Plan Steering Group, an advisory group consisting key stakeholders convened to advise on how best to support resilience and recovery in the sector. This group was in place from June 2020 – May 2021. Purpose of this meeting is outlines in an email from the Chief Executive of CollegesWales at exhibited **WG/EPSPG/01-18/INQ000299756**. Three working groups were relevant to further education: (i) blended learning; (ii) A levels; and (iii) learner/staff well-being. These supported the development of practical guidance for the sector in those areas, and the sharing of information and best practice. Terms of references for these groups are exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-19/INQ000300023**, **WG/EPSPG/01-20/INQ000300058** and **WG/EPSPG/01-21/INQ000299764**.
60. Prior to the pandemic, Welsh Government officials had regular channels for engagement with the FE sector. These were used to share information, undertake informal consultation, respond to queries from the sector, and co-construct initiatives and projects. The key structures were ColegauCymru's networks including Finance Directors, Senior Curriculum & Quality Managers, and the FE Principals' forum, all attended regularly by officials. Other groupings including task and finish groups, steering groups and one-off events were also convened for specific programmes and projects.

Relationship with other devolved administrations

61. In making all of these decisions, officials within the Welsh Government fostered good relations with their counterparts in the UK Government, Scotland and Northern Ireland to ensure that we learned from each other and discussed decisions that were about to be made.
62. There was regular direct contact at ministerial and director level with the UK Government and devolved governments, including bilateral ministerial meetings.
63. During early 2020, meetings between officials within the Education Directorate and their counterparts in the other governments across the four nations were sporadic and ad-hoc, reflecting the pace and nature of developments. However, by Easter

2020, four nations meetings became regularised with the involvement of Director Generals (DGs). In addition to myself, the Director of SHELL (or a deputy) regularly attended these meetings. Colleagues from the education directorate also attended these meeting from summer 2021 in relation to school operations and qualifications. These DG meetings were not the only meetings that took place, as we met with UK Government counterparts regularly throughout this period - these meetings did not inform policy, they were mainly updating each other on approaches being taken and where possible ahead of formal announcements. There were also regular meetings with policy officials in HE due to the UK wide distribution of students and the implications of mass travel at the start and end of term. These meetings enabled policy officials to consider policy advice in relation to safe travel and safe return to campus as well as how best to protect Welsh students and their families living in other parts of the UK and returning to Wales at the end of term and in protecting local communities in Wales when students arrived in Wales.

64. The Deputy Director for Early Years, Childcare and Play chairs the British and Irish Council Early Years Work Sector, which brings together the four UK nations, the Crown dependencies and the Republic of Ireland. This is one of a number of Early Years workstreams that falls within the British and Irish Council. Prior to the pandemic these meetings were held three times a year, with each administration taking turns to host. The last face-to-face meeting pre-pandemic was held in Glasgow on 5-6 March 2020. Meetings were then held virtually until face-to-face meetings resumed in June 2022. These meetings enabled administrations to share information on their pandemic response in relation to childcare, play and early years provision. They did not inform decisions and were not used to shape advice to ministers.
65. Separate, official-level, four nations meetings were also convened on an ad hoc basis. Meetings would generally be arranged at the request of one of the four nations, to discuss a particular topic. For example, to outline announcements on financial support or to confirm planned timescales for restarting provision. Minutes were not usually taken as these meetings were typically convened to ensure we were all aware of planned updates, and to check whether or not other nations were working on similar guidance. They were not typically used to shape advice to Ministers, although Ministerial Advice documents (MAs) would often reference the approaches being taken in other nations for information.

66. The relationship with colleagues in the UK Government, Scotland and Northern Ireland was always constructive and the approach taken was extremely useful in ensuring that information and approaches to emerging challenges were shared, and communication messaging, both to the public and to childcare and education settings, was managed effectively to ensure that they understood the NPIs in place in each nation, what it meant for them and where they may have differed in various parts of the UK.
67. In general, the decisions and approaches adopted in Wales were broadly similar to those taken by the other UK administrations. Where there were differences however, we have tried to outline them in the paragraphs below.

Childcare

68. In the main, the approach to childcare and play provision in Wales aligned to that of the UK Government, with action taken within similar time frames and advice to settings and parents broadly aligning.
69. There was a slight divergence initially, as childcare in Wales re-opened on the 22 June 2020 in comparison to the 1 June in England. This reflected wider decision timescales across both countries. There was also slightly differing guidance on group sizes. In Wales guidance outlined that children in childcare and play provision should be cared for in groups of no more than 8 children, and this applied to children aged up to 12. We understand England advised settings to work to the EYFS staff: child ratios for pre-school aged children. However, the lifting of restrictions on group sizes in childcare settings occurred in England and Wales at the same time, in July 2020.
70. It is important to see this in the context of the two systems, which have different registration and regulation arrangements. In Wales, a setting caring for children aged up to 12 has to register with Care Inspectorate Wales, but the arrangements and age ranges are different in England. We had to provide guidance that covered a broader range of registered settings, including those caring for school age children, and provide clarity to all settings on that basis. Some phrasing in the respective guidance would also have differed given that context as we were referring to different regimes.
71. There were also slight variations in the lifting of other restrictions pertaining to play. Outdoor playgrounds opened in England on 4 July 2020 and in Wales on 20 July 2020. Again, this reflected wider decision timescales. Indoor play provision was able

to resume in Wales on 10 August 2020 and in England on 15 August 2020, though we believe this was slightly later than they had originally hoped.

72. Wales also developed a specific funding scheme to support the children of critical workers and vulnerable children under-5 to attend childcare settings where necessary. The Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme ran from April to August 2020. England did not offer a similar scheme.

School operations

73. The approaches to how and when schools opened and closed in line with lockdown regulations differed in each administration in line with the wider approaches taken by each Government. However, we do not believe that the approaches were sufficiently different that they would have resulted in different educational outcomes. An example of this would be the limited opening of schools for wellbeing check-ins at the end of the summer term in 2020 which was unique to Wales. The advice to Ministers on this approach is exhibited later in the statement at para 187 as **WG/EPSC/01-100/INQ000145229**.

74. Similarly, whilst the advice and guidance to schools and settings in Wales on implementing NPIs, such as social distancing, face coverings and lateral flow testing for example, did occasionally differ to those in the other administrations, this would have been as a result of the wider societal approaches being different, rather than the Welsh Government considering the approaches being taken in schools in other administrations as being insufficient or ineffective. Where this was the case, these differences would typically be included in MAs to Ministers so that they were aware of them at the time of decision.

Free School Meals (FSM) provision

75. The approaches to maintaining provision to children eligible for FSM were different in each administration. In Wales, the Welsh Government worked with local authorities to allow a flexible approach to ensure continued provision of FSM for eligible learners, rather than the voucher-based system adopted in England, for example. This meant that provision continued via a number of approaches, including cash or vouchers, and where necessary appropriate meals were delivered direct to eligible families. Wales was the first country to extend the provision of financial support for children to receive free school meals during school holidays.

Examination series

76. The Welsh Government worked closely with the UK Government and other administrations on exams and assessments over the period summer 2020, 2021, and, indeed, still meet them regularly. Whilst there were divergences: Scotland moved to Centre Assessed Grades (CAGs) first in summer 2020; Wales decided to replace all exams with alternative assessment models first for 2021; Wales and Scotland took a much more co-constructive approach to those alternative assessment models than England, and also had independent reviews of what happened in summer 2020, which England did not, these were ultimately minimal. Our priority as a government during that time was to support learner wellbeing and progression, and ensuring there was a fair playing field for learners from Wales compared to their UK counterparts was also part of this policy.

Learning recovery

77. The approach taken to learning recovery differed across the administrations, in that Wales placed emphasis on learner wellbeing to facilitate covid recovery amongst learners, whereas England focused to a greater extent on tutoring and teaching to close the academic gap. Northern Ireland split focus between the two whilst Scotland placed emphasis on wellbeing support, staff recruitment and additional support for learners in exam years. All nations' responses were shaped by the challenges of a limited supply of potential practitioners although there were differences in how this was managed.

78. The Welsh Government's Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards (RRRS) Programme was launched in Wales in August 2020 to support schools by increasing staff capacity. This additional capacity was designed to provide temporary support for priority learners to enable them to reengage with the school system, achieve the progression that they are entitled to, and rebuild confidence and learning capability.

79. Funding in Northern Ireland and England was broadly linked to need, but schools were given autonomy to decide which learners required extra support. Scotland's approach was based on an existing programme, the Scottish Attainment Challenge, which focuses on closing the poverty related attainment gap. In Wales, local authorities provided support, but schools retained autonomy to make their own decisions based on their unique needs. Local authorities played a more limited role in England than in the other nations with some funds were distributed directly to schools, with varying levels of guidance.

Further Education

80. In line with the guidance provided to schools on issues such as operating times and implementing NPIs, that provided to colleges in Wales differed from that provided to those in the other UK administrations to ensure that it reflected the wider approach taken by the Welsh Government to such matters.

Higher Education

81. In the main, the approach to the Higher Education sector was aligned to that of the UK Government, with action taken within similar time frames and advice and guidance to institutions. We had regular engagement with colleagues from across the UK Government and devolved administrations where we discussed guidance for the sector and processes for decision making. Group members agreed that it would be helpful if guidance could be similar across the UK though guidance was published independently by each government for their respective sector.
82. There was, however, a slight divergence with regard to social distancing measures. In June 2020, UK Government announced changes to social distancing measures. This, 1 metre change, applied only in England and had no read-across to Wales. The HE Task and Finish Group felt that UK needed to act as one and any difference between England and Wales would have a significant competitive edge for English Universities. The group were advised following discussions with TAC that the 2m social distancing measure was to remain in Wales for the short term and requested group members to send evidence on the impact of social distancing and delivery, and consideration of what mitigations they could put in place to maximise safety in different scenarios, should the regulations change. It is also worth noting that funding decisions in relation to Universities/ HE sector were taken by each Government and were an area of divergence.

Use of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and health protection regulations to enable the continuity of education provision in Wales.

83. During the period of the pandemic, the Education Directorate made a number of legislative changes designed to enable and facilitate continuity of education provision in Wales. These changes have been listed below under the headings – school operations, curriculum and assessment provision and statutory reporting requirements.

Changes relating to school operations:

84. The Education (Admission Appeals Arrangements) (Wales) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 came into force on 4 May 2020 and relaxed certain requirements around the constitution of school admission appeals panels to allow them to continue through the coronavirus pandemic.
85. The Maintained Schools (Amendment of Paragraph 7 of Schedule 17 to the Coronavirus Act 2020) (Wales) Regulations 2020 came into force on 25 June 2020 and allowed us to make modification/disapplication notices for the School Organisation Code and the Changing of School Session Times Regulations.
86. Temporary disapplication notices to The Changing of School Session Times (Wales) Regulations 2009 were issued throughout 2020 and 2021, by virtue of Schedule 17 to the Coronavirus Act 2020, and allowed schools and local authorities to make changes to the start and end times of the school day without the need for consultation or giving notice, enabling them to accommodate learners safely to check in, catch up and prepare.
87. Temporary modification notices to the School Organisation Code were issued throughout 2020 and 2021, by virtue of Schedule 17 to the Coronavirus Act 2020, and allowed school organisation proposals to proceed as if references to “school day” include a day on which there would have been a school session but for any restriction on the attendance of pupils at the school in connection with the prevalence of coronavirus.
88. Temporary modification notices to section 3 of the Education Act 1996 (definition of pupil) were issued throughout 2020 and 2021, by virtue of Schedule 17 to the Coronavirus Act 2020, and allowed for learners who had been temporarily attending a school other than their own to return to their own school. They also limited any unintended obligations on the temporary school when the situation normalises.
89. The Education (Notification of School Term Dates) (Wales) (Coronavirus) (Amendment) Regulations 2020 came into force on 16 July 2020 and extended the deadline by which local authorities must inform Welsh Ministers of their proposed term dates for 2022/23, thereby freeing up local authority resources at the time.

