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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF Claire Dorer OBE – CEO National Association of Special Schools (NASS)

I, Claire Dorer, will say as follows: -

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Introduction

1. I am Claire Dorer, OBE and have been the Chief Executive Officer of the National Association of Special Schools (NASS) since March 2005. Prior to this, I held various roles including in the Department of Education, University of Birmingham and Birmingham Children's Hospital.

2. I offer this statement in response to the Rule 9 request received by NASS from the Inquiry team on 24 February 2025, and on behalf of NASS and its member schools and organisations.

Background to NASS and its member schools

3. NASS is a membership association for special schools that are not maintained by local authorities. At the time of writing, we have over 450 member schools and organisations across England and Wales. Our member schools offer in the region of 15000 placements for children and young people with Special Educational Needs (SEN). NASS is operated by a small staff team, all of whom work from home. During the pandemic, we operated with a staff team of 3.4 F.T.E.

4. We have schools based in each region of England and Wales but the highest concentration of schools is in the South East and North West and the lowest concentration in Wales and the East of England.

5. NASS has the following categories of school in membership:

a. Independent Special Schools
b. Non-Maintained Special Schools
c. Special Academies

6. We have the following numbers of schools in each phase of education:

a. Primary - 18
b. Secondary - 19
c. All through - 377

Many of our schools are registered to take children from the age of two but we do not hold details of how many children are educated in Early Years provision.

7. Almost all placements (more than 95%) in member schools are funded through the public purse via Local Authorities paying for placements as a result of their statutory duty to meet the needs of children with SEN in their area. A very small number of placements are directly funded

by parents, who are either from overseas or have chosen to opt out of the statutory framework for SEN. This is not a sector that operates bursary schemes.

8. Our member schools generally work with children with the most complex needs. Over 62% of our member schools support Autistic children and 65% support those with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs. A smaller percentage of schools support children with Speech, Language and Communication Needs, Physical and Medical Needs and Hearing or Visual Impairments.

9. Children typically are placed in our member schools when other settings have been unable to meet their needs effectively. In a 2017 study, NASS found that for over 70% of children, their current school was at least the third school they had attended and for 11% it was at least their fifth school. Children often arrive at our schools with large gaps in their education and learning and with an expectation of failing in education.

10. Our schools offer a range of features, designed to meet need holistically and effectively. Class sizes tend to be very small – generally between 6-8 students and staffed by both a teacher and support staff. Most of our schools employ their own therapy teams so that children can access speech and language therapy, physiotherapy and occupational therapy alongside their learning. Our schools have invested in mental health support, including clinical psychologists, counsellors, psychotherapists and creative arts therapists to support the emotional development and wellbeing of children, many of whom arrive with a history of trauma in their early lives. Around 40% of our member schools offer residential provision where children stay overnight – sometimes during term time only and sometimes across the year. This combination of education, care and therapies supports children to be in a position where they can develop trusting relationships with others and make use of the opportunities to learn that schools provide.

11. NASS was originally established as a means of schools connecting and networking in 1998. Since then, the focus of the organisation has broadened along two main areas. NASS represents special schools with other key stakeholders, such as the Department for Education and Ofsted, ensuring that special schools are considered in education policy and practice development. We also support special schools through individual advice, sector-specific guidance, training, professional development and through commissioning relevant research.

Pre-pandemic experiences of special schools

12. At the time of the pandemic (and since), we saw a national trend of increased numbers of placements of children with SEN in special schools and a marked growth in the use of independent special schools by local authorities. This was in part driven by an increasing complexity in the needs of children identified as having SEN but also by policy decisions such as the Children and Families Act 2014 (which gave parents greater rights to express a preference for a specific school) or the Free Schools Programme, which constrained the ability of local authorities to set up their own specialist provision.

13. Our schools noted that many of their children presented with needs that had been unmet for a significant amount of time, be that through being out of school for an extended period of time, due to lack of suitable provision, and/or lacking the specialist therapy and mental health services needed to 'scaffold' their education and learning. Children generally arrived in our schools highly disengaged from learning and had to learn how to trust the adults around them and to feel safe in order to re-engage with formal education. This often took time to achieve, during which their starting point for attendance was low but grew as children's trust and confidence in those around them grew. Most of our schools have a wealth of stories about children who finally re-engaged with learning and were able to go on to achieve formal qualifications and employment as adults.

14. Use of remote learning pre-pandemic was not common within our sector. Many schools used it occasionally when a child might be absent from school for a specific reason or as a tool to support a child's movement into school. However, many children in our schools would not be able to make good use of online learning due to physical and cognitive needs, and learning in the absence of wider school services and relationships with staff was felt to be potentially counterproductive.

15. Most of our schools had taken some steps to plan for a major incident but none had planned in advance for a pandemic of this nature. One of our member schools had prepared a plan for avian influenza, which they felt had some use in the covid pandemic, but this was unusual. In general, Government guidance had focused on schools being prepared for acts of terrorism – although the guidance was not well-adapted for special schools – and one-off events such as fire or flood.

The pandemic experiences of special schools prior to the first lockdown

16. NASS was first asked by member schools about the potential impact of the pandemic in late February 2020. At this point, there was no Government guidance available for schools. The first formal Government guidance was issued to schools on 28 February 2020. There was nothing in this guidance that hinted that the Government might be considering a national lockdown, or the closure of schools, and it focused largely on measures of hygiene to be taken, and instructions to send children home if they were suspected of having covid.

