

Witness Name: Centre for Young Lives
Statement No.: 1
Exhibits: JG/01 - JG/46
Dated: 23rd July 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF THE CENTRE FOR YOUNG LIVES

I, Jo Green, on behalf of the Centre for Young Lives, will say as follows: -

1. The Centre for Young Lives, founded by the former Children's Commissioner for England, Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, in February 2024, is an independent think tank and delivery unit working to improve the lives of children, young people, and families across the UK — with a particular focus on those facing the greatest challenges. Our team, which includes two former members of Baroness Longfield's former team at the Children's Commissioner's Office, combines decades of experience in Westminster, Whitehall and beyond with a relentless commitment and drive to breaking down the barriers that hold back some children, and to ensuring that every child and young person can thrive. We use high quality research and evidence to advocate and campaign for innovative solutions and new models that improve the lives of children, young people and their families. The Centre for Young Lives continues some of the work carried out by Baroness Longfield as Children's Commissioner and is a successor to the Commission on Young Lives, a year-long inquiry chaired by Baroness Longfield, which developed a national plan to protect vulnerable teenagers and support them to succeed.
2. This rule 9 request was sent to provide an opportunity to the Centre for Young Lives to provide evidence.

Statement: The impact of the Covid pandemic on children

3. The Centre for Young Lives believes the impact of the Covid pandemic on children and young people, both in the short and longer term, has been substantial. It is important to iterate that many of the problems facing some children and young people now existed before the pandemic, however there is empirical evidence and anecdotal evidence which demonstrates how the pandemic and decisions made that affected children and young people, heightened and worsened some of the challenges facing many young people. Vulnerable and disadvantaged children in particular were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic compared to their more affluent peers.
4. The initial school closures were necessary but the choice to keep schools closed for most children from March 2020 to September 2020, while then opening other parts of society, was a significant error and illustrated that children's needs and interests were not at the forefront of the government's response to the pandemic.
5. Playgrounds and other areas where children could play or take part in sport were closed for too long, and it was a mistake to enforce a "rule of six" on children, denying them the opportunities to spend time with other children or family members.
6. Since the end of the pandemic, there has been a rise in some vulnerabilities among children and young people. For example, the number of children with SEN has increased by 39% since 2018, where there were just under 1.3 million children with SEN [JG/01 - [INQ000649613](#)]. Participation in extracurricular activities decreased from 46% pre-pandemic to 37% post-pandemic [JG/02 - [INQ000649620](#)]. In four years since the pandemic (April 2020 to April 2024), there has been a 340% increase in the number of children waiting for an autism assessment [JG/03 - [INQ000649647](#)]. The proportion of young people who are NEET has increased from 1 in 10 in 2021 to almost 1 in 7 in 2025 [JG/04 - [INQ000649651](#)].
7. The Covid pandemic and the Government's response to it, had a disproportionate impact on many children, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. The Government did not appear to prioritise the risks to the wellbeing of children and young people, and their strategy for tackling the impact of the pandemic and stopping its spread failed to predict or account for the secondary impacts on many children. Many children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, children in need, children

with social workers, disadvantaged children, children with existing mental health problems, and children at risk of exploitation or harm suffered disproportionately due to the lockdowns and other subsequent decisions.

8. The overarching mistake made during the Government's response to pandemic was a failure to consider the impact of policies on children, and a failure to listen to, consult with or act upon the advice of professionals working with children, or to hear from children themselves on the impact of policy decisions. This failure was not unique to the pandemic – there has been too little emphasis on the impact of government policies and decisions on children, and no attempt to consult with children about their experiences or views before major decisions are made. Too often children have been an afterthought instead of a priority.