Changes relating to curriculum and assessment provision:

90. The Curriculum Requirements (Amendment of paragraph 7(5) of Schedule 17 to the Coronavirus Act 2020) (Wales) Regulations 2020 came into force on 23 June 2020 and extended the provisions for which we could make disapplication notices to include:

- Section 69 of, and Schedule 19 to, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 regarding the provision of religious education.
- Section 109 of the Education Act 2022 which requires the National Curriculum for Wales to be implemented in maintained schools in Wales, and section 110 which requires it to be implemented in maintained nursery schools and some other nursery education settings in Wales.
- Sections 116A to 116K of the Education Act 2002 which make provision about the local curriculum including requirements that all young people are provided with a minimum offer of choices (25 choices at Key Stage 4 with a minimum of 3 vocational choices; 30 choices at post 16 with a minimum of 5 vocational choices)
- Orders made under section 108 of the Education Act 2002 which impose duties on schools to deliver desirable outcomes, education programmes, assessment arrangements and attainment targets.

91. The Curriculum Requirements (Amendment of paragraph 7(6) of Schedule 17 to the Coronavirus Act 2020) (Wales) Regulations 2020 came into force on 26 August 2020 and extended the provision for which we could make modification notices to include:

- Section 69 of, and Schedule 19 to, the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 regarding the provision of religious education.
- Section 43 of the Education Act 1997 regarding provision of careers education in schools in Wales.
- Section 101(1) of the Education Act 2002 regarding the provision of the basic curriculum in maintained schools in Wales.
- Section 109 of the Education Act 2002 which requires the National Curriculum for Wales to be implemented in maintained schools in Wales and section 110 which requires it to be implemented in maintained nursery schools and some other nursery education settings in Wales.
- Sections 116A to 116K of the Education Act 2002 which make provision about the local curriculum including requirements that all young people are

provided with a minimum offer of choices (25 choices at KS4 with a minimum of 3 vocational choices; 30 choices at post 16 with a minimum of 5 vocational choices).

92. Temporary disapplication notice was issued for the period 24 June 2020 to 23 July 2020 disapplying curriculum requirements for Wales and associated assessment arrangements for schools and funded non-maintained nursery settings. This included the following provisions:

- Section 101 of the Education Act 2002 (“the 2002 Act”) which places requirements on maintained schools in Wales to provide a basic curriculum including; the national curriculum, religious education, personal and social education, work related education and for secondary schools, sex education.
- Section 109 of the 2002 Act which requires the National Curriculum for Wales to be implemented in maintained schools in Wales, as well as section 110 which requires it to be implemented in maintained nursery schools and some other nursery education settings in Wales.
- Sections 116A to 116K of the 2002 Act which make provision about the local curriculum including requirements that all young people are provided with a minimum offer of choices: 25 choices at KS4 with a minimum of 3 vocational choices and 30 choices at post-16 with a minimum of 5 vocational choices.
- Orders made under section 108 of the Education Act 2002 which impose requirements on schools to deliver desirable outcomes, education programmes, assessment arrangements and attainment targets.

93. Temporary modification notices were issued on a monthly basis from September 2020 to March 2021 modifying curriculum and assessment requirements to a reasonable endeavours basis. This included the following provisions:

- Section 101 of the Education Act 2002 relating to requirements on maintained schools to provide a basic curriculum including the national curriculum, religious education, personal and social education, work related education and for secondary schools, sex education.
- Section 109 of the Education Act 2002 which requires the National Curriculum for Wales to be implemented in maintained schools in Wales, as well as section 110 which requires it to be implemented in maintained nursery schools and some other nursery education settings in Wales.

- Sections 116A to 116K of the Education Act 2002 which make provision about the local curriculum including requirements that all young people are provided with a minimum offer of choices.
- Orders made under section 108 of the Education Act 2002 which impose requirements on schools to deliver desirable outcomes, education programmes, assessment arrangements and attainment targets (Duties associated with end phase and end stage assessment plus moderation were disapplied 01 April 2021 to 23 July 2021).
- Section 69 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998 which contains a duty to secure due provision of religious education.
- Section 43 of the Education Act 1997 which makes provision about careers education in schools in Wales.

94. Temporary notices were issued for the 2021 summer term (1 April to 23 July) modifying provisions as above with the exception that assessment duties associated with end phase and end stage requirements and moderation were disapplied.

Provisions subject to temporary disapplication included:

- National Curriculum (Key Stage 2 Assessment Arrangements) (Wales) Order 2004.
- the National Curriculum (Key Stage 3 Assessment Arrangements) (Wales) Order 2005.
- Part 4 of the National Curriculum (Desirable Outcomes, Educational Programmes and Baseline and End of Phase Assessment Arrangements for the Foundation Phase) (Wales) Order 2015.
- the National Curriculum (Moderation of Assessment Arrangements for the Second and Third Key Stages) (Wales) Order 2015.

Changes relating to statutory reporting requirements:

95. Revoking of the School Performance and Absence Targets (Wales) Regulations 2011: these regulations were revoked in August 2020. They required schools to set and publish targets which are agreed by local authorities. Due to the closure of schools, and disruption to assessments, tests and examinations, attainment and attendance was either unavailable or incomparable to previous years.

96. Amendment of the Head Teachers Report to Parents and Adult Pupils (Wales) Regulations 2011: these regulations require headteachers to make a report available to all parents or adult pupils about the educational achievements of pupils, each school year. Some information that would ordinarily be included in a report, was either unavailable, not meaningful, or considered inappropriate.
97. In respect of the 2020/21 school year, the provision of reports for all learners remained an absolute duty. Some information that would ordinarily be included in a report was, however, either unavailable, not meaningful, or considered inappropriate. Regulation 3(3), which specifies the content for reports about the educational achievement of pupils, was amended to a “reasonable endeavours” basis.
98. Amendment of the School Information (Wales) Regulations 2011: these regulations require local authorities to publish a composite school prospectus and schools to publish their own individual prospectus and prescribes the school information that must be included. Requirements were amended to exclude data on authorised and unauthorised absences, in respect of pupils registered at the school in the 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22 school years, from being published in any school prospectus.
99. Amendment of the School Performance Information (Wales) Regulations 2011: these regulations provide for the reporting of teacher assessment and examination outcomes. As there was disruption to the undertaking of foundation phase and key stage teacher assessments during the 2019/20 summer term, due to school closures, and the associated Welsh Government statutory data collection was cancelled.
100. Amendment of the School Governors’ Annual Report (Wales) Regulations 2011: these regulations require school governing bodies to produce an annual report, including information about school performance against published targets. The regulations were amended to modify the content of reports produced in relation to the 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22 school years so that information may not be included in any school governors’ report.

Data, Information and Advice

101. From 11 May 2020, TAG established the Children and Education Sub-group, which specifically focused on children and young people, education and childcare. The group met for the first time on 11 May 2020 and was used extensively as the

main source of scientific and technical advice in relation to the safe operation of childcare and education settings. Both the Deputy Director for Early Years, Childcare and Play, for childcare, and the Deputy Director for Operation of Schools from the Education Directorate, were members of the TAG Children and Education Sub-group. I exhibit the groups TOR as **WG/EPSPG/01-22/INQ000300170** and the minutes of this meeting as **WG/EPSPG/01-23/INQ000300154**.

102. On 18 May 2020 the TAG Children and Education Sub-group met and discussed higher education. The minutes note that there had been engagement with universities and that there was pressure building to provide information to students. The universities wanted a clear steer from Welsh Government ahead of the September return. I exhibit the note of this meeting as **WG/EPSPG/01-24/INQ000300036**.

103. On 01 June 2020 TAG met and discussed children and education (notes exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-25/INQ000300169**). It noted that ahead of any re-opening of schools clear advice needed to be given to children who were vulnerable or more susceptible to severe outcomes – as to which it was identified that the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage (“SAIL”) Databank may hold information around any conditions which may make children more susceptible to severe outcomes. I provide more information about SAIL at paragraph 107.

104. On 2 June 2020 TAG produced a ‘Summary of SAGE paper for Welsh Government Education Department’ Paper, which is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-26/INQ000145230**. The overarching advice was that relaxation of NPIs should only happen when test, trace and protect was in place, the policies have been modelled and the effect on R can be estimated. Risk assessments must be undertaken and mitigations put in place. In relation to children and schools it advised:

- The impact of early years returning was less than older children;
- Staggered return of half classes on week-on-week-off basis reduced transmission if groups did not mix;
- Younger children may be less susceptible to clinical disease although there was insufficient evidence to say the same about older children;
- Some evidence indicated transmissibility was lower in younger children;
- Reopening for younger children was lower risk than older children;
- Social distancing was likely not possible for younger children;

- Children with special educational needs (SEN) are very likely to be adversely affected by school closures.

105. On 18 June 2020 the TAG Children and Education Sub-group produced a paper for ministerial advice (MA-FM-1937-20) describing the latest understanding of Covid-19 with respect to children and education, summarising findings from SAGE, Independent SAGE, Scottish Government, Welsh Government and action taken in other European countries. The report informed discussion in Wales relating to the safe return to education. The TAC advice paper is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-27/INQ000048843**.

106. On 19 June 2020 the TAG Children and Education Sub-group met and discussed testing in schools. It was noted that asymptomatic testing had been ruled out by ministers because the evidence in support was weak. The TAG Children and Education Sub-group identified that separate consideration needed to be given to testing in universities. HE policy team had produced a higher education policy paper which was to be passed to PHW for modelling input. A key question was how students in halls of residence were expected to behave, e.g. were they expected to form a bubble. I exhibit the note of this meeting as **WG/EPSPG/01-28/INQ000299986**.

107. On 26 June 2020 a TAG Consensus Statement on repeat antibody testing of school staff was published, I exhibit this as **WG/EPSPG/01-29/INQ000299391**.

108. On 6 July 2020 TAG Children and Education Sub-group produced a paper on return to schools, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-30/INQ000299446**, this was published on the 7 July. It noted that:

- Real world observation of the reopening of schools in England demonstrated little evidence of transmission by children;
- Social distancing for the under-12s could be reduced;
- Secondary age children are likely to need to reduce overall daily contacts by 40-60% to maintain Covid security - this could be achieved by 2m social distancing and/or maintaining class 'Covid secure groups' with avoidance of mixing;
- The decisions in England, Scotland and Northern Ireland varied;

- Bubbles / limited groups are not straightforward in secondary schools given the movement between different classes and behaviour associated with this cohort;
- The Welsh Government has developed a circuit-breaker methodology to monitor the impact of schools reopening on transmission and this is being developed;
- International comparisons - lack of school related outbreaks in countries that are now open corroborates the position on children's role in transmission;
- There was an issue with universities' accommodation and movement. There were differences in how universities were planning to organise teaching;
- The further education sector, particularly for the post-19, has many different courses and teaching types and much of the teaching is practical;
- Early years sector was keen to co-produce given different incentive to re-open than others. It identified that less than 2% of Covid-19 cases appeared in children of school age and transmissibility was far greater in adults.
- It identified issues for consideration in respect of students at Universities and their accommodation / movement around campus. It also identified that in the further education sector, particularly for the post-19, there were many different courses and teaching types and much of the teaching was practical. Modelling had been undertaken by Cardiff University to inform testing in HE and this was submitted to the Minister for Education and Cabinet, this paper is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-31/INQ000299473**.