17. This initial guidance was not simple for special schools to follow. It was not a simple matter to send children home if they were unwell. Many children relied on local authority transport to and from school and parents were unable to pick children up. Use of taxis was not practical for some children, who needed familiar staff and routine to feel safe. For residential schools, there was no initial guidance on how best to manage children who fell ill at school and who had to be cared for in school. Most schools did not have a ready supply of PPE available and struggled to get hold of masks, hand sanitiser and aprons.

18. Many of the children attending special schools struggled to follow the measures set out in the initial guidance – particularly around maintaining social distance and hand washing. This in turn created anxiety for some staff who felt less able to safeguard themselves from the virus – about which there was little information at this point. During this period we also started to see the number of covid cases in school staff increase, leading to concerns about whether schools would be able to maintain safe staffing levels.

19. Our member schools also faced challenges that were not experienced by local authority-maintained schools. In early March, we were contacted by member schools concerned that if they were forced to close as a result of covid that local authorities might withhold payment for placements. Much of early March was spent taking legal advice on continuity of payment and whether the pandemic would be counted as 'force majeure' in contractual terms. As a possible closure of schools became more likely, schools reported contact from some local authorities stating that in the event of closure, they would stop all payments to the school. NASS issued its first advice to member schools on this topic on 9 March 2020.

Announcement of school closures from 20 March 2020 and the impact on special schools

20. At 5 p.m. on 18 March, the then Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson, announced that all schools would close from 20 March to all children except those from key

worker professions and children considered vulnerable. Whilst NASS and its member schools had started to consider school closures as a possibility, there was a sense that the Department of Education (DfE) was not well-prepared to plan for, and support, school closures. In the week leading up to 18 March we heard of a rapid rise in covid cases amongst our school staff and students. Several schools, but not a majority, indicated that they were unable to operate with safe staffing levels and may be forced to close temporarily.

21. NASS was in regular contact with officials at DfE from 9 March onwards. Whilst we cannot fault the willingness of individual officials to engage and help, there was a sense of the Department being caught 'on the hop' by wider Government announcements and struggling to plan ahead for guidance for schools. Meetings with officials on 16 March led us to believe that schools would not be asked to close, and this was further reinforced by the Coronavirus Bill launch on 17 March, which included powers to ensure that educational establishments could remain open.

22. On the morning of 18 March we briefed member schools that they should plan to remain open Exhibit NASS/01 [INQ000587836]. By 5 p.m., Gavin Williamson had announced that schools should close, except to a limited group of children. NASS was notified of this at 4.15 p.m. At the point of the announcement, there was no clear definition of which group of children would or would not be included within the definition of 'vulnerable' and special schools were left very uncertain if they were being asked to remain open to all students and to extend their opening period over the Easter holidays. This caused considerable stress to school leaders, some of whom already felt that they did not have sufficient staffing levels to remain open safely. Schools calling the DfE helpline to ask for the definition of 'vulnerable' were told by staff that they had 'no idea'.

23. On 19 March, we received confirmation from Government that schools would continue to be funded in the event of closure. This was very much welcomed by special schools. Promised guidance on vulnerable groups did not appear on that day. Whilst, in retrospect, a day's delay sounds like a small matter, it's hard to capture the stress these delays caused to school leaders as they tried to grapple with understanding what was expected of them and then how they might deliver it. Confirmation that staff in special schools would be treated as key workers was not issued until 20 March, leaving school leaders two days of uncertainty about how they would manage to staff their schools, which they believed they were being asked to keep fully open at that point.

24. On 20 March, DfE issued seven separate pieces of guidance to education settings. Specialist guidance to residential settings was not launched until 21 March, a Saturday. The guidance for education settings for vulnerable groups was not issued until Sunday 22 March. This pattern of a lag between guidance for mainstream settings and for specialist settings ran across the pandemic as a whole and created additional work for special schools and the organisations that support them, like NASS, trying to fill the gaps by anticipating the impact on these settings.

The availability and quality of information and guidance for special schools during the pandemic

25. As noted previously, there was a sense across the pandemic of the DfE playing 'catch up' with its guidance to schools. Guidance generally arrived several days after it was needed for mainstream schools and, several days after that, the position for special schools may be clarified, although not always. This was in no way due to the unwillingness of officials to engage – during the early part of the pandemic NASS had almost daily contact with officials from SEN and Disability Division within DfE. We welcomed officials engaging with us and listening to our views. However, we experienced frustration at the time taken for these views to make their way across the wider Department and on to other Departments, such as the Cabinet Office. We generally saw only some of the issues we had raised reflected in final guidance for schools.

26. Whilst we understand the intent of leaving guidance at a fairly headline level and leaving local interpretation to individual school leaders, this left a significant gap for schools and their supporters to fill. As a membership association, NASS attempted to bridge this gap with our own daily briefings to schools and individual support to members. Our experience was that official guidance rarely helped special school leaders to critically evaluate their own settings and determine appropriate actions. School leaders needed 'thinking partners' and sounding boards to talk through their planned actions and we had the sense that Government was unable to contain their anxiety.

27. The delays in Government issuing guidance, and then further delays before guidance was issued to specialist settings, meant that our schools often felt as if they were having to communicate information to parents and carers without being certain of its validity or if they were suggesting actions which would later be considered as 'wrong'. Parents and carers were clearly anxious about the implications of the pandemic and whether their children would be able to stay at school or would need to be returned home. Some parents were very keen to have their child at home, whilst others were very anxious about how they might manage their child's needs if they were not attending school.

28. Each change in guidance resulted in a period of stress for special schools, children and families as they had to reconsider what would need to change in school to accommodate the new rules. Special schools found implementing guidance on testing for covid in schools and guidance on the creation of 'bubbles' particularly challenging. Many of the children supported by our schools found testing intolerable, even with suggested adaptations of just swabbing nostrils, rather than throat and nostrils. Most of our schools lacked the dedicated space needed to set up testing rooms on site and, initially, access to tests was poor for some independent special schools.