The impact on children's education

9. The impacts of a child not reaching a good level of development can be long lasting and wide reaching and there has been a rise in the period since the pandemic. Good academic achievement, even in a child's first few years, lays the foundation for later academic success, employment opportunities and psychosocial outcomes [JG/05 – INQ000649629]. Over half of the children who are not school ready perform below expected in their Key Stage 1 reading assessment, compared to only 6% of children who were considered school ready performing below expected [JG/05 – INQ000649629]. There is some evidence to suggest there was a downward trend in childhood motor skill proficiency – particularly as a result of the pandemic [JG/06 - INQ000649654].
10. Children who are not school ready are nearly 2.5 times as likely to be persistently absent from school. This increases to three times when considering persistent absence over several academic years. Children starting school 'not school ready' are found to be three times as likely to be Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) at 16-17 [JG07 - INQ000649646].
11. Since 2021/22, the proportion of children reaching a Good Level of Development before they begin school has increased. In 2023/24, 32.3% of children did not achieve a Good Level of Development. In 2021/22, 34.8% of children did not achieve a Good Level of Development [JG/08 - INQ000649634]. However, when compared to pre-pandemic levels, a smaller proportion of children are achieving a Good Level of

Development. In 2018/2019, 28.2% of children did not achieve a Good Level of Development. Before 2018/19, children achieving a Good Level of Development had been steadily rising since 2012/13 [JG/09 - INQ000649633].

12. A report published in 2022 revealed a 13-percentage point difference between the proportion of children being school ready before and after the pandemic, highlighting the impact of the pandemic on the development of children under five [JG/10 - INQ000588447]. Another study found that children aged 4-7 years old were ten percentage points more likely to have seen their social and emotional development worsen when compared to 12- to 15-year-olds during the pandemic [JG/11 - INQ000649641].
13. Families in the North are more likely to take up the two-year old early entitlement offer, available to 40% of the most disadvantaged two-year olds. Seventy-four percent of families are taking up the offer compared to 67% in the South of England. Over the course of the pandemic, take-up of the early entitlement offer declined significantly. By 2021, uptake had declined across England, with only 68% of two-year olds in the North of England, and 58% in the South of England, accessing early education [JG/12 - INQ000649622].
14. Following the pandemic, early education uptake fell among three to four-year-olds. By 2021, uptake of early education in the North of England stood at 93% (a decrease of three percentage points from 2020) and 88% in the South of England (a decrease of four percentage points). During the first lockdown period, only 7% of children who had previously attended formal early education and childcare services continued to do so [JG/12 - INQ000649622].
15. Disadvantaged pupils have lower attainment than other pupils, and results from the Key Stage 1, 2 and 4 tests taken in 2022 showed that this disadvantage gap had grown [JG/13 - INQ000649645]. The disadvantage gap index at the end of primary school was 3.23 in 2022, compared with 2.90 in 2018 [JG/13 - INQ000649645].
16. In March 2022, a study by the Education Endowment Foundation [JG/14 - INQ000236977] on the impact of Covid-19 on pupil attainment set out how the disruption caused by the pandemic had impacted the attainment of all pupils, but particularly the most disadvantaged. This research showed that COVID-19-related

disruptions worsened educational inequalities and that the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers had grown since the onset of the pandemic.

17. For example, in a survey conducted across all Bradford schools, teachers expressed concern over the disproportionate effect of COVID-19 on vulnerable children and children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities. Key issues included the lack of access to specialist services such as children's social services, Speech and Language Therapy, and counselling. Education psychologists across the North West described similar concerns [JG/12 - INQ000649622].
18. There were regional disparities on the impact of school closures. Children in the North of England missed more schooling in lockdown than their peers in the rest of England, with only 14% receiving more than four or more pieces of offline schoolwork per day, compared with 20% countrywide. There were also regional differences in parental homeschooling support related to regional deprivation. Specifically, the Northern regions of England saw lower levels of parental engagement than the South (50% in Yorkshire and the Humber, 59% in the South and East of England, excluding London) [JG/12 - INQ000649622].
19. The loss of learning children in the North experienced over the course of the pandemic will cost an estimated £24.bn in lost wages over the course of their lifetime earnings [JG/12 - INQ000649622].
20. In primary maths, by the second half of the autumn 2020 term, pupils in the North East and Yorkshire and Humber experienced 4.0- and 5.3-months learning loss respectively, compared to less than a month in the South West and London.
21. The COVID Social Mobility & Opportunities (COSMO) study, led by the UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies and the Sutton Trust [JG/15 - INQ000587925] showed 80% of young people said their academic progress has suffered due to the pandemic. Half felt less motivated to study and learn. State school pupils were more than twice as likely to feel that they have fallen behind their classmates than independent school pupils, and 45% of all pupils did not believe they have been able to catch up with lost learning. Almost half of young people had accessed no catch-up education, and a large majority had not accessed tutoring.

