Witness Name: Lyndon Lewis
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Statement Number: One
Exhibits: None
Dated: 6 June 2025

THE UNITED KINGDOM COVID 19 INQUIRY
FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF LYNDON LEWIS

I, LYNDON LEWIS, WILL SAY AS FOLLOWS:

1. I make this statement in response to the request for evidence under Rule 9 of the Inquiry Rules 2006 made by letter dated 11 March 2025 on behalf of Baroness Heather Hallett, the Chair of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry.

2. My name is Lyndon Lewis, and I am the Head Teacher of Ysgol Hendrefelin School, a local authority maintained special school in Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council ("The Local Authority").

3. I have been the Head Teacher of Ysgol Hendrefelin since September 2019 and hold a National Professional Qualification for Headship. I have worked in the teaching profession for 36 years.

4. This is the first statement I have made in relation to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, particularly concerning Ysgol Hendrefelin.

5. My statement has been prepared with the assistance of lawyers from within the Local Authority's Legal Services Department.

6. As requested, my statement deals with the period 1 January 2020 and 28 June 2022 ("the Specified Period") and addresses matters of pre-covid preparedness, the pandemic itself and the effects upon the school's pupils during and after it.

PART A – ABOUT THE SCHOOL AND ITS STUDENTS

7. Ysgol Hendrefelin is a special education school located in Neath Port Talbot, South Wales. The school is dedicated to catering for pupils, aged between 3 and 16 years of age, with a range of additional educational needs, specifically those with moderate learning difficulties (MLD), autism (ASD) and social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). Pupils are enrolled at the school by the Local Authority.

8. The school operates in accordance with the Welsh Government's key developmental stages of education which consist of:

- Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS): Ages 3-5 (Nursery and Reception).
- Key Stage 1 (KS1): Ages 5-7 (Years 1 and 2).
- Key Stage 2 (KS2): Ages 7-11 (Years 3, 4, 5, and 6).
- Key Stage 3 (KS3): Ages 11-14 (Years 7, 8, and 9).
- Key Stage 4 (KS4): Ages 14-16 (Years 10 and 11).

9. There are currently one hundred and seventy-seven (177) pupils registered with the school. The school employs one hundred and two (102) members of staff consisting of the senior management team (4 staff), teachers (25), teaching assistants (54), residential staff (11), administrative staff (6) and two caretakers.

10. The school operates across three distinct sites so that the varied needs of its pupils are addressed more effectively. These sites consist of:

- The Bryncoch site at Main Road, Bryncoch, Neath. This provides social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties provision at Key Stage 2, alongside the moderate learning difficulties and autism provisions at Key Stages 3 and 4.
- The Theodore Road site in Port Talbot. This provides for pupils requiring social, emotional and behavioural difficulties provision for Key Stage 3 pupils.
- The Velindre site at Reginald Street, Velindre, Port Talbot. This provides social, emotional and behavioural difficulties provision for Key Stage 4 pupils.

11. In addition to the above, Ysgol Hendrefelin also has a residential unit, based at its Bryncoch site, which allows children to participate in activities and stay overnight at least once a week. This unit significantly supports the development of functional life skills and enhances the overall well-being of the students. This is catered more towards the older

students at Ysgol Hendrefelin encouraging them to gain a higher level of independence and is able to offer placements for up to twelve children per night.

12. With the exception of four pupils, all pupils attending the school were resident within the area of the Local Authority. None of the pupils attending the school have English as an additional language.

13. The educational demographic within our school immediately prior to the pandemic in December 2019 was as follows:

- There were one hundred and sixty six (166) pupils registered at the school with a total of 52% of pupils recorded as being entitled to Free School Meals, highlighting significant socio-economic challenges faced by the student body.
- All pupils were identified as having Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) with one hundred and fifty five (155) pupils holding either a Statement of Educational Needs or an Individual Development Plan, and 16 pupils at School Action Plus.
- There were fourteen pupils in the care of the Local Authority, one pupil was subject to child protection measures and thirteen pupils were classified as children in need of care and support by the Local Authority.
- The whole school attendance from September to December 2019 was recorded as 79%.