109. On 17 July 2020 the TAG Children and Education Sub-group met. I attach the minute of this meeting as **WG/EPSPG/01-32/INQ000299527**. One of the issues they identified was the difficulty posed by the 16-18 age group and the fact that some of them were in further education as opposed to schools and that the guidance would need to address their situations. Decision-making on NPIs in the further education sector encountered the difficulty caused by a relative lack of specific evidence, such as data on transmission rates and the risks of teaching environments were very heavily focused on schools. There was less scientific data and modelling on older teenagers and further education environments (workshops, workplaces etc). Although further education was within scope of the TAG children and education sub-group, it was concerned with learners up to the age of 18 and was primarily focussed on schools. In practice, this meant that decision-making in relation to further education adopted a hybrid approach – consistency with NPIs for schools where

appropriate together with an individualised approach to other areas such as vocational learning and adult learning. For college-run businesses like training salons and restaurants, the advice was to adhere to guidance for those businesses in effect at any given time. The same applied to apprenticeships provision which takes place on employer premises. One of the papers before this meeting was the updated guidance on further education setting out the blended-learning model from September onwards. I exhibit this paper as **WG/EPSPG/01-33/INQ000299496**. It noted that young adults on independent living skills programmes were likely to require face-to-face provision because they had additional learning needs and would not be able to learn independently.

110. On 28 July 2020 the TAG Children and Education Sub-group produced advice on school transport and the mitigations that should be put in place to reduce the risk if increased transmission to an acceptable level. The advice is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-34/INQ000299550**.
111. On 30 July 2020 the TAG Children and Education Sub-group issued a ministerial advice (MA/FM/2440/20) on the safe return to schools. This advice led to the recommendation to amend physical distancing guidance for children aged under 11 years old, effective from 3 August 2020. I attach the advice as **WG/EPSPG/01-35/INQ000221174**.
112. On 11 August 2020 the TAG Children and Education Sub-group published the paper on school transport (as described above in paragraph 93).
113. On 14 August 2020 the TAG Children and Education Sub-group met to discuss the principle of local lockdowns. The group was referred to a list of publications and there was discussion around evidence from Israel, Sweden and Finland which indicated that most transmission by children did not take place in school, but outside of school. The situation in Scotland was also discussed because schools had opened there and the evidence could be monitored. I exhibit the notes of this meeting as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-36/INQ000299557**.
114. On 21 August 2020 the TAG Children and Education Sub-group considered the paper by PHE 'Transmission of Covid-19 in school settings and interventions to reduce the transmission: a rapid review' and noted that the evidence was weak and

did not change previous advice. I attach the note of this meeting as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-37/INQ000299982**.

115. On 22 September 2020 the Further Education & Apprentices Division requested advice from the TAG Children and Education Sub-group on infection rates in further education, given that trade unions had raised concerns about the risks of face-to-face teaching following the return of blended learning in further education colleges. I attach the request for advice as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-38/INQ000299998** and the note of the meeting on the 29 September where this request was discussed as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-39/INQ000299985**.
116. On 9 November 2020 TAG carried out an evidence review in relation to schools and a proposed two-week firebreak beginning on 23 October 2020 for year 9 students and above. It followed SAGE advice suggesting secondary school closures could affect R by up to 0.35. The paper reviewed primary data sources, peer-reviewed papers and international sources. Paper is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-40/INQ000299692**.
117. On 7 January 2021 TAG published a briefing paper on a new variant and education which included detail on modelling around schools and the R number, suggesting increased transmission when schools were open, especially amongst secondary school age children. I exhibit this paper as **WG/EPSPG/01-41/INQ000066357**.
118. On 11 March 2021 TAG produced a paper 'Summary of considerations for allowing a return of more higher education students to in-person education – summer term'. The paper identified the risk factors and the steps that should be taken to mitigate them. The paper is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-42/INQ000227567**.
119. On 31 March 2021 TAG produced a paper for the 21-day review which touched upon higher / further education and the return of secondary schools. Paper is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-43/INQ000227495**.
120. On 27 May 2021 TAG published a consensus statement on the use of face coverings in schools and childcare settings. Paper is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-44/INQ000066360**.

121. In October 2021 TAG produced a paper on preparing for the winter. It refers to children and education and to the reviews commissioned by the TAG children and education sub-group from the COVID-19 Evidence Centre on the 'fifth harm' – how COVID-19 has exacerbated existing, or introduced new, inequalities in our society. Paper is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-45/INQ000087025**.
122. On 10 December 2021 the TAG Children and Education Sub-group met and discussed a paper which had been produced, which outlined what the group had achieved since inception and the papers which had been considered at each meeting, as well as identifying lessons learned. Paper is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-46/INQ000300038**.
123. In addition to the information sharing functions and specialist advisory bodies already described, new regular data collections were put in place by Welsh Government's Knowledge and Analytical Services (KAS) to gather data on children's attendance at 'repurposed' school and settings from local authorities (organised by Data Cymru, which is a Welsh local government company which offers specialist support in finding and using data effectively). This captured data on settings that were open in Wales and the numbers of children and staff that were attending them. This information helped us monitor take-up and demand for places and contributed to UK-wide monitoring and decision-making. The information collected included the total number of vulnerable children attending, as well as an estimated percentage of the overall population of pupils meeting the definition. From October 2020, this information was extracted directly from school management information systems on a weekly basis. Additionally, higher education institutions reported numbers of known Covid-19 cases to Welsh Government statisticians on a weekly basis. I exhibit as example **WG/EPSPG/01-47/INQ000300062**.
124. During the pandemic, the Welsh Government made available a number of its own datasets via the Secure Anonymised Information Linkage ("SAIL") Databank to ensure they could be used by academic researchers. The SAIL Databank was established by the Population Data Science Group at Swansea University in 2007 with core funding from Health and Care Research Wales (HCRW) of the Welsh Government. The data set shared included education attendance data and the School Workforce Annual Census. A number of other datasets that were already available in SAIL were refreshed throughout the pandemic, including the Pupil Level Annual School Census which has been used extensively in pandemic-related

research, staff school vaccination update in addition to data on shielding staff and teaching assistants. I exhibit examples as **WG/EPSPG/01-48/INQ000299967** and **WG/EPSPG/01-49/INQ000300009**.

125. Data on the number of childcare settings open and operational at any time was available from the Care Inspectorate for Wales who were notified of closures. Local authorities continued to administer and monitor funded childcare under both Flying Start and the Childcare Offer, reporting on the numbers of children attending childcare under both schemes. Alongside this, local authorities administered the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme from April to September 2020, reporting on the numbers of children receiving funded childcare. This provided some data on the numbers of children attending childcare though was less extensive than that available for schools.

Communicating with the public and with parents

126. The communications teams for Health, Education and Childcare worked closely together throughout the pandemic to ensure that messaging to parents and the public was clear and consistent. Long-standing links with wider public sector communications teams helped ensure there were networks in place to disseminate information to parents clearly through various channels, networks and methods. In particular, strong working relationships were developed with local authorities via the WLGA, who would share and amplify our messaging via their communication channels.
127. A range of techniques were used to ensure a clear flow of consistent messaging to the childcare and education sector, who engage more directly with parents/carers on a daily basis, and also directly with parents. Examples include:
- Setting up a childcare and education stakeholder bulletin to ensure stakeholders were briefed and had access to consistent messaging for parents;
 - Use of Dysg, the Welsh Government's newsletter to schools and colleges, to communicate with the workforce (40,000 + subscribers);
 - A clear 'you'll hear it from me first' approach to communications by the Minister of Education, when it was clear that there were sometimes differences in the approach between the Welsh Government and the UK Government. The Minister positioned herself as the authoritative voice for

parents on what was happening in education in Wales (and childcare even though it was not in her portfolio);

- An increasing use of social media, especially Twitter to share announcements and to engage with parents. Followers to the Minister for Education Twitter account increased from 29,000 to 40,000 during this time with clear evidence that parents were engaging more and turning to official Welsh Government channels for information;
- The Minister for Education held Q&A sessions on Twitter for parents, as well as taking part in Welsh Government press conferences to make childcare and education related announcements;
- Direct engagement with parental organisations such as Parentkind. For example, Parentkind ran a survey for us in the initial months asking parents what they needed to support children's education. This resulted in the Keep Wales Learning campaign;
- Keep Wales Learning campaign – aimed at parents to provide advice and reassurance and supporting them in educating children at home, it focused on directing parents to relevant Keep Wales Learning resources and information on our online learning platform, Hwb. As well as using Welsh Government corporate, education and community channels, a marketing agency was also engaged to support us with the reassurance campaign;
- Work with Health communications team, Public Health Wales, local authorities and wider public and third sector organisations to amplify key Keep Wales Safe messaging, for example on vaccinations, face coverings etc;
- Developing good working relationships with University Communications teams and the DfE Higher Education communications team to ensure messaging to students, especially around start and end of term travels, was consistent across Wales and England. We ran a Keep Wales Safe campaign targeting students and families at key times in the year. We also supported the health communications team who worked with PHW to amplify vaccination campaigns targeting students.
- Information was also shared via UCAS channels direct with students and provided communications materials to universities and their students' union for them to adapt as they considered students would listen to messaging which came direct from their institutions.

- Further Educations colleges were also provided with communications materials for them to share via channels that were trusted by their college community.

Support for vulnerable learners

128. It is important to note that the policy lead for supporting vulnerable children sits within the Health and Social Services Group. However, throughout the pandemic the policy areas responsible for education and childcare provision worked to ensure that vulnerable children were supported. On 18 March 2020 for example, when it was announced that the Easter break for schools would be brought forward, it was also announced that some schools would be re-purposed, remaining open for vulnerable children and the children of critical workers.
129. In April 2020, a cross-Government group was established in response to the Covid-19 pandemic to ensure a joined-up, coordinated response in support of safeguarding vulnerable children and young people, which consisted of a number of workstreams. The Vulnerable Children Young People and Safeguarding (VCYPS) workstream included policy leads from education, children and families, housing, communities, health and social services. I have attached the Terms of Reference for the Directors Group as **WG/EPSPG/01-50/INQ000300064** and the workstream groups as **WG/EPSPG/01-51/INQ000282126**.
130. An external stakeholder group was also established which includes representatives from the Children's Commissioner, the Inspectorates, the third sector, the Youth Board, the National Safeguarding Board, Directors of Education, Directors of Social Services, the Police, Public Health Wales, the ACE Hub (ACE stands for Adverse Childhood Experiences), and Child and Adolescent Psychology. The purpose of this group was to share intelligence and to identify any risks and gaps, and to feed its output into the VCYPS workstream.
131. During Phase 1 - April 2020 to early September 2020 – this workstream's primary aim was to ensure that vulnerable children and young people were 'safe, seen and heard' during the initial crisis. Through mapping of departmental work and plans, and intensive communication and engagement, the VCYPS workstream facilitated consideration, prevention and mitigation of the impact of the pandemic and the ensuing restrictions on vulnerable children and young people. A Phase 1 plan

was developed and agreed with policy leads, directors and ministers. A draft of the plan was submitted to Ministers in March 2020 and is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-52/INQ000300160** and a summary of the work completed as **WG/EPSPG/01-53/INQ000282125**.

