Friday, 6 September 2024 (10.00 am) Opening Introductory remarks by THE CHAIR LADY HALLETT: Good morning. This is the first preliminary hearing for Module 8, investigating the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people. Many of them lost loved ones and suffered other devastating consequences. I wish to know whether more could have been done in advance of the pandemic or during the pandemic to reduce the impact upon them, and also whether lessons can be learned, for example in the provision of education during a pandemic. In that task, I have the very considerable assistance of Counsel to the Inquiry, the core participants and experts, many of whom work closely with children and young people. I am extremely grateful to them all for their very helpful written submissions, and the assistance they have already provided to the Inquiry team. In the light of one submission, I should emphasise that this module will examine only the impact on children and young people. The impact on adults has been examined to an extent and will be examined, I can assure everyone, in other modules. They are as follows: Save the Children UK, Just for Kids Law, the Children's Rights Alliance for England, the Centre for Young Lives, and the Child Poverty Action Group, which we at the Inquiry collectively refer to as the children's rights organisations, are represented by Mr Broach King's Counsel and Ms Twite. The Coram Group of Charities are represented by Ms King King's Counsel and Ms Davies. Article 39 is represented by Ms Cover and Mr Callender. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People is represented by Ms McGurk. The Children's Commissioner for Wales is represented by Mr Gardner. The Department for Education in Northern Ireland is represented by Ms O'Gorman. The Office of Qualifications and Exam Regulation also appear before you, as does the Office of the Children's Commissioner for England.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health is

I should also mention that the disabled people's

represented by Mr Hocking. The Sutton Trust is

organisations are represented by Ms Beattie this

represented by Dr Rebecca Montacute.

morning.

In a moment, Ms Clair Dobbin King's Counsel, Counsel to the Inquiry for this module, will explain the background, how the Inquiry has tried to capture the memories of children and young people before they fade, and what issues this module will be examining.

We have limited time today and a lot to get through,

so I shall stop now, with a warning to advocates who are new to the Inquiry that I shall be strict on timings.

Ms Dobbin.

Statement by LEAD COUNSEL TO THE INQUIRY

MS DOBBIN: Thank you.

My Lady, may I, on behalf of the counsel team, welcome those core participants who appear before you. There are 25 core participants in Module 8. They are organisations with responsibilities for aspects of children's lives, organisations dedicated to representing the interests of children, and professional organisations too.

A list of the core participants who have been designated for Module 8 will be published on the website after the conclusion of this preliminary hearing.

My Lady, a number of these have not been core participants in other modules to this Inquiry, so may I introduce those who are new to the Inquiry and who appear before you for the first time today.

There are other familiar representatives who appear before you and who you know. I hope that they won't regard it as any discourtesy on my part if I don't mention by name and introduce them again. It's simply that we have such a large number of core participants in Module 8 today.

But, my Lady, doubtless what they and us all share is our common purpose in Module 8 in putting children and young people at its centre. We wish to acknowledge the positive and constructive written submissions which have been filed. A number of the core participants who appear before you have a deep expertise in the lives of children and young people in the UK and which will undoubtedly inform our direction of work.

We want to encourage co-operation and dialogue with all core participants, and I speak for the entire legal team when I say we look forward to working with them all and are so grateful for their support of this module.

May I also make clear at once that although this module might be referred to in shorthand as the "children's module", it is a module for young people too. In the provisional outline of scope we've explained that a child means a person up to the age of 18. A young person is an individual who during the pandemic was aged between 18 and 25 years old and was

a care leaver, or had special educational needs or disabilities, or attended further and/or higher education and/or training, or was in the custody of the state. So these young people too are included in our work

My Lady, I should say as well before I go on that this is a hybrid hearing. It's being broadcast so that anyone who wishes to can follow it, and by this, my Lady, you meet the obligation imposed by section 18 of the Inquiries Act 2005 to take reasonable steps to ensure that members of the public are able to attend or see and hear a simultaneous transmission of the proceedings.

The broadcast has a three-minute delay. This means that if anything is said which ought not to be, the live feed can be paused and it can be corrected before it's broadcast. As ever, but particularly today, there's no expectation that this will happen, but it serves just to remind that sometimes these short interruptions in broadcasting can arise.

My Lady, before I set out some of the practical and legal matters that you will deal with today, can I introduce and say something about the work of Module 8.

As the Inquiry's work to date has shown, there were

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was not suddenly and completely transformed beyond all recognition by the pandemic. And childhood is short and precious. It's a time of milestones, and the experiences which shape us into the adults we become. Whether it's going to school for the first time or leaving home for college or university, these are the everyday aspects of childhood, unremarkable but formative. And at heart there can't have been many people with a child in their lives during the pandemic who was not saddened by what they knew they were missing out on

For some children, the pandemic brought them time with their parents and siblings that they may not have had before, it may have been a time of closeness, and there may be something of value to learn here about what some children saw as good or valuable about the pandemic

But for almost every child, the pandemic constituted the abrupt end of education as they knew it, and for months. The consequences of that on their development and attainment are still being felt by many children and young people today.

For other children, we know that the pandemic must have been extraordinarily difficult. These are the children for whom school is a respite from neglect or

constituents of society whose lives were more profoundly affected by the pandemic than others. There were older people who faced a far greater risk of serious illness and death, those living in poverty or who already faced disadvantage, disabled people for whom the pandemic brought yet further limitations on the ability to live with autonomy. These are some of the groups of people that you have focused on in your consideration of decision-making in response to the pandemic, and specifically the extent to which these groups figured or were taken into consideration in the most significant decisions that were made.

In Module 8, the Inquiry's lens turns to children and young people. They fall into a different category. For most, but not all, Covid-19 did not represent the existential threat it posed to many adults. Rather, what the pandemic proved to be was a profound disrupter of almost every child's life across the United Kingdom. It took away fundamental aspects of what it means to be a child: to go to school, to play with friends, to play sport or sing or dance together, to spend time with grandparents; for older children, to develop their identity away from family.

Module 8 is distinct in this regard, because there is scarcely a child in the United Kingdom for whom life

abuse. These are the children who were exposed to domestic violence, physical, sexual and emotional abuse. These are the children who had to cope with ill parents, the children who had to deal with parental addiction. These are the children for whom the pandemic brought out or worsened mental ill health. Children who lived in overcrowded houses or who didn't have a laptop or broadband or a parent who was willing or able to help them access education. They are the children in local authority care, the children in detention, who we understand to have suffered intense isolation.

There are many such groups of children. They are the children who had no agency to change the situations they were in. They are the children with no one to talk to

These are the children for whom the lockdown would obviously increase the risk their families or carers posed to them. We already know that for some children the ability of their families to evade the scrutiny of school and social workers during the pandemic was a factor in their coming to serious and, in some cases, fatal harm.

So the focus of Module 8 is on all children in the United Kingdom. It's on their universal experience, and the impact of the pandemic, and it will look

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unflinchingly at what life was like for those children and young people for whom the pandemic brought particular disadvantage or hardship.

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Before I move on, I wish to say on behalf of the legal team that although most children escaped the worst of the physical aspects of Covid-19, some children and young people became seriously ill or died from it. We offer our condolences to their families and sympathy to those children who live with the consequences of having gotten Covid-19 too.

We also offer our sympathy to the family and friends of those children who lost their lives at the hands of parents and carers during the pandemic, and we also offer our sympathies to children who lost parents and loved ones to Covid-19. It's not lost on us that you too were bereaved.

My Lady, with that, may I turn to the agenda which has been circulated to the core participants and deal with some of the matters that have been set out.

Very briefly, if I may, I'll deal with the provisional scope of Module 8, evidence gathering, disclosure, listening to children and young people, and some of the future hearing dates.

In terms of the background to the Inquiry in Module 8, my Lady, you come to this with the accumulated

considered prior to 18 March 2020, when the Prime Minister announced, and I use his words, that:

We wish to understand the extent to which there was pre-planning for the possibility that education would have to be delivered remotely to most children. We are seeking evidence about and will examine what was understood at the time about the impacts that the closures of schools and lockdowns were having on children and, of course, what is understood now about those impacts.

We're aware that important figures, like the then Secretary of State for Education, Sir Gavin Williamson, did not give evidence in Module 2 and it is the intention of Module 8 to call him, for example, to give oral evidence.

So whilst Module 8 is concerned with the impacts of the decisions made on children and young people, it will involve the same forensic consideration of how the most significant decisions which affected children were made, as has been the general approach in earlier modules.

There are obviously serious questions to be asked about the scientific basis upon which decisions to close schools to most children were made; what assessments

experience of having chaired this Inquiry to date and having heard a very considerable body of evidence already. That included in Module 2, for example, some evidence about the decisions which most profoundly affected children and which it's anticipated will be examined in greater detail in Module 8. A number of other modules have opened and we'll have public hearings prior to Module 8.

It opened on 21 May 2024. On that day, a provisional outline of scope was published and the window for applications for core participant status opened as well, and that window closed on 17 June 2024.

In terms of its scope, Module 8 will examine the impact of the pandemic on children and young people in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. But to be clear, its work will necessarily entail understanding more about the decisions which were made which affected children's lives during the pandemic and the circumstances in which they were made. A few core participants in their written submissions have sought clarification about whether Module 8 will examine how decisions which affected children were made and so, to be clear, we do wish to examine, for example, the extent to which the consequences of closing schools to most children were considered and the mitigations

were made at the time about the impacts that school closures would have on different groups of children, what mitigations were planned, not just in terms of education but also in terms of the safety and protection of children; regardless of whether or not it was inevitable that schools would close, the extent to which this eventuality properly was planned for.

I reiterate that this module is a United Kingdom wide one. It will not just focus on decision-making at Westminster but also consider the role of the respective governments of the devolved nations, for these devolved administrations have considerable powers and responsibility in relation to the lives of the children who live there, so their role will be scrutinised too.

In terms of impact, Module 8 will consider how the pandemic affected the lives of children and young people across the UK. This will include its impact on children and young people's education, their physical and mental health and wellbeing, and their development more generally. So this will include, for example:

The impact that the closure of schools to most children and lockdowns had on the wellbeing and safety of children and young people, regardless of their background.

What effect the pandemic had on children who were of

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"Schools will be closed for most pupils, for the

vast majority of pupils, until further notice."

pre-school age when the pandemic started, both at the time and in the longer term. For example, many babies born during the pandemic started primary school this week and it has been publicly reported that, because of reduced interactions with family members and lack of access to services such as health visiting, that this has had a serious impact on the speech and language of some of these children.

The extent to which the provision of remote education was effective, both in terms of its accessibility and whether or to what extent children were actually learning from it.

Was children's access to education equal?

What, if any, are the long-term consequences of the interruption to children's education?

How are children being supported, where necessary, to catch up?

What the impact was on children's lives of moving online and in such an accelerated way. How did this impact upon their mental wellbeing, their ability to learn and their development? Are there ongoing consequences of this?

How was the experience of attending university or college affected by the pandemic? Do young people consider that they missed out in terms of the quality of

education or training they received or because the social aspects of higher and further education were so curtailed?

To what extent were children put at risk by the time they were spending online and what measures were put in place to identify and mitigate against these risks?

How did the pandemic, including the use of non-pharmaceutical interventions, impact upon the mental health, development and wellbeing of children and young people? Were any risks these might present to children understood at the time, or should they have been? What was done to mitigate the potential impacts of non-pharmaceutical interventions?

What support was put in place to assist children and young people experiencing mental ill health and distress, both at the time and in the longer term?

Module 8 will endeavour to understand the overall cost that the closure of schools to most children and lockdowns had on children and young people.

Returning, if I may, to young people, the provisional scope includes the impact of the pandemic on further or higher education or apprenticeships.

Module 8 has well in mind that, whilst childhood is short, this period of young adulthood is even shorter.

There are young people whose college or university life

or training coincided with almost the whole duration of the pandemic, and who will feel that they didn't properly get to enjoy these formative experiences or they that didn't get the education or training they hoped for. Equally, there will be young care leavers for whom this was a far more uncertain and daunting period because of the pandemic. It's really important to Module 8 that experiences like these of young people during the pandemic, now likely to be young adults, are properly understood.

My Lady, as I've mentioned, some children and young people, regardless of background, including having loving and supportive families, faced challenges and difficult times during the pandemic, and then there are the children already facing difficult circumstances for whom the pandemic would make life even harder. In respect of these children, there are a number of issues that Module 8 wishes to examine, for example why so few vulnerable children attended schools, what barriers did they face?

Unsurprisingly, given that children were not at school and many were just not seen, child protection referrals decreased, yet it's obvious that many children would have been at increased risk by virtue of not being at school, by being at home and having limited contact

with the outside world. What steps were taken to address this during the pandemic? What were social work practices for the most vulnerable children? Were children put at risk by modifications to social work? What do we know now about what children at risk of abuse and neglect experienced within their homes when there was not the usual scrutiny of teachers, family and community?

And what of those children in care, what were their experiences of education during the pandemic? To what extent were they able to have access to support or to their family and friends? What happened to placements during the pandemic? Did they break down at a higher rate? One group of children who gave rise to particular concern during the pandemic were detained children. To what extent were they subject to lengthy periods of confinement in cells? To what extent did they have access to their families, to education, to healthcare and to meaningful activities? We also note the point made on behalf of organisations like the disabled people's organisations, and Article 39 in their written submissions to you, to have in mind that some children, like those with disabilities and learning needs, are particularly vulnerable at the best of times in residential settings.

What was life like for groups of children about whom less might be known? For example those children within the asylum system, were they at additional risk because of the pandemic? What support was afforded to children with special educational needs and those children with disabilities? Equally, to what extent were disabled children supported to attend education or their families otherwise supported in their care of them?

My Lady, I identify these questions because, ultimately, this Inquiry does not exist just to point out what went wrong in the response to the pandemic; it exists to identify that which could be done better in the future in the event of another pandemic. As has been observed before in the course of this Inquiry, future pandemics are now a reality with which we all must live. There are serious questions to be asked about whether and how children and young people could be better supported, better educated and better protected in a future pandemic.

These are just some of the issues that informed the provisional outline of scope for Module 8. I'm not going to read all of that scope out. I hope, on behalf of the Inquiry, that those who have an interest in children and young people will read it. It is important to reiterate again that, although Module 8 is charged

of scope provides a flexible and reasonable framework for the key issues which the Inquiry is likely to enquire into. It also provides a sufficient indication for persons and organisations with relevant information and evidence, as well as core participants, to be able to commence their preparations.

Once this module is more advanced, and this includes the important contributions that undoubtedly core participants will want to make, for example through the provision of witness statements, then the key issues are likely to crystallise and we anticipate that we will then circulation a list of issues to help identify those matters which will be of particular focus in the oral hearings.

My Lady, may I turn then to the submissions that have been made on behalf of core participants.