22. In April 2022, Ofsted reported that the pandemic and lockdowns had resulted in delays in learning speech and language; problems with social interaction and confidence, such as not knowing how to take turns and struggling to make friends; and delays in walking and crawling, with more obesity as a result. Children were also not at the expected level in developing vital self-care skills, such as being potty trained, tying their shoelaces and taking their coats off.
23. In 2023, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee warned that it may take a decade for the gap in attainment between disadvantaged pupils and others to return to what it was before the COVID-19 pandemic [JG/16 - INQ000649640].
24. The Nuffield Foundation published research in June 2023, finding that children in all years of primary school remained approximately 2 months behind the pre-pandemic attainment level [JG/17 - INQ000588358]. They found that the biggest drops in attainment occurred in schools with higher disadvantage levels, and that the disadvantage gap increased each autumn between 2020 and 2022 for Year 6 reading and maths. Moreover, children who were starting Year 3 in autumn 2020 and autumn 2021 had larger decreases in academic wellbeing than any other year group in Key Stage 2. These children were in Year 1 and 2 at the beginning of the pandemic and had the most disruption to their schooling (the largest impact on their attainment [JG/17 - INQ000588358].
25. A long-term study from 2020-2024 by the National Foundation for Education Research has shown that although the reading performance of Year 1 pupils was behind their pre-pandemic peers until spring 2022, the children in its study closed the Covid-19 gap by spring 2024 [JG/18 - INQ000610403]. Children who began the NFER's study as Year 2 pupils appeared less impacted by the school closures of 2020, and there was no negative Covid-19 gap between this cohort and their pre-pandemic peers from spring 2022 onwards and in some cases, they scored even higher than the pre-pandemic standardisation samples. Across the four years of the study, disadvantaged pupils' reading and maths has shown a recovery similar to non-disadvantaged children, but the disadvantage gap remains wide.

Lost learning

26. Children missing school are often vulnerable – which can be both a cause and consequence of losing learning. These children have lower educational attainment and can get caught up in further social exclusion and often lack the protective factor of schools. This crisis that has grown since Covid. In 2022/23, there were thirty-two million days of learning lost due to suspension and unauthorised absence. This number has increased by 68% since 2019, where there were nineteen million days of lost learning [JG/19 - INQ000649643].

27. The number of children who are persistently absent, meaning they are missing 10% or more of their education, has almost doubled (93% increase) from 771,863 in the 2018/19 academic year to 1,487,022 in 2023/24 over just five years, with a peak in 2021/22 where 1,643,876 children were persistently absent (113% increase since 2018/19) [JG/20 - INQ000649615]. The number of children who are severely absent, meaning they are missing more than 50% of their education, has almost trebled (184% increase) since before the pandemic. This has steadily increased since 2021/22, with an increase of 41% since after the pandemic.

28. Children who receive Free School Meals are about 2.5 times more likely to be persistently absent than their peers not in receipt of Free School Meals. This has risen by eleven percentage points [JG/21 - INQ000649616].

29. Children with an EHCP are twice as likely to be absent than those with SEND, and children from the traveller community have the highest rate of persistent absent at 70% [JG/20 - INQ000649615].

30. As the Child of the North/Centre for Young Lives report, “*An evidence based plan for improving school attendance*” shows, school absence disproportionately affects children from disadvantaged regions of the UK, with the overall persistent absence rate being highest in the South West (22.2%) and Yorkshire and The Humber (22.1%) [JG/22 - INQ000649623]. Our report highlighted how children in the North of England experienced longer COVID-19 lockdowns and continue to experience higher levels of poverty and reduced educational funding, increasing the risk of school attendance difficulties. Pre-COVID-19 data (2015-16 to 2019- 20) shows overall absence rates in the North, South, and Midlands were relatively stable, with some fluctuations.