132. Phase 2 - September 2020 to early 2022 - moved from a crisis recovery model and extended the primary aim of the VCYPSP workstream to ensuring that all children and young people are 'safe, seen, heard, nurtured and developing' and subsequently morphed into the Children and Young People's Plan. The definition of vulnerability was also extended. The Phase 2 plan is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-54/INQ000300150**.

133. Over the course of the pandemic, the Welsh Government made available an additional £83.3 million for free school meals. This included funding to provide free school meals during school holidays and for those learners unable to attend school as a result of pandemic related disruption. This investment provided direct, time-limited support for families who had been struggling to make ends meet during the immediate crisis. Guidance was continuously updated to reflect changes in the situation, and the Welsh Government worked closely with both the WLGA and local authorities to ensure that eligible learners received provision in lieu of free school meals. Local authorities were able to choose the most appropriate method of provision in response to locally identified need, but most chose to provide either a cash payment or voucher, with a limited number providing food parcels. I attach guidance as it was April 2020 as **WG/EPSPG/01-55/INQ000300025**.

134. The additional funding made available was based on a daily allowance of £3.90 per child, per day or £19.50 per five-day week. This included £2.90 for lunch, plus an additional £1 to compensate for the fact that primary school children may have been losing out on a free breakfast and free milk. We did not distinguish between primary and secondary school pupils and local authorities were also able to claim in respect of reasonable additional costs they had incurred in making provision in lieu of free school meals. This included delivery costs where appropriate.

135. In April 2020 we announced up to £3 million to support 'digitally excluded' learners during the coronavirus pandemic. Local authorities, working closely with their schools, would use the funding to provide digitally excluded learners, i.e. those learners defined as 'a learner who does not have access to an appropriate internet

connected device to engage in online learning activities from home', with repurposed school devices and 4G MiFi connectivity where required. Replacement devices would also be funded for schools out of the wider Hwb infrastructure programme. Having identified the need for devices and connectivity early on to ensure continuity of learning remotely, officials maintained regular contact with local authorities to monitor the needs of pupils and worked closely with suppliers to meet those needs in terms of both equipment and connectivity. I exhibit as **WG/EPSPG/01-56/INQ000299254** the relevant guidance and **WG/EPSPG/01-57/INQ000300046** as the relevant press notice.

136. A working group for representatives of special schools and the independent schools sector was established, which enabled officials to engage directly with special schools and independent schools, providing them with opportunities to share intel and operational issues, and to help ensure that Welsh Government Covid-19 guidance for education settings reflected the particular circumstances of these sectors. This group was part of a wider co-production approach that helped shape the guidance to support vulnerable and disadvantaged learners which the Welsh Government issued during the pandemic. The guidance supported schools and settings to ensure an inclusive approach, and it adopted a wide definition of vulnerable and disadvantaged learners. The aim of the guidance was to provide schools and settings with good practice examples to support the implementation of approaches aimed at supporting all learners to keep safe and continue learning during the pandemic. The guidance was also useful for independent schools and non-maintained early years settings to consider and adopt aspects of the advice that were relevant to their settings and learners.

137. The Welsh Government also published guidance for elective home educating families (EHE) during the pandemic, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-58/INQ000300020**. It provided clarification for parents and carers during lockdown and restrictions on movements between dwellings. The guidance made clear that in order to minimise the spread of infection, wherever possible provision for home educated learners should take place on-line/virtually. It also clarified what the regulations (the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No5) (Wales) Regulations 2020) allowed at that time, which included an exception to the restriction on gatherings in private dwellings where the person was participating in the gathering for a purpose that was reasonably necessary and there was no reasonably practicable alternative.

138. The Welsh Government also published guidance for independent boarding and residential school learners travelling to Wales from abroad during the Coronavirus pandemic, these are exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-59/ INQ000082329** and **WG/EPSPG/01-60/INQ000300166**.

Support for learning continuity and well-being

139. On 8 July 2020 the Minister for Education announced that £29 million of “recruit, recover and raise standards” funding would be provided to schools to boost support for learners at crucial stages in their education from September 2020. The context of this announcement was recognition of the impact that lockdown had had in terms of the disruption to learners’ learning and on their wider well-being; and that specific measures were needed to mitigate as far as possible the disruption to learners caused by absence from school. Identification of need was undertaken using a range of evidence from Wales, the UK and international contexts, and it was clear that the funding needed to be sourced and allocated in a way that recognised the impact of the pandemic on different groups of learners. This area of the work became known across the education sector as the Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards programme (RRRS).
140. Allocation of funding to schools was determined by two principles – that funding needed to be sensitively allocated to those schools and communities most likely to have been hardest hit, and that the use of funding at school level was best determined by Headteachers in schools. This meant that schools with the most impacted learner groups received the higher allocations – for example, school communities with higher levels of economic deprivation, those with more ALN learners, those with more learners from Black Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds and those with more learners in the key age-groups of early years, transition and qualifications. There were encouraged and allowable activities identified in the guidance for the RRRS grant, so as to provide Heads with the flexibility they needed to deploy the resource at school level.
141. As it was identified that one of the key hindrances to continuity was the quality and range of digital and analogue resources that teachers could develop and learners could access, investment was also made into resource to support learners in exam years and to support teachers in their learning design skills in respect of learning resources, materials and activities that learners could use when not in

school. A key enabler of this was the Welsh Government's previous investment in the development of Hwb, a website and collection of online tools provided to all schools in Wales by the Welsh Government, the use of which expanded significantly during this period.

142. The Renew and Reform (R&R) programme was established in January 2021 to build on the support in place from the Recruit, Recover, Raise Standards programme and to develop a shared, continued articulation of our support for learners emerging from Covid-19. The R&R programme included early years learning, compulsory education, and post-16 learning and transitions, and had a specific focus on coordinating our support for disadvantaged learners. Partnership working and local decision-making were established as its core principles: the scope and objectives of the programme were co-constructed with partners and promoting well-being was specifically recognised as the platform for learning recovery. The programme was governed through an internal Welsh Government structure, chaired by the Director General for Covid Recovery, involving three Directorates, addressing these objectives through programme and funding coordination to focus on learners. This was to ensure that the aims, focus and functioning of the programme maximised the coordination of investment across Welsh Government, and operationalised it as close to the point of need as possible, such as payments being made directly to schools and colleges. I attach the Plan that was submitted as part of Ministerial advice June 2021 as **WG/EPSPG/01-61/INQ000299951**.

143. Throughout 2021, and as the programme matured, additional funding was released as plans concerning local level support were published and updated (June and September 2021 respectively). Following the publication of the Renew and Reform plan in June 2021, an additional £278 million was allocated in the 2021-22 financial year to support the system on an ongoing basis to respond to emerging issues and evidence, including particular issues around, for example, learner engagement and attendance; support for learners taking qualifications; and to respond to ongoing disruption to the operations of schools through autumn 2021, including the emergence of the Omicron variant during the last months of 2021 and the re-establishment of some restrictions. I attach an example of an announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-62/INQ000299444**.

144. The evidence from various sources, including the OECD internationally, the Sutton Trust within the UK and the Children's Commissioner in Wales, suggests that the pandemic affected some groups of learners more than others. The plan therefore recognised and sought to address four key issues borne out by consideration of the evidence relating to the impacts of the pandemic on children and young people:
- a. Learners will need support to develop a secure foundation for learning;
 - b. Learners will need support to continue to progress, developing their knowledge, understanding and skills;
 - c. Practitioners will need support for their own well-being;
 - d. The education system is already working towards reform.
145. Across these four issues, different learners were being affected differently. The plan set out the specific target cohorts that we sought to support through bespoke interventions, including:
1. vulnerable or disadvantaged learners, and learners with additional learning needs (ALN);
 2. learners in early years (aged 0 to 7 who attend settings which support their learning and development);
 3. learners in post-16 and transition.
146. Emerging evidence about impacts and recovery from the pandemic and disruption in other contexts informed the programme design and helped tailor it to support different groups of learners. Externally commissioned evaluation of the Recruit, Recover and Raise Standards programme, published in May 2023 (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-63/INQ000300173**) found it had paid for nearly 2,500 additional full-time-equivalent staff, that the school-led approach to meeting learners' needs was successful and wellbeing support was the most effective approach. A similarly commissioned evaluation of the Winter of Wellbeing (WoW) Programme, published in January 2023 (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-64/INQ000300171**) found that the programme had helped the vast majority of participants to address impacts of the pandemic. They had been helped to try new things, learn new skills and be physically active. Nearly all had fun taking part and most had been helped to make new friends, manage their mental health, and feel more confident. WoW also helped providers to thrive and develop local partnerships. An evaluation of the post-16 Covid-19 recovery funding is due to be published in autumn 2023. It provides evidence on how the funding supported the post-16 education and training sector and how it was used in practice by institutions, with a focus on the effectiveness of different teaching and

learning interventions, digital inclusion and the implementation of additional mental health and wellbeing support. Other education research has explored pandemic impacts: for example the Curriculum for Wales Early Insights studies, an example published in April 2023, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-65/INQ000300224** provided an up to date and detailed assessment by school leaders of the emerging longer term impacts of the pandemic upon learning. The long-term study of Covid-19 Impacts and Initiatives will continue over the next 5-10 years, will include a wide range of stakeholders and evidence. Its focus is to understand impacts in depth, to inform future support for learners and settings and better equip the system for any future disruption.

147. In total, £499 million was provided to support the education system's response to coronavirus over the course of the pandemic. The majority of this funding was provided across the 2020-21 and 2021-22 financial years, predominately through our grant award mechanisms. As the R&R programme ended, many elements of the programme and its funding have been transferred into 'business as usual' arrangements.

148. On 16 June 2021 the Welsh Government announced a £5 million Summer of Fun 2021, I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-66/INQ000300052**. Linked to the R&R programme, the Summer of Fun provided children and young people aged 0-25 the opportunity to play and participate in free leisure, recreational, sporting and cultural activities to help rebuild their physical, social and emotional skills in both Welsh and English. The programme was delivered from 1 July until 30 September 2021.

149. On 6 October 2021 the Welsh Government announced a further package of well-being support for children, young people and families in the recovery Covid-19 which included £20m funding for a Winter of Well-being, to build on the success of the Summer of Fun 2021. The Winter of Well-being supported the commitments set out in Renew and Reform to provide more opportunities for children and young people aged 0-25 to develop their social, emotional and physical well-being. It provided opportunities to play, and to engage in social, cultural and physical activities outside of formal learning. Activities took place between October 2021 and March 2022. I attach the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-67/INQ000300022**.

150. In delivering the Winter of Well-being, we worked with a range of providers including local authorities, schools, colleges, universities, Sport Wales, the Urdd, the Young Farmers, NUS Cymru, our museums and libraries and more. This ensured a broad spread of activities for children and young people of all ages. The programme was delivered via five strands: local authorities, national organisations, schools, Further Education institutions and Higher Education providers.