29. The introduction of 'bubbles' was a major challenge for special schools and also where we saw some exceptional efforts made by schools to keep providing a service to children. In residential schools we heard about staff who lived in school, away from their own families, to ensure that the integrity of their bubble was maintained and that children could continue to access education. Such stories generally went unreported in the media where the widespread assumption was that schools were mainly closed.

30. The Government decision for schools to 're-open' on 1 June was a key moment when special schools' lost trust in Government guidance. In the run-up to the 1 June, Government published its evidence base for the impact of covid on children. I, and others, felt that this was not persuasive evidence that it was safe for all children to return to school. There were still significant gaps in understanding about the short and long-term impact of the virus on children and, at this point, schools were advised by DfE that masks were not needed. This was within a wider context where a much-publicised incident of a member of the public spitting at a member of transport staff had resulted in widespread calls for all transport workers to wear PPE. Many school staff were working with children who regularly spat at them but were being told that they did not need to wear masks. This was further compounded by advice from the major teaching unions that schools should not re-open. Whilst this was well-intentioned and addressed the anxieties of some staff, we were concerned that it might have a destabilising effect on schools that had successfully remained open and were delivering education and support to children.

31. The response to special schools from local government was very mixed. A few were particularly helpful in contacting schools at an early point to offer support and reassurance that funding would be maintained. A few local authorities became very concerned about independent schools 'profiting' from being paid for children who were not in school, even though all of the schools' costs remained during the pandemic and exceeded normal operating costs in some areas. No local authority issued direct guidance to special schools, but many implemented their

own data collections for attendance and staffing, which were experienced as unhelpful by special schools as they duplicated national data collection by DfE and took up valuable staff time completing.

Attendance

32. In the earliest phase of the pandemic (March 2020), NASS saw the majority of its member schools close briefly due to insufficient staffing. Beyond this, all of our member schools remained open to some children all of the time, except for the very rare occasion when a significant outbreak within a school meant that a brief closure was necessary. Some schools were able to offer places to all students across the pandemic – a fantastic achievement. Across the wider sector, we saw most schools able to accommodate between 50-75% of their usual student numbers during the first lockdown. Some created rotas to enable a larger percentage of children to spend some time on site each week. This became much more challenging in the second lockdown, once bubbles were a key feature, and staff would be required to work across several bubbles in this scenario. However, schools made huge effort to have as many children back in school as possible during this time. Where this was not possible, and where online learning was not appropriate, we heard of schools sending staff out to children's homes to support their learning. Our schools showed huge creativity and determination in continuing to meet children's needs.

33. All the children that attend our member special schools have high levels of need. Different needs presented different challenges during the pandemic. Schools for autistic children recognised the need to maintain as much of a predictable routine as possible for their students. Schools for children with complex medical needs recognised that they had the facilities and equipment necessary to ensure that they remained the safest place for their children to be. Children with slightly less complex needs were the most likely to be at home or on reduced attendance at school in those settings where 100% attendance could not be maintained.

34. It was rare for a parent to insist on their child staying away from school when a place had been offered. There were a small number of cases where a child with extreme clinical vulnerability was kept at home by a parent or carer. In all cases where children were not in school, their schools made huge efforts to maintain contact with children and their families. This included phone calls, online meetings and visits to the family home. Our schools are generally smaller than mainstream schools and this was an enabler to relationships with children and families being maintained.

35. Schools also maintained close links to children's placing local authorities. Where there were concerns about a child not attending and where the family lived a long way from school, the school was able to flag concerns with the local authority. Some local authorities were very responsive, but others did not appear to take action as a result of schools raising concerns.

Wellbeing

36. It is hard to generalise about the impact on wellbeing across children attending our schools. However, the start of the pandemic was stressful for the majority of children as it created uncertainty and changes in their everyday routines. Children were getting prepared for their Easter break from schools and many did not understand why, for some, they were having to go home earlier than they expected or, for others, to stay in school over the Easter break. Many children picked up on the anxiety in the adults around them and there were practical changes to accommodate, such as social distancing, handwashing and, later, the use of masks, which were very difficult for some children.

37. Notwithstanding the challenges for our children, schools reported that some children appeared to thrive during the pandemic. Schools reported that some children responded particularly well to class sizes being even smaller than they were usually and the usual demands of school life being reduced. Children were able to develop closer bonds with school staff, especially when staff and students lived together in bubbles. As a consequence, some schools reported that they saw far fewer incidences of behaviours that challenged, such as physical aggression, and used far fewer restrictive physical interventions with children. This was something that most schools had not anticipated.

38. Our impression is that children with SEN who attended Non-Maintained and independent special schools, overall, had a more positive experience of education during the pandemic than children in other settings. They generally had a higher chance of attending school for at least some of the time and maintained access to therapies and mental health support as a result of these being directly delivered by their schools. This was not the experience in other settings, where health-related input was extremely hard to secure and many children missed out on support.