31. During the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-21 to 2021-22), there was a surge in overall absence rates across all regions due to school closures, remote learning challenges, and health concerns. Both authorised and unauthorised absences increased during that period, with the North still showing the highest absence rate. Data post COVID-19 (2022 to 2022-23) show that overall absence rates remain higher than pre-pandemic levels. The North continues to experience elevated absence rates compared to the Midlands and the South [JG/22 - INQ000649623].

Outdoor access and loss of opportunities to play.

32. Children spend more time playing at home than any other location and spend more time playing in their gardens – if they have one – than they do anywhere else outdoors. However, one-in-eight British households have no garden, rising to more than one in five in London [JG/23 - INQ000649652]. With playgrounds and schools closed during the COVID pandemic lockdowns, children in these households had little to no access to green space and places to play freely, in some cases for months at a time.

33. There are social and racial disparities in access to green space. In England, Black families are nearly four times more likely than White families to have no access to outdoor space at home and 2.4 times more likely even after accounting for factors such as the higher ethnic diversity of urban areas – where garden access is likely to be lower. Garden access also varies by income. A survey by Natural England has found children from higher income households (£50,000+) are more likely to have access to a garden than those from low- or mid-income households [JG/23 - INQ000649652].

34. Playful space at home is not only important given the decline in opportunities to play elsewhere, but because the privacy of the home can provide a safe space where children feel they can truly be the child they are. We have spoken with children who say they want to play but do not feel comfortable doing so because of social pressures to 'grow-up' and act more like an adult [JG/23 - INQ000649652].

35. During the pandemic, when children were not allowed to meet in-person because playgrounds and schools closed for most children and learning moved online, many turned to digital devices for education, entertainment, and social connection. With tight and sometimes unclear restrictions around going outdoors, screen use surged by 52% during the pandemic, adding an average of eighty-four extra minutes per day.³¹⁰ Since then, these habits have become ingrained, with screen use continuing to rise.

12-to-15-year-olds are now spending an average of 35 hours a week on their smartphones, (almost the equivalent to a full-time job) [JG/23 - INQ000649652].

36. The prominence of screens and digital devices in our lives had been consolidated long before the pandemic but these habits became further ingrained, shaping how children engage with the digital world long after the lockdowns ended. Teachers have told us they feel young people are spending more time online and less time interacting with the 'real world' since the pandemic [JG/23 - INQ000649652].

The impact on vulnerable children

37. A child is classified as a child in need if they are unlikely to achieve a reasonable standard of development or likely to have development significantly impaired without intervention, or if they are disabled. This is assessed after a child is referred to children's services. If a child is identified as in need, a local authority then has a duty to provide services for that child and family. Some children in need have a child in need plan, which is a voluntary plan outlining the support a child and their family will be provided.

38. The number of children identified as children in need has decreased slightly since 2018 but has increased since 2020. This may be partly driven by the number of referrals to children's social services decreasing by 5% from 655,630 in 2018 to 621,880 in 2024 [JG/24 - INQ000649635].

39. For children in need assessments, 58% of primary need is identified as abuse or neglect, which has increased by five percentage points since 2018 [JG/24 - INQ000649635]. However, the number of child protection plans has also decreased slightly by 7%, from 53,790 to 49,900 between 2018 and 2024 [JG/24 - INQ000649635].

40. Neglect and emotional abuse are the only forms of maltreatment that have not declined over the past 10 years. It is important to iterate that many children who are experiencing harm, abuse or neglect are not on the radar of children's services or other agencies. While neglect is the most common concern on CPPs, it can be difficult to identify and provide evidence for reaching a threshold for support.

41. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that in mid-May 2020, there was a 12% increase in the number of domestic abuse cases referred to victim support. Between April and June 2020, there was a 65% increase in calls to the National Domestic Abuse Helpline, when compared to the first three months of that year [JG/25 - INQ000649650].
42. The very low attendance of vulnerable children in schools, and changes to social worker visits, meant that at risk children were less likely to be in sight of trusted professionals. The number of reported incidents of children dying or being seriously harmed after suspected abuse or neglect rose by a quarter after England's first lockdown [JG/26 - INQ000649614].