Overview of approach to examinations

151. On 27 March 2020 the Minister for Education announced she had met with Qualifications Wales and the Welsh Joint Education Committee to consider options and had decided that Year 10 and 12 students who were due to sit exams that summer would not be required to sit the exams at a later date. Announcement is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-68/INQ000299097**.

152. This decision, to revert to Centre Assessed Grades for examinations in the summer of 2020, which was made at late notice but consistent across the UK, created significant disturbance and unrest in the system. The Welsh Government's primary concern was the impact on young people's mental health and well-being from this disruption, including the often very challenging discussions in the media during this period. On 28 August 2020, the Minister for Education announced her decision to request an independent review to transparently reflect on the experiences of summer 2020 and seek to build confidence for development of thinking towards qualifications 2021, with the expectation that these could be similarly disrupted. I attach the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-69/INQ000300050**.

153. The independent review was wide ranging, including a range of reflections on the approach in summer 2020, and involving a range of partners. In particular and distinctively, it included a learner survey to ensure the voices of young people were heard as plans were made towards 2021. The outcomes of the review published in October 2020 were part of the evidence base the Minister for Education used to take an early policy decision that exams should be cancelled in summer 2021 and that alternative assessment arrangements should be developed. This was discussed extensively with Qualifications Wales prior to this policy decision being taken. The early policy decision was intended both to provide reassurance to learners that their well-being and progression was being supported and to give the sector time to

develop and prepare for the alternative arrangements – both key learning points from the review. I exhibit the review as **WG/EPSPG/01-70/INQ000300155**.

154. Recognising the impact of the situation in summer 2020 on learner well-being, and the loss of confidence in the sector, the Minister for Education announced the establishment of a Design and Delivery Advisory Group of headteachers and college leaders to design an approach to qualifications in 2021 which supported both learner well-being and progression. A similar approach was taken in other parts of the UK, although the deep and direct engagement with practitioners, QW and WJEC to design the approach to qualifications in 2021 was distinctive to Wales, recognising the loss of confidence in summer 2020. This entailed weekly meetings of half to a whole day from December 2020 to June 2021, chaired by an independent education specialist on behalf of the Minister.

Key decisions / announcements during the pandemic

155. I have included an overview of the key decisions and announcements made by the Welsh Government in respect of education and childcare from 0-25 years.
156. On 18 March 2020, the Minister for Education announced that “*we are bringing forward the Easter break for schools in Wales. Schools across Wales will close for statutory provision of education at the latest on 20 March 2020*”. It was announced that schools would be repurposed to help support those most in need, including people involved in the immediate response to the coronavirus outbreak. The Minister confirmed she was working with colleagues in the Cabinet, government officials and partners in local government to develop and finalise the plans. Key areas of concern included supporting and safeguarding the vulnerable and ensuring continuity of learning. I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-71/INQ000300014**.
157. On 20 March 2020 the Minister for Education and the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services delivered a written statement regarding ongoing provision for children who are vulnerable, or whose parents are critical to the Covid-19 response. I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-72/INQ000299040**. They recognised the most recent scientific advice on how to further limit the spread of Covid-19 was clear. It was imperative that, as far as possible, social contact should

be minimised. If children could stay safely in their home, they should, to limit the chance of the virus spreading. In summary, from Monday 23 March:

- If it was at all possible for children to be at home, they should be;
- If a child needed specialist support, was vulnerable or had a parent who was critical to the Covid-19 response, then provision in an educational or childcare setting should be made available for them;
- Parents should not rely on anyone who had been advised to follow social distancing guidance, such as grandparents, friends, or family members with underlying conditions, for childcare;
- Parents should do everything they could to ensure children were not mixing socially in ways, which could contribute to spreading coronavirus. Children should observe the same social distancing guidance as adults;
- Residential special schools and special settings should continue to care for children wherever possible.

158. Also on 20 March 2020, the Minister for Education and the Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services delivered a written statement regarding ongoing provision for children who are vulnerable, or whose parents are critical to the Covid-19 response. I exhibit the written statement as **WG/EPSPG/01-73/INQ000299030**.

159. On 20 March 2020, all school sixth forms, colleges and other post-16 learning providers closed for face-to-face learning. Learning moved online where possible in higher education. Some face-to-face learning resumed over the summer term, but the majority of learning remained online for the rest of the academic year.

160. On 21 March 2020, the Welsh Government issued a press release confirming £7 million would be made available to support pupils while schools were closed, which is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-74/INQ000299054**. The funding would be provided to local authorities to provide financial assistance to families of pupils who relied on free school meals but were unable to receive them due to school closures. Guidance was later issued to local authorities to make arrangements to ensure children and young people eligible for free school meals would receive access to alternative provision.

161. On 27 March 2020, the Minister for Education announced she had met with Qualifications Wales and the Welsh Joint Education Committee to consider options and had decided that Year 10 and 12 students who were due to sit exams that

summer would not be required to sit the exams at a later date. I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-68/INQ000299097**.

162. Also on 27 March 2020, the Minister for Education wrote to all higher education institutions highlighting that universities in Wales were carrying out a range of activities aimed at supporting students' mental health and well-being, supported by funding made available through HEFCW. The Minister recognised that universities are responsible for planning and delivery of their provision, however, the letter confirmed that the Minister expected them to consider the needs of students in providing alternative and accessible formats for both teaching and assessment. I exhibit this letter as **WG/EPSPG/01-76/INQ000300059**.

163. On 02 April 2020, officials established a cross-government workstream to consider the priorities for safeguarding and vulnerable children. The sub-groups of activity within the workstream included:

- Outreach (inc. Families First and Flying Start);
- Emotional Well-being (schools counselling, helplines, mental health);
- Parenting (Positive Parenting and support for parents);
- Improving Outcomes for Children (care experienced);
- 16+ (inc. youth work, care leavers and young carers);
- Special Schools and additional learning needs (ALN);
- Safeguarding - Settings and Services;
- Communications - supporting all.

164. The workstream included officials from teams in education, health, social services, children and families and communities to ensure, that as far as possible, all aspects of the impact on safeguarding and vulnerable children and young people were considered. Its aim was to identify issues from multiple sources and respond to them once; share intelligence and use the Welsh Government's networks and stakeholders to their greatest effect; harness and make use of all potential responses across government; and to have a single, multi-layered plan, that the Welsh Government would work to in a coherent and joined up way. I attach the Ministerial advice regarding this workstream as **WG/EPSPG/01-77/INQ000116756**.

165. On 06 April 2020, announcement of funding to support the children of critical workers and vulnerable children under-5 to attend childcare settings where necessary via the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme. I exhibit the Ministerial

advice and announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-78/INQ000300168** and **WG/EPSPG/01-79/INQ000300153**.

166. On 08 April 2020, Circular Letter WG 005/2020 was issued explaining under what circumstances and subject to what arrangements the Welsh Government would allow the temporary relaxation of some of the requirements in the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare. I exhibit the letter as **WG/EPSPG/01-80/INQ000198290**.

167. On 15 April 2020, the Minister for Education wrote to HEFCW to outline a provisional grant in aid budget for higher education, which would be subject to further internal Welsh Government budgetary review. I exhibit this letter as **WG/EPSPG/01-81/INQ000300161**.

168. On 16 April 2020, the Minister for Education announced £1.25 million funding to provide additional mental health support for children who may be experiencing additional stress or anxiety as a result of the pandemic. The additional funding would be available in the financial year 2020 to 2021 and provided for school counselling services to address an anticipated increase in demand. The statement is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-82/INQ000300045**.

169. On 20 April 2020, the Welsh Government published 'Stay Safe. Stay Learning: Continuity of learning policy statement'. Exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-83/INQ000299175** refers.

170. Also on 20 April 2020, the Welsh Government issued a press release entitled 'Five ways Wales is leading the way in delivering digital education services'. I exhibit the press release as **WG/EPSPG/01-84/INQ000299179**.

171. On 21 April 2020, the Minister for Education made a statement in relation to higher education addressing matters including a moratorium on unconditional offers and a Four Nations approach to matters including Student Loans Company funding, this is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-85/INQ000300027**.

172. On 22 April 2020, the Welsh Government issued a press release, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-86/INQ000300026**, stating that Wales had become the first country in the UK to guarantee ongoing funding for children to continue to receive free school

meals throughout the summer holidays in response to the coronavirus pandemic. With the support of the Welsh Local Government Association, the Welsh Government would make £33 million available to help local authorities continue to provide free school meals until schools re open or up until the end of August 2020.

173. On 23 April 2020, Steve Davies, Director of Education, and Albert Heaney, Deputy Director General for Health and Social Services, wrote to all Directors of Education and Directors of Social Services sharing that the Welsh Government had refined its definition of 'vulnerable children'. I exhibit the letter as **WG/EPSPG/01-87/INQ000300005**. The context of this letter was that local authorities had established hubs at which the provision for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children was to be provided so that resources from across the schools in the area could be pooled. However, the local authorities were encountering difficulties meeting the demand for critical worker spaces at education hubs so that their approach to vulnerable child provision at the hubs was necessarily affected by this difficulty so that in some instances a more restrictive approach was being taken to which children qualified for the vulnerable child provision.

174. On 24 April 2020, a ministerial advice (MA/P/JM/1092/20, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-88/ INQ000104010**) was submitted to the Ministers for Education and Health and Social Services. It recommended that further drafting be undertaken in relation to notices under section 38 of and Part 1 of Schedule 17 to the 2020 Act to allow the temporary disapplication / modification of statutory provisions / requirements in childcare and education legislation in response to Covid-19. The context was that some schools had children in attendance from across the authority, including children who were not their pupils; lessons were not taking place as normal with teachers supporting distance learning; meetings of governing bodies were not being held as planned and there are a wide range of administrative matters which were either taking longer to undertake or were being done differently including the setting of schools budgets and the undertaking of annual reports. It was necessary to modify or disapply certain of these functions as otherwise schools, governing bodies and local authorities would be in breach of statutory duties.

175. On 29 April 2020, the Minister for Education announced up to £3 million to support 'digitally excluded' learners during the coronavirus pandemic, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-57/INQ000300046**. Local authorities, working closely with their schools, would use the funding to provide digitally excluded learners, i.e. those

learners defined as 'a learner who does not have access to an appropriate internet connected device to engage in online learning activities from home', with repurposed school devices and 4G MiFi connectivity where required. Replacement devices would also be funded for schools out of the wider Hwb infrastructure programme.

176. On 07 May 2020, Cabinet met to consider the second 21-day review. Cabinet agreed that schools would not re-open on 01 June 2020 and an announcement was made by the Minister for Education to that effect later in the day. It was important to make it clear that they remained open for those with ALN and the children of key workers, I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSG/01-90/INQ000299270**.

177. On 11 May 2020, the definition of 'vulnerable children' in the vulnerable child guidance was updated to state as follows in relation to children with special educational needs (SEN):

"We are asking local authorities to consider the needs of all children and young people with a statement of SEN, and make a risk assessment. This should involve parents or carers and the views of the child or young person. A multiagency approach should be used where appropriate. The assessment should focus on determining whether children and young people with a statement of SEN will be able to have their needs met at home with support provided remotely. Local authorities and education settings should decide together who is best placed to undertake the risk assessment, noting that the duty to secure provision remains with the local authority."