14. To assist in understanding, the meaning of the terms in paragraph 13 are as follows:

- *A Statement of Educational Needs* is a legally binding document that sets out a child or young person's special educational needs, the provision they require and the educational placement they should attend. The statement should be detailed and contain specific information about the support that should be delivered. The Statement of Educational Needs is currently being phased out by the new ALN system in Wales and being replaced by the Individual Development Plan.
- *An Individual Development Plan (IDP)* is a legal document which describes a child or young person's additional learning needs. The IDP outlines the support they need, and the outcomes they would like to achieve. Children and Young People (aged 0-25) with additional learning needs (ALN) will have an Individual Development Plan.
- *School action plus* is a stage on the graduated response to Special Educational Needs as part of the old SEN system, currently being phased out by the new ALN system in Wales. Once a pupil with SEN is recognised as needing School Action, if required, they would

then proceed to the next level being School Action Plus, before finally, if required, receiving a Statement of Educational Need.

PART B: PLANNING FOR THE PANDEMIC

15. In preparing for the pandemic, information and guidance was regularly received from the Local Authority and the Welsh Government. Information sent to the school from the Local Authority came via the Director of Education and his team through meetings, phone calls, and emails. Risk assessments were provided to all schools including Ysgol Hendrefelin and training with regards to cleaning was provided by the Local Authority. Headteachers (including myself) met with the Director of Education and his team weekly and sometimes daily when necessary. The information was focused on keeping people safe. As a leadership team, we also focused on the delivery of education moving forward.

16. When information was received from either the Local Authority or Welsh Government, I arranged with the school staff for the information and guidance to be disseminated to the parents of the pupils at the earliest possible opportunity.

17. In light of the information and guidance received by myself, the senior leadership team (consisting of myself, Mr Ryan Duford (Deputy Headteacher), Mr Nick Lloyd (Deputy Headteacher), Mr Paul Thomas (Assistant Headteacher)) and the teachers explored various options for the delivery of remote learning. The Senior Leaders disseminated essential information to all staff, fostering an approach to the challenges ahead. Additionally, staff members undertook the critical task of contacting families to assess the availability of essential resources at home. This evaluation focused on the accessibility of technology, internet connectivity, books, and stationery.

18. The information disseminated consisted of links to videos to keep pupils and adults safe, risk assessments, phone calls, letters, text messages, and emails outlining procedures and guidance directed to keep staff and pupils as safe as possible. Information was also shared with parents through texts, letters, emails and telephone calls.

19. Responses from these communications were subsequently reported to senior leaders, highlighting the varying levels of support available to pupils. Such insights were invaluable in recognising the disparities within the school community and addressing them appropriately. In light of this information, the school implemented preparations to ensure that the educational needs of all students were planned for in the event of a lockdown.

Furthermore, the local authority played a significant role by providing devices and dongles for internet access to families lacking these essential tools.

PART C: PRIOR TO THE PANDEMIC

20. Prior to the pandemic, our school faced significant challenges related to the complex needs of our pupils. With small class sizes (the average class size was eight pupils), we could ensure a high ratio of adult support, which enabled us to provide a tailored curriculum that accommodated the diverse learning styles and ability of all pupils. This structure was vital in fostering an inclusive learning environment, although it is important to acknowledge that the learning journey can be particularly arduous for these individuals. Their complex needs necessitated robust support systems, which we have sought to implement effectively.

21. These support systems included:

- Staff visiting pupils at home.
- Staff checking in on pupils daily via phone calls and TEAMS.
- Lessons via TEAMS morning and afternoon each day.
- Welfare calls if pupils did not attend lessons on TEAMS.

22. If issues with any pupils were identified by staff, these were passed onto senior staff, who formed the Wellbeing Team. Senior staff met daily with the school's personal Educational Social Worker and Therapeutic Support Worker to identify the best way to support the pupils and their families.