39. Physical wellbeing was harder to safeguard during the pandemic, especially with regards to potential exposure to covid. Outbreaks in schools were a regular occurrence, although these were generally managed very well. Our schools found it challenging to operate using the safeguards suggested by DfE. Many children were unable to maintain social distancing and

regular handwashing. When wearing masks was introduced for adults in schools, many schools recognised the problems of children not being able to see the face of the staff members working with them. For children with hearing impairments, staff wearing masks denied them the opportunity to read lips and facial expressions. Autistic children found it distressing not to be able to see the familiar faces of staff members in full. Mitigations, such as masks with a transparent pocket over the mouth, were available but were prone to fogging over. This resulted in some schools taking the decision not to wear masks, knowing that this might increase their risk of exposure to the virus. Transmission risks were also increased in some settings by children requiring aerosol-generating procedures, such as tracheostomy care, or through children engaging in behaviours such as spitting at staff and other children. Some schools used transparent visors to manage this but access to these was not always possible.

40. Special school staff did an admirable job of supporting children's mental health across the pandemic – sometimes to the detriment of their own. Staff created spaces where children felt safe and maintained as much familiarity and routine as was possible. Most of our schools continued with mental health support delivered on site, delivered by counsellors, psychologists and therapists employed by the school.

41. Children that had not attended school full time during the pandemic saw a greater negative impact on their social and emotional development and the return to school full time in 2022 saw a period of readjustment as they adapted to being back in school. Schools reported that some children had to go through the same process of adjusting to school life that they had done when they first arrived at school. Schools felt a tension between allowing children time to feel secure in school again with pressure to be 'back to normal' with learning.

Safeguarding and Food Security

42. Our schools recognised that children with SEN are at a higher risk of abuse than their peers. Our schools' ability to remain open for the majority of their students across the pandemic meant that they were able to continue their existing safeguarding procedures in the main. Where choices had to be made about which children could be in school, risk assessments were used to help schools determine which children might be at greatest risk without a school placement. NASS has worked with Carolyn Eyre Safeguarding since 2005 and she developed guidance for our member schools, which was issued on 22 March 2020 Exhibit NASS/02 [INQ000587837]. Within the guidance we considered questions schools should ask to determine if children were safe being at home. We also anticipated greater use of online learning from home and considered online safety

of children working at home. Shortly after the Easter break, DfE issued safeguarding guidance to schools in anticipation of the phased return to school.

43. The Government's laptops scheme inadvertently created safeguarding risks for schools and children. Laptops were distributed to families with safeguarding software already loaded and active. After a couple of months, the Government took the decision to remove access to this software and to pass the responsibility back to schools. This was done with very little notice and created a very significant problem for schools where children did not live in the local area, as there was little practical way of the school directly installing replacement software on these devices. We also heard accounts of children's laptops being used by other family members for work as the family had no access to other devices.

44. There was considerable concern about food security for children not attending school. At the point school closures were announced, there was no clear Government guidance on how Free School Meals would be provided to children not attending school. The mainstream Government guidance worked on the assumption that children attending lived close to the school and that school staff might be able to deliver food parcels to the family home. This was not the case for the majority of children attending our schools, many of whom lived more than one hundred miles away from school.

45. Our schools were quick to recognise that food security may be an issue. In late March 2020, we received daily emails from members seeking guidance about the best action to take and seeking reassurance that Government financial support would be available where schools were incurring additional costs in order to maintain food security. Most of our schools quickly moved to sending supermarket vouchers to families with children at home. Again, this was complicated by children coming from a wide geographical area where there were different supermarkets which were local to them. This resulted in schools having to spend time and money ensuring that they sent a voucher that could be used at a supermarket local to the family.

46. The Government's policy on funding schools for additional costs during the pandemic was applied differently to different types of schools. Whilst our special academy and Non-Maintained Special School members were eligible to reclaim additional costs from Government, independent schools were not. Once the Free School Meals (FSM) voucher scheme came into force, most schools had access to vouchers that could be used at a range of settings. Independent schools were not included in this policy and had to continue to source vouchers individually for eligible families. This was an example of a policy that put food security at risk for a group of children simply as a result of the registration status of the school they attended. In practice, independent

schools went to huge lengths to ensure that children out of school had secure access to food but this was made very much harder than it needed to be and at a time where their efforts would have been best utilised elsewhere. We made extensive representations to DfE to complain about this policy and did not feel that there was a sound rationale for excluding independent schools from the scheme. We were told that Government was concerned about 'double funding' independent schools who would have already charged for meals within their fees but this was an argument that would have applied to all types of school, who were in receipt of existing school funding for meals.

47. Whilst our academy and Non-Maintained Special School members did have access to the national voucher scheme via Edenred, we heard many complaints from schools that this was difficult to use. Some schools gave up using the system after Easter 2020, preferring to pay for vouchers directly, due to the unreliability of the national system.

48. Independent special schools were also excluded from the summer holiday food schemes. Again, the rationale for this was unclear and unconvincing. The policy left families of children from independent schools having to contact their local authority for food support over the summer. In many cases, the local authority wrongly stated that the school was responsible for providing vouchers. Where families and children were at risk of going without food, we saw our member schools stepping in to provide vouchers. We saw the same interactions repeated with the Winter food grant in 2020 with many local authorities sending families back to schools for support, despite funding having gone to local authorities for this.

Online learning

49. In general, online learning was not highly effective for the majority of our children. Some children with fewer cognitive difficulties were able to do some online learning but this was not a meaningful option for many of our children with profound and multiple learning disabilities. Even when online learning was technically possible for children, the experience of learning was markedly different from being in school. A key factor in the success of our schools is the ability for staff to build strong and secure relationships with children. Over time, that development of consistent and trustworthy relationships is what enables children to feel safe enough to create the mental space for more academic learning. Working remotely did not allow for these relationships to wield the same influence. Schools were reliant on families acting as de facto teaching assistants to support learning, and engagement was variable due to many of our parents having unmet needs of their own. Engagement with learning remotely was lower than when children were in the classroom and most schools had to reduce the length and content of teaching

sessions. Schools noted that many children had difficulty starting sessions independently and that managing potentially disruptive behaviour was considerably more difficult online. Schools balanced maintaining contact with all learners and offering an education with maintaining their standards of behaviour and not losing the strong cultures established in schools before the pandemic. Some schools reported that sending home paper-based learning packs and resources was more effective than online learning.

