

Dated: 6 August 2025

WITNESS STATEMENT OF DILWYN ELLIS ROBERTS

I, Dilwyn Ellis Roberts, was the General Secretary of Undeb Cenedlaethol Athrawon Cymru (“**UCAC**”) between September 2018 and 2022. I returned to UCAC as a field officer in April 2025. My office address is Penglais Road Aberystwyth Ceredigion SY23 2EU.

1. I make this statement on behalf of UCAC in response to a letter dated 15 May 2025, sent on behalf of the Chair of the UK Covid-19 Public Inquiry (the “**Inquiry**”). This statement is made for the purposes of Module 8 of the Inquiry, which is examining the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children and young people in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. As requested, this statement focuses on the period of time between 1 January 2020 and 28 June 2022.

Introduction

2. The pandemic has had a lasting impact on pupils, teachers and the education system in Wales. We have seen increasing numbers of children and staff suffering mental health issues. We now face worrying rates of absences and attendance issues, as well as a teacher retention and recruitment crisis.
3. Although the Welsh Government seemed to be more willing to listen than some other UK administrations, at times it was difficult to understand the reasoning behind the decisions made. We need to ensure, going forward, that there are effective plans in place for future crises, which take account of considerations around the Welsh language, and a valued

and supported workforce that is able to provide the education Welsh children and young people deserve.

4. This statement seeks to address these fundamental issues, and in doing so, is structured as follows:

- a) Structure and role of UCAC;

Engagement with Welsh Government and other stakeholders

- b) Learning and education prior to the pandemic;

- c) Learning and education during the pandemic;

Welsh language

School 'closures'

Online learning

Safeguarding and food security

Examinations and grading

- d) Keeping schools safe – non-pharmaceutical interventions and infection prevention and control;

Face coverings

Testing

- e) Impact of the pandemic;

Pupils

Staff

- f) Lessons learned and recommendations.

(A) Structure and role of UCAC

5. UCAC is Wales's own education union for teachers, head-teachers, lecturers and tutors, with 3,643 members as at the date of this statement. UCAC provides support for its members in the Welsh language and all its publications are in the Welsh language only. UCAC offers a full professional service to its members, combining tailor-made advice and support with a strong union voice in campaigns. We are passionate about supporting and protecting our members, and about working towards an education system that meets the needs of Wales and everyone who lives here.

Engagement with Welsh Government and other stakeholders

6. UCAC engages with the Welsh Government through a combination of formal and informal mechanisms, with the aim of influencing education policy, representing the interests of its members, and contributing meaningfully to the development of the education system in Wales. The union is an integral member of the Social Partnership framework, which facilitates structured collaboration between the Welsh Government, local government and trade unions representing all school staff on matters relating to the education sector workforce. These mechanisms include participation in the Workforce Partnership Council (the national forum for discussing employment matters across the public sector in Wales) and engagement in sector-specific groups, such as the Education Workforce Council, or Welsh Government working groups on areas like curriculum reform, workload, or professional learning.
7. Trade unions are routinely consulted by the Welsh Government on proposed legislation and statutory guidance, changes to national policies (such as the Curriculum for Wales, ALN (Additional Learning Needs) reforms, and assessment frameworks) and budgetary decisions affecting school funding and teacher pay and conditions. This engagement typically includes written submissions, meetings, presentations and contributing to focussed and public consultations.
8. Teachers' pay and conditions in Wales have been devolved since 2018, and UCAC has a critical role in participating in the Independent Welsh Pay Review Body process, submitting evidence and recommendations on pay, workload, and working conditions, and responding critically to recommendations and Welsh government proposals.
9. UCAC also engages with Welsh Government as a member of advisory groups and taskforces on specific issues in order to facilitate the implementation of education policies, such as professional standards, teacher induction and training, and school leadership and governance.
10. Aside from these more formal forms of engagement, UCAC also campaigns to influence public opinion and political decision-making and provides briefings to and attends meetings with Senedd Members and Westminster Members of Parliament.
11. In terms of employer engagement, UCAC engages with employers at both school and local authority levels, as well as with the four regional consortia. At school level, UCAC supports

individual members and participates in consultations with schools on matters such as staffing, health and safety, and the implementation of policies. The majority of policies are negotiated at the local authority or regional level, where formal trade union meetings take place. These meetings involve union representatives and local government officials and provide a forum for structured consultation and discussion. It should be noted that, due to a revised Welsh Government approach, the consortia structure is being terminated at the end of this academic year.

12. Throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, UCAC had a proactive role in engaging with Welsh Government, by means of discussions and consultation meetings. This engagement worked towards:

- a) safeguarding the welfare of educators and pupils;
- b) considering the best strategies to maintain education standards;
- c) ensuring that the welfare of teachers, lecturers and pupils was the focus of strategies to deal with the pandemic; and
- d) ensuring that any potential changes to employment terms and conditions were proportional.

13. UCAC voiced concerns regarding safety, consistency, and clarity in school operations. The union provided commentary on matters such as advice on good practice in health and safety as well as on the shift to online learning.