178. On 13 May 2020, a 'Coronavirus and Me' survey was launched by the Welsh Government, the Children's Commissioner for Wales, the Welsh Youth Parliament, and Children in Wales. The Welsh Government wanted to hear directly from children and young people regarding how the pandemic was affecting their lives and teamed up with a number of independent bodies to create, and disseminate, an on-line survey to formally seek their views. The Children's Commissioner for Wales project-managed the survey and produced reports on the key findings. Reports were developed on the experiences of disabled children, children from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups, and young people aged 15-18. The results of the survey were reported on in June 2020. I exhibit the reports as **WG/EPSG/01-91/INQ000300152** and **WG/EPSG/01-92/INQ000300158**.

179. On 15 May 2020 the Minister for Education announced the publication of 'The decision framework for the next phase of education and childcare' to set out the Welsh Government's current thinking on how schools, other education settings and childcare providers' operations would change to allow social distancing and other factors. The announcement is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-93/INQ000299283** and the framework as **WG/EPSPG/01-94/INQ000299284**.
180. On 18 May 2020, the Minister for Education and Minister for Health and Social Services announced £3.75 million of funding for mental health in schools to include new support for children under the age of 11 as exhibited in **WG/EPSPG/01-95/INQ000300047**.
181. On 20 May 2020 ministerial advice (**MA/KW/1553/20** exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-96/INQ000299304**) was submitted to the Minister for Education and the Minister for Finance recommending that £50 million be allocated from Welsh Government Covid-19 reserves to establish a Higher Education Relief and Investment fund to support the sector to maintain critical capacity and jobs in teaching, research and student services, before the Welsh Government embarked on joint negotiations with the Scottish Government and HM Treasury. It was intended that the Star Chamber considered the advice on 21 May 2020.
182. On 26 May 2020 Star Chamber considered the request for funding for higher education and requested further evidence be submitted. A new advice was submitted on 10 July 2020 (**MA/KW/2230/20** exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-97/INQ000299517**) which requested a lower amount of £27 – 30 million.
183. On 27 May 2020 Cabinet met to consider the third 21-day review. Easements in education and childcare were considered and it was identified that a critical factor was the need for an effective test, trace and protect system, which could be possible by the next review period.
184. On 28 May 2020, the Welsh Government published the Covid-19 Resilience Plan for the post-16 education sector. I exhibit this plan as **WG/EPSPG/01-98/INQ000300028**.
185. On 2 June 2020, the first Children's Rights Impact Assessment ('CRIA') was carried out. This is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-99/INQ000299535**.

186. On 3 June 2020, the Minister for Education made an announcement regarding the reopening schools in Wales. It was proposed all schools would start a phase of reopening on 29 June, with the term extended by a week, therefore ending on 27 July. Guidance was published to support schools, as well as further and higher education institutions. This would include information on managing their facilities and logistical arrangements, including buildings, resources, cleaning and transport. I exhibit the Ministerial advice in relation to this decision as **WG/EPSPG/01-100/INQ000145229** and the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-101/INQ000300048**.
187. Also on 3 June 2020, the Welsh Government published a paper from its Technical Advisory Cell regarding Covid-19, children and education, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-102/INQ000066275**.
188. On 10 June 2020, the Welsh Government published 'Operational guidance for schools and settings: Keep Education Safe (Covid-19)' exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-103/INQ000081200**. This stated that more intensive and/or specialist support should be available in an appropriate and timely fashion. Local authorities and the NHS should work with schools to identify and support learners' needs. Special school staff should consult parents of children with additional learning needs about specific support needs and use their discretion flexibly. It stated that the vulnerable child provision should continue to be offered but that vulnerable children should receive this provision from their usual school rather than local authority hubs.
189. On 10 June 2020, non-statutory advice was published to the higher and further education sectors (including work-based and adult learning) to manage the safe return of learners and staff to blended and face-to-face learning, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-104/INQ000145395**. Ministerial advice (MA/KW/1865/20) relating to the guidance is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-105/ INQ000103917**.
190. Also on 10 June 2020, the Welsh Government published operational guidance for childcare settings. This was updated regularly throughout the pandemic, with iterations of the guidance shared with stakeholders in draft and comments taken on board. Guidance as of 10 June is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-106/INQ000081206** and the latest iteration as of 28 April 2022 as **WG/EPSPG/01-107/INQ000082797**.

191. On 15 June 2020, further education providers, colleges and work-based learning providers began to reopen for face-to-face learning for a limited group of learners.
192. On 22 June 2020, childcare settings were able to open for all children but were asked to follow the Welsh Government's guidance, including keeping children in small, consistent groups. The Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme was extended to 31 August 2020. Ministerial advice for this decision is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-108/INQ000145420** and **WG/EPSPG/01-109/INQ000299372**.
193. On 23 June 2020, Welsh Ministers issued the Disapplication of Curriculum Requirements in Wales Notice 2020 in exercise of powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020. The notice temporarily disapplied specified curriculum requirements and their associated assessment arrangements. This meant that, whilst learners were at home, schools would not be legally required to provide the full curriculum as set out in the legislation. It was not possible for schools to do this consistently in the circumstances of on-site hub provision and home-learning, and it enabled schools to focus on those elements of learning that were most relevant to their particular cohort of learners. This was accompanied with 'learning guidance' which emphasised the importance of outdoor learning, and the need to retain breadth of offer during the period of disruption. I exhibit the notice and amendments as **WG/EPSPG/01-110/INQ000300061** and **WG/EPSPG/01-111/INQ000300063**.
194. Also on 23 June 2020, a written statement from the Minister for Education was issued confirming that as schools opened to more learners, she was clear the priority should be focusing on the health and well-being of learners, supporting them to prepare for and re-engage with school learning, particularly those learners who have been most affected by the current period of disruption. This decision was made based on a number of different sources. I exhibit the statement as **WG/EPSPG/01-112/INQ000300037** the Ministerial advice relating to this decision is as exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-100/ INQ000145229** (para 169).
195. On 24 June 2020, Circular Letter WG007/2020 was issued (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-113/INQ000081244**) extending the temporary relaxation of some of the requirements in the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare from June to 30 September 2020.

196. On 25 June 2020, Welsh Ministers made the Maintained Schools (Amendment of paragraph 7 of Schedule 17 to the Coronavirus Act 2020) (Wales) Regulations 2020. The Welsh Ministers issued the Disapplication of Changing School Session Times Requirements (Wales) Notice 2020 in exercise of powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020. The notice temporarily disapplied provisions in the Changing of School Session Times (Wales) Regulations 2009.
197. Also on 25 June 2020, Welsh Ministers issued the Modification of School Organisation Code (Wales) Notice 2020 in exercise of powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020. The notice temporarily modified paragraphs in the School Organisation Code. Welsh Ministers also issued the Modification of section 3 of the Education Act 1996 (Wales) Notice 2020 in exercise of powers in the Coronavirus Act 2020. The notice temporarily modified section 3 of the Education Act 1996.
198. On 26 June 2020, the Minister for Health and Social Services made an announcement setting out the action the Welsh Government was taking to ensure the safety of children and school staff. The announcement addressed the rapid deployment of antigen testing and antibody testing. I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-114/INQ000299393**.
199. Also on 26 June 2020, the education and children sub-group of TAG met and discussed a test paper on higher education during the pandemic. They also discussed a SAGE paper around different Universities wishing to take different routes, which was awaited. It was agreed a UK level conversation and consensus about universities would be beneficial. Concerns were raised around the testing regime and its capacity to handle 120,000 students in the autumn.
200. On 29 June 2020, schools opened to pupils from all year groups for limited periods during the week, with only a third of pupils in school at any one time.
201. On 6 July 2020, the Minister for Education and Deputy Minister for Social Services announced that £1.6 million would be made available from the local authority emergency hardship fund to enable local authorities to enhance their childcare and play opportunities for children and young people aged five to 16 to provide for all those who need additional support over the summer, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-115/INQ000300006**. A further £1 million was allocated from the education budget to fund support for children and young people over the school

summer holidays to help them re-engage with education, giving them the opportunity to take part in activities, which they may have missed out on while not at school, including socialising with their peers and physical activity.

202. On 8 July 2020, the Minister for Education announced that £29 million “recruit, recover and raise standards” funding would be provided to schools to boost support for learners at crucial stages in their education from September 2020, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-62/INQ000299444**. The funding was targeted at recruiting the equivalent of 600 extra teachers and 300 teaching assistants throughout the next school year, targeting extra support at Years 11, 12 and 13, as well as disadvantaged and vulnerable learners of all ages.
203. On 9 July 2020, the Minister for Education announced that schools would re-open in September, referring to the TAG recommendation that schools “plan to open in September with 100% of pupils physically present on school sites, subject to a continuing, steady decline in the presence of Covid-19 in the community.” I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-117/ INQ000300049**.
204. On 17 July 2020, all schools in Wales closed for the summer holidays, with the exception of schools in Conwy, Powys and Pembrokeshire. Childcare was able to operate over the summer, in line with Welsh Government guidance. Further Education colleges extended their summer terms to enable learners, particularly those on vocational programmes, to undertake practical assessments and complete their courses.
205. On 20 July 2020, playgrounds reopened across Wales. Outdoor playgrounds remained able to open from this point, subject to advice on distancing and safe operations. I attach the guidance that was published as **WG/EPSPG/01-118/INQ000081308**.
206. On 22 July 2020, the Welsh Government announced £50 million in additional funding for universities and colleges. £27 million was to be provided to higher education institutions; and £23 million to support students in further education colleges and sixth forms for the 2020/21 academic year, as exhibited in **WG/EPSPG/01-119/INQ000299526**.

207. On 24 July 2020, schools in Conwy, Powys and Pembrokeshire closed for the summer holidays.
208. On 29 July 2020, the Education Directorate produced an Integrated Impact Assessment incorporating a Child Rights Impact Assessment ('CRIA') (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-99/INQ000299535**). Due the pace at which things were moving and the need to make quick decisions, it was not possible to undertake a full CRIA earlier than this. The CRIA looked at the impact of a number of key decisions including:
- The repurposing of schools;
 - The arrangements put in place for free school meals;
 - The Continuity of Learning Programme;
 - The guidance to local education authorities to risk assess children with SEN to decide on whether to offer vulnerable child provision;
 - The cancellation of the summer exams.
209. On 31 July 2020, the Minister for Education published two sets of guidance for Further and Higher Education containing detailed information on protective measures including how to engage with the Welsh Government's test, trace and protect programme and advice on PPE, I exhibit these as **WG/EPSPG/01-121/INQ000081316** and **WG/EPSPG/01-122/INQ000081352**.
210. On 10 August 2020, indoor play areas were able to reopen but asked to follow Welsh Government guidance as exhibited at **WG/EPSPG/01-123/INQ000081375**.
211. On 26 August 2020, the Minister for Education and Minister for Health and Social Services announced children and young adults over the age of 11 should wear face coverings in school and education settings, based on the advice of the Chief Medical Officer for Wales and TAG advice on face coverings in schools (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-124/INQ000300223**). This was followed by a funding announcement on 07 September 2020 to fund face coverings in schools and further education settings, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-125/INQ000300227**.
212. On 28 August 2020, the Minister of Education announced an independent review to transparently reflect on the experiences of summer 2020 and seek to build confidence for development of thinking towards qualifications 2021, with the

expectation that these could be similarly disrupted. The independent review was wide ranging, including a range of reflections on the approach in summer 2020, and involving a range of partners. In particular and distinctively, it included a learner survey to ensure the voices of young people were heard as plans were made towards 2021. Recognising the impact of the situation in summer 2020 on learner well-being, and the loss of confidence in the sector, the Minister announced the establishment of the Design and Delivery Advisory Group of headteachers and college leaders to design an approach to qualifications in 2021 which supported both learner well-being and progression. I attach the written statement published as **WG/EPSPG/01-69/INQ000300050**.