Some core participants have made suggestions for other matters that could be included in the provisional outline of scope. In general terms, it appears to us that the provisional terms are already sufficiently flexible to include matters which some core participants would seek to add or to specify but, of course, you'll want to consider any submissions about scope carefully after you've heard further submissions about that today.

But, for example, areas within the provisional scope

with looking at the impacts of the pandemic generally on children, the provisional scope makes clear the importance to it of children with special educational needs or disabilities and those from a diverse range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

May I make a couple of general points about the provisional scope. It is not intended to be exhaustive but rather to indicate the sorts of areas likely to be considered as part of Module 8's work. The fact that each suggested area of scope does not mention different groups of children within it is deliberate. The language is intended to be flexible and not to exclude any given group of children.

The scope is thus broad and it's necessarily provisional. Although it provides for a wide range of topics, Module 8 can't identify at this stage all of the issues which may be relevant to it and which might need to be considered at a public hearing, nor is it possible to state at this point what emphasis will be given to each topic. We anticipate that some issues will become more significant and require greater focus in the hearings. This may also depend, of course, on the evidence and documentation that's obtained under the Rule 9 process.

The Inquiry considers that the provisional outline

include the extent to which children and young people were considered by the UK Government and the devolved administrations in respect of the application of non-pharmaceutical interventions and the impact of those decisions. So, for example, here the reference to children and young people includes different groups of children and young people. They are not specified, deliberately, as I've said.

The scope also includes the impact of the pandemic on the education of and the early years provision for children and young people but, again, this has been widely drawn so to encompass within it children, for example, with disabilities or learning difficulties.

Again, that is a deliberate election in the drafting.

There is one aspect of the submissions received about the scope which it may assist if I address on behalf of the legal team. The representatives of the Trades Union Congress invite the Inquiry to specify whether, in addition to the impact of central government decision-making on children and young people, the Inquiry will include within the scope of Module 8 the impact of decision-making upon education staff.

I reiterate the point on behalf of the Inquiry that the focus of Module 8 is on children, not adults. It is of course understood that many teachers and others who

worked in schools played a very important part in seeking to maintain the education of children and in trying to keep children safe. It's anticipated that Module 8 will hear evidence as to the reality of government decision-making on the running of schools and upon child protection systems. It's not, however, the purpose of this module to specifically consider the impact of decision-making on those adults who provided services to children, like education and social work, but how those decisions impacted children. This is not intended to and does not minimise the role that any of the professionals who continued to educate, care for and protect children had during the pandemic. It is simply to say that the focus of this module is squarely on the impact of the pandemic on children, as outlined in the provisional outline of scope.

My Lady, with that, may I turn then to evidence and to Rule 9 requests.

The Inquiry team has already begun the process of making requests for evidence under Rule 9 of the Inquiry rules. The legal team met with representatives from a range of government departments, children's rights organisations, and the Offices of the Children's Commissioners across the UK as part of the process of informing the nature, scope and targets of

core participants. My Lady, I won't go through all of those areas for today's purposes. But other areas may be identified as the Inquiry's work continues, and we'll endeavour where it's possible to combine reports so that issues that are capable of being considered together are.

May I also make the point that we're not seeking expert evidence on every issue or every area that might be important to a core participant. This is because our first port of call will always be to seek factual evidence on given issues, including on the impact that the pandemic has had on children. There will be many issues within scope capable of factual assessment. There will inevitably be some witnesses, and I think a ready example of this is the UK Chief Medical Officer, who may combine both factual evidence but who, by virtue of their position, may also provide evidence of their opinions as to the impact of decision-making on children.

We will be seeking expert evidence on those issues where it is necessary because, for example, the evidence rests upon underlying research or because, for example, no single witness of fact can speak to it.

The appointment of experts is, of course, a matter for you, my Lady. A number of core participants have

Rule 9 requests.

Those requests seek information and evidence including contemporaneous evidence about the decision-making at the time relevant to children.

Across the Inquiry, Rule 9 requests for documentation and witness statements are being issued on an iterative basis. In terms of what this means, additional requests will be made of some recipients, focusing on particular issues or topics in due course. So further Rule 9 requests will be issued on a rolling basis to other organisations and witnesses as issues come into greater focus during the course of this investigation.

To ensure that the core participants are kept properly informed, the Inquiry will ensure that the Module 8 lead solicitor provides monthly updates to core participants on the progress of Rule 9 work. Such updates will include a summary of who has received a Rule 9 request, the topics those requests cover, what categories of documents have been requested, when the request was made, and when a response is expected.

In terms of expert evidence, the Inquiry has provisionally identified a number of areas where expert evidence is likely to assist in examining some of the matters set out in Module 8's provisional outline of scope, and those areas have already been indicated to

made suggestions in their submissions as to further potential areas of expert evidence, and others have offered to provide further assistance, and for this the Inquiry is grateful. Those suggestions will be given careful consideration.

The identity of instructed experts will be contained in the Module 8 monthly update note to core participants, and once they are instructed these notes will also provide further details of the topics which the experts will address in their reports. So that will enable core participants to comment on those matters, should they wish to do so.

My Lady, may I then say something about disclosure from material providers.

This Inquiry expects that those material providers who are asked to provide material to it do so in a spirit of co-operation and not to take narrow or technical approaches to disclosure. Equally, any sort of legal process can be diverted and damaged by excessive and unfocused disclosure which can obscure rather than throw light on important issues. Module 8 will be vigilant about both these possibilities.

My Lady, you have the power to compel the production of documents under section 21 of the Inquiries Act.

There are also provisions in section 35 of that Act

which make it an offence if, during the course of an Inquiry, a person does anything to alter or distort a relevant document or prevent a relevant document being produced to the Inquiry, or intentionally destroys, suppresses or conceals a relevant document. We hope of course that neither set of powers will ever be required in Module 8.

In terms of disclosure to core participants, in common with the approach taken in the preceding modules, Module 8 will adopt the following approach to disclosure to core participants.

First, all core participants will receive all documents disclosed by the Inquiry in Module 8, so not just those documents which are relevant to them.

Disclosure will be subject to three things: first, a relevance review so that only relevant documents are disposed; second, a de-duplication exercise; third, a redactions exercise in accordance with the Inquiry's redactions protocol. A team of solicitors, barristers and paralegals is already in place to review for relevance the material that's received.

Disclosure will be in tranches made on a rolling basis. Disclosure updates will be provided by the Module 8 solicitors team, informing core participants of the progress which has been made in obtaining relevant

In their written submissions, Coram highlight the impact of the pandemic on the civil justice system and allude to research undertaken by the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, which was produced at the request of the president of the family division, in respect of the efficacy and fairness of remote hearings. So on behalf of the Module 8 team, I thought it worth mentioning that this is an area that we will consider further and that we're grateful to Coram for drawing attention to it.

My Lady, may I move on to what may be the most significant topic to address before you this morning, and that's listening to children and young people.

The Inquiry's overall terms of reference make clear that although the Inquiry will not investigate individual cases of harm or death in detail, listening to the accounts and experiences of those who suffered hardship or loss will inform the Inquiry's understanding of the impact of the pandemic, the response and the lessons to be learnt. It's really important to say that there are obvious difficulties in having children come forward to give accounts of their experiences to the Inquiry. There are issues related to ethics, consent, safeguarding and the protection of children which have meant that the Inquiry could not have the

documents.

The Inquiry has begun the process of identifying material which is potentially relevant to Module 8 that has been provided in other modules of the Inquiry. This material will be reviewed for disclosure and, where relevant, disclosed to the core participants of Module 8

I note on behalf of the legal team that those representing Long Covid Kids question whether, upon the timetable outlined, which will see disclosure commence in spring 2025, affords sufficient time for core participants to properly review disclosed materials in order to be of effective assistance to the Inquiry.

My Lady, addressing that, Module 8's approximate timetable provides core participants with disclosure commencing approximately six months prior to the hearing. By the point at which disclosure has taken place, it has already been reviewed for relevance by the legal team, and gone through that process of redaction that I've described. All of this takes time, but it also occurs within the context of an Inquiry in which hearings and preparations for other modules are occurring simultaneously. But we are satisfied that there is sufficient time for core participants to be able to consider disclosure in advance of the hearings.

equivalent of a listening project for children.

As many of our expert core participants will also understand, decisions as to whether children should give evidence as witnesses in legal proceedings, like criminal or civil proceedings, requires extremely careful individual assessment, for example as to what is in the best interests of a given child, whether that child understands the potential ramifications of their giving evidence. All of those considerations apply with equal force to a public inquiry. Indeed, there may be even greater public attention in the context of an Inquiry setting.

For these and for other reasons, Module 8 will not hear witness evidence from children. But the Inquiry does recognise the fundamental importance of understanding the experiences of children without potentially exposing them to risk, and it will seek to do this in a number of ways.

My Lady, may I set these out.

The first is by way of its targeted research project, Children and Young People's Voices. The Children and Young People's Voices is a major research project which has been commissioned by the Inquiry that will hear directly from approximately 600 children and young people.

May I make the point immediately about the significance of its scale. As must be obvious no Inquiry could hope to hear witness evidence about personal experience on this sort of scale. The project, which was announced in January 2024, is being carried out by independent research specialists, Verian. It will collect first-hand experiences from a representative sample of children and young people drawn from a variety of ages, ethnicities, genders, sexualities and socioeconomic backgrounds and geographical locations, about their experiences during the pandemic.

Specifically, Verian will hear from children and young people who are now between the ages of 9 and 22, so who were between 5 and 18 years during the pandemic. Around half of the children and young people interviewed will represent a sample of the general population. This will enable the Inquiry to capture the experiences of a cross-section of age groups, ethnicities, geographies and different levels of deprivation.

The other half of the interviews will focus on hearing from children and young people from groups potentially disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. This includes, but it is not limited to, those children with disabilities or health conditions -- and this will

As the project progresses, the Module 8 team are being provided with updates from Verian in order to support the module in understanding better the experiences of children, both positive and negative, and to inform any further investigative steps which may be necessary to ensure that, where appropriate, evidence is sought from relevant organisations or individuals.

Findings from the research will be adduced in evidence and, in combination with other evidence obtained, will help inform your conclusions and your recommendations.

My Lady, may I then turn to Every Story Matters.

The second way in which Module 8 will seek to ensure that it encompasses the experiences of those who were children and young people during the pandemic is through Every Story Matters. Every Story Matters is completely separate to the Children and Young People's Voices research project. The latter is a specific targeted research project which will hear directly from children.

Every Story Matters is the process by which adult members of the public can contribute to the Inquiry. It enables the Inquiry to hear the voices of people of the United Kingdom, to reflect on their experiences and to incorporate themes emerging from those experiences into its work.

include, for example, children with special educational needs, physical disabilities and children with post-viral conditions, for example Long Covid -- those children with particular pandemic experiences including those who lost loved ones, children with caring responsibilities and from clinically extremely vulnerable families, children who interacted with particular services and systems during the pandemic, including social services, mental health services, the criminal justice system and those seeking asylum, and children who were in particular settings during the pandemic including care settings and in detention or secure accommodation.

My Lady, critically this research is trauma-informed and participant-led, which enables children and young people to share their experiences in a safe and meaningful way. Interviews last up to an hour and children and young people are invited to share their experiences across a range of topics including education, family, friendships, physical health, wellbeing, hobbies and interests.

It's so important that I say that we are grateful to all of the children and young people who have shared their experiences so far as part of the Children and Young People's Voices research.

Every Story Matters aims to obtain insight and information from anyone who has been impacted by the pandemic and wishes to share their experience. It gives individuals the opportunity to contribute to the Inquiry in an accessible way. It doesn't require people to attend a hearing in order to contribute. No one person's experience or loss will be the same as another's. The listening exercise enables the Inquiry to capture a range of people's stories from across the UK, including from those people who might not otherwise come forward or otherwise have a forum within which to say what happened to them.

It's been designed so that anyone and everyone in the UK aged 18 or older can contribute if they wish to do so, and there are different ways for people to share their experiences, including through the Inquiry's web form and a variety of alternative formats, including Easy Read and paper forms or community listening events around the country.

So, my Lady, to be clear, anyone who was a child during the pandemic but who is now 18 or over can contribute to Every Story Matters, and the Inquiry is particularly interested in hearing from those young adults who can participate in it and would encourage them to do so. As I have said, their voices are

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important to Module 8. But additionally, parents, carers and adults working with children and young people during the pandemic can also contribute to that.

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In addition to that, Every Story Matters is in the process of commissioning a targeted listening project with adults about the impact of the pandemic on children and young people. So again, I stress that this is a different exercise to the Young Voices research as well

This is a listening exercise which is based upon the work being carried out by Every Story Matters, again based upon the participation of adults in Every Story Matters, so its focus is upon parents, carers or other adults who may be able to speak to the experiences of children, and that's why included within it, for example, is those who worked with children.

My Lady, it's this specific piece of work which will be informed by the key lines of enquiries, those are often referred to in the Inquiry as KLOEs, which have been written by the Inquiry and its team, and these KLOEs are an important tool for framing the way in which the Inquiry will gather and analyse experiences shared with Every Story Matters.

The Inquiry has already shared with core participants the proposed KLOEs and also set out to them

lines of enquiry and topics that witnesses will be asked about but these are separate processes.

My Lady, directions and future hearing dates.

I know that once you have had the opportunity to consider the written and oral submissions together, that you'll publish any appropriate directions in due course. A further preliminary hearing for Module 8 will take place in the summer of 2025. It's anticipated that the Module 8 public hearings will start in the week of 25 September 2025 --

LADY HALLETT: The 25th? 11

12 MS DOBBIN: I apologise, I've got the 29th for some reason.

25 September 2025.

14 LADY HALLETT: I think it is the 29th.

15 MS DOBBIN: Oh, it is the 29th. I'll say that again to make 16 sure it's quite clear.

> So the hearings will start in the week of 29 September 2025 and they'll last for four weeks.

Further timetabling details will be provided by way of an update to core participants and, of course, that will also be announced on the Inquiry's website, and hearings are going to take place here at Dorland House in London.

My Lady, I think the point has been reached when the core participants will make their submissions to you.

the target audiences as well as part of this part of Every Story Matters. Again, the Inquiry's grateful to core participants for the submissions that have been received in relation to these and which will be carefully considered.

The experiences shared with Every Story Matters will be analysed and turned into themed records. The resulting records will synthesise and amalgamate the individual accounts that have been given and will contribute to Module 8 hearings and potentially the Inquiry's other modules. The records will be anonymised, disclosed to core participants and formally adduced in evidence, so that they can form part of the Inquiry's written record. It's anticipated that the records will identify trends and themes and will include illustrative case studies, which may demonstrate systemic failures.

Again, I think it's important, my Lady, to say that the key lines of enquiry that have been set out to core participants are part of Every Story Matters. So they don't limit the lines of investigation which may be pursued in Module 8, they're not related to the Rule 9 requests which we will make and nor do they condition in any way the evidence which Module 8 will seek.