The impact on children's health

43. There is widespread acceptance that the pandemic had a concerning impact on some children and young people's mental health, and that it also intensified known risk factors for child mental health disorders, including disadvantage, isolation, and bereavement. Moreover, access to sources of support was reduced, including spending time with friends, at school and taking part in extracurricular or leisure activities. Rates of probable mental health problems in children and young people have increased to 1 in 5 in 2023 [JG/27 - INQ000649644]. Referrals to urgent and emergency mental health crisis care rose by 80% between April and June 2021 compared to the same period in 2019 [JG/28 - INQ000649627].
44. School leaders have continued to report high levels of pupil mental health needs, with 25% of primary school children and 29% of young people in secondary school needing mental health support [JG/22 - INQ000649623]. Schools also report increasing difficulties accessing support from social and welfare services [JG/22 - INQ000649623].
45. YoungMinds reported that from over 2,000 young people interviewed, 83% of those with mental health needs agreed that the coronavirus pandemic had made their mental health worse [JG/29 - INQ000618452]. Sixty-seven per cent of young people believed that the pandemic would have a long-term negative effect on their mental health.
46. A survey by Girlguiding in 2021 found 63% of young women aged 7-21 said that they were happy most of time compared to 81% in 2018. Sixty-seven percent aged 7-21 felt

more sad, anxious, or worried than before the pandemic and 62% aged 7-21 said they are lonelier than before the pandemic [JG/30 - INQ000649631].

47. The rates of probable eating disorders in children and young people increased following the pandemic. Preliminary data from the Born in Bradford Age of Wonder study found that 18% of 12- to 15-year-olds reported symptoms indicative of a probable eating disorder, which is higher than that found in England in the NHS Digital survey (13% of 11- to 16-year-olds) [JG/31 - INQ000649626]. Year group results show that Year 9 pupils reported the highest rate of probable eating disorder (21%), compared to Year 8 (17%) and Year 10 (16%). Girls were more than twice as likely to report a probable eating disorder (24%), compared to boys (11%) [JG/31 - INQ000649626].
48. There is also evidence that during the pandemic there was an increase in the prevalence of loneliness, with 43% of children and adolescents in England saying they were 'often' or 'always' lonely during the first lockdown compared to 10% pre-Covid [JG/31 - INQ000649626].
49. In the North, 55% of parents of school-aged children felt that lockdown had caused them and their child to feel significantly more depressed, compared to 44% in South. For school closures, the figures were 45% in the North, compared to 33% in the South. Parents in low-income families experienced higher levels of depression and stress during the pandemic. In the Born in Bradford study, clinically significant depression among mothers increased from 11% pre-pandemic to 19% during first lockdown; clinically significant anxiety increased from 10% to 16% [JG/12 - INQ000649622].
50. It has been estimated that the mental health conditions that children in the North developed during the pandemic will cost an estimated £13.2bn over their lifetime earnings [JG/12 - INQ000649622].
51. To date there has been no study has comprehensively investigated the longitudinal impact of the pandemic on children and young people with existing mental health problems in 2020. This group of children and young people may have been more vulnerable than their healthy counterparts to the negative effects of the pandemic restrictions such as remote schooling without support or being stuck indoors with little or no access to outside space.

52. There is also evidence to suggest existing physical inequalities have widened since the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to increased sedentary behaviours, decreased physical activity levels, and negative attitudes towards physical activity [JG/32 - INQ000649653].

Access to remote learning and technology

53. Schools in the most deprived areas were less likely to have the digital technologies required for remote teaching during the pandemic, limiting those children's ability to learn and putting extra stresses on families living with poverty. It has been estimated that one third of families most concerned by finances had to buy a laptop to ensure their child could engage with school [JG/33 - INQ000608448]. Teachers in more disadvantaged areas were also less likely to have received training on delivering teaching online, due to the additional constraints faced by these schools.