50. For children without SEN, the assumption was that access to a laptop and a reliable broadband connection would be the key tools needed for children to access online learning. Whilst we would say that this was not the case for children with SEN, even accessing technology was challenging for some children in special schools. The DfE's 'Get help with technology' programme to support access to technology and connectivity, launched in 2020 should have been open to all disadvantaged children. However, in common with many other aspects of support during the pandemic, independent schools struggled to receive devices for their children. Academies and Non-Maintained Special Schools were able to order devices directly, but independent schools were not. Instead, they were told that their allocations had gone to the local authority that placed each child and would need to be ordered through them. Many local authorities were not aware of this and several refused to order devices, believing it was the school that should be doing this. Some schools bought laptops for children from their own funds, even though there was money allocated within the system for their children. We were frustrated by policies that potentially disadvantaged children simply because they attended an independent special school.

51. Schools reported that access to reliable broadband connections was a major problem for many families and some families spent excessive amounts on mobile phone data to try to support their children's learning. Where schools had secured laptops through the Government scheme, they were judged to be of poor quality and many broke after short periods of usage. Many schools had to make significant investments in technology to be able to stream lessons remotely. As previously noted, this was not something that was common practice for schools prior to the pandemic.

52. For children with more profound learning disabilities and physical disabilities, the potential for remote learning at home was low. Within school, great use is made of augmentative and assistive communication (AAC) to ensure that children have a 'voice' and can take an active role in life and learning. In practice, this requires both kit and people who know how best to use it. Neither of these could be simply replicated at home.

53. Remote learning activities varied considerably between schools and between children. In general, special schools did not simply take classes online with a traditional model of one teacher talking to a group of students. Where group remote sessions were used, they were more likely to be utilised as a means of keeping connections between students. Teaching was more likely to be delivered via one-to-one sessions. Special schools generally operate highly 'differentiated' and person-centred curricula, i.e. each child's learning is adapted according to their needs. This approach tended to continue with remote learning but was very challenging to deliver. Schools reported being able to continue with some talking therapies via online sessions, such as counselling and some aspects of speech and language therapy, but this was not possible for therapies requiring a physical connection with the child.

54. The DfE did make efforts to gather online learning resources for children with SEN and consulted with the sector in May 2020. The initial collection of resources made available was very small and of limited use for most special schools. When DfE introduced a requirement for schools to offer remote learning in preparation for the lockdown in the run up to Christmas 2020, there was considerable anxiety from our schools about how this might be done meaningfully and effectively. By this point, the Oak Academy had been established to support schools with online learning and there was a strand considering online learning for special schools. NASS and its member schools were able to engage with this, but our schools did not make widespread use of the resources created as they were still not sufficiently nuanced to be valuable for children with more complex and overlapping needs.

55. By the January 2021 closures, most schools had a clearer sense of what they could and could not offer and for which children. By this point, a majority of children were attending their special school face to face and remote learning was being used in specific circumstances, not as an approach for large groups of children. However, schools reported that children, families and staff had a growing sense of fatigue at this point and whilst schools felt better prepared, securing engagement from children and families was more of a challenge.

The impact on children's learning of school closures and remote learning

56. The pandemic undoubtedly had an impact on children's learning in our schools. It is hard to quantify this across such a diverse group of children, and this was not as simple as being able to say that children had missed out on specific parts of curricula or had failed to achieve expected milestones. For many children, their educational experiences prior to joining their special school had been disrupted by being out of school or being placed in a setting which could not meet their needs. Few children arrived at their special school ready to learn and needed to develop trust and

security in their new setting to be able to make use of education. The skill of special schools is in getting children to a point where they are re-engaged with learning and can see the contribution it will make to their later life successes. The pandemic disrupted these secure learning relationships for some children and most schools reported having to go through a period of re-engagement when schools were open in full again, very similar to how they would approach working with a student new to the school.

57. Many children identified as having SEN struggle to retain, consolidate and transfer prior learning – particularly those at an early stage in their education or those with higher cognitive needs. Schools note that any gap in learning, e.g. for school holidays, results in a need for schools to recap on areas of knowledge or skill attained in the past. In this sense, the pandemic required special schools to use the same skills as they would ordinarily, albeit on a much bigger scale.

58. By the time all schools 're-opened' most of our schools had been open to almost all children for some time. Very few children in special schools will have had the same experience as their mainstream peers of being out of school for considerable periods of time. Even so, there was a period of transition for children and schools as the focus moved back to more formal learning and more demands were placed on children, such as being back in classroom sessions with a larger number of students and greater expectations. Some children took time to re-adjust to this.

Online Safety

59. NASS issued guidance to its members ahead of formal guidance being released to schools by DfE in April 2020. We did not believe that the DfE guidance was sufficiently tailored to the needs of special schools and children with SEN. Schools took a range of approaches to informing parents and carers about online safety from training sessions to sharing posters and to making staff available for any queries. Most schools specifically adapted their safeguarding/child protection policies to reflect children being off site and learning remotely. Where parents did not have extensive knowledge on online harms, schools did have concerns that young people may be exposed to harmful materials at home.

60. For children who remained in residential care over the pandemic there were challenges in maintaining contact with families. Video calling was routinely used but schools faced challenges in ensuring privacy of both the callers and other children at the school. It was not always possible to allocate a specific, separate space from which to make calls.