Now, of course, there may be overlap between the key

1 You've received written submissions from 12 core 2 participants. I think one matter that we have to ask 3 your permission about is whether those written 4 submissions can be published on the Inquiry's website, 5 and that's entirely a matter for your discretion.

6 LADY HALLETT: They may.

7 MS DOBBIN: My Lady, 12 core participants wish to address you orally, so I think I had best stop and let them get 8 on with that but -- unless there is anything, of course, 9 10 that I can assist you with further at this point.

LADY HALLETT: I'm very grateful, Ms Dobbin, thank you very 11 12

MS DOBBIN: I think you're going to hear first from the 13 14 children's rights organisations.

15 LADY HALLETT: Mr Broach.

Submissions on behalf of Children's Rights Organisations by 16 17

MR BROACH

MR BROACH: My Lady, I appear for the children's rights 18 19 organisations, or CROs, with Ms Twite and Ms Leydon of 20 counsel. The CROs are five leading organisations in the 21 field of children's rights and we're grateful for the 22 grant of core participant status in this key module for 23 children.

> At the outset, we would wish to recognise and acknowledge the devastating impact the pandemic has had

on children and young people and their families, including those who lost their lives, who lost people they loved, those now suffering from Long Covid and those whose childhoods and adolescence were harmed in a way which has not yet been remedied. The CROs welcome the grant of core participant status by you, my Lady, to a range of other organisations who have interest and expertise in children's rights.

To very briefly introduce the five CROs, and my Lady will be familiar with the first three who were part of Module 2 on your grant:

Save the Children Fund, the UK member of the Save the Children movement, which alongside advocacy work during the pandemic has published several reports addressing concerns about the impact of the pandemic on children and, in particular babies, my Lady.

Just for Kids Law, an organisation working both with and for children and young adults, which also provides legal representation and has, therefore, first-hand knowledge of some of the difficulties children and young people experienced during the pandemic, especially those in contact with the youth justice or social care systems.

And the Children's Rights Alliance for England, a membership organisation with over 100 members, many

My Lady, the CROs' preliminary submissions build on the concerns expressed in Module 2 that the UK Government's response to the pandemic did not sufficiently consider the rights, best interests, welfare, health or wellbeing of children.

We say that the harm to children caused by the Covid-19 virus itself was exacerbated exponentially by the governmental response to the virus, which too often ignored or marginalised children's rights and interests.

We say that, in large part, it was the governmental response, which as Counsel to the Inquiry rightly said, took away fundamental aspects of what it means to be a child. The Inquiry now has the opportunity to consider in more granular detail whether that response could have better respected children's rights. Our position for this module can be distilled into the central proposition that, whilst some of the impact on children eloquently set out by Counsel to the Inquiry this morning was inevitable, much of it was sadly unnecessary and stemmed from a failure of the state fully to consider the different and unique rights of children in pandemic planning and response.

Beneath that core proposition we make three underpinning points.

Firstly, the rights and interests of children and

being key children's organisations themselves, which has worked both during and since the various NPIs were brought in, the non-pharmaceutical interventions, to highlight the lack of consideration given to children's rights.

As my Lady knows, these three organisations were joint core participants in Module 2. They have been joined and strengthened by the inclusion of two further organisations for Module 8, the Centre for Young Lives, led by Anne Longfield CBE, who my Lady will, I'm sure, recall gave evidence in Module 2, as she was Children's Commissioner for England during most of the time periods with which this Inquiry is concerned.

The Centre for Young Lives has a research focus on the experience of children who face secondary risks which Covid-19 exacerbated, including migrant children.

Finally, our fifth member is the Child Poverty

Action Group, who work on behalf of the children growing
up in poverty in the UK and have conducted extensive
research about the impact of lockdown on children and
also successfully persuaded decision-makers during the
pandemic to take some measures to mitigate the increased
harm to children living in poverty, for example working
with other organisations to secure the expansion of free
school meals to those with no recourse to public funds.

young people were routinely overlooked or deprioritised throughout the pandemic. This frequently led to a disproportionate impact from various measures as compared to adults and, indeed, at times, those rights and interests were actively undermined. To give three examples, first of all, a judicial review brought by Article 39 showed that changes were made to entitlements for looked after children in England unlawfully when the then Children's Commissioner and others concerned with children's rights were not consulted prior to their introduction.

Second, extended custody time limits were applied to children in England and Wales until a claim brought by Just for Kids Law was settled, reinforcing the point made by Counsel to the Inquiry about the particular vulnerability of detained children.

Third, children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities in England also saw their entitlements diminished by a series of statutory instruments that were issued on a month-by-month basis, reducing the ability for these to be scrutinised and challenged.

Our second underpinning point is that the lack of focus on the rights and interests of children and young people during the pandemic was systemic. This was not,

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we say, an unfortunate oversight for which particular individuals bore responsibility. It resulted from a failure to embed the rights and interests of children in the centre of the machinery of government.

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Third, to echo an important theme of the submissions made by Counsel to the Inquiry, the impact of the pandemic and the response to it was not uniform. Certain groups suffered worst. To highlight just three: babies who lost the support of health visitors, wider family and community support and face-to-face contact with social workers and other professionals. The data on serious incident notifications shows that from April to September 2020 there was a 31% rise in incidents of death or serious harm to children under the age of one, when compared with the same period in 2019. There is an increasing evidence base, including the BICYCLE, Born in Covid Year - Core Lockdown Effects study and the Social Distancing and Development Study on the lasting harm of the pandemic response to children's cognitive. social, emotional, speech and language skills.

Our second core group to highlight: children and young people from black and racialised communities who already experienced greater levels of poverty and disadvantage before the pandemic. Nearly half of children from black or minority ethnic communities were

children's rights throughout the module, rather than focusing on the interests of the institutions which exist to serve children, particularly local authorities and schools, and further we urge the Inquiry to maintain a focus on rights that are particularly important to children and young people themselves, such as the right to play, which, as the Inquiry heard in Module 2, is a vital aspect of childhood development and which was

play was given insufficient weight in decision-making. The problem was more fundamental. Children's right, such as the right to play, were often simply ignored or given no consideration at all by those making decisions on public health grounds.

Notwithstanding the need to focus on individuals rather than institutions, we share the position expressed by the TUC at paragraph 8 of its written submission as to the chaos in government decision-making and communication in relation to schools during the pandemic. We urge the Inquiry carefully to consider the steps required to ensure that children's schooling experiences far less disruption in any future pandemic or crisis, with continuity of educational experience

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living in poverty on the eve of the pandemic, 46%, even higher than the general rate of children living in poverty, slightly below a third.

Thirdly, we highlight looked-after children, and children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, whose statutory entitlements were taken away or reduced on an assumption, which we say was misconceived, that they simply could not be delivered during this time of crisis.

Of course, these groups intersect, my Lady, and many children will have experienced multiple disadvantage from the pandemic as a result of a number of their particular characteristics.

The particular forms of intersectionality which led to prejudice to children from the pandemic and its response will require careful consideration during this module.

In this context, the CROs welcome the breadth and focus of the Inquiry's proposed scope for Module 8 and. in particular, the underpinning theme of inequalities which we see runs through it. We agree with the Clinically Vulnerable Families submission that this scope could be expressly extended to explicitly focus on children in clinically vulnerable households.

We urge the Inquiry to maintain its focus on

being given greater priority. We welcome what was said by Counsel to the Inquiry in this regard this morning.

We say that schools and early years settings must be treated as essential infrastructure in any future pandemic and that there needs to be sustained investment to bridge the digital divide that the most disadvantaged children experienced during Covid-19.

We do not support the Department for Education's proposal in its written submissions for the term "attendance restriction" to be used in relation to schools. Although schools were not closed for all children, the reality for very many children was that their schools, and many other places that mattered to them, were closed to them for significant periods and, furthermore, many children did not receive or could not access adequate remote education in place of school.

In the view of the CROs, the term "attendance restriction" tends seriously to underplay the severity of the experience of lockdown for children and young people generally.

My Lady, questions in relation to the management and approach of the module that were posed by the Inquiry are addressed in our written submissions. We briefly supplement those, if I may, as follows.

On the question of the evidence which the Inquiry

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subject to severe and at times disproportionate restrictions in the name of public health. Our position, my Lady, is not just that the right to

(11) Pages 41 - 44

will hear in this module, the CROs support the suggestion by the disabled people's organisations that Dr Cath Lunt would be an appropriate expert for the Inquiry to hear from on issues in relation to children and young people with SEN, and we further support the Long Covid's group proposal for the Inquiry to hear from a paediatric expert in Long Covid, reflecting the underlying principle that children are not simply little adults in their experience of Covid-19 or generally.

We also consider that it's vital and urgent that the Inquiry hears directly from children, both in its research and by way of direct evidence taken in an appropriately child-friendly manner, and the Inquiry can be assisted by evidence from young people who have now turned 18 but were young teenagers when the pandemic began.

The CROs thank the Inquiry for the efforts being made to progress this module as quickly as possible. For children and young people every day matters. A child who was starting school at the beginning of the pandemic would now be at or close to 10 years old and would be of secondary school age by the time this module reports. Despite the clear recommendations made by the Education Recovery Commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins, and a plethora of other bodies, for a substantial investment

resources in the services that matter most to children. Those include education, care and both physical and mental health services, the latter being particularly vital, given the step change in child mental ill health occasioned by both the pandemic and the response to it by the adults in charge.

My Lady, the CROs look forward with working with you and the Inquiry team and the other core participants on these vitally important issues for the UK's children and young people as this module progresses and, unless I can assist you further, my Lady, those are the submissions the CROs wish to make this morning.

LADY HALLETT: Thank you, Mr Broach, both for the content and for your excellent time keeping. Thank you very

I think possibly we will take the break now.
I shall return at 11.20.

18 (11.08 am)

19 (A short break)

20 (11.20 am)

21 LADY HALLETT: Right, is it Ms Beattie next? Ms Beattie.

22 Submissions on behalf of Disabled People's Organisations by

23 MS BEATTIE

MS BEATTIE: My Lady, we act for three disabled people's organisations, or DPO, from across the UK. They are

in children's recovery, no such funding has yet been made available by the current or former governments. We therefore agree with the TUC that, if possible, the next preliminary hearing should be brought forward and, more fundamentally, we urge the Inquiry to publish its final report on this module at the earliest possible date which is consistent with proper scrutiny of the evidence and issues

My Lady, the CROs have set out in written submissions our preliminary position on the key recommendations needed to address the structural invisibility of children within government. These recommendations will include legislative change, we hope, to incorporate children's rights in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in domestic law, to fill the gap in the Equality Act that allows public bodies and service providers to discriminate against children on the grounds of age with impunity, and to set clear child poverty reduction targets as part of a cross-government child poverty strategy.

However, we reiterate that to start to clear the long shadow which the Covid-19 pandemic has cast over the lives and life chances of a generation of children, meaningful implementation of such legislative changes needs to be accompanied by significant investment of

Disability Rights UK, Disability Wales and Disability Action Northern Ireland.

The DPO thank you for recognising them as core participants. They join with other CPs in acknowledging the Inquiry's commitment to hearing the voices and stories of children and young people and investigating the impact of the pandemic upon them.

I start with a few words about vulnerability and its relevance here. My Lady has heard in other modules the DPO encouraged the Inquiry and others to be constructively critical of the term "vulnerable". The DPO do that because it reinforces an approach based on individual impairments, it ignores that we are all vulnerable at different times in different ways and it detracts from the need for systems to be responsive to the human condition in all its manifestations. If they are not responsive in this way, it is the systems themselves that are vulnerable.

Following the work of Martha Fineman, there are certain forms of universal vulnerability, based on the life cycle and diversity of the human condition, of which childhood is one category. There is also socially determined vulnerability that can render children unequally vulnerable because of their dependence on the distribution of assets in adult society that is beyond

their control.

These forms of vulnerability combined to make disabled children and young people amongst those in our society most exposed during the pandemic. Moreover, it is disabled children and young people who will experience enduring and potentially irreparable harm from the Covid-19 era.

In earlier modules, the DPO adopted Professor Tom Shakespeare's conditions of Covid's triple jeopardy for disabled people. The danger was from: (1) the virus itself; (2) the reduced care for pre-existing needs; and (3) the disproportionate impact on disabled people because of non-pharmaceutical interventions or NPIs.

This module must consider how those jeopardies affected disabled children and young people.

First, pre-existing conditions of disabled children and young people made them particularly exposed to the effects of the virus, unlike the rest of the population of their age. This includes all of the conditions on the shielding list. We know that more than 500 children and young people aged 25 and under died due to or involving Covid in England and Wales alone. It remains to be understood how many of those who died were disabled. More than 50,000 children and young people aged up to 17 shielded for much of the pandemic, with

disabled people and their families lived with prior to the start of the pandemic.

On the way forward, the DPO make five points.
Our first point is that the Inquiry should not be constrained in its scope by defining disabled children and young people by reference to the current systems of special educational needs and/or disabilities or SEN as they operate in the four nations. The reference in the provisional outline of scope to children with SEN is welcomed and it is crucial, as schoolchildren who need that support number over 1.6 million in England, over 52,000 in Wales, over 241,000 in Scotland and over

These are significant numbers but it would be wrong for the Inquiry to take the formal recording of special educational needs and/or disabilities as conclusive and comprehensive for at least two reasons.

62,000 in Northern Ireland.

First, disabled children and young people were already, before the pandemic, underassessed, unsupported and unplanned for in education systems that had faced long-term resourcing competency deficits. The formal figures are wholly under-inclusive, even on their own terms.

Second, those systems are overly medicalised in their orientation, requiring proof of problematic and

all of the developmental and social consequences that entailed

Second, post-viral conditions rendered children and young people disabled because of Covid. Those acting on behalf of Long Covid Kids will develop the point but in the younger part of the population these consequences have sometimes been devastating. This contrasts starkly with the evidence that most children experienced benign symptoms and speedy recovery.

Third, reduced access to treatment, medication and support aggravated pre-existing conditions in disabled children and young people. This included those on the spectrum of neurodiversity, those with depression and other mental health conditions and those in need of ongoing treatment and rehabilitation.

Fourth, enforced isolation under the state's response to Covid generated new impairments, conditions and risks for children and young people for the first time, for example eating and anxiety disorders, self-harm and suicidal ideation. Lockdown also accentuated the risk of abuse at home and residential settings.

Those composite and often compounding harms must be understood against the general evidence that my Lady heard in Module 2 about structural inequalities that

stigmatising vulnerability and thereby entrenching the medical model of disability which the DPO contest.

Many disabled children and young people have no conditions of learning disabilities or learning difficulty and, therefore, do not have special educational needs as such, and yet they also repeatedly encounter barriers in their education caused by their social disablement.

Our second point therefore involves looking beyond how the education system defines need and disability to broader aspects of the lives of disabled children and young people.

