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**Written Submission for First Preliminary Hearing (6<sup>th</sup> September 2024) of Module 8: UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry**

The Children's Commissioner's office (CCo) welcomes the commencement of Module 8 'Children and Young People' of the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry (the Inquiry) and our designation as a Core Participation. The work of the office over the past four years has demonstrated that children were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, and it is imperative that their voices are heard in this public inquiry.

**Agenda**

The CCo makes no comment on the agenda for the First Preliminary Hearing, and particular welcomes Counsel's Update on the following items:

b. An update from Counsel to the Inquiry including:

iii. The provisional scope of Module 8

viii. Listening to children and young people: Every Story Matters and Children and Young People's Voices

**The provisional scope of Module 8**

The CCo welcomes that the Inquiry aims to fully consider disparities in the impact of the pandemic, and that the scope makes specific reference to the different structures which exist for the provision of education, children's social care and child protection.

The CCo welcomes the inclusion of seldom-heard and particularly vulnerable groups of children and young people, including those in care and care leavers, and children and young people in contact with the criminal justice system.

We reserve further comment on the provisional scope of the Inquiry until this is confirmed.

**Listening to children and young people**

Dame Rachel de Souza began her tenure as Children's Commissioner on 1<sup>st</sup> March 2021, in the middle of pandemic lockdowns and one of the biggest upheavals to public life in living memory. Her work since then has been informed by seven pillars derived from what children told us are their priorities: Better World, Children's Social Care, Community, Family, Education, Health, and Jobs and Skills. Children's lived experience in each of these domains has been fundamentally shaped and changed by the Covid pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, the CCo worked to understand the unique risks being faced by children and young people. Help at Hand is the Children's Commissioner's advice and representation service for children living away from home or otherwise working with children's services, and for care leavers aged 18

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to 25. Following the start of national lockdown, two distinct themes emerged through enquiries to Help at Hand, the CCo's advice and advocacy service:

- The distress caused to children in care by the sudden loss of contact with family; and
- The isolation experienced by young care leavers.

In March 2021, the CCo launched The Big Ask, the largest-ever survey of children, which asked children aged 4 to 17 about their hopes, fears, dreams, lockdown stories and their plans for the future. Of the children who answered the question 'What do you think stops children in England achieving what they want to achieve when they grow up?', 9% spoke about the Covid pandemic and lockdowns. Among the half a million children who responded to the survey, were many of those groups most vulnerable to the impacts of the Covid pandemic:

- 6,000 Looked After Children;
- 13,000 children with a social worker;
- 97,000 children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND);
- 26,000 receiving mental health support;
- 2,200 working with in youth justice services; and
- 6,000 young carers.

Three years later, it is vital that we understand not only how the pandemic impacted children and young people at the time, but that we seek to discern the long-term impacts that it continues to have.