23. Notably, a substantial proportion of our pupils come from disadvantaged backgrounds, limiting their access to essential resources such as reading materials, digital devices, and reliable transportation. Additionally, our school serves a high number of children who are looked after by the local authority and who are not eligible for free school meals. Many of these pupils experience inadequate family support, which further compounds their educational challenges and impacts their overall learning outcomes.

24. Prior to the pandemic, the school did not provide digital remote learning, however, we did employ higher-level teaching assistants and teachers through the Outreach programme to deliver lessons at home for pupils exhibiting emotional-based school avoidance.

25. The Outreach programme consists of a group of staff who deliver education to children that do not attend school. Remote learning takes place in local libraries, community centres and sometimes homes. Sessions are delivered by teachers, teaching assistants and school support staff.

26. Furthermore, we engaged two Cynydd workers to support our most challenging pupils, particularly those with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (SEBD). These are support workers provided via grant funding through the Local Authority. The school assists in partly funding their employment. This intervention has been beneficial in helping pupils engage with their education, a service that continues throughout school holidays to ensure continual support.

PART D – DURING THE PANDEMIC

27. Due to the fast-paced changes occurring at the onset of the pandemic, the school received pertinent information from the Local Authority as soon as it became available. The Director of Education and his team met with headteachers via Microsoft Teams to disseminate this information. Regular meetings were conducted with headteachers to ensure that they were kept informed of updates, and written correspondence followed these discussions along with risk assessment guidance and online meetings took place specifically with Special Schools, the Local Authority and Public Health. The first school closure was undoubtedly more rushed due to time constraints; however more preparation and planning was able to be implemented in the second school closure.

28. The school was already equipped with effective means of communication with families, utilising a school texting service, the Class Dojo platform (a communication software package which the school operates between parents/carers and school staff), email, letters and telephone calls. Given the specific needs of our pupils and the small class sizes, staff engaged in conversations with parents and carers regularly. Additionally, thoughtful phone calls were made to all families who might not access reading materials due to the parents having issues with literacy or additional learning difficulties, ensuring that families were well-informed and supported throughout these challenging times. Any information provided to parents with literacy issues was also done so verbally to make sure that they understood.

29. The onset of the pandemic created an atmosphere of anxiety for all, including our pupils, many of whom already faced challenges related to anxiety. The constant changes in

guidance significantly affected our pupils' well-being; their learning needs necessitated consistency, routine, and preparation for changes in their educational environment. Nonetheless, the school recognised that these conditions were unavoidable, and endeavoured to reassure staff, pupils and their families during this time of great uncertainty. Whole school attendance was recorded at 74% during the pandemic, reflecting a decrease of 5%. However, it is noteworthy that there was substantial increase in attendance during the second school closure, with figures rising from 61.4% in March 2020 to 88.2% in January 2021.

30. The impact of the pandemic on our pupils' well-being varied significantly. During school closures, those with strong home support adapted relatively well, as their parents actively engaged with the learning and well-being resources provided by the school. Conversely, numerous pupils viewed school as a vital safe space, integral to providing routine. Regular discussions highlighted that some parents reported difficulties with their children often refusing to engage in outdoor activities or learning, leading to increased behavioural concerns and stress within households, particularly when children resisted guidelines. The school sought to support these families through garden visits, community walks, welfare checks, and therapy at home when restrictions permitted.

31. Upon returning to school, many pupils exhibited heightened anxiety regarding social distancing measures, finding them overwhelming. Eager to reconnect with classmates, some pupils showed reluctance to engage in physical activities. Our school-based education social worker collaborated with staff to secure necessary support for both pupils and families in need.

32. Pupil safety remained paramount at Ysgol Hendrefelin, and the school closures intensified concerns about their well-being. Throughout this challenging period, school staff remained dedicated to maintaining communication with all pupils, engaging with them daily through video calls or telephone conversations, thus fostering continuity and providing essential support. Concerns and observations were documented via OneNote, ensuring that senior leaders were always informed and could collaborate effectively with relevant agencies to safeguard pupil welfare. This proactive communication strategy has evolved into a common practice at the school, with regular online well-being meetings between senior leaders and staff.