Given the life stage of children and young people, there is an understandable and necessary focus in this module on education, early years provision and further and higher education and apprenticeships for young people. But, as my Lady's provisional outline of scope importantly anticipates, this module is much broader. The DPO welcome the recognition in area 4 of the provisional outline of scope of the impact on physical and mental health, wellbeing, development, family lives and access to healthcare services. The provisional outline also recognises, under area 5, social care and other services which are relevant to many disabled children and young people, including disabled children

and young people who are themselves carers. For example, in England, young carers under the age of 17 are almost three times as likely to be disabled, compared with their peers who do not provide care.

By considering the experiences of disabled children and young people within each of the areas of the outline scope, the Inquiry will be able to examine the impact of the pandemic on this part of the population holistically and to recognise the multifaceted aspects of their reality.

Our third point is that, in order to do that effectively, the DPO again urge upon you a human rights approach and the social model of disability, which identifies the interaction of impairments or conditions with barriers or attitudes in society as hindering the full and effective participation of disabled children and young people on an equal basis with others.

Across a range of NPIs, disabled children and young people were an afterthought. Excuse me, disabled people were an afterthought, and that extended to disabled children and young people.

It started with the failure to plan for mass exclusion from school attendance prior to the pandemic, with two fundamental problems with the rapidly improvised government policy of March 2020.

by a reduction in care services at the same time, including the easement of statutory duties to a requirement of reasonable endeavours.

Digital poverty is a phenomenon suffered by many but one particularly pronounced in the households of disabled people and, even when digital access and literacy were there, the adjustment of services for disabled children and young people lagged behind the innovations that were made available to non-disabled children.

That lagging behind continues due to the lack of targeted catch-up education activity for disabled children and young people, with ramifications not only for education but for equality in later life.

Our fourth point is that the risk to disabled children and young people was one to their broader wellbeing and security, including the risk of abuse in education and care settings as well as at home, a reduction in external services and in contact with families and visits, rendering disabled children and young people more isolated, with a reduction in safeguarding and increased use of inappropriate physical restraint.

Aside from wanting the module to deal with these harms, the issue echoes the point urged upon you by the

First, the exception for non-attendance of so-called "vulnerable" children may have had good intentions but it was highly problematic. Its definition meant different things in different parts of the devolved education systems in the UK. In England, for disabled people it only extended to people with education health and care plans. That omitted the almost 1.1 million children receiving SEN support but without those plans.

Whatever the breadth of the notion of vulnerable children, the outcome was considerable underuse of the exemption, which required children to self-identify as vulnerable to use it, thereby carrying stigma, and required disabled people, both children and their parents and carers, to take on the additional risk of travelling to and from school with insufficient recognition of how that risk would be handled.

Second, given in the first wave only three in ten disabled children attended school and in the second wave it rose only to four in ten, it is critical to consider how much the provision of remote learning was predicated upon non-disabled norms and dependent upon the assets of socioeconomic advantage.

Teaching packages were not tailored to various forms of neurodiversity. The capacity for families and other unpaid carers to support home learning was compromised

DPO in module 6 to include within "care provided in the home" coverage of the various supported and interdependent ways that disabled people live.

A similar approach must be taken to the situation of disabled children and young people, some of whom live at residential special schools, some of whom live in other residential settings. This would seem naturally to sit within the fifth area listed in the provisional outline of scope. But, as we say in our written submissions at paragraph 5.1, this includes not only disabled children and young people receiving support from services because of safety, but also those receiving support from services because of disability.

Our fifth point concerns how the Inquiry will hear from disabled children and young people. The DPO are pleased that other CPs also identified the need for reasonable adjustments to be made so that disabled children and young people can participate in Every Story Matters and the research project Children and Young People's Voices, and we are pleased to hear from Counsel to the Inquiry, Ms Dobbin KC, this morning that interviews will be held with disabled children and young people as part of Children and Young People's Voices.

Those voices must be heard, and the DPO would be happy to assist the Inquiry to achieve this end. The

DPO are confident that Module 8 would benefit immeasurably from hearing these voices and encourages the Inquiry to embrace wholeheartedly the opportunity to do so.

Finally, we again acknowledge the evident commitment that my Lady and your team, including Ms Dobbin KC today, have shown to this module. It may seem trite, but the greatest legacy of this Inquiry may come from this part of your work, because it will learn from and seek to set up different possibilities for children and young people. They are the generation in many ways most damaged by Covid, who gave up so much and who will have to take change forward.

Thank you, my Lady, unless I can assist further. **LADY HALLETT:** No, thank you very much for your help,

Ms Beattie, I'm very grateful.

Ms Hannett, I think you're next.

Submissions on behalf of Long Covid Kids and Long Covid Kids Scotland by MS HANNETT KC

MS HANNETT: My Lady, I appear on behalf of Long Covid Kids and Long Covid Kids Scotland. I'm assisted by Ms lengar and Ms Sivakumaran, and I'm instructed by Jane Ryan of Bhatt Murphy Solicitors.

My Lady, Long Covid Kids was established in September 2020 by the families of children who did not

statistics from the Office of National Statistics show that as of March 2024 there were over 55,000 children and young people in England and Scotland alone suffering from symptoms that persisted for at least 12 weeks after infection with Covid-19.

Beyond the prevalence, the effect of Long Covid on children and young people is profound. My clients support children and young people who continue to suffer from complex illnesses over four years after infection.

As noted by the disabled people's organisations, the long-term effects of Covid, Long Covid, have rendered some children newly disabled. All of the children supported by my clients had their education disrupted. Some are still unable to attend school at all, and many are unable to access alternative provision. Children and young people with Long Covid are unable to have a full social life or participate in hobbies that they once enjoyed. Further, alongside the physical challenges, the uncertainty of a child's future recovery can have an additional impact on their mental health and on that of their family.

Children and young people with Long Covid therefore suffer the double burden of the direct effect of their illness and disability as well as the indirect effects of the pandemic and its associated measures that have recover from Covid-19. They now support over 11,000 children, young people, their families and carers. Long Covid Kids Scotland acts under the umbrella of Long Covid Kids, and supports approximately 300 family and carers in Scotland.

My clients are grateful for the grant of core participant status, and we look forward to assisting the Inquiry in its important work in Module 8.

The Inquiry has our written submissions. I propose to focus on a small number of those issues that we raised. That focus is not intended to diminish the importance of the remaining points, but the Inquiry has our submissions and will no doubt consider those with care

With that in mind, I propose to make brief submissions on four topics. First, the impact of Long Covid on children and young people. Second, the provisional scope of Module 8. Third, the need for expert evidence on Long Covid in children and young people. Fourth, the hearing of children and young people's voices.

Turning first, then, to the impact of Long Covid in children and young people. The number of children and young people supported by my clients, whilst large, does not reflect the true picture. The latest available

been felt by all children and young people. For example, a member of the Long Covid groups, T, who is 19 years of age, said:

"I missed one year of school after completing year 12. I was unable to socialise in and outside of school, leaving me feeling isolated. Long Covid has limited family activities as I am unable to walk far. Holiday plans and trips are affected by my lack of energy because it limits the options available to my family."

Despite the scale and the impact of Long Covid, the prevailing public messaging has been that children or young people are at little or at no risk from the disease. The inaccuracy of that messaging has been fatal. Some children and young people have lost their lives to Covid-19 and, as I have already indicated, many continue to suffer from the life-changing disabling symptoms of Long Covid.

Long Covid is poorly understood, particularly in children and young people, which has meant that patients and their families suffer the additional burden and stigma of being disbelieved and disparaged or having their symptoms minimised or dismissed as anxiety.

For example, a member of the Long Covid group, C, who is 17 years old, said:

"We were told by the GP that children were not affected by Covid. I was unable to attend school or college, I had to give up football, and I was isolated from my friends."

There is no effective treatment. Access to care and support from health services can be inconsistent. The health services that are available for children and young people are funded only on a one-year basis, which doesn't ensure sustainable Long Covid healthcare.

It is therefore no exaggeration to describe
Long Covid Kids and Long Covid Kids Scotland as a life
raft to children and young people with Long Covid in
their families. It remains the position that few other
children's rights organisations have engaged fully with
the ongoing issues of Long Covid for children and young
people. That lack of recognition can unfortunately be
seen in many, albeit not all, of the submissions made to
you in writing before today.

The stories of the children and young people suffering from Long Covid reflect the wider failures of state organisations in the pandemic to prioritise the distinct needs of children and young people. We agree with the observations made by the children's rights organisations that the Covid-19 pandemic -- and we would add Long Covid -- exacerbated and continues to worsen

need to consider. We say all of those groups will contain children who have Long Covid.

Finally, the Long Covid groups welcome the confirmation that Module 8 will be child-centred. In particular there is a need in the context of Long Covid to focus on the specific healthcare impact needs of children as opposed to adults. As we note in paragraph 13 of our written submissions, one important example is that the prevalence of paediatric Long Covid should be compared against the prevalence of other childhood diseases amongst children and young people and not against the prevalence of Long Covid in adults. That is a distinct disease. As Mr Broach noted this morning already, children are not little adults.

I turn third, briefly, to expert evidence. The
Long Covid groups welcome the proposal to instruct
expert evidence, expert witnesses, on, amongst other
things, the impact of the pandemic on the mental and
physical health of children. We note, however, that
none of the areas outlined by Counsel to the Inquiry to
date expressly include Long Covid in children and young
people. The Inquiry does not presently have the benefit
of any direct paediatric expert evidence of the effect
of Long Covid in children and young people. The expert
reports for Modules 2 and 3 are authored by two experts

existing inequalities amongst children and young people in terms of, for example, socioeconomic status, ethnicity and disability.

I turn second to the provisional scope of Module 8. As we note in paragraph 10 of our written submissions, the Long Covid groups are grateful for the clarification that Module 8 will investigate the past, current and ongoing impact of Covid-19 on children and young people. It's critical, in our view, to appreciate that children and young people continue to develop Long Covid following infection from Covid-19, and so those ongoing effects of Long Covid are ongoing and profound.

Further, my clients emphasise the importance of not siloing Long Covid as a discrete issue. We say it has a pervasive impact on children and young people on all aspects of their lives. In paragraph 11 of our written submissions, we've set out the areas of investigation that a thorough focus of the impact of Long Covid on children and young people would require. This includes, for example, the impact of Long Covid on children's education and on their physical, mental health and wellbeing.

Counsel to the Inquiry, Ms Dobbin King's Counsel, identified a number of different groups of children this morning in her opening comments that the Inquiry will

in adult respiratory medicine who do not have any direct clinical experience of paediatric Long Covid. Whilst the report for Module 2 contains a brief section on children and young people, it's caveated by the comment that its findings derive from a literature review and discussions with paediatricians only.

Similarly, the material in the Module 3 report concerning children and young people is thin and was written only by way of consultation with paediatricians. It cannot be said, therefore, to provide direct paediatric expertise on the subject of Long Covid in children and young people.

Standing back, then, the Inquiry presently lacks an analysis of the impact of Long Covid on children and young people directly from an expert in paediatric medicine. Counsel to the Inquiry this morning in her helpful opening observations noted that the Inquiry would seek expert evidence where there is underlying research and/or no single witness of fact can speak to the evidence.

We say both of those criteria are met here. Expert evidence can explain important underlying research evidence on children and young people which witnesses of fact simply cannot speak to. For example, just yesterday a clinical study was published which explores

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the characteristics of Long Covid in children and young people which are still presenting 36 months after initial diagnosis, two years longer than the ONS figures account for.

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We have set out in full at paragraph 18 of our written submissions the matters that we say a paediatric expert on Long Covid could assist with, and for these reasons my clients invite the Inquiry to instruct a paediatric expert with clinical expertise of Long Covid in children and young people to ensure that it has the necessary material to address this issue fully in Module 8.

I turn finally, my Lady, fourth, to the voices of children and young people. My clients welcome the Inquiry's extensive efforts to engage with those young people who were under 18 at the time at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic through the Every Story Matters project and the Verian research project. We welcome CTI's confirmation that the engagement will factor in the experiences of a wide cross-section of children and young people with Long Covid. Several children and young people represented by the Long Covid groups now suffer from disabilities that have resulted from their diagnosis of Long Covid, and we anticipate that those research projects will have in mind that reasonable

to be the voice of the clinically vulnerable in this Inquiry.

My submissions will address, first of all, clinically vulnerable children must not be sidelined again; second of all, provisional outline of scope; third, expert evidence; and fourth, key lines of enquiry.

Chair, you are already familiar with CVF through their participation in Modules 3 and 4 as core participants. In short, CVF is a grassroots organisation, which was founded in August 2020 in the first months of the pandemic. Since then, it's helped thousands of people through its advocacy and advice. It represents those who are clinically vulnerable, clinically extremely vulnerable and the severely immunosuppressed, as well as their households across all four nations. When I refer to clinically vulnerable, I include all of those groups going forward.

CVF, when it was founded, initially concentrated on issues relating to unsafe schools and then it broadened its focus to other areas. We've listed in our written submissions at paragraph 9 the extensive activities CVF have been involved in and still are involved in relating to schools, for example: fighting for cleaner air in schools; advocating for children in CV families who had

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adjustments will need to be made to ensure their 2 effective participation in those direct evidence 3 gathering exercises.

> Further, our written submissions at paragraph 28 set out a number of suggested additions to the key lines of enquiry, the KLOEs, to ensure that the impact of Long Covid across all areas of a child's life can be fully captured.

In conclusion, then, my Lady, the Long Covid groups look forward to assisting you and the Inquiry over the course of your work in Module 8. Unless I can be of any further assistance, those are our submissions.

LADY HALLETT: No, I'm very grateful, thank you very much for your help, Ms Hannett.

Mr Wagner.

Submissions on behalf of Clinically Vulnerable Families by MR WAGNER

MR WAGNER: Thank you and good morning, Chair. 18 19 My name is Adam Wagner and I act for the Clinically

Vulnerable Families. I'm assisted by Lameesa Iqbal and we are instructed by Kim Harrison and Shane Smith of Slater & Gordon.

CVF is very grateful to you, Chair, for granting them core participant status in this module and they're looking forward to assisting the Inquiry and continuing

not been vaccinated; campaigning for masking in schools; highlighting inequalities for children forced out of schools due to Covid; helping families locate appropriate educational resources when their children were not supported through the formal education system; advising families how to mitigate risks so their children could attend schools more safely; campaigning for safer exam conditions; addressing inequalities faced by children and young people in clinically vulnerable households and highlighting problems faced by children who were locked out of education due to high clinical

My first topic and overarching topic is that clinically vulnerable children and young people must not be sidelined again.

CVF is involved in a number of Inquiry modules but it has a simple overarching aim, which is this: to ensure the Inquiry investigates the full impact of the pandemic on the clinically vulnerable and their families and households. Those individuals not only faced but continue to face greater risks to their lives than any other category of person. We do not argue with the disability rights groups about terminology and we understand there are controversies, but we, as the clinically vulnerable, representing the clinically

vulnerable, did not choose to be designated as "clinically vulnerable", and that is the term that I use for that reason.