213. On 31 August 2020, the Coronavirus Childcare Assistance Scheme closed, and the Childcare Offer for Wales restarted.
214. On 1 September 2020, some schools operated a phased return with flexibility to focus on priority groups.
215. Also on 1 September 2020, further education colleges, work-based learning providers and adult learning providers were able to recommence in-person teaching sessions, subject to control measures such as social distancing and contact groups. Some settings operated a phased return with flexibility to focus on priority groups. There was also a SAGE meeting, which discussed the opening of higher education and further education settings and the relevant principles were discussed.
216. On 03 September 2020, Circular Letter WG009/2020 was issued extending the temporary relaxation of some of the requirements in the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare from 01 October to 31 December 2020. I attached the letter as **WG/EPSPG/01-127/INQ000300163**.
217. On 7 September 2020, the Minister for Education wrote to the chair of Qualifications Wales to update the Direction that was provided on 6 April under Section 53 of the Qualifications Wales Act 2015, to have regard to the Welsh Ministers' policy regarding the cancellation of exams and the subsequent determination of grades. The decision to revert to Centre Assessed Grades in the summer of 2020, made at late notice but consistent across the UK, created significant disturbance and unrest in the system. The Welsh Government's primary concern was the impact on young people's mental health and well-being from this

disruption, including the often very challenging discussions in the media during this period. I exhibit the letter as **WG/EPSPG/01-128/INQ000300225**.

218. On 14 September 2020, schools opened to all pupils and the Pupils Present in Wales data collection began.

219. On 6 October 2020, the 'Coronavirus and me: experiences of children from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups in Wales' report was published, based on the survey that had been carried out in May 2020 (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-129/INQ000299588**). The paper was produced with advice from Race Council Cymru, the Ethnic Youth Support Team and Show Racism the Red Card Wales. It recommended that consideration be given to steps to allow Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children access to libraries and community centres and outlined steps to address an increased digital exclusion, as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic children were more likely to identify the closure of libraries, community centres and digital exclusion as impacting upon their education and well-being.

220. Also on 6 October 2020, the Welsh Government published a report 'Coronavirus reconstruction: challenges and priorities', (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-130/INQ000300057**). In relation to further education, the report stated that the Welsh Government would make sure that young people did not lose out educationally or economically through the effects of Covid-19 or because of any economic downturn that was not of their making. The Welsh Government would support all young people to stay in education and to catch up at school and college. In addition, the Welsh Government would ensure that particularly disadvantaged groups, including members of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic communities, received the additional help that they needed. It highlighted that universities, further education colleges and students were to be supported with a £50 million fund to maintain teaching and research.

221. On 19 October 2020, Conwy, Powys and Pembrokeshire had a two-week autumn half term holiday from 19 to 30 October 2020. All other schools closed from 26 to 30 October 2020 for autumn half-term. Childcare was able to remain open but asked to follow Welsh Government guidance.

222. On 22 October 2020, additional funding of £10 million was announced (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-131/INQ000299632**) by the Welsh Government for

higher education student support and well-being, to be managed by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW); this was in addition to the £27 million Higher Education Institution (HEI) support announced in the summer.

223. On 2 November 2020, pupils in Year 9 and above were not expected to be present in school in the week commencing 2 November 2020, due to the firebreak in Wales. Childcare and university settings were able to remain open but were asked to follow the Welsh Government's guidance.
224. On 10 November 2020, the Minister for Education announced there would be no GCSE, AS and A-level qualification exams in 2021, because the time learners would spend in schools and colleges would vary and it would not be possible to ensure fairness. I exhibit this announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-132/INQ000299996**.
225. Also on 10 November 2020, revenue funding for CWLWM, Play Wales and local authorities totalling £3.3 million was approved by the Minister for Health and Social Services, Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services and Minister for Housing and Local Government to support the childcare and play sector, both in terms of recovery from the impact of Covid-19 and ongoing sustainability. This was approved in Ministerial advice MA/JM/3424/20, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-133/INQ000300012**.
226. On 11 November 2020, the Minister for Education announced guidance to help university students to travel home safely ahead of Christmas. The announcement (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-134/INQ000300000**) provided that the Welsh Government had been working closely with universities to agree a set of principles that would allow all students living in term-time accommodation to move home at the end of the term. Measures included universities agreeing to conclude teaching on 8 December 2020 and developing guidelines and messaging with Public Health Wales. The Welsh Government had worked with the other governments across the UK to ensure that all students, no matter where they lived or studied were treated fairly. It included an opportunity for all our universities to take part in an asymptomatic mass testing pilot that explored the use of new lateral flow test devices within higher education settings. The announcement identified that the evidence showed that transmission was not taking place in the teaching and learning environment at that time.

227. On 23 November 2020, the Minister for Education announced an update to Welsh Government guidance on the use of face coverings in schools and colleges. The guidance (**exhibited as WG/EPSPG/01-135/INQ000081406**) stated that face coverings should be worn in all areas outside the classroom by staff and learners in secondary schools and colleges; on dedicated school and college transport for learners in year 7 and up; and by visitors to all schools and colleges, including parents and carers dropping off and picking up children. The policy for face coverings in classrooms remained the same. I also exhibit the written statement as **WG/EPSPG/01-136/INQ000300051**.
228. On 7 December 2020, the Minister for Education announced the plans for the safe return of students to Welsh universities after the Christmas break, this is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-137/INQ000300001**. Students were asked to return to campus over a four-week period, starting from 11 January 2021, with a phased return to in-person teaching. The lateral-flow testing (LFT) pilots for asymptomatic students was to continue. Ministerial advice MA/KW/4169/20 outlines the rationale behind this, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-138/INQ000177019**.
229. On 10 December 2020, the Minister for Education announced that secondary schools and colleges in Wales would move to online learning from 14 December 2020 as part of the national effort to reduce the transmission of Covid-19. The advice of the CMO(W) was that the situation was deteriorating. This announcement is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-139/INQ000299714**.
230. On 14 December 2020, all secondary schools in Wales moved to online remote learning for the last week of term before Christmas (14 to 18 December 2020). Many primary schools closed this week. Childcare settings were able to remain open but were asked to follow Welsh Government guidance.
231. Also on 14 December 2020, the Welsh Government announced plans to roll out serial Covid testing in schools and colleges from January 2021 following discussions with Public Health Wales and the Children and Schools Technical Advisory Cell (**exhibited as WG/EPSPG/01-140/INQ000300034**). Education colleagues were supported by the Welsh Governments Covid-19 testing team.
232. On 23 December 2020, Part 6 of the Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No.5) (Wales) Regulations 2020 came into force. This was done

because the First Minister asked for statutory provision for vulnerable children when schools moved to blended learning following the advice of the CMO. The regulations were not accompanied by an equality impact assessment, but the intention was for the regulations to be covered by a summary impact assessment to be published alongside the Welsh Government's Covid Control Plan.

233. On 4 January 2021, all schools across Wales closed and moved to online remote learning, with the exception of provision for vulnerable children and children of critical workers. Childcare settings were able to remain open but were asked to follow Welsh Government guidance.
234. On 8 January 2021, the Minister for Education announced that she had spoken to universities in Wales and asked them to be realistic about how they delivered teaching in the forthcoming term. The announcement (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-141/INQ000299750**) also referred to a fund for student hardship and mental health. Updated guidance was published for higher education, exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-142/INQ000081760**. The return in January was specifically for students on practical courses or for courses with governing body requirements which would mean a student would be unable to qualify. Further returns were enabled in February for a further list of subject areas.
235. On 14 January 2021, Circular Letter WGC 001/2021 (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-143/INQ000300157**) reintroduced the temporary relaxation of some of the requirements in its National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare until 30 June 2021.
236. On 18 January 2021, funding of £3 million was approved by the Minister for Health and Social Services and Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services to provide funding for local authorities to support childcare and play work providers through existing sustainability measures or through the introduction of specific Covid-19 grant funding arrangements. Ministerial advice agreeing this is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-144/ INQ000145451**.
237. On 20 January 2021, the Minister for Education announced her policy intention that due to further disruption to education, grades for GCSE, AS and A-levels would be determined by their school or college, based on the advice of the

design and delivery group that is made up of head teachers and college leaders. I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-145/INQ000299760**.

238. On 28 January 2021, the Minister for Education announced that the Welsh Government had strengthened the duties for local authorities providing for the children of critical workers and vulnerable learners with provisions included in The Health Protection (Coronavirus Restrictions) (No.5) (Wales) Regulations 2020. Part 6 of those Regulations relate to provision of education in school. In deciding whether a pupil is the child of a critical worker, the local authority had to have regard to any guidance published by the Welsh Ministers about identifying children of critical workers.

239. On 5 February 2021, the Minister for Education wrote an open letter to all headteachers stating based on the advice from TAG and CMO(W), and ongoing engagement and discussion with local authorities and education unions she had decided that from 22 February, there would be a phased return to face-to-face learning for foundation phase learners (3- to 7-year-olds). I exhibit this letter as **WG/EPSPG/01-146/INQ000300032**.

240. Also on 5 February 2021, the Welsh Government confirmed an offer of testing for staff in childcare and education. I attach a joint written statement by Vaughan Gething, Minister for Health and Social Services, Kirsty Williams, Minister for Education and Julie Morgan, Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-147/INQ000299978**.

241. On 22 February 2021, a phased return of Foundation Phase pupils began (pupils aged 3 to 7).

242. On 3 March 2021, the Minister for Education announced that pupils in years 7, 8 and 9 could also now return to school (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-148/INQ000299806**).

243. On 15 March 2021, all remaining primary school pupils and secondary pupils in qualification years 11 and 13 were able to return to learning on site. Other secondary years were able to return for check-ins.

244. On 16 March 2021, the Minister for Health and Social Services and Deputy Minister for Health and Social Services agreed to provide administration funding to local authorities supporting childminders and peripatetic staff to access Covid-19 test kits, as they could not be delivered to domestic properties at that time.
245. On 12 April 2021, all remaining pupils were able to return to learning on site.
246. On 14 June 2021 a ministerial advice was submitted by Higher Education Division, to the Minister for Education and Welsh Language, advising that he send a letter to the Secretary of State for the Home Office asking her to extend a concession for foreign students to discourage travel to the UK before it was safe to do so. I exhibit the letter issued as **WG/EPSPG/01-149/INQ000300162**.
247. On 16 June 2021, the Welsh Government announced 'Renew and reform: supporting learners' well-being and progression' which was part of the Covid-19 Recovery Plan. I exhibit the written statement as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-150/INQ000300018**.
248. On 30 June 2021, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language announced a relaxation of restrictions so that further and higher education no longer needed to comply with the 2m rule so that more learners could return to face-to-face teaching. I attach the press notice as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-151/INQ000300002**.
249. **On 16 June 2021**, the Deputy Minister for Social Services announced a £5m investment in the provision of a Summer of Fun. The Summer of Fun was intended to provide children and young people aged 0-25 to play and participate in leisure, recreational, sporting and cultural activities to help rebuild their social and emotional skills in both Welsh and English. I attach the written statement published as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-66/INQ000300052** and the MA relating to this decision as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-153/INQ000145169**.
250. On 9 July 2021, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language announced that from September 2021 face coverings would no longer be required in classrooms, contact groups were no longer required and normal session times would resume. I attach the announcement as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-154/INQ000299987**.