The use of non-pharmaceutical interventions in schools and classrooms

61. As previously mentioned (para 39), many special schools struggled to fully utilise these interventions during the pandemic. Social distancing was an impossibility for many of our children as they required very 'hands on' care with adults remaining in close proximity. It was also common for staff to be in close proximity to bodily fluids, working with children who dribbled, spat or required support for toileting.

62. Government advice on whether PPE was needed in schools was a source of stress to our members. In the early part of the pandemic, advice was that schools did not need PPE as children were less likely to become seriously ill with the virus. However, our school staff were working with children who could not follow the general mitigations against virus transmission and there was significant anxiety amongst some special school staff that they would be placing themselves at high risk of transmission. Schools struggled to access PPE in the early stages of the pandemic.

63. By the time face coverings were mandated by Government in education settings, many of our schools had determined that they posed too significant a barrier in the relationships between staff and children and risked too much potential distress to children. However, this wish to put the needs of children first left some staff feeling extremely vulnerable. Conversely, the advice for schools to stop wearing masks was made at a time when the number of cases was very high and groups of children and adults were still considered to be extremely clinically vulnerable. Schools for children with complex medical needs were left to make decisions about whether or not they should continue to wear masks and 'return to normal' when there were still significant potential risks to children, and some staff, in the school from the virus.

64. The introduction of Test and Trace in June 2020 did not appear to have considered the potential impact on school staffing sufficiently and particularly for children's residential settings. The initial requirement for contacts to isolate for 14 days threatened to leave schools with insufficient staff to be able to operate safely. Schools with cases were directed to their local Public Health Authority, where support was extremely variable. Most schools were left to make their own decisions about if and how staff should isolate.

65. The introduction of mandatory asymptomatic testing in January 2021 was a major challenge to special schools. Logistically, many schools struggled to identify a dedicated testing space and space to store tests. Testing was extremely distressing to many children with SEN who could not tolerate the sensation of the swap in their throat or up their nostrils. Even adapting the tests to be

nostril only did not make them accessible to a large group of children. Special schools were recommended to continue testing until April 2022, 2 months after this recommendation had been halted for mainstream settings.

66. Special schools went to great lengths to create and maintain 'bubbles' – particularly in residential settings which functioned as the children's homes. We heard of staff who moved out of their family homes and lived on site at school to maintain the integrity of their bubble – an amazing commitment to children. However, it was often difficult for schools to maintain bubbles. For example, many schools relied on local authority transport to take children to and from school. Groups of children using the same taxi might not reasonably be expected to form part of the same bubble at school. There appeared to be recognition from DfE that even though bubbles in schools were encouraged, there was little possibility of them being a reality for most special schools.

Exams and Grades

67. Most of our schools offer at least some formal qualifications for some students and, in some schools, the majority of children took at least some GCSEs during the pandemic. Schools reported that they did not have confidence in the grading algorithm and some schools felt that young people had received grades which were significantly higher than they might have achieved under usual assessment procedures.

68. Whilst schools did not have confidence in the grading algorithm, many special schools noted the positive aspect of judging children on work undertaken, rather than primarily on a final examination. This approach was judged to be fairer for children with SEN and to increase their chances of attaining formal qualifications.

Overall Impact on Children

69. My view is that the children who attended special schools during the pandemic were less likely to have experienced the same disruption to education as their peers, in terms of school attendance. Despite the challenges of some children not living close to their school, we saw some amazing efforts made by school staff to keep children in school and to maintain contact and relationships with children and families where this was not possible.

70. This does not mean that children were unimpacted by the pandemic. In paragraphs 56-58, I have set out some of the key challenges that children have faced as a result of the pandemic.

Given the daily challenges our children experience, it is not always easy to attribute ongoing difficulties to a specific cause. My observation is that the impact is more likely to have been seen in children who were placed in special schools after the pandemic and who lived through it in other education settings. We have seen a significant increase in the numbers of children placed in special schools since the pandemic, most commonly autistic young people and/or those with mental health needs. These children may not have had access to specialist support at a point when their needs were first emerging or being recognised.

71. The response of our schools has been to build services that support children's social and emotional needs alongside their educational needs. Schools have invested in mental health support in school with many consciously taking on a 'trauma informed' approach which recognises the role of trauma in creating barriers to learning. For many children, the experience of the pandemic will have been traumatic. Even in circumstances where children continued to attend school, their school life was different in every aspect. Those who were not attending school in the earlier part of the pandemic lost some of their hard-won connections in school with staff and other children. Children will have picked up on the fear of the adults around them, even when school staff were actively managing their own feelings. Alongside this, many children will have experienced bereavements – of family members, fellow students and school staff. Even in cases where losses were not absolute, reduced connections with peers and trusted adults would be experienced as losses. Children in residential settings in bubbles may have had extended periods of time where they did not have physical contact with their families. Throughout this time there was huge uncertainty about if, when and how the pandemic would end.

72. For special schools, there has been a particular investment in repairing and restoring the relationships needed for children to feel safe to learn again. Many schools reported a fairly smooth return to school for most learners with children being happy to be back in school and for things to be 'normal' again. This was not generally sustained. As children began to feel more settled in school, we heard reports of increased incidents of children expressing their distress about their pandemic experiences through verbal or physical aggression. There was a sense that children were now feeling safe enough to express that distress. I witnessed an extremely thoughtful and compassionate response from staff in our schools as they supported children to try to make sense of their pandemic experiences.