But those groups included millions of people, millions who were at higher risk from Covid-19 and who made up the vast majority of those who died as a result of Covid-19.

There's an important point here. The clinically vulnerable are not other people: they are us, they are our families, our loved ones, and that means advocating for clinically vulnerable people to be protected, and that's not at the expense of anyone else. It's about upholding the essential values of our society. The measures that CVF and its members advocate for and have advocated for throughout the pandemic -- high quality masks, clean air, ventilation, just to name three -- these are measures which do not just help clinically vulnerable people: they make things better for everyone, and that includes improving the attendance of children at schools and their families.

On this we make a point which should be an important one in this module. The public debate over children in the pandemic often made it seem as if there was only one important question, schools open or schools shut, as if there was a switch. But this masked two other important

So that's my first point: don't forget clinically vulnerable children.

My second topic is clinically vulnerable children and young people must not be sidelined. Many of the children and young people who are the focus of this module are clinically vulnerable. Many more live in households with clinically vulnerable family members.

At this stage, I want to read the opening lines from an article in the Irish Independent, which appeared just yesterday by Tess Finch-Lees:

"It's not your fault', I told 16-year-old Cara, whose mother died of a SARS-CoV-2 infection she gave her. To be clear, the doctor confirmed Cara (not her real name) had passed on the virus and Covid was entered on the death certificate as the cause of death.

"Cara's mother had not been outside of their home in the weeks preceding her death. When masks were dropped in the 'Omicron is mild' phase of the pandemic, Cara continued as the lone masker at school to protect her immunocompromised mother who was undergoing chemotherapy. It was tolerable until a child psychotherapist said on nation airwaves that some girls were continuing to mask anyway to hide their acne. His words were used to bully her.

"Cara left but without support from the teachers she

questions: are schools safe and can they be made safe?

Counsel to the Inquiry has said this module will consider infection prevention and control. We say that should be a central focus. CVF were asking the questions from early on in the pandemic: is the air in schools safe? Can it be made cleaner? Why not bring in inexpensive air filters? Why not ventilate more? Why not use high-quality masks?

When it is safe enough for the most vulnerable to attend, it's safe enough for everyone. These questions were urgent and remain urgent.

Chair, you have obtained extremely useful evidence on IPCs in Module 3, the healthcare module, which gets to the heart of those questions. We hope that this evidence is brought across, and also the learning from this evidence, to this module, and taken seriously in answering the questions about what should have happened and how we can make the schools safe in the future.

We do support the TUC's position that the safety of school staff could be considered by this module, not as a central focus but as a focus, because it is impossible to assess the proportionality of IPC measures without understanding the impact on staff. To ignore the impact on staff would be to ignore a central part of the balancing exercise.

struggled. Her parents pleaded with the school to use the HEPA filter they brought. The school refused. Cara eventually returned to school unmasked, caught Covid and infected her mum. It killed her. Cara self-harms because she blames herself. She hasn't been to school since "

This is a powerful and upsetting story which no doubt was reflected by similar stories in the UK too and it highlights a number of interlinked issues which we say should be investigated in this module: the experience of children with clinically vulnerable family members, the attitude of schools and society generally towards important IPC measures.

One of CVF's primary focuses in this module is to ensure that CV children and young people and those who lived in clinically vulnerable households are not forgotten as they were during the height of the pandemic and in pandemic planning.

At present, Chair, we are concerned that there is no mention of the clinically vulnerable in the provisional list of issues. There is no mention of the clinically vulnerable in the key lines of enquiry. We appreciate those are provisional early documents but we say, respectfully, it has to change. We hope this will shortly be rectified.

My third topic is provisional outline of scope.

There is no mention of clinically vulnerable children or children in clinically vulnerable families in the scope.

We do appreciate, Chair, CTI's point this morning the scope is not meant to be exhaustive and there are some broad categories which will include other subcategories, but the scope does refer explicitly to eight subgroups of children: children with disabilities; those with special educational needs; children at risk; children whose families receive support from social services; young carers; those in the care of local authorities; care and care-leavers; children and young people in contact with the immigration system.

Of course we understand CTI's point, but we also highlight the practical reality that, once a group is explicitly mentioned in the scope, that explicit mention cascades down to many other Inquiry actions and activities.

So we have proposed an addition to the scope in the opening paragraph, which is in red text in paragraph 16 of our submissions, which simply would add a line which says:

"... those who were Clinically Vulnerable and/or Clinically Extremely Vulnerable and/or who were part of families of [Clinically Vulnerable and Clinically

during the pandemic and the impact of the pandemic on them. CVF are keen that the experience of clinically vulnerable children and also children who lived in clinically vulnerable households are considered by experts in this module explicitly. I've already explained why they're different to other groups and they need specific consideration.

In our written submissions, at paragraph 20, we've proposed the names of three experts who we propose would be well suited to this task and we've also proposed another expert, another potential expert, who can deal with the question of how Covid-19 compares to other vaccine preventable diseases in terms of severe acute and long-term disease in children and young people, and again we've made a proposal.

My final topic, Chair, is key lines of enquiry.

From paragraph 23 of our submissions, we have respectfully made some proposals, again in red, for additions to the key lines of enquiry. I will not refer to them in detail now, but I make the point again that the KLOEs, as the acronym has come to be referred to, made no mention at all of clinically vulnerable children or people in clinically vulnerable families. That, in my submission, is no surprise because they don't appear in the scope either and, if they don't appear in the

Extremely Vulnerable] people."

It's important to note that -- and I've said this before in other modules -- although of course it's important to focus on disabled children, not all disabled children are clinically vulnerable and not all clinically vulnerable children are disabled.

Moreover, children in clinically vulnerable households, like Cara in the article, don't fit in anywhere in these categories.

This makes sense in the context of other aspects of the Inquiry's work too. For example, it's already been said that clinically vulnerable children are being included in the research topics for Module 8, so we say they should be in the scope too.

CVF also requests the Inquiry makes sure it considers children who were removed from the school roll, whilst also recognising the significant impact of nearly half of CVF families who were told to withdraw their children from the school rolls under the threat of fines and prosecutions. Only a small number went to court but many withdrew, mostly temporarily, or felt compelled to take unnecessary risks.

My next topic is expert evidence. We note that paragraph 44 of CTI's note refers to the experience of children with special educational needs and disabilities

scope, it doesn't cascade down to other parts of the Inquiry's work. We say that our proposed changes will ensure that the clinically vulnerable people are included, paid attention to and their experiences are appropriately investigated in Module 3. We, of course, only propose those as ideas, the point is just to get them in somehow.

In conclusion, Chair, many children and young people are clinically vulnerable, many more live in households with clinically vulnerable people. They have largely been forgotten during the pandemic and certainly have been forgotten since the pandemic -- sorry, since the acute phase of the pandemic. In this important module, there is a chance to begin rectifying that but it will only happen if clinically vulnerable children and families are placed at the centre of this module, in the issues list, in the key lines of enquiry, in the expert evidence. We hope that having granted CVF core participant status, you will now take these important steps to ensure the voice of the clinically vulnerable people can be heard. Thank you.

LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much, Mr Wagner, very grateful.

I think we're turning to Coram now, Ms King.

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Submissions on behalf of the Coram Group by MS KING KC MS KING: Good afternoon, my Lady. I appear on behalf of Coram. I'm joined today by Ms Compton, who is part of the Coram Children's Legal Centre and by Steph Davies, who is from those instructing me at Leverets. I'm also joined online by Ms Logan Green, who is also appearing on behalf of Coram.

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Though Coram has produced a Rule 9 statement at the request of the Inquiry at a different phrase of the Inquiry, this is the first module in which Coram has appeared as a core participant, and it is its first direct involvement in the Inquiry. So I will take the opportunity to address the Inquiry in oral submissions, having submitted written submissions in advance.

Coram is grateful to the Inquiry to have the opportunity to contribute to the work of this phase of the Inquiry. It sees its role very much to assist and advise the Inquiry and to work with it on the central issues that are going to be interrogated. Originating as the Foundling Hospital in 1939, Coram is the UK's oldest children's charity, working as the Coram Group of specialist organisations helping hundreds of thousands of children, young people, families and professionals nationwide

Coram uses its experience of working daily with

direct experience of the impact of the Government's policies with some of the specialist organisations being more engaged than others.

Through its experience of the restrictions imposed in the pandemic during lockdowns and at times of social distancing, Coram came to appreciate that there were a number of consequences of the pandemic, some ostensibly foreseeable and inevitable, some foreseeable and preventable, some unforeseeable but inevitable, and some unforeseen but preventable, many of which continue to negatively affect the lives of children and their carers today.

During and since the pandemic, Coram has had the opportunity to witness and record the impact on children of the pandemic and is conscious that some cohorts were disproportionately negatively affected, the compounding effect of disadvantage, but that, in fact, the repercussions for all children were significant.

Coram has already sought to understand the effects of the pandemic and has conducted its own research in a number of areas and a number of ways relevant to the experience of children, their carers and the professionals working with them while restrictions were

The Inquiry will know that Coram has offered up the

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children and young people to engage with government, local authorities, social workers, teachers and families to help deliver better practice, systems and laws.

Coram supports young people and children from infancy to independence with a number of initiatives through a range of different parts of its organisation. The ambit of its work is set out in the course of the written submissions already provided but the Inquiry will be aware that there is a large range of services provided to children, their families and professionals, organisations and institutions by Coram.

The Coram Group consists of Coram Children's Legal Centre, the Migrant Children's Project, Coram Adoption, Coram Intercountry Adoption Centre, Coram's Creative Therapies Team, Coram Life Education, Coram Beanstalk, Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation, Coram-i, CoramBAAF, Coram Family and Childcare, Coram International, Coram Voice and Coram Hempsall's.

There was significant activity in response to the pandemic by those who make up the Coram Group. Coram was well placed to support and assist those to whom it provided services at that time and assist those to whom it provided services at that time, and it was called upon to do so both frequently and consistently. During the acute phase of the pandemic, Coram Group gained

research it has conducted to the Inquiry for its assistance and attention.

Coram is keen to assist with the identification of expert witnesses to ensure that those issues relevant to the strand of the Inquiry that your Ladyship is conducting are fully interrogated and rigorously explored.

Coram has read with interest the preliminary scope of the Inquiry in this module and welcomes the updated information from Counsel to the Inquiry. To assist the Inquiry, Coram identified a number of further or specific issues to interrogate which it would contend are important areas of exploration that will promote an understanding of the action taken in response to the pandemic and the consequences of the decisions taken by government. It is submitted that these defined aspects of the scope will provide information which will avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, so that when the next pandemic strikes there will be a better state of preparedness and more robust decision-making leading to less damaging policy and practice.

It is hoped that what is explored in this module will ensure that the rights and interests of children will be at the forefront of decision-making in future. There are a number of particular observations about the

scope which Coram has made, and I don't intend to detail the reasons for the proposals but will set out some areas that Coram considers should be the focus of this module, noting that they are echoed by other core participants and in the contemplation of Counsel to the Inquiry, as we now understand, from the more detailed narrative we have been provided today in relation to the intention of the Inquiry in relation to this module.

Those are -- and I'm grateful to Counsel to the Inquiry for indicating that there is a willingness to explore this issue -- the impact of the pandemic on the family justice system, not merely the need to adopt a remote process but also the compounding effect of the pandemic on delays is something that Coram considers to be a necessary enquiry for this Inquiry to make; the impact of the pandemic on relationships, with a focus on early years; both formal and informal development and learning opportunities; care leavers; access to professionals and permanency planning for looked-after children; contact and family relationships for looked-after children and those in kinship placements in respect of, in particular, contact for those who were deprived of relationships with family members during the acute phases of the pandemic.

Further areas include investigations into the

consequences of the pandemic on placement moves for looked-after children and it is also submitted that there is a need to extend the scope of the Inquiry to include the impact on children in institutional settings more broadly.

There is also a need for attention to the repercussions for housing and homelessness on children and young people, and the effect on those who were involved in the immigration and asylum system during that time.

Coram invites these issues to be explicitly included in the scope of the Inquiry. Coram is encouraged by the Inquiry's intention to listen to the voices of children, and the Every Story Matters initiative and the research in respect of children and young people's voices that has been outlined today.

Coram has much to contribute to this module and is keen to do all it can to assist, to ensure that the rights and interests of children will be well supported in the event of future pandemics. Often, as others have said, children's rights tend to be an afterthought. Coram hopes that this module will ensure that in the future they are very much placed at the forefront of decision-makers' minds.

Unless I can assist further.

LADY HALLETT: No, I'm very grateful, Ms King.

May I just declare an interest -- I'm sorry,
I should have spotted it before -- I note that one of
the organisations that comes within the group you
represent is Coram Shakespeare Schools Foundation and
I have worked with them and am highly supportive of the
work they do, so I'd just like to get that out there in
case anyone would think I was keeping it quiet.

MS KING: For my part, I'm grateful for that indication.

LADY HALLETT: Thank you.

Right, and next we have Ms Cover.

Submissions on behalf of Article 39 by MS COVER

MS COVER: My Lady, I represent Article 39, who have been granted core participant status, for which we are very grateful. I'm accompanied today by the director,

Ms Carolyne Willow, and by Mr Chris Callender, who is my instructing solicitor, who works for Article 39.

Its name is derived from Article 39 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that:

"... Parties shall take all appropriate measures to promote physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration of a child victim of: any form of neglect, exploitation or abuse; torture or any other form of cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; or

armed conflicts. Such recovery and reintegration shall take place in an environment which fosters the health, self-respect and dignity of the child."

My Lady, it is estimated by Article 39 that about 80,000 children, if not more, are living in institutional settings, which is the particular focus of this charity, including boarding in residential special schools, children's homes, mental health inpatient care, prisons, supported accommodation and immigration detention.

Many of these children are looked after or under care orders to local authorities, but not all.

The policy context in which the government approached the Covid pandemic seems to have been not guided by the fact that this country ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child many years ago, that the Secretary of State for Education is required by statute to promote the wellbeing of children in England, and that when the United Kingdom Government rejected the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse's recommendation, which was made in October 2022, for a cabinet minister for children, it stated that this was unnecessary because the Education Secretary already fulfils this role.

Moreover, a Children's Commissioner has been in

place in England since 2005 and its statutory framework was significantly strengthened in 2014, making this a national body unequivocally and exclusively concerned with the promotion and protection of children's rights.

We will ask this Inquiry to look into the actions of the Children's Commissioner during the Covid pandemic and also the way in which her interventions, representations and objections were dealt with or not dealt with by government.

We ask that the entirety of this Inquiry into the impact on children and young people is looked at through the lens of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, because all of the articles form a comprehensive array of rights and protections for children, and provide an extremely useful framework.