33. We had concerns about the impact that closing our school would have on children's safety. This is one of the reasons why we set up google classrooms so that staff would be able to

see pupils for a morning and afternoon session online every day. If pupils did not attend then staff would make telephone calls to homes to check up on pupils and their well-being. When concerns did arise, the senior leadership team would organise home visits where possible. This support continued throughout the pandemic.

34. Staff collaboration was vital in identifying pupils lacking adequate access to food or facing unmet basic needs during the pandemic. In response, staff delivered food and supply parcels to families in need, providing crucial support during this period. Additionally, staff undertook shopping trips on behalf of families unable to leave their homes and assisted parents in setting up internet and email access where required.

35. Initially, remote learning presented challenges for staff, pupils, and families alike, as this approach had not been previously utilised. Staff swiftly adapted, upskilling and developing knowledge of effective practices. Some staff members took the initiative to create video recordings to guide colleagues in managing the necessary platforms and technology. All teachers established Google Classrooms to deliver daily lessons. The subsequent collaboration and resource-sharing proved beneficial as staff recorded teaching videos and set differentiated activities for pupils.

36. All of our children have additional learning needs. Most pupils with autism or moderate learning difficulties engaged in remote learning online through Google Classrooms and Teams however, pupils with social, emotional and behaviour difficulties were very difficult to engage online. Many refused to attend sessions or complete any work. In addition to online sessions, staff visited the homes of many of these pupils and left work for them to complete. Unfortunately, many SEBD pupils refused to complete any work. Some children who are living in poverty did not have Wi-Fi available at home. The Local Authority provided dongles as a solution so that every pupil could get access to Wi-Fi.

37. Initially there were many teething problems with pupils accessing online lessons. Also staff expertise varied across school. As time went on, the staff skillset improved and the resources that they were able to access online also improved. Various professionals across the country created banks of resources that teachers could access to support the delivery of education. The key differences between the experience of the March 2020 closures and the January 2021 closures are centred around more time for planning, more online resources available, more time to train staff, and pupils becoming more used to the routine.

38. Despite these efforts, challenges to remote learning stemmed largely from varying levels of parental support available at home and access to technology. Given our pupils' complex needs, reliance on familial support and reassurance was crucial. One-to-one sessions were conducted via video calls, although these proved time-consuming. Work packs were distributed to pupils lacking access to laptops (when restrictions permitted this), and devices were subsequently provided by the school. Access to the Hwb platform was also facilitated, permitting pupils to engage with their learning.

39. As we progressed through the pandemic, pupils returned to school revealing notable gaps in their learning, particularly in their readiness to learn and their reading development. Staff dedicated increased pastoral time to support pupils in settling back into the classroom environment. This emphasis allowed for better regulation of emotions and feelings, which ultimately facilitated a more conducive learning atmosphere. Staff communicated observations to senior leaders, which prompted immediate action in procuring a new reading assessment package designed to evaluate reading abilities and implement targeted interventions. The ongoing effects of the pandemic on literacy remain evident, necessitating vigilance in monitoring trends and adapting strategies to support each pupil's learning journey effectively.

40. Staff actively communicated their observations and concerns to senior leaders, including the curriculum lead, deputy headteacher, and headteacher. A particularly noticeable gap in reading levels among pupils, especially in Years 7 and 8, was identified, where a greater number of students were reading below a chronological age of 5 years and 6 months within our moderate learning difficulties unit. Consequently, immediate action was taken to procure a new reading assessment package, specifically the Salford Sentence and Reading and Comprehensive Test, to evaluate reading abilities accurately.

41. School staff implemented targeted interventions, including daily catch-up phonics and reading sessions tailored to the individual needs of each learner. The adoption of the Read Write Inc. phonics scheme, along with supplementary reading books, has further supported these initiatives. The ongoing effects of the pandemic on literacy remain evident, necessitating continued vigilance in monitoring trends and adapting strategies to support each pupil's learning journey effectively.