14. In Social Partnership meetings the then incumbent General Secretary of UCAC served as chair of the trade unions and association representing school staff. They were GMB; NAHT; NASUWT; NEU; UNISON; UCAC; UCU; UNITE; VOICE as well as the non-TUC affiliated ASCL. He also served as Vice-chair of the Social Partnership meetings between Welsh government; the Welsh Local Government Association ("**WLGA**") and trade unions, chairing a substantial number of those meetings. The trade unions representing school-based staff were also represented in the broader Social Partnership meetings with the minutes and oral reports being shared with all trade unions.

15. This approach to engagement provided an opportunity to ensure meaningful discussions with partners as well as officers of bodies such as Public Health Wales; the Consortia; the Future Generations Commissioner; and the Children's Commissioner for Wales offices. It was an opportunity to advocate for the teaching profession and to be proactive in challenging issues relating to health and safety.

16. Meetings with Welsh Government were held regularly, and this principle of engagement was established from the outset. The then Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, informed trade unions representing education staff individually of the proposed decision that schools across Wales would close 'for statutory provision of education' at the latest on 20 March 2020.
17. The regular engagement continued within the principle of Social Partnership with the WLGA providing secretarial support and facilitating meetings. Within UCAC we were clear in communications with our officers and with the general membership. It was recognised as good practice that we did not inundate our members with information at a time when consistency was crucial to the health and well-being of our members, pupils and students.
18. So, in summary, from very early on in the pandemic, Welsh Government was in regular contact with the unions. Whilst the Welsh Government sought the unions' cooperation to ensure that messages were disseminated, the unions used the meetings with the Welsh Government to ensure consistency. The regular meetings with Welsh Government lasted for the duration of the pandemic. However, there were areas where it felt that our advice and requests were falling on deaf ears. See for example the reopening of schools, addressed further below, and the decision not to include school staff in the list of workers entitled to a Covid vaccine.

(B) Learning and education prior to the pandemic

19. UCAC's 2019 annual conference addressed many issues relating to the state of education in Wales prior to the pandemic [DER/01 - INQ000649248]. Something of great concern to the education profession was the lack of adequate funds to ensure effective delivery of education, particularly in light of prospective changes and reforms, such as the new curriculum and new ALN legislation. The Conference called for more funding and for greater transparency and less bureaucracy in matters pertaining to school budgets. The education workforce called for adequate time, resources and training to plan and deliver the numerous changes facing the profession in 2019, and there was a call for recognition that Professional Learning should be the prerogative of all teaching staff, including supply staff, thus enabling the workforce to successfully introduce any new ventures. In addition to the issues facing all schools in Wales, Welsh-medium schools faced the challenge of

securing Welsh-medium resources and Welsh-medium training for the delivery of the new curriculum.

20. The aspiration of a million Welsh speakers by 2050 [DER/02 - INQ000649249] highlighted the need for more Welsh-medium schools and more Welsh-speaking teachers, and this inspired some of the motions in the 2019 conference – such as a call for opportunities for the workforce to hone their Welsh language skills and an assurance that those who receive bursaries for following PGCE courses through the medium of Welsh do actually pursue a teaching career in the Welsh sector.
21. 2019 was a time when teachers were slowly coming to terms with the demands of the new curriculum and this required a greater emphasis on health and wellbeing, expressive arts and the role of pioneering schools.
22. An unsustainable workload on teachers was a recurring theme and was exacerbated during the pandemic. The motions in the 2019 Conference called for a formal investigation into the demands on teachers, as well as an assurance that teachers would be paid for any supplementary duties.
23. Furthermore, there were pre-pandemic signs of high parental demands on teachers, which appear to have increased substantially since. We called for equality of status and parity of respect for pupils, teachers and parents.

(C) Learning and education during the pandemic

Welsh language

24. For children from English speaking homes who were pupils at Welsh-medium schools, lockdowns were challenging not only in terms of being isolated from their peers, but to some degree or other, they were isolated from the Welsh language. They received lessons (sometimes live, on-line lessons) in Welsh from their schools, but they missed out on the natural day-to-day interaction in Welsh. Some parents felt very concerned and there were some who decided to remove their children from Welsh-medium education as they felt they had been deprived of the opportunity to practise the Welsh language [DER/03 - INQ000649250]. These feelings instigated Rhieni dros Addysg Gymraeg (Parents for Welsh Education) to conduct a survey, asking parents to share their experiences during

the pandemic and the challenges they faced as non-Welsh speaking parents whose children attend Welsh-medium schools.