Article 2, non-discrimination in the enjoyment of all of the rights and protections under the convention by all children.

Article 3, the best interests of each child and each group of children, must be a primary consideration in all actions concerning them.

Article 6, the right to maximum survival and development.

Article 12, the right to express views and feelings, and to have these views given due weight in all matters

families, almost always because of neglect or abuse, and they have often lost those ties or those ties have been weakened substantially, either by the neglect and abuse but, following that, by separation from their families, so that many of the safeguards which have been put into place over so many years for children living in institutional settings, at the beginning of this pandemic, originated from past abuse scandals where children's concerns and complaints had been not heard or had been deliberately silenced.

Independent complaints procedures, independent advocacy services, independent people making monthly visits to children's homes, the role of the independent reviewing officer, regular visits by social workers, with the presumption that they will always be able to meet children in private, together with the opening up of institutions to parents and friends of these children, were all measures designed to protect against institutionalised practices and coercive cultures going unchecked.

It was therefore very startling that at the very beginning of lockdown, in April 2020, the department responsible for children's social care and wellbeing, the Department for Education, began the pandemic with a radical deregulation programme which either removed or

concerning the child. And of course this provision includes the right to assistance to be heard in proceedings of all kinds, and, in that regard, we do support, strongly support, the submission made by Mr Broach that, with all due protections and considerations for any particular vulnerabilities, you should hear directly from some representative children and young adults during the course of this module.

Not only because it will give reassurance to that group, particularly young adults, who are either care-experienced or have experienced other adverse -- particularly adverse outcomes as a result of the pandemic, but also because of the way in which it will throw light on their experiences in a way which simply cannot have the equivalence if those experiences have been mediated by professional adults, no matter how well meaning they may be.

My Lady, the safeguarding risks for children living in institutional settings are widely recognised and have been documented throughout a series of independent inquiries and investigations from the 1960s right through until the Independent Inquiry Into Child Sexual Abuse, and they are, if I can put it this way, the most acutely vulnerable of an already extremely vulnerable group of children who have been removed from their

weakened 65 protections for children in care or looked after or about to be placed for adoption.

One of the judges considering this matter, Mrs Justice Lieven, said this:

"I agree with the claimant, Article 39, that these are not bureaucratic provisions that are a 'burden' and, as such, can be set aside relatively lightly. Regular visits to children in care, oversight by more senior officers over decision making and provision for independent scrutiny are critical safeguards to protect deeply vulnerable children in a field where errors happen with sad frequency and the consequences can be devastating."

So Article 39 seeks to understand the decision-making process for the deletion and dilution of those safeguards and what other safeguards might have been put into place or were put into place or were not. Who decided? What risk assessments were made? What children's rights impact assessment was conducted? Why was the Children's Commissioner for England not consulted? What was the role of the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, and why was every single change to the statutory scheme a diminution of protection, with no strengthening of any legal duty towards vulnerable children and young people?

My Lady, we filed a short paper to say what other areas of key lines of enquiry we'd like to have considered, and one of them, of course, is the position, the terrible position, of children in custody, and the normalisation of solitary confinement as a way of dealing with them.

We also hope that the Inquiry will be able to shine a spotlight on the extent to which central and local government was prepared or had systems in place to serve the interests of and meet the particular needs of children and young people in responding to the pandemic and we began at a low point in the sense that almost half of local authorities with childcare responsibilities were at that point graded as either inadequate or needing improvement by Ofsted, and so not all of the harms suffered can be attributable to Covid alone but to the parlous state that child protection was in to begin with.

But children living in institutional settings, their isolation and the risk posed to them is perhaps the most acute of any risk that was posed during this pandemic.

Did the government know how they were being affected by the restrictions put in place and by the coronavirus itself? Who was championing their interests within government? Why was the voice of the Children's

reassurance from Ms Dobbin in her opening remarks and we say no more about it.

I turn instead to what is our second submission on scope. It is that this module should include within its scope the voice, experience of and impact on education staff, including teachers, support staff and school leaders. Our submission is that doing so not only acknowledges the challenges faced by such staff, but crucially is a necessary part of improving outcomes in education for children and young people in the next pandemic, and for that reason must be a matter for this module.

My Lady, in your introductory remarks you indicated in the light of one submission, presumably ours, that this module will examine only the impact on children and young people. You indicated that the impact on adults has been examined to an extent in earlier modules and will be examined in other modules.

As helpful as it is to have such a straightforward indication of your view, my Lady, I must address it, and it is useful to know where I need to focus my submissions

But first, my Lady, some clarity as to what it is we seek. We do not seek to turn this module into anything other than a module focused on children and young

Commissioner not being heard in the corridors of Whitehall? To what extent were the needs and rights of children and young people, including those directly in the care of the state, or in the custody of the state, proactively considered and attended to as government began to plan for a post-Covid recovery?

My Lady, unless I can assist you any further. **LADY HALLETT:** No, thank you very much for your help, Ms Cover, I'm very grateful.

Right, next it's Mr Jacobs.

Submissions on behalf of the Trades Union Congress by MR JACOBS

MR JACOBS: Good afternoon, my Lady, these are the submissions of the Trades Union Congress. They are made on behalf of the TUC and its affiliated unions, and in particular the very many staff across education that those unions represent.

I am instructed by Thompsons Solicitors and appear with Ms Rubv Peacock.

The primary issue that we address is the scope of this module. Our first submission on scope, as made in writing, was really to seek reassurance that this module will examine rigorously the full breadth of issues relating to central government decision-making in education. We are grateful to have received that

people. Nothing I submit necessitates a wholesale or fundamental shift in the module's focus. Nothing I submit need diminish the extent to which this module will hear about and focus on the impact on children. It is simply to say that in examining issues relating to education, one of the myriad of issues within this module should be the position of and impact on education staff. I will come on in a moment to a bit more detail as to why.

Second, if, as Counsel to the Inquiry indicates, this module is to hear evidence as to the reality of government decision-making on the running of schools, then when it comes to it, the difference between what the Trades Union Congress seeks and what the Inquiry envisages may not really be that far apart. The reality of government decision-making would presumably include the challenges faced by education staff in implementing those decisions.

In a sense that provides some reassurance. Equally, however, if the Inquiry is to hear evidence as to the practical consequences of implementing decisions in schools, it is unclear to us why impact on staff and, by extension, how that impact affects outcomes for children, is so clearly disavowed by the Inquiry. It appears to us to be rather like refusing to accept the

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final piece of the jigsaw.

Third, my Lady, is to say a little more as to why considering the position of and impact on staff is a necessary part of achieving what this module sets out to achieve

Educators are integral to education and to the wellbeing of children. They are not a workforce whose interests need to be put to one side so that the interests of children can come to the fore. Ultimately, an effective response in education is a response which supports both children and staff and the interests of each needs to be considered.

By way of example, this module must consider the issue of NPIs, non-pharmaceutical interventions, within schools, but those NPIs must account for the safety of those at places of education as a whole and, therefore, the impact on both children and staff. It is noted, for example, that Every Story Matters is looking at the impact on children of a number of NPIs such as masks. However, impact on staff also needs to be considered. Consider a teacher or teaching assistant with elderly or clinically vulnerable relatives working in close proximity to students with no masks and in a poorly ventilated classroom. The interests of those students will quite properly be an important and primary

profession.

The resilience of the profession in terms of having sufficient numbers of adequately trained, experienced staff working in an environment in which they can thrive is central to having the capacity to meet the exceptional needs of children in a pandemic in creative and demanding ways.

The NEU's State of Education surveys in the last three years revealed a trend of worsening mental health issues in pupils after the pandemic. That places additional demand on already stretched teaching support resources and causing children to lose out on the individual support they require. These issues do not affect children in isolation: there are evident knock-on effects for staff in terms of workload, but that contributes to workforce shortages. Identifying the problem for staff and resolving it is the first step to enabling those staff to support children.

At its heart, the approach of the Inquiry, we say respectfully, is to adopt a false premise that the interests of pupils attending education and the interests of staff providing that education can be separated, but in truth we say they are interdependent.

Ultimately, a series of findings and recommendations properly centred on the interests of children but at the

consideration, but the interests of the teacher and assistant also cannot be excluded. As Mr Wagner says on behalf of Clinically Vulnerable Families, it is part of the balancing exercise.

Another example is that restricting school attendance must, in addition to taking account of the impact on children, also consider the impact on staff. Such decisions cannot exclude the additional risks faced by staff members and those with whom they live. Similarly, if education staff are to remain in schools to supervise and educate the children of key workers and vulnerable children, consideration must be given to how this work is allocated, considering vulnerabilities of staff or persons in their households.

Getting these matters wrong diminishes the workforce and affects educators and children alike. Again, the impact on children may well have a particular importance, but the interests of staff are intertwined.

There are numerous examples, my Lady. One fundamentally important one is of the resilience of the profession, both going into the pandemic and coming out of it. Underlying the effectiveness of education during and in the aftermath of a pandemic is the resilience of schools, including both the quality and capacity of its building and resources and also the resilience of the

exclusion of the interests of and impact on staff will be fundamentally flawed.

That is our third point, my Lady, and it really amounts to saying this: considering the position of educators will not in some way weaken this module or detract from what it achieves for children and young people. Quite the opposite. It will enhance it.

Fourth, I address the suggestion that the impact on adults has been considered already to a point and will be considered in future modules. My Lady, we have had the privilege of being core participants in those modules that have proceeded to substantive hearing and there has not been any significant focus on the position of education staff. Insofar as they might be some consideration in an as yet unidentified future module, we are concerned. As I have sought to set out, insofar as decision-making in education is concerned, these issues are entwined. Insofar as recommendations are concerned to change the provision of education in a future pandemic, the position of children and young people and on education staff must be considered together, and it is not effective, it appears to us, to hive off education staff-related issues to a future module.

Just by way of one example, it would not be 96

effective to consider the efficacy of the policies on face coverings in schools only so far as children and young people were impacted in Module 8 before turning in a later module to the same issue again with a focus on its impact in silo upon education staff.

Fifthly, my Lady, and finally on this scope point, including the impact of education staff in this module is consistent with and appropriately respects the sacrifice of education staff in the pandemic. Whether referred to as "school closures" or "restrictions on attendance", the fact is that schools remained open to our most vulnerable and the children of key workers. In those frightening first weeks, education staff were also key workers who continued to attend their place of work. They did so in an environment that was fraught with difficulty when it came to wearing any PPE, let alone adequate PPE. They did so in environments often wholly unsuited to basic non-pharmaceutical interventions such as ventilation and social distancing. They did so with some who, by reason of age or vulnerability, would not understand the concept of social distancing nor the potential impact of failing to observe it. In later waves, the so-called closures actually saw very significant numbers of children and young people in education settings.

contribution of those staff during this challenging time is not overlooked, and we say, my Lady, that that is correct.

We do acknowledge, in a sense gratefully, the remark made in opening by Counsel to the Inquiry that the exclusion of the impact for staff is not intended to and does not minimise the role that any of those professionals who continued to educate, care for and protect children had during the pandemic. The reality, however, is that excluding impact on staff from the sole module that will hear orally from the Secretary of State for Education does minimise their role and importance, and that, my Lady, is the problem.

That is what we say as to scope. We know, my Lady, you will consider it carefully, and I do repeat the point I started with. Though this point is to my clients a very, very important one, what the Trades Union Congress and its unions seek and what the Inquiry envisages may not be terribly far apart.

My Lady, we touch briefly on the preliminary and final hearing. In respect of the preliminary hearing, we urge the Inquiry to hold it earlier than June 2025, on the basis that, by that time, potentially no more than three months prior to the commencement of the substantive hearings, the opportunity for significant

The challenges for staff were broad. They were told on little or virtually no notice that they were to educate in schools, then at home. They were turned into remote educators in a wholly unprecedented way. They were asked to assess and grade in a similarly unprecedented way. They were asked to marshal vast groups of students in giant bubbles. They were turned into sites of mass testing. They were a profession already under strain meeting these challenges and seeking to meet the needs of a population of pupils with an increasing level of need.

In other modules, such as those concerned with healthcare and social care, the position of those who provide vital services forms an important part of the consideration of the Inquiry, and we say it is difficult to understand why education and education staff ought to be singled out for a different approach.

In its written submission, the Department for Education says it is important to acknowledge and pay tribute to the enormous efforts made by staff on the ground in all education settings who worked in immensely challenging circumstances with dedication and often bravery to seek to mitigate the impacts on children and young people. Further, the Department for Education suggests that it is important that the commitment and

influence on the direction of the module will be narrow.

As to the substantive hearings, it has been indicated today that this module will last for four weeks. My Lady, speed and efficiency is important for all manner of reasons, and we have impressed on you the importance of other modules as well as this, and we are conscious of that.

However, there is also a certain reality to the breadth and importance of the issues in this module which we say renders four weeks problematic. The issues in education alone are numerous and significant: restrictions on attendance, the various NPIs within schools, the chaos of exams, the challenges of remote learning, the challenges in supporting vulnerable children. But that is just education. This module seeks to examine access to healthcare services, access to and engagement with social care services, the impact on those in the criminal justice system, the impact of those in contact with the immigration system, and other issues

My Lady, the border between an ambitious timetable and an unrealistic timetable can sometimes be a fine one. Respectfully, we say it appears to us that four weeks realistically falls on the wrong side as the Inquiry seeks to do justice to the significance and 100

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breadth of the issues in this module. 1 2 My Lady, those are our submissions, thank you. 3 LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much, Mr Jacobs. If I may say 4 so, you coped deftly with my attempt to head you off at 5 the pass and you made some excellent points that I will 6 consider with Counsel to the Inquiry. Thank you very 7 much. 8 MR JACOBS: Thank you. 9 LADY HALLETT: Mr Gardner, can we fit you in before lunch? 10 MR GARDNER: I should hope so my Lady. 15 minutes, I'm sure 11 I can work to. 12 LADY HALLETT: Thank you. 13 Submissions on behalf of the Children's Commissioner for 14 Wales by MR GARDNER 15

MR GARDNER: I'm grateful my Lady.

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I represent the Children's Commissioner for Wales. The commissioner thanks the Inquiry for allocating her core participant status in this important module considering the impact of Covid-19 on children and young people across the UK.

The commissioner considers and hopes that she and her office can assist in understanding the impact and challenges brought by Covid-19 for children and young people in Wales, some will be similar across the four nations, others, of course, will be unique to Wales.

country of the UK to establish the post of Children's Commissioner.

The Children's Commissioner for Wales is a national human rights institution, compliant with the Paris principles. Independence from government has always been a key tenet of the office's role.

During the pandemic, whilst the working relationship between the commissioner's office and the Welsh Government altered, the Paris principles, particularly around independence, remained an important aspect for the commissioner to maintain in scrutinising and holding the Welsh Government to account. The urgent nature of decision-making in the pandemic necessitated that the commissioner's office worked closely alongside the Welsh Government to discharge this responsibility and hold the Welsh Government to account on behalf of children and young people across Wales.