42. Whilst social distancing guidelines presented considerable challenges, particularly given our pupils' diverse needs, school staff adopted a proactive approach to maintain a safe, supportive learning environment. During examinations, the arrangements established

provided crucial flexibility, with classroom assessments acknowledging the unique needs of our pupils, ensuring that they were afforded a fair opportunity to demonstrate their skills. Although not universally effective across all schools, these adaptations represented meaningful steps forward in supporting learners through unprecedented times. Special consideration documents were completed for pupils who were taking examinations to ensure that pupils achieved grades that were worthy of their efforts and ability.

43. At Ysgol Hendrefelin, we attempted to follow all the measures outlined in the guidance. However, we did experience a number of issues: many children with learning difficulties were unable to follow social distancing requirements and also found it very difficult to wear masks. Most of our children were also unable to test themselves and therefore SLT staff would have to test the pupils. This was challenging and very stressful for staff as well as children.

44. Staff in special schools are always concerned for children's online safety. It became more of a concern during the pandemic as children obviously had a lot more time on their hands to spend online. Staff communicated with children and parents to help keep pupils safe online. We also worked closely with the community police service who attend school and communicate information focussed around keeping children safe online.

PART E – OVERALL IMPACT ON CHILDREN FOLLOWING THE PANDEMIC

45. The overall impact of the pandemic on the pupils of Ysgol Hendrefelin is still ongoing, manifesting in various challenges and opportunities for recovery. Notably, levels of whole school attendance have slightly increased, with current figures standing at 77% as of April 2025. However, there has been a marked rise in instances of emotionally based school anxiety. While a significant majority of pupils expressed happiness in returning to a sense of normality and re-establishing their school routine, some segments of the school population have found these transitions particularly arduous. Specific concerns have arisen around pupils struggling to navigate interactions within larger groups, which has hindered both their social engagement and overall learning experience. Additionally, incidents of unwanted behaviours have increased, further complicating the educational landscape. For some pupils, engaging in learning itself has proven to be a significant challenge, necessitating considerable support.

46. The adjustment to school life has not been uniform across the student body. Initially, some pupils expressed difficulties in adhering to established school rules and behaviour

expectations. Nonetheless, classroom environments have generally reverted to conditions akin to those experienced prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This re-establishment of normalcy has been beneficial for many pupils, allowing them to reconnect with peers and engage in a productive learning atmosphere.

47. Particularly concerning is the impact observed among learners within the Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) units. These pupils have shown pronounced struggles in several key areas, including full engagement in lessons, appropriate behaviour exhibition, and the achievement of their academic potential. The isolation and disruption experienced during the pandemic have exacerbated existing challenges within this group.

48. Substantial efforts have been made by staff to reassure pupils and facilitate their transition back to school following the unprecedented challenges of the pandemic. The wellbeing of our pupils remains a top priority; to this end, school-based counselling services have been made available to all pupils. Our school-based social worker collaborates closely with staff, pupils, and families to address and manage any ongoing effects stemming from the pandemic.

49. To further support our pupils and their families, the school has employed an Attendance & Engagement Officer, who plays a crucial role in supporting families, monitoring attendance and addressing barriers that may impede regular school participation. In instances where pupils are unable to attend school for extended periods, staff proactively visit their homes to deliver bespoke learning opportunities. The use of Google Classrooms has also been successfully implemented, enabling those unable to attend physically to engage with their studies remotely.

50. Each unit in the school is allocated a Higher Learning Teaching Assistant specifically tasked with supporting interventions for identified learners. ELSA (Emotional Literacy Support Assistant) intervention and Play Therapy remain integral components of our support framework. The school promotes holistic engagement through outdoor projects, such as forest school activities and surfing, which enhance pupils' wellbeing while fostering teamwork.

51. Since 2023, Ysgol Hendrefelin has actively participated in the national initiative, Food and Fun, designed to provide essential food, nutrition education, and enrichment sessions during school summer holidays. Although the programme effectively nurtures our pupils, there remains a concerning gap in attendance from those who most need it, despite staff

extending offers of support. The school also benefits from various funding initiatives aimed at addressing food poverty.