54. Some schools in disadvantaged areas avoided online learning altogether because too large a proportion of their students did not have access to digital technology. Sixty percent of private schools in affluent areas already had online platforms when the pandemic hit compared to only 23% of schools in the most deprived areas [JG/34 - INQ000618059]. In the schools serving the most disadvantaged communities, only 3% of teachers hosted online lessons and only 4% had audio/video calls with a student [JG/35 - INQ000649625].

55. For children and young people with SEN(D), the transition to home learning was particularly challenging – changes to routines will have left some unable to transition to home learning. Some families reported feeling underequipped to manage their children's complex needs and parents and children were worried about falling further behind [JG/36 - INQ000649628].

Impact on children at risk of exploitation and harm

56. There are children growing up all over the country who are experiencing adverse childhood experiences, living very vulnerable lives, and who are susceptible to involvement in serious violence, gangs, and the criminal justice system. A report from Crest Advisory spoke to thirteen boys who had all experienced childhood trauma and displayed a range of vulnerabilities before known involvement in county lines. As their

report makes clear, while children in need of additional help represent a small proportion of the overall population, they comprise most children involved in county lines [JG/37 - INQ000649630].

57. The challenges facing these children, and the systems and services that are supposed to keep them safe, have existed for years. Yet sadly, the size of some of these problems have been an even bigger task following the Covid pandemic. Analysis published in July 2020 highlighted the heightened impact of lockdown on the 120,000 teenagers in England – one in 25 – already slipping out of sight before the pandemic [JG/38 - INQ000231362].
58. Shortly after the first Covid lockdown, there were already signs that the pandemic was impacting negatively on many children, including additional stresses on parents and a reduction in protective services, and an increase in children and young people's vulnerability to abuse at home and online, and through sexual and criminal exploitation [JG/39 - INQ000073864].
59. There was a 31% drop in referrals (just under 36,000) made by schools in England to children's social care services between pre-Covid 2019/20 and 2020/21, when there were two school lockdowns. Some vulnerable children dropped out of the sight of teachers, often the first to spot the need for an assessment. While nearly 600,000 children and young people were referred to children's social care services in the year to 31 March 2021, this was a fall of 7% compared to the previous 12 months [JG/30 - INQ000649631].
60. While increasingly fewer young people are going into secure custody, and usually only those who have committed an extremely serious offence, most children involved in the criminal justice system share very similar experiences of childhood adversity. These children are very likely to be highly vulnerable. Some can fall through gaps in the education, social care, or health systems which is often associated with no longer attending school or struggling with unsupported mental health problems or neurodivergent conditions. Eight out of ten children in the youth justice system are identified as having Special Educational Needs or Disability (SEND) [JG/40 - INQ000649624] and 85% of boys in Young Offender Institutions have previously been excluded from school [JG/41 - INQ000649642]. Approximately half of children in

custody have previously been in care at some point in their life [JG/42 - INQ000649617].

61. Exclusions and suspensions are correlated with contact with the criminal justice system. Youth Endowment Fund has found that, after controlling for factors including child's previous behaviour, family circumstances, and poverty, those who are suspended or excluded from school are 2.5 times more likely to perpetrate violence and 4.5 times more likely to offend [JG/43 - INQ000649658].
62. Similarly, evidence from the Department for Education and Ministry of Justice found that 71% of all children who had been cautioned or sentenced for an offence, and 82% of those cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence, had received a suspension. For permanent exclusions, 44% of children had their first exclusion more than a year before their first serious violence offence, and for suspensions 74% of children had their first suspensions more than a year before [JG/44 - INQ000649632].
63. Like absence, permanent exclusions and suspensions have grown since the pandemic. The main reason for suspensions and exclusions is persistent disruptive behaviour, which are often a result of poor mental health or unmet special needs. Between 2018/19 and 2022/23, suspensions have increased by 80% from 438,000 to 787,000. During the same time frame, permanent exclusions have increased by 19% from 7,900 to 9,400 [JG/45 - INQ000649639].
64. Meanwhile, there has been a 60% rise in number of children being electively home educated since 2018/19 and 2022/23 [JG/46 - INQ000649655]. Although there are many parents who provide high quality home education for their children, there is evidence to suggest that some children are pushed into home education due to their school being unable to cope with the child's behaviour, underachievement or special educational needs that are not being properly supported. These children are often vulnerable to falling out of sight and into danger. As the Commission on Young Lives has noted, children at risk of serious violence or criminal exploitation are often those who are not in school [JG/30 - INQ000618452].