251. On 20 July 2021, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language confirmed £4.85million in funding for the Welsh Government's School Holiday Enrichment Programme (SHEP) for 2021, providing places for nearly 8,000 children, the announcement is exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-155/INQ000300156** and the MA relating to this decision as exhibit **WG/EPSPG/01-156/INQ000300164**.
252. On 27 August 2021, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language announced the publication of the local Covid-19 Infection Control Decision Frameworks for schools and colleges. The Frameworks (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-157/INQ000300226**) set out arrangements allowing schools, colleges and education settings to tailor interventions to reflect local risks and circumstances. The approaches set out in the Frameworks were to be adopted as soon as possible after the start of term, and by 20 September 2021 at the latest. The Ministerial advice in relation to the framework is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-158/INQ000116779** and the written statement is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-159/INQ000300060**.
253. On 24 September 2021, the Deputy Minister for Social Services announced £3.5 million funding to assist with the short-term impact of the health emergency on childcare and play services (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-160/INQ000300015**). The funding was intended to help ensure that providers could continue to operate as they sought to recover from the effects of Covid-19 or to adapt to meet the needs of families in the future. The MA relating to this decision is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-161/INQ000300165**.
254. On 6 October 2021, the Deputy Minister for Social Services announced a further £36.6 million to support children and families as part of their recovery from the pandemic and its restrictions to ensure no child was left behind (this announcement is exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-67/INQ000300022**. £16.6 million of this was capital funding intended to support adaptations to childcare settings, including improved ventilation, and enable local authorities to support play provision. £20 million was revenue funding, the purpose of which was to build on the success of projects, such as the Summer of Fun, around what became known as the Winter of Well-being.
255. On 14 October 2021, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language published a Written Statement to update on the situation in schools and colleges. He also confirmed the publication of additional advice to support children and young

people with higher clinical risk and clinically extremely vulnerable adults in education settings. I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-163/INQ000300053**.

256. Also on 14 October 2021, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language confirmed £3.31 million was to be made available to improve ventilation in schools, colleges and universities in Wales. I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-164/INQ000300030**.

257. On 15 December 2021, it was announced (exhibited as **WG/EPSPG/01-165/INQ000300054**) that over £24 million of funding had been allocated to support learners who had felt the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. This included £7.5 million to support learners in exam years; £7 million to support learners whose attendance had dropped during the pandemic and £9.5 million to support FE and Sixth Form learners with transition to the next stage of their education or career.

258. On 16 December 2021, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language announced all schools were to have two planning days at the beginning of the next Spring term, in January 2022, to allow time for schools to assess staffing capacity and put the necessary measures in place to support the return of all learners. All schools were also advised to plan that mitigations from January onwards were based on those set out at the 'Very High' risk level in the Local Infection Control Decision Framework for schools.

259. On 05 January 2022, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language published a Written Statement with an update on the latest position with the national guidance on the operational arrangements for schools and colleges. He confirmed schools and colleges had been asked to continue to plan for the most protective measures in accordance with the framework. Schools were also provided with the option to operate staggered start and finish times as an additional mitigation should their risk assessment support this. He also announced further funding of over £100 million to support schools and colleges. I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSPG/01-166/INQ000300065 and WG/EPSPG/01-167/INQ000300008**.

260. On 17 January 2022, Circular Letter WGC 002/2022 extended the temporary relaxation of some of the requirements in the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare until 01 April 2022. I exhibit this letter as **WG/EPSPG/01-168/INQ000300159**.

261. On 11 February 2022, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language confirmed schools would return to using the Local Infection Control Decision Framework by the beginning of the new half term on 28 February, in line with the Welsh Government's 21-day review on the same date, which set out how protections would be gradually relaxed if improvements were seen in the public health situation. The return to using the national framework would enable schools to tailor interventions to reflect local circumstances, and detailed core measures that should be in place, regardless of risk level. I exhibit the announcement as **WG/EPSTG/01-169/INQ000299955**.

262. On 17 March 2022, the Deputy Minister for Social Services announced further funding for a Summer of Fun in 2022. A new grant scheme was set up to administer the £7 million funding - £5.5 million to local authorities and £1.5 million to national organisations. I attach the announcement relating to this funding as exhibit **WG/EPSTG/01-170/INQ000300055** and the Ministerial advice agreeing the funding as **WG/EPSTG/01-171/INQ000300167**.

263. On 5 May 2022, the Minister for Education and Welsh Language announced the publication of Public Health Advice for Schools: Coronavirus, as exhibited in **WG/EPSTG/01-172/INQ000300013**. This new advice brought schools and education settings into line with other sectors in Wales in terms of public health advice and Covid-19, and replaced the Local Covid-19 Infection control decision framework for schools. Special schools continued to follow the advice for children and young people with higher clinical risk and clinically extremely vulnerable adults.

264. On 9 May 2022, it was announced the Infection Control Framework for Higher and Further Education institutions was formally removed, exhibit **WG/EPSTG/01-173/INQ000300056**.

Challenges faced and lessons learned.

265. Many lessons in respect of the education and childcare sectors were learned as we moved through the pandemic and gained experience, and various review exercises were undertaken. Some examples are given below.

266. Exhibit **WG/EPSEG/01-174/INQ000066568** contains the learning from a review with the Directorate's senior team undertaken during the late summer and early autumn of 2020.
267. Exhibit **WG/EPSEG/01-175/INQ000066569** is an amalgamation of Divisional and workstream lessons learned reviews captured during the period February to September 2022.
268. Exhibit **WG/EPSEG/01-176/INQ000066570** captures the lessons learned during delivery of the Continuity of Learning Project.
269. Exhibit **WG/EPSEG/01-177/INQ000066571** is the lessons learned section from the Renew and Reform Programme closure report.
270. The lessons identified in these four exhibits above (para 249-252) cover the full range of policy and delivery areas covered by the Directorate. Most are specific to a particular policy area and have fed into the continuous improvement activities that are a day-to-day element of the Directorate's work. Some, however, are focused more on internal operations, such as resourcing processes and well-being support to staff, and have been fed back to colleagues at the centre of the Welsh Government as well as feeding into the Directorate's own management thinking.
271. Reviewing, learning and continuously improving has been an ongoing process throughout the pandemic period and may not always be captured by the annexes. Good examples of where we were developing new approaches to delivery as result of the pandemic that were continuously reviewed with our stakeholders and improved as a result include: provision for the children of critical workers and vulnerable learners during national lockdowns; providing free school meals; and guidance to schools on issues such as public health, school operations and continuity of learning. Stakeholders with whom we met regularly, and often on a weekly basis, as part of this process include education officials in local authorities; education trade unions; and school headteachers and staff.
272. At a macro level, there are a number of key areas of work within the Directorate that were instigated as a result of learning during the pandemic, and these are detailed further below:

273. The Continuity of Learning Project was instigated in March 2020 to minimise the impact of school closure on learning, progress and the well-being of our learners, and on the well-being of our education workforce. The Project set out to do this by facilitating access to electronic devices, connectivity, and learning opportunities; supporting our headteachers and teachers to deliver effective learning and support services to our children and young people; and giving learners and their families guidance and support around learning at home. It sought to ensure that no learner was disadvantaged in this because of where they lived, their age, their special educational needs, the language of their school or whether they are well off or not.

274. The Renew and Reform Plan was published in June 2021 and outlined the Welsh Government's commitment to supporting learners' well-being and progression in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The programme's key focus was to support a revitalised, reform-focused and resilient educational system that put learners' physical and mental health and well-being at the heart of its approach. £499 million was provided to support the education system's response to Covid-19 over the course of the pandemic. The majority of this funding was provided across the 2020-21 and 2021-22 financial years, predominately through our grant award mechanisms. As the programme came to a close, many elements of the programme and its funding were transferred into our 'business as usual' arrangements.

275. Resilience Planning and Response: in the early days of the pandemic, the Directorate acted quickly to gear up in response to the emerging challenge. Initially, responses included: setting up a small team to help coordinate our approach; opening bespoke engagement and communication channels with our key stakeholders; and establishing connections with key information sources and contacts in wider organisations, such as the other UK administrations and delivery partners such as Public Health Wales. As the pandemic progressed, much of this work transmuted into our 'business as usual' practices but it was important that the Directorate learned from the challenges of those early weeks to ensure that it was better prepared for future emergencies.

276. The Directorate has therefore set up a permanent Business Continuity and Resilience function. This function is small in its standing state and resilience planning and response is not its sole responsibility. However, the intention is for it to be able to expand and respond quickly to any emerging issues and risks. The function maintains a framework of actions and responses that can be deployed when

deemed necessary in response to a threat and provides advice and guidance to the education sector more widely in respect to resilience planning and emergency response. Alongside this, the Directorate continues to work with partners to strengthen the sector's ability to maintain Continuity of Learning and preparedness, health and safety and well-being of pupils and the workforce whatever challenges it faces.

277. Business continuity and resilience has also become a permanent feature within the SHELL Directorate, with the recognition that combining efforts across Directorates is the most efficient and productive approach. This has been demonstrated through subsequent contingency planning exercises.

278. In addition, lessons learnt exercises have been conducted through reflections from the HE Task and Finish Group and the Looking Forward Group. All additional funding allocated through HEFCW was subject to monitoring and reports to the Welsh Government on expenditure.

279. When producing advice on each iteration of guidance, and each funding proposal, challenge and scrutiny was a core part of the process. This took place in a range of ways, either via expert groups such as TAC, internal finance officials, comparison with policy in other nations, collection and review of evidence, and challenge from an internal red/blue group process. In particular, the assessment of the financial situation for higher education between March and July 2020 was subject to extensive analysis, collaborative work with HEFCW, internal challenge and evidence review.

280. A lessons learned exercise was conducted in relation to childcare and play provision in the autumn of 2020. This involved internal policy officials and external stakeholders with all lessons captured in a report exhibited as **WG/EPSC/01-178/INQ000066541**. These findings informed engagement with stakeholders during the remainder of the pandemic and on an ongoing basis. Provision related to the early years was included within Renew and Reform Programme and is also covered within the Continuity of Learning Project. The Division is also fully engaged in a wide range of emergency planning activities, with several team members involved. This continues to be taken forward jointly with education services to ensure a joined-up approach in respect of all children and young people.

281. The pandemic has further highlighted the fragility of the childcare and play sector, and the importance of access to high quality early years provision, including a wide range of family support services. This is informing thinking on the refresh of our 10-year plan for the childcare, play work and early years workforce, and the development of our early childhood education and care action plan (which is scheduled for publication following summer 2023, along with activities to strengthen recruitment and retention within the sector.

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: 20 October 2023