52. Funding from the Covid-19 Premium Catch Up was used:

- To expand our outdoor learning opportunities for children. The impact includes improved well-being, self-confidence and resilience.
- Purchase resources and programmes, provide time for staff to develop quality resources and further develop the skills of staff to support the development of reading, writing and mathematics.
- Employ extra staff to deliver intervention programmes for individual or small groups of pupils.

53. In the realm of technology, the evolution since the pandemic is evident. There is a notable increase in pupil confidence and skill levels when utilising digital tools, reflecting technology's positive integration into learning. The school ensures equitable access by providing all pupils and staff with laptops and facilitating remote learning for those unable to attend due to health concerns. Staff meetings and engagements with outside agencies are now conducted via video calls, enhancing collaboration and communication within the educational community.

PART F – LESSONS LEARNED

54. The experiences we have navigated as a school during the pandemic have imparted several invaluable lessons that will shape our future practice. Foremost among these is the recognition of our staff as an essential resource; their unwavering dedication to our pupils and the families we serve is nothing short of commendable. The ability of our educators to remain creative, adaptive, and flexible has been paramount. It has become increasingly evident that school practitioners must stay informed about technological advancements and the diverse range of resources available to support learners in an ever-evolving landscape.

55. Throughout this period, the well-being of our pupils has been a driving force behind our decision-making and actions. While it is impossible to prepare for every eventuality, the collaborative efforts within our school community and with our stakeholders have proven vital. One critical insight is the recognition that many pupils do not have access to fundamental resources such as stationery, books, or technology at home. This stark

reality underscores the importance of refraining from making assumptions or imposing unrealistic expectations on families regarding their capacity to support their children's education. Each family presents a unique set of circumstances, necessitating a tailored approach to support that addresses individual needs.

56. The education sector has faced unprecedented challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and Ysgol Hendrefelin has been no exception. It is challenging to outline what could be done to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on our pupils, as we have worked tirelessly to implement every feasible support available to us, whilst adhering to government guidelines. The focus has been on ensuring that pupils continue to receive an education in a safe environment, despite the numerous restrictions imposed.

57. In reflecting on strategies for future contingencies, it is paramount that we advocate for the continued attendance of pupils at school, albeit with appropriate safety measures in place. However, this approach brings considerable implications for health and transport needs, which must be carefully managed to safeguard the well-being of all stakeholders involved. One innovative avenue to explore would be the production of educational videos created by health practitioners and child psychologists. These resources could be particularly beneficial for pupils with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), aiding them in better understanding the changes they experience in their daily lives during such crises. By regularly updating these pupils on current circumstances and justifying why certain measures are necessary, we can foster a sense of security and stability.

58. Additionally, it is vital that all children, regardless of their background, have access to basic learning materials at home. Our role extends beyond the classroom and ensuring that every household can provide a conducive learning environment is critical. For parents of SEND children, it would be advantageous to offer targeted training and resources that empower them to assist in their child's education. Such support could take many forms, including workshops, online resources, or direct guidance from educational professionals.

59. Furthermore, equitable access to the internet is essential for all children, as it serves as a gateway to a wealth of learning opportunities and resources. In the digital age, the lack of connectivity can exacerbate educational disparities, making it imperative that we work towards providing reliable internet access for every pupil at home. This access not only facilitates remote learning but also helps to ensure that all children can engage with educational content, even when physical attendance is not possible.

60. In conclusion, while the pandemic has posed significant challenges, our collective resilience and commitment to innovation can lead to a more inclusive educational system prepared for future uncertainties. Understanding, effective communication, and collaboration remain key factors in the lessons learned from our experience of the COVID-19 pandemic.

61. This statement consisting of 14 pages is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and I make it knowing that, if it is tendered in evidence, I shall be liable to prosecution if I have wilfully stated in it anything which I know to be false, or do not believe to be true.

Signed:..... PD

Lyndon Lewis Headteacher Hendrefelin School

Date: 6th June, 2025…