73. The Government programmes aimed at helping children 'recover' from the pandemic were of very limited value to special schools and the children who attended them. In my mind, this stemmed from a failure to conceptualise the likely losses of children during the pandemic. Government interventions primarily focused on 'lost learning' as if this could be identified and

remedied as a discrete entity. The formal Government offer focused on 'catch up' funding and the National Tutoring Programme. Both of these focused on giving extra learning time to children – through activities such as summer schools, extra time in school or additional tutoring. These were all extremely difficult for special schools to administer or for children in the schools to benefit from. For our students, we could not simply identify 'chunks' of learning that had been lost and which could be easily replaced.

74. The Catch-up Premium was launched by the DfE in November 2020 with the stated aim of getting children back to a 'full curriculum'. Whilst there was acknowledgement from DfE that this might not be the case for special schools, there was little in the way of specific guidance that gave a clear steer for how they should utilise the funding. Whilst independent schools were included in this funding stream, unlike many of the others, there was confusion about how the money had been distributed and whether it had gone to each school's host local authority or to the authorities which had placed children. This resulted in delays in schools accessing funding and time spent by schools chasing the payments with different authorities.

75. The National Tutoring Programme was announced in June 2020. Initially, Non-Maintained and independent schools were not included in the programme. After NASS lobbied on this, Non-Maintained Special Schools were included but independent special schools remained unable to access the programme until 2022, when funding was distributed to local authorities who place children at the schools. There did not seem to be any logic to which programmes and funding streams that independent special schools were and were not included in. Most special schools struggled to make good use of the funding and there were very few approved tutors who were specifically qualified to work with children with SEN or had experience of doing so. NASS and other SEN stakeholders made representation to DfE but this did not result in any significant adaptations to the programme.

76. Relationships between schools and local authorities were very variable over the course of the pandemic. Some authorities were very supportive at the start of the pandemic, reassuring schools about continued funding and relaxing some reporting requests for student data. Local authorities were placed in a difficult position where they maintained responsibility for children but were unable to undertake monitoring visits or attend children's annual Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) reviews. As the pandemic progressed, schools saw local authorities seek ever increasing amounts of data about schools and children – not all of which it was clear that they could make use of. This was not a good use of schools' time, which was best spent focusing on supporting children to be in school and learning. Schools felt that they were often not being trusted to get on with the job of educating and caring for children.

77. Many EHCP annual reviews moved online during the pandemic. This allowed for some continuity in reviewing progress and ensuring that EHCPs continued to reflect children's needs. However, with fewer local authority staff at work during the pandemic, schools reported significant delays in local authorities carrying out amendments following reviews. Practice prior to the pandemic was not strong in this area with many children facing delays in receiving amended EHCPs. However, during the pandemic, most local authorities fell behind in this work and schools reported an average delay of between 6-12 months after an annual review before an amended EHCP was issued. This risked children not getting access to all the services needed to meet their needs or as generally happened, schools delivering the provision they felt was needed without confirmation that the local authority would fund this.

78. Online learning has continued to be used in special schools in limited circumstances. It is still felt by special schools to be a far less effective way of supporting and educating children with SEN. We have seen some innovative use of robots being deployed to family homes where a child is temporarily unable to attend school and have seen that some young people are able to form an effective learning relationship via the robot. We have seen most schools invest in technology in the classroom to enhance children's learning experiences face-to-face. Remote technology has been widely adopted by schools for meetings and training sessions – NASS moved the majority of its training for schools online during the pandemic and has only returned to a limited number of face to face events.

Lessons Learned

79. Our schools demonstrated care for their students on a daily basis during the pandemic. Special schools kept services going for as many students as possible in as 'normal' a school environment as they could. However, school staff generally felt as if they were working in isolation, without the right guidance at the right time. For special schools, this was compounded by guidance which rarely considered their children's or school's needs in the first iteration, and which required both interpretation and lobbying for further SEN-specific guidance to make sense of. Even though NASS had regular contact with engaged officials at DfE, I had the sense that schools were a fairly minor consideration for Government and that the DfE was not always at the heart of discussions about the pandemic. Significant changes in guidance came with little warning, especially when the decision was taken to move the nation to a stage of 'living with

covid'. Schools were asked to introduce and then stop practices at short notice and rarely with a persuasive case being made for either action.

80. The programmes and support that Government put in place for schools largely excluded special schools and the children within them. For our children, additional funding to support mental health support and additional therapies would have had a higher impact than funding designed to catch children up to a defined 'normal' which was rarely theirs to start with. Whilst I understand Government's need to ensure that public funds were used well, funding ended up not being used by special schools or was used at a lower impact than had it been used for another purpose.

81. In the event of a future pandemic, I think it is likely that special schools would do all they can to stay open to as many children as possible. Special schools have shown that this can be achieved and we should ensure that children with SEN are prioritised so the risk of their education being disrupted is reduced. However, we would wish to see significant changes in how special schools and their children are supported during a pandemic:

A) Children must be a key group when Governments are planning for a future pandemic. The anticipated impact on children was unhelpfully minimised during the last pandemic with early assumptions that children would be less likely to catch the virus and less likely to suffer severe illness than adults. From this stemmed the idea that the main impacts on them would be lost learning from not being in school. Had we anticipated that the main impacts on them would be on their mental health and relationships, the suggested mitigations and recovery supports would have been very different.
B) DfE should be enabled to play a larger role in Government during a pandemic.
C) Government planning for a future pandemic must consider the likely impact on children with SEN. This must be a starting point of any planning and guidance, not a later adaptation. If we had planned for what would work best for children with SEN – strenuous efforts for children to maintain contact with school and a focus on their relationships in school and mental health – we would arguably have had an approach that worked better for all children.
D) DfE should make use of learning from this pandemic to make evidence-based policy for supporting children with SEN, disabilities and medical conditions so that special schools can have confidence in the actions they are asked to take.
E) Any Government support or funding aimed at supporting children with SEN should be available to all schools, regardless of designation. It makes no sense to exclude independent schools from such support – if it is targeting children then all schools need

easy access to it. Government's distribution route via local authorities caused unacceptable delays and barriers to funding being received and DfE needs to develop a route by which they can make direct payments to all schools in the event of a similar national emergency.