In practice, whilst not a decision-maker, this meant that the commissioner's office was asked to comment on draft guidance and public messaging at very short notice throughout the pandemic.

My Lady, in Module 2B the Inquiry sat in Cardiff and heard evidence on decision-making and political governance in Wales. As such, this Inquiry will already have some appreciation for the difficulties and problems 103

The commissioner anticipates and hopes that the Inquiry will also benefit from the learning and experience of the commissioner on legislation, guidance and practice which Wales has in place to protect the rights of children and young people.

The Inquiry in this module may wish to consider whether these arrangements, had they been followed more carefully or gone further, would have provided greater protections to children and young people and minimise the harm they experienced. In similar terms to the Commissioner for Northern Ireland in his written submissions, the Commissioner for Wales strongly believes that children's rights need to be more effectively embedded at the heart of governmental decision-making and that, when they are, the negative impact on the lives of children and young people will be greatly reduced.

My Lady, it may assist the Inquiry and indeed those watching the Inquiry if the role of the commissioner is briefly explained. The office of the Children's Commissioner for Wales was established by the Care Standards Act 2000 following the Waterhouse Inquiry. This judge-led Inquiry concluded that children in Wales needed an independent champion to ensure that their rights are respected and upheld. Wales was the first

which came with the pandemic for the children of Wales.

In submissions in Module 2B, the commissioner drew together some key themes and issues, which the commissioner submits may assist the Inquiry in the current module. To assist in this preliminary hearing I intend to give just a summary of those themes and issues.

My Lady the pandemic had an immediate impact on all children and young people. Inequalities caused by race, poverty and disability in children also became more pronounced. There is a longer term continuing adverse impact on children's confidence, school attendance and mental health since the pandemic.

School closures had a significant detrimental impact on children. The impact included severe impairment to learning, adverse impact on those with additional learning needs, the digital gap, exacerbating socioeconomic inequality, loss of social engagement, the impact on mental wellbeing, and the loss of the protective environment of the school for vulnerable children.

Children reported that they were left feeling lonely and isolated by the restrictions which were put in place. The commissioner knows this because, importantly, the commissioner asked children by

conducting surveys and engagement events during the pandemic. The commissioner did her best to ensure their voices were heard by feeding the findings directly to the Welsh Government in real time to inform decisions.

Having opportunities to express views and have their views valued is identified by young people as being beneficial for mental wellbeing and can lead to more effective policy responses.

Children also had a strong sense of fairness. They reported that they thought it was fair there were measures being put in place to protect older people but there was also a sense of injustice linked to the appearance of economic necessities, such as opening businesses and hospitality being given priority over their long-term educational and social needs.

The commissioner considers that the social partnership model in Wales and the willingness of the Welsh Government to listen and learn should be commended. Further, the commissioner commends to the Inquiry the model of the Shadow Social Partnership Council which allowed ministers, officials and the Chief Medical Officer for Wales to explain the rules and latest evidence and major decisions which were to be announced and allow those stakeholders present to raise issues and concerns.

are the initial decision to close schools, when considering support for children with additional learning needs, relating to face masks in schools and on the impact of self-isolation on children.

The commissioner is concerned that the Welsh Government failed to fully and properly acknowledge the rights of children under the UNCRC or the efficacy of CRIAs or to undertake its CRIAs to the detriment of the children of Wales during the pandemic.

When the decision to close schools in Wales was taken on 18 March 2020 by the Welsh ministers, it does not appear that consideration was given to the Rights of the Child Measure 2011 or the UNCRC, or the educational, developmental and emotional harms which would inevitably impact children by being unable to attend school, or the mitigating measures which could be put in place to support children. Shockingly, the commissioner was not consulted in that decision.

The decision to close schools in Wales was taken without legal advice. It is presumably due to that lack of legal advice that the decision to close schools was taken by the Welsh Government when, in the absence of the Coronavirus Act 2020 at that time, it did not have the power to do so. The lack of legal advice also denied the then education minister the opportunity to be

My Lady, in Wales there is an important duty on the Welsh ministers under the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011. That duty is to have due regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, or UNCRC, in exercising its functions. This requires consideration of the best interests of children as a primary consideration, as well as 41 other duties to children. This is landmark legislation which Julie Morgan MS in her foreword to the Children's Rights Scheme 2021 described as follows:

"Wales is a country where children's rights are a fundamental entitlement and not an optional extra. We have led the way in children's right by enshrining them in law."

The Children's Rights Scheme 2021 drafted by the Welsh Government as required by the 2011 measure requires, amongst other matters, that the Welsh Government undertake children's rights impact assessments, or CRIA, to understand the social, economic, cultural and environmental effects of decisions on children.

However, CRIA in practice during the pandemic were either not completed or completed late and after the decision had already been taken. For some major decisions, no CRIA was completed at the time. Examples

reminded of her legal duties to children under the 2011 measure.

It appears that there was no, or at least no adequate, contingency planning relating to school closures taking place in Wales in the months of January and February 2020. If proper contingency planning had been undertaken at the time with the rights and needs of children at the centre of that planning, school closures may have been shorter or even avoided. They may have been implemented in a smoother way, with legal advice and putting in place support for children and young people, which they would need for a long period of time away from school.

The commissioner raised concerns about the use of face coverings in the classroom in the foundation phase of return to school and the concerns over the impact on language development for children with hearing loss, for those with speech and language difficulties, and those whose first language is not Welsh or English and also brought the lack of clarity on when face coverings should be used in Welsh Government's operational guidance to the attention of the Welsh Government.

My Lady, guidance regarding residential homes tended to be generic as opposed to age specific and therefore failed to take account of the differing risk profile of

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small two to four-bed residential children's homes for a child in a local authority in Wales, as compared to, for example, a large residential or nursing home for the elderly, or those with complex or multiple needs or disabilities

During the pandemic, public facing guidance was issued from a number of different sources, including the UK Government and both the Welsh Government and Public Health Wales. There were increased areas where the jagged edge of devolution caused practical difficulties when implementing the new legislation and guidance in Wales

This often led to children and young people, their parents and guardians, and even the commissioner, being confused as to which guidance applied. One sector in which this became particularly apparent was youth justice, specifically youth custody settings. Youth justice is not a devolved area, whereas public health is a devolved area.

My Lady, in conclusion, this module will no doubt highlight the issues which children and young people across the UK encountered during Covid-19 and importantly the continuing impact. That impact was sharply felt by children and young people in Wales where high poverty rates, large rural areas with stretched 109

mitigated?

Fourthly, had those protections been stronger, such as by directing co-operation of the UNCRC in similar terms to the Human Rights Act 1998, would the impact on children and young people across the UK have been mitigated?

The commissioner takes the preliminary view that the due regard duties were not fully and properly followed in Wales and, had they been, then the impact of the pandemic on children and young people would very likely have been mitigated.

Further, the commissioner takes the preliminary view that, if those duties were stronger and directly enforceable, then the impact of the pandemic on children and young people would very likely have been mitigated.

My Lady, the commissioner thanks the Inquiry for allowing her involvement as a core participant in this module and hopes her submissions and assistance help the Inquiry to make recommendations for better decision-making and more support for children and young people in the future.

Unless I can assist the Inquiry further.

LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much for your help, Mr Gardner.

Right, we'll break now. I'm afraid because we've so

services, where large numbers of children speak Welsh, not English, as a first language or attend a Welsh medium school, these all exacerbated that impact.

Whilst the commissioner does commend the work of the Welsh Government in a number of ways in which it operated during the pandemic, there were no doubt a number of failings in preparedness and process which cost children and young people dearly. There was also a failure to consider the rights of children and young people, which acted to their detriment.

My Lady, the commissioner encourages the Inquiry to consider the protection of children's rights across the UK. At present, the UNCRC rights of children are enshrined in law in the 2011 measure in Wales. This creates a due regard duty which the Welsh Government must observe but this leads to some important follow-on questions which the Inquiry may wish to consider.

Firstly, were the due regard duties properly adhered to in Wales?

Secondly, had the due regard duties been properly adhered to in Wales, would the impact on children and young people in Wales have been mitigated?

Thirdly, had similar due regard duties applied and been adhered to across the UK, would the impact on children and young people across the UK have been

much to get through and I have to finish by 3.00 this
 afternoon, I will have to shorten people's lunches,
 I'm sorry. I shall return at 1.40.

4 (12.55 pm)

(A short break)

6 (1.40 pm)

7 LADY HALLETT: Right, Ms McGurk.

Submissions on behalf of the Northern Ireland Commissioner
 for Children and Young People by MS McGURK

10 LADY HALLETT: I see your name up on the screen. Yes, got11 you.

12 MS McGURK: Thank you.

Good afternoon, my Lady. Thank you, your Ladyship, for the opportunity to address this Inquiry. We wish to express our graduate attitude to Counsel to the Inquiry for the further detail and clarity set out this morning in relation to this module.

I speak on behalf of Chris Quinn, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and I'm assisted by my colleague, Peter McGettrick, also in attendance by link today.

The commissioner welcomes this module of the Inquiry dedicated to children and the decision of her Ladyship to grant his application for core participant status.

As you will be aware, we have provided our written

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submissions to the Inquiry. Today in these oral submissions, I intend to speak briefly about the commissioner and his office, that I will hereinafter refer to as NICCY, to secondly describe NICCY's understanding of the experiences and impact of the pandemic on children, and finally to set out some of the suggestions and recommendations which the commissioner feels would be beneficial for children in Northern Ireland in response to future emergency situations.

As a brief introduction, NICCY was established by the Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 with the principal aim to safeguard and promote the rights and best interests of children and young people in Northern Ireland. The commissioner's paramount consideration in the exercise of its functions must be the rights of children and young people, having regard in particular to their ascertainable wishes and feelings and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We have included the statutory duties and powers of the commissioner in our written submissions and I do not intend to go through these today for the sake of being brief.

The commissioner's remit is infants, all children and young people in Northern Ireland, up to the age of

further in those areas and identified further areas that, in the commissioner's view, he sees as deserving of consideration distinct from the areas already identified. I intend a take a little time to highlight the commissioner's position on the impact of the pandemic on children, which is recognised as different to adults as it impacted upon their very many, in some cases from a very early age.

The overall impact of the pandemic has had a profound effect on the rights and wellbeing of children across Northern Ireland. It disrupted their education, social lives and access to essential services, while also exacerbating existing inequalities.

Some children have lost their lives to Covid-19, have experienced the loss of family members or friends, have physical or mental health issues as a result of the pandemic, or have vulnerabilities including within their family, all of which continue to have a significant ongoing impact on their day-to-day lives and development.

In relation to pandemic planning, earlier identified by the Inquiry, Northern Ireland entered the Covid-19 pandemic with a newly formed government, following nearly three years without one. The lack of forward and contingency planning was evident, with children largely 18 and up to the age of 21 where they are care experienced or a have a disability. In this submission, I will refer to them as "children" throughout.

During the specified period all of the work of NICCY related to the impact of Covid-19 on children or was impacted by Covid-19. The current commissioner took up post in September 2023 and, in addition to his involvement in this Inquiry, the outgoing commissioner, Koulla Yiasouma, has indicated her willingness to work with our office to assist the Inquiry and the children and young people of Northern Ireland.

The impact of the pandemic still continues to highly influence the work of the office, due to the disruptions and hardships children experienced and the ongoing impact of that in their lives. NICCY was concerned, especially in the early stages of the pandemic, that some government departments failed to proactively consult NICCY and remains concerned that the lessons of the pandemic have not been learned for children.

The commissioner welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry to enable better outcomes for children in the future.

NICCY has considered the provisional scope of the Inquiry and welcomes consideration of those areas identified. In our written submissions we have expanded 114

overlooked in pandemic planning. It's imperative that we learn from this and develop robust plans for future emergencies that prioritise the needs and the rights of children. This includes safeguarding their education, their health and mental health, as well as their overall wellbeing. NICCY urges the development of comprehensive plans for future pandemics, ensuring all societal stakeholders, including children, are meaningfully considered and involved.

In relation to education, the closure of schools and the shift to remote learning posed significant challenges, particularly fro children from disadvantaged backgrounds or children with special educational needs. The digital divide, lack of access to resources and varied home environments led to disparities in educational outcomes. The impact on education, including the impact and identification of children with special educational needs and school attendance, following the re-opening of schools and the lack of adequate support in relation to these, remains a significant concern. Thousands of children in Northern Ireland remain absent from school today and there is insufficient understanding of the challenges they are facing or supports in place to help them back to school.

The commissioner welcomes that health, wellbeing and access to healthcare are included within the scope of this module. Difficulties in accessing services and provision of care and support were already apparent pre-pandemic and especially for children with disabilities and vulnerabilities.

Rights of the Child.

The healthcare system was experiencing significant delays, including increasing waiting times, and these problems were exacerbated by the pandemic. We witnessed a rise in mental health issues among children, including anxiety, depression and feelings of isolation, and the reduction in face-to-face support services compounded these issues.

Several cohorts of children requiring access to social care and safeguarding, including but not limited to children in care, children in need, young carers and children subject to immigration control, reported heightened feelings of isolation and stress. The lack of social activities and reduced face-to-face interactions with key professionals, such as social workers and legal representatives were particularly troubling.

In our view, this is an important area for the Inquiry to consider. NICCY welcomes that children impacted by the immigration system and newcomer children

To move on to the matter of participation, one of the critical lessons from the pandemic is the need for meaningful consultation with children and young people. Their voices were often overlooked in decision-making processes that directly affected their lives. Communications to children and parents were limited, and misinformation caused fear and anxiety. At times messaging created the impression that children were to blame for the spread of Covid and Covid deaths. Future responses must include children in the conversation, ensuring their rights and needs are considered in line with Articles 12 and 13 of the UN Convention on the

NICCY welcomes the Inquiry's efforts to listen to the views of children in this module, through Every Story Matters and through the targeted research project aiming to hear from children. In the Commissioner's view, listening directly to the voice of the children will assist the Inquiry to fully understand the impacts of Covid on this cohort of the population.

In NICCY's submission, we identify that play and recreational activities for children during the pandemic is worthy of distinct consideration by the Inquiry. Children in Northern Ireland, when asked the most difficult aspect of the pandemic, highlighted social

are included in the scope of the Inquiry. Substantial barriers were faced by asylum seeking families in accessing vital resources during this period, including educational provision. The abrupt closure of schools not only disrupted their education but also severely hindered their ability to adjust to a new country and learn a new language during a critical time in their

In relation to justice, how Covid impacted on the administration of justice is, in our submission, an important area for the Inquiry to consider, and we would welcome the examination of the impact upon those children in contact with the courts and the youth justice system.

Although closely linked to justice and youth justice, policing and the policing response to the pandemic is not expressly identified in the scope of Module 8, and this is an area that, in our submission, would merit consideration by the Inquiry.