25. UCAC called on the Welsh Government to create a robust strategy to assist parents to 'cope throughout the next period of learning' and stated that there were specific challenges within Welsh-medium education. We also called for investment in on-line work, stipulating that digital equality had not been developed and that there was a real need for a strategy of some kind.
26. Teachers worked hard to address issues such as those experienced by non-Welsh speaking parents and went to some lengths to provide bilingual guidelines to accompany work set, so that parents could assist their children. New resources were also prepared, for example '*Ti yw F'Anwres*' based on the English book '*My Hero is You - a Storybook for Children on Covid-19*', translated by Cardiff University's Welsh Department [DER/04 - INQ000649251].
27. Aberystwyth University also conducted research on the issue and presented its conclusions and recommendations to the Welsh Government in May 2021 [DER/05 - INQ000649252]. Another document was published in 2023, which identifies certain policy and practice implications for Welsh Government [DER/06 - INQ000649253]. In 2024 a booklet was produced, '*Partner, Promote and Provide*', providing guidelines for schools how to support and promote the use of Welsh and Welsh language skills amongst parents and pupils [DER/07 - INQ000649254].

School 'closures'

28. In our meetings with the Welsh Government in Spring 2020, no mention was made of any specific date(s) for returning to school [DER/08 - INQ000649255]. We made it clear at the time that no pupil, teacher or leader should return to formal education until it was safe to do so [DER/09 - INQ000649256]. However, despite rigorous campaigning, UCAC was disappointed when the Cabinet Minister decided to reopen schools for all age groups on 29 June 2020. In a letter addressed to the Minister for Education, Kirsty Williams, unions expressed the feeling of betrayal by this decision. To all appearances the regular discussions between the Minister and the unions had been transparent, honest and constructive, but the decision was contrary to the recommendation of the unions to limit the opening of schools to certain age groups. UCAC felt that the decision seemed to go against

four of the five principles which the Minister had maintained would be crucial in the process of making any decision.

29. With the decision having been made, UCAC produced a pamphlet specifically for school leaders, providing useful advice and guidelines prior to the reopening of schools [DER/10 - INQ000649257]. The potential reopening of schools led to a number of further meetings and discussions with the Welsh Government. UCAC continued to have serious concerns and felt that the risks of reopening were unacceptably high, unnecessary and irresponsible. A long list of questions was prepared for the Welsh Government, mainly practical issues which had not been sufficiently addressed in any statement or announcement [DER/11 - INQ000649258].

30. On 11 December 2020, UCAC welcomed the Welsh Government's decision to move secondary schools and colleges to on-line learning as part of a national effort to prevent the transmission of Covid-19. However, UCAC was concerned that a similar decision was not made on a national level for the primary sector, resulting in inconsistencies across Wales. We assured members that we were pressing on Welsh Government to provide clear guidance for the Spring Term, noting that UCAC was continuing to discuss with the Government and with Local Authorities in preparation for January [DER/12 - INQ000649259]. We further noted the hard work of members and their care for pupils.

31. On 8 January 2021, we welcomed a statement by Welsh Government not to reopen schools and colleges for face-to-face teaching [DER/13 - INQ000649260]. I stated, *"The decision is based on medical information and keeps to the Education Minister's key principle that it is only through 'evidence and information' that the 'confidence of parents, staff and students is to be acquired'".* I went on to note *"An early statement will provide schools and colleges with the opportunity to plan in advance, in order to ensure education for pupils and students. It will also enable parents to make the necessary arrangements, bearing in mind that a significant number of school staff are also parents"*.

32. On 29 January 2021, the First Minister announced that younger children could return to school after the half-term holiday if the coronavirus rates continued to decline. In response to this statement, I stated, *"Everyone is eager to see the reopening of schools and colleges and face to face teaching when it is safe to do so – there are many advantages to children, young people, families and staff. We welcome the fact that the final decision regarding gradual and flexible return to school will be made on the basis of the latest scientific and medical evidence. We note the need to ensure adequate warning for schools and colleges"*

to be able to make the appropriate arrangements, before half term. We will continue to discuss with the Government, local authorities and further education colleges to ensure that any return to school will be as safe as possible to everyone. In those discussions we will definitely raise the importance of vaccinating staff as well as ensuring support for the mental, emotional and physical health of staff and pupils” [DER/14 - INQ000649261].

33. There then followed, on 5 February 2021, a further announcement that Foundation Phase pupils could return to school after half term. We saw this as a positive step that Welsh Government had shared the latest scientific and medical evidence, allowing Foundation Phase pupils to return to school, and welcomed the fact that additional measures had been stipulated in order to increase safety, including regular testing for staff and an investment in resources and adjustments [DER/15 - INQ000649262]. However, there was still genuine concern expressed by Foundation Phase teachers, therefore we urged local authorities and schools to take into account local conditions before making decisions, and to consider a gradual, flexible and planned return to school.

34. We continued to urge a careful and gradual approach throughout the rest of the pandemic, to ensure the safety of pupils and staff as well as the continuation of teaching and learning. This included, in January 2022, supporting mandatory face coverings [DER/16 - INQ000649263].

Online learning

35. The most obvious pedagogical change as a result of Covid was a much greater dependence on technology. ‘Necessity is the mother of invention’, and the pandemic certainly led to a honing of IT skills, even amongst the most reticent users of technology. When schools were forced to close, live on-line lessons were the best option for many, but videos of lessons had to be distributed to some pupils who had challenges with broadband and Wi-Fi