F) DfE needs to ensure that any guidance it gives special schools is consistent with both its own guidance to other groups and guidance to other sectors by other departments. The guidance for residential special schools did not always match the guidance for children's social care and this, in turn, frequently did not match the guidance given to adult social care settings. These discrepancies left school staff uncertain and reduced their trust in the guidance they were given.

G) Planning for schools needs to recognise that education is delivered via a relationship – between the child and an educator. To lessen the impact on children, we must ensure that school staff are supported as well as possible to maintain services. There has been no recovery programme to support staff working in schools, nor to recognise the significant impact the pandemic had on them. In the immediate wake of the pandemic we saw a large exodus of staff from the profession – often those staff who had given everything during the pandemic and just ran out of energy to keep on doing so. This did not appear to have been anticipated by Government.

H) Government must do more to support and recognise the role of charities and professional bodies that support schools during major incidents. Stakeholder reference groups need to be established more quickly and effectively at the start of the pandemic and clear expectations created of how members will disseminate information to their interested parties. Where Government is effectively asking organisations to 'take the strain' in interpreting guidance for their audiences and being the first point of call for advice and guidance, they need to ensure that they are resourced to sustain this. NASS was proud to serve its member schools across the pandemic and to provide support and guidance that special schools valued. However, we are a very small organisation with limited staff resources. The gaps in Government guidance led to my small team working exceptionally long hours to try to ensure that these had as little impact as possible on our member schools.

Further Information

82. This module rightly considers the impact of the pandemic on children. However, it is difficult to talk about this without also mentioning the impact on staff working in special schools. The successes our schools have with children are as a direct result of the expertise and dedication of the staff who work with them. Our experience, as noted previously, is that special school staff

were poorly considered and supported by Government during the pandemic. James Waite, a principal of 2 NASS member schools, has captured the experience of school leaders supporting children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs in an excellent journal article and we have included this as Exhibit NASS/03 [INQ000587835].

83. The stresses placed on special school leaders were huge and continued for almost two years. School leaders often felt caught between Government advice, doing the best for children and families and maintaining a duty of care to their workforce. These demands were frequently competing and conducted at a time where most parties were operating at high levels of anxiety and stress. Special school leaders had to take the role of 'containers', absorbing and managing those stresses – frequently without any reliable and effective form of external support to allow them to process and manage their own stress. In late 2019, NASS had started a pilot programme with Talking Heads to offer clinical supervision to school leaders. The pandemic hit early into this programme and provided a good test of the value of school leaders having a trusted and enduring external relationship in which they could process their own thoughts and feelings about their roles. We know the school leaders within the pilot valued supervision particularly during the pandemic and we wish it could have been routinely made available to all school leaders. NASS offered its own weekly drop-in sessions for special school staff where they could come for an hour each week and talk about their experiences with people who would listen and understand. This was a valuable resource for some leaders but it was sometimes hard to get school leaders to recognise their own needs and vulnerabilities and to give themselves 'permission' to address these.

84. NASS saw several excellent special school leaders step away from the role in the aftermath of the pandemic. Some had concluded that they were not willing or able to manage the stresses of the role and felt exhausted and burnt out by their pandemic experiences. As noted, there was no national programme aimed at supporting the recovery of school staff post pandemic. This compounded a feeling expressed by many special school staff that their work during the pandemic had been largely invisible and undervalued, both by Government and the wider public. Special schools remained open throughout the pandemic, but the national media messaging was of schools being closed and children being at home. Schools managed many of the same issues faced by hospitals and care homes in managing infection control but with little recognition that they were doing so. The move to 'living with covid' phase happened very quickly and with little time for schools to plan. Schools were still grappling with high numbers of cases, vulnerable children (and sometimes staff) and mitigations which were difficult for them to implement. At a point where schools had battled to maintain their services for children, and staff were exhausted,

they were pushed to return to 'normal' as quickly as possible. In my view, the way this phase of the pandemic was managed was particularly harmful to the wellbeing of school staff.

85. In preparing this statement, I have spoken to staff in NASS member schools. For most, it is the first time they have had time and space to reflect on the pandemic since it ended. There is a rightly held sense of pride for how schools managed and continued to support children during this time but discussions about the pandemic quickly moved to staff recalling their isolation, anxiety and stress during the pandemic. My observation is that many of these emotions have had to be buried post pandemic as there simply has not been space or opportunity to process them. It has been clear that many staff are still in touch with the pain of their experiences once space is made to explore them. I have concerns that this phase of the inquiry will make these feelings 'live' for school staff again and that there are relatively few sources of support available to them. I would highlight the work of organisations like Education Support, who do a great job in supporting education staff welfare and NASS is investing in having trained supervisors on-site at our annual conference in October, which coincides with the time when witnesses will be giving oral evidence. However, I would like to see Government think about the impact of the pandemic on education staff and make a greater investment in education staff wellbeing. Effective learning and support for children cannot happen outside of relationships with well-qualified and well-supported education staff. We fail children by failing to address the needs of the adults who support them.

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: ___23 June 2025_____