As an example, one of the police responses to the pandemic in Northern Ireland was to introduce the use of spit and bite guards to include those under the age of 18. NICCY has consistently raised concerns about the introduction of spit and bite guards and their continued use as a tactical option for police today on children.

isolation as one of the hardest parts. The reduction of play, recreational activities and leisure activities have had a devastating impact on many children's physical and mental health as well as their emotional wellbeing. In the Commissioner's view, greater priority needs to be given to such activities inany future pandemic.

In addition, it's the position of the commissioner that the impact of the children in poverty is worth distinct consideration. Of the 450,000 children in Northern Ireland as of 2022, one in four of these children live in poverty with two-thirds of these living in working households. The impact and failure to adequately address poverty, including for children prior to the pandemic, and given adequate consideration in pandemic planning and in decision-making, exacerbated the impact felt by children in poverty.

We must give credit for the allocation of the £20 weekly top-up to the Universal Credit allowance that was awarded in 2020, but that unfortunately ended in October 2021.

In Northern Ireland we await the finalisation of a poverty strategy with a key focus on children and young people with government working to agree a draft by March 2025. We note that the draft programme for

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government released yesterday does not prioritise action to tackle child poverty, nor indeed poverty at all. In our view, it's vital that the Executive prioritises lifting children out of poverty and allocating resources in order to do so. In our submission to the Inquiry, this would improve the lives and outcomes for children and young people going forward and would reduce the impact on them in any future health emergency. 10 In closing we would urge the Inquiry to consider 11 recommending specific policy changes that address 12 13 There should be a commitment across government 14

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problems that were compounded further by the pandemic. departments and agencies in Northern Ireland that co-operation that is required in accordance with the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 to address child poverty, ensuring universal access to education resources, expand child health and social care services and implement a child element to emergency planning.

NICCY's report on the pandemic and the impact of the pandemic identified that children's rights were not sufficiently embedded in government, and this impacted decision-making and had a direct and negative impact on children during the pandemic. We urge this Inquiry to

voices and rights of children.

We are very grateful to the Inquiry for the opportunity to make these oral submissions, and to facilitate us attending hybridly, and we look forward to assisting the Inquiry in any way that it requests as the module progresses.

Unless there is anything further, your Ladyship. LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much indeed, Ms McGurk. At the beginning I thought the line was going to be dodgy, but in fact I heard everything you had to say. Thank you very much indeed.

12 MS McGURK: Thank you very much.

LADY HALLETT: Ms Masood. 13

> Submissions on behalf of the Department for Education by MS MASOOD

MS MASOOD: My Lady, thank you and good afternoon.

I represent the Department for Education, who I will refer to by the acronym DfE. The DfE is grateful for the opportunity to participate in Module 8 and to make these brief oral submissions.

The DfE recognises that as the government department responsible for children's services and education, many of the areas listed in the provisional outline of scope either fall directly within or touch upon matters for which DfE is responsible.

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consider recommending that children's rights be embedded at the heart of government, including through incorporation of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic law and the mandatory completion of child rights impact assessments in relation to governmental decision and policymaking.

It was and continues to be the responsibility of government departments and agencies to uphold the rights of children in all circumstances, ensuring that they are protected, supported, informed, listened to, empowered, and even at times of crisis.

The findings of this Inquiry will be crucial in our view in shaping a better future for children and children in Northern Ireland. We respectfully suggest that the Inquiry consider incorporating recommendations specific to Northern Ireland given the distinct social, political, educational, cultural, health and social care contexts that differ from other jurisdictions, and indeed the variation in response to the pandemic in Northern Ireland.

NICCY remains committed to safeguarding and promoting the rights and best interests of children in Northern Ireland and to working towards children's rights being embedded at the heart of government to ensure that decision-making takes into consideration the

The DfE is acutely conscious of the impact that the pandemic and associated measures had and continue to have on children and young people, especially those who are most vulnerable. The policy and operational challenges that the pandemic presented to the DfE and the services for which it is responsible were considerable.

The DfE notes the submissions made by some of the other core participants in respect of decision-making during the pandemic. This of course is not the time to address those submissions, suffice it to say that it is right that Module 8 should examine both the experiences of and impact on individuals as well as the decisions that were taken by the DfE and by others in the areas identified by the provisional outline of scope. The DfE recognises the importance of that scrutiny.

Throughout the pandemic, and following it, DfE has sought to identify and learn lessons to improve our approaches and deliver the best outcomes for children and learners.

The DfE accepts and acknowledges that there will be further important and valuable lessons to be learnt in relation to aspects of the response that could have been handled better. The DfE is committed to providing its full co-operation and support to the Inquiry to allow

for its investigation to take place.

Finally, we hope the Inquiry will take note of the point of terminology raised in the DfE's written submissions. This morning you have heard on this point the submissions made on behalf of the children's rights organisations. The DfE respectfully maintains and asks that the term "attendance restrictions" is adopted in place of "school closures". This is in the interests of accuracy as schools and other education settings were not closed but remained open to vulnerable children and children of critical workers throughout the pandemic, and teachers and other staff continued to work in those settings as well as providing remote education.

It is also in the interests of recognising the important contribution made by all staff working in education settings in extremely challenging circumstances to seek to mitigate the impacts on children and young people. That contribution has already been compellingly addressed by the Trades Union Congress in their submissions.

My Lady, thank you.

LADY HALLETT: Ms Masood, I'll take note, but I'm afraid I'm going to take some persuading not to use an expression that everybody understands. "School closures for the majority of schoolchildren", I think

already been alluded to, my Lady, by Mr Gardner for the Children's Commissioner for Wales, but in our submission it also has wider significance across Wales and indeed across the rest of the UK, where the language that children and young people speak at home differs from the language which would have been used to educate them, had they been going to schools and other educational settings. So we hope to work with the Inquiry team on that particular issue, my Lady.

That discrete point aside, the Welsh Government has three main aims in making these brief submissions. The first, my Lady, is to acknowledge the significant and the ongoing impact that the pandemic has had on children and young people in Wales across very many different areas of their lives. My Lady, these impacts have been brought to life vividly this morning by Counsel to the Inquiry and again by other core participants.

The Welsh Government was very glad to note from Ms Dobbin KC's submissions this morning that the Children and Young People's Voices research will hear from children across different geographic areas in the UK and we hope, therefore, my Lady, that you will hear from the voices of Welsh children as part of that.

My Lady, the second aim is simply to reaffirm the Welsh Government's full commitment to the Inquiry, its

everybody knows what we're talking about, but
I appreciate you were instructed to make that
submission. Thank you very much.

4 MS MASOOD: Thank you.

LADY HALLETT: Thank you for your help.

Ms Bicarregui. Sorry, I hope I pronounced it correctly.

Submissions on behalf of the Welsh Government by

MS BICARREGUI

MS BICARREGUI: Yes, thank you, my Lady.

Prynhawn da, my Lady, I make these brief submissions on behalf of the Welsh Government.

My Lady, you have our written submissions which address the provisional scope of this module and the issues raised in the note provided by Counsel to the Inquiry. So, in the interests of time, I'm not going to repeat those. I have one overarching submission, my Lady, and then three main aims for the Welsh Government in making these brief submissions.

The overarching point is in respect of the effect or the impact of the pandemic on young Welsh language learners. You will have noted from our written submissions, my Lady, that we ask you to consider these young learners as a discrete group. Now, obviously, this is of particular significance in Wales, this has

determination to provide the fullest possible co-operation, so that the decisions it took in response to the pandemic, which affected children and young people, can be thoroughly scrutinised. My Lady, there have been many modules, the Welsh Government will continue to work closely with this Inquiry team to disclose all relevant information. We will have in mind what Ms Dobbin KC said about relevant information and not sort of overwhelming the Inquiry with information.

Lastly, my Lady, the third aim is simply to listen to what Counsel to the Inquiry said this morning and to listen to what other core participants have to say, so that we can take all of that into account when we're preparing our advice for you.

We've already taken note, as you would expect, my Lady, to the important points, the wide-ranging points and the preliminary views that were set out in the written submissions of the Children's Commissioner for Wales, and you have had those again summarised this morning by Mr Gardner.

Those are directed to the Welsh Government and we are turning our minds to how we can best provide you with evidence in respect of those, but also we've taken note of and considered the written submissions of the other core participants advocating for particular groups

of children. Again, my Lady, thought is already going into how we can provide you with evidence in respect of those issues, and no doubt the requests for information which we're expecting to be imminent will reflect those concerns as well.

Diolch, my Lady.

LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much indeed.

Right, Dr Montacute, where are you? Right there at the back.

Submissions on behalf of the Sutton Trust by DR MONTACUTE

DR MONTACUTE: Good afternoon, my name is Dr Rebecca

Montacute. I'm head of research and policy at the

Sutton Trust. We're a prominent UK charity conducting
research and advocacy work on issues of educational
inequality and disadvantage.

I would like to start by thanking the Chair for our organisation's inclusion as core participants. The Sutton Trust carried out the earliest and most extensive research on the impacts of the pandemic on the education of young people from lower income homes, and that's what my oral submission will focus on today.

This work has included setting up the COVID Social Mobility and Opportunities, also known as the COSMO study, in collaboration with the UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities and the

further and higher education. These are issues that the Sutton Trust has also researched considerably throughout the pandemic and where we similarly found considerable impacts for children and young people from lower income families

Looking to schools specifically, during periods of school closures, barriers to remote learning, such as a lack of access to a suitable device for learning or having to share a device, lack of a quiet space in the home or lack of support from teachers or parents were all more likely to be experienced by young people from lower social economic backgrounds, and those who experienced those barriers reported working fewer hours during periods of school closure and lockdowns.

While many pupils without suitable devices received eventually support through school and government distribution programmes, we found that over half of those who lacked a device at the beginning of the pandemic had still not received one by the end of the second period of school closures. These issues had an impact on many lower income students throughout the periods of school closures impacting the quality of their education. There were also substantial gaps in the remote learning provided to students from different social economic backgrounds, for example between state

UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies. The COSMO study is a major national youth cohort study examining the short, medium and long-term impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on educational inequality, wellbeing and social mobility.

Given the findings of our research, the Sutton Trust would like to request that alongside the existing categories that are currently included -- for example young carers, those with SEND, those in care and asylum seekers -- that the impacts of the pandemic on the educations and wider outcomes of children from lower income families is also explicitly considered as a category within this section of the Inquiry.

We agree with the point that's been made by other core participants today that, while the Inquiry has stressed the flexibility and broad focus of this module, which we appreciate, we believe that which groups are explicitly named will have an impact throughout on the focus of the Inquiry, and we know from our research that educational experiences differed considerably for young people from different social economic backgrounds during the pandemic.

I will briefly outline some of the evidence on schools specifically but, as discussed throughout today's pre-hearing, there were also considerable impacts throughout early education, as well as in

and private secondary schools, there were large differences in the intensity of remote learning during the first lockdown in 2020, with the private sector much better placed to adapt quickly and with attendance at private schools strongly related to income level. 96% of independent school pupils had live online lessons in the first lockdown, compared to 65% of state school pupils. While state sector provision improved in the second period of school closures in early 2021, inequalities opened up within the state sector. Comprehensive schools with more affluent intakes caught up the most, but students in the schools with the most deprived intakes were comparatively less likely to receive live online lessons in this period.

Even when schools re-opened, inequalities remained with many students missing large amounts of school time even as schools had reopened and, again, this was an issue that we saw was more common for lower occupation status background young people, compared to those from better off families.

Young people from lower income families also experienced considerable challenges at home, many households' financial situation declined during the pandemic but gaps between groups also widened, with 52% of disadvantaged households reporting worse financial 132

it's clear that children from lower income homes health, compared to 34% of other households. 1 1 2 2 Children from lower income families have suffered suffered a disproportionate impact during the pandemic, 3 long-term impacts from the pandemic as well and, while 3 which is why we're requesting they are added to the 4 4 areas to be covered in the module as outlined in government did have some catch-up provision in place, it 5 was nowhere near enough to meet the scale of the 5 paragraph 44. 6 challenge posed by the pandemic on children's learning, 6 We are keen to do all we can do to assist the 7 and particularly those from lower income families. 7 Inquiry to fully examine the impact of the pandemic on 8 As has already been highlighted by others today, the the education of children from lower income homes. 8 9 government's Education Recovery Commissioner, Sir Kevan 9 Those are our submissions, thank you. 10 Collins, resigned due to, in his view, a lack of funding 10 LADY HALLETT: Thank you very much, Dr Montacute. for catch-up efforts. Those from poorer homes were more 11 Right, if I may say so, not only excellent content 11 12 likely to take part in catch-up activities but many 12 in all the submissions, both written and oral, but also, 13 students who would have benefited from these 13 as I said to Mr Broach right at the beginning, excellent 14 interventions were not offered them. 14 time keeping. 15 15 Before the pandemic there was already a considerable So thank you very much everybody. This bodes 16 gap in attainment between students eligible for free 16 extremely well for the progress of this module and 17 school meals and their better-off peers but slow 17 I will consider, with Counsel to the Inquiry, all the 18 progress was being made to closing that attainment gap. 18 submissions made with great care. So thank you all very 19 However, post-pandemic, ten years of progress has been 19 much and I hope you all have as good a weekend as you 20 lost in closing that gap. 20 21 To close, paragraph 23 of the Counsel to the 21 (2.09 pm) 22 Inquiry's note for this hearing points out that the 22 (The hearing concluded) 23 scope should consider the impact upon those children who 23 24 24 stood to suffer disproportionate impact. 25 Given the evidence I've summarised here, I think 25 133 134 1 **INDEX** 1 Submissions on behalf of the Trades Union 90 2 **PAGE** 2 Congress by MR JACOBS 3 Opening Introductory remarks by THE CHAIR 1 3 4 4 Submissions on behalf of the Children's 101 5 5 Statement by LEAD COUNSEL TO THE INQUIRY Commissioner for Wales by MR GARDNER 6 6 7 Submissions on behalf of Children's Rights 36 7 Submissions on behalf of the Northern 112 8 Organisations by MR BROACH 8 Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young 9 9 People by MS McGURK 10 10 Submissions on behalf of Disabled People's 47 Organisations by MS BEATTIE 11 11 Submissions on behalf of the Department for 123 12 Education by MS MASOOD 12 13 Submissions on behalf of Long Covid Kids and 57 13 14 Long Covid Kids Scotland by MS HANNETT KC 14 Submissions on behalf of the Welsh 126 15 15 Government by MS BICARREGUI Submissions on behalf of Clinically 16 16 66 17 Vulnerable Families by MR WAGNER 17 Submissions on behalf of the Sutton Trust 129 18 18 by DR MONTACUTE 19 19 Submissions on behalf of the Coram Group 77 20 by MS KING KC 20 21 21 22 Submissions on behalf of Article 39 83 22 23 by MS COVER 23 24 24 25 25 135 136

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