Recommendations for any future pandemic

65. In planning for future pandemics, children's perspectives and experiences should be reflected in scientific and public health advice and decision making. Their needs and

the impact of policies on their lives and futures should be taken into much greater account. There should be a recognition that policies may have different or unique – and sometimes negative – impacts on children. Children should be recognised as a priority in any future emergencies.

66. Lessons must be learned from the chaotic and unnecessarily extended closure of schools to most children in 2020 and 2021. Education should be prioritised over other sectors – in other words, the first to open, and the last to close.
67. Should a situation arise where national social interaction needs to be limited, it should be recognised that in person access to education and in person access to play facilities should be protected as much as possible, and at the expense of adult activities if necessary.
68. Decisions to close schools in future should be weighed up against the known harms that this can bring to some children, particularly the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Schools should only be closed as a very last resort, and their reopening should be a priority for planning from the day they do close.
69. In situations where a vaccine is found to tackle a pandemic, teachers should be a priority after health workers for vaccination.
70. Any rights extended to adults must also be given to children, for example the right to play outside or meet with friends.
71. Data gathering, including live local data should be prioritised to ensure that decision makers have the best possible information and intelligence to make informed decisions on priorities and resources.
72. Government should embark on a plan across departments to reduce the number of vulnerable children to improve capacity and resilience to emergency situations.
73. The full range of services used by children should be prioritised so that children's centres and family hubs were kept open and visits from social workers and health visitors to at-risk children continued as normally as possible.

74. Children's rights and protections should be strengthened, and a national children's rights impact assessment should be undertaken in any emergency to ensure children are considered in all decisions that will affect them.
75. It should be made clear who in Cabinet has clear, overall responsibility for children during any future emergency.
76. Government should support schools and children's services to undertake detailed preparation for any future emergency, including children's social care priorities and protocols, school buildings, access to tech for online and remote learning, and identifying local buildings that could be used as 'Nightingale Schools.'
77. Children with SEN support and those with EHCPs should be entitled to attend school as well as vulnerable children in the event of a lockdown.
78. Councils should do everything possible to ensure support and respite services remain available for disabled children and their families.
79. Priority should be given to increase protections for children who are likely to be particularly vulnerable or at risk of harm at home, and for babies and young children, and social work visits to these families should be prioritised.
80. The Government should ensure schools are able to provide counselling and other mental health and wellbeing support, even if remote, should another lockdown occur.
81. In the event of another lockdown, local authorities should monitor in real time the levels of referrals to children's social care, to identify levels of unidentified need. Greater information sharing between agencies, supported by central government, should be enabled to ensure proactive outreach to vulnerable families. Early years education settings and health services should be kept open, and the Government should support health visiting services so they can continue to provide support.
82. There should be clear guidance for youth justice establishments, including Young Offender Institutions, about how to implement virus restrictions in a way that protects

children's wellbeing and welfare. The Government should protect timetables, including out of cell, in-person education, and outdoor activities. Access to family and professionals must be prioritised, including remotely when necessary.

83. The Government, local authorities and the police should make clear that children are allowed to play in public green spaces and should not be "moved on." The availability of green space for children should be maximised, which at a minimum should mean no closure of parks or playgrounds. Any definition of "exercise" should specifically include playing outdoors.
84. The messaging and enforcement of lockdown rules must be child friendly. Specific press conferences which address children and the impact on children should be held regularly throughout any national emergency, as they were by the Norwegian Prime Minister during the pandemic.
85. Protections for incomes and food security should be a priority. Free School Meals vouchers should be available during any lockdown, regardless of whether it occurs outside normal term time.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed:

Personal Data

Dated: _____ 23rd July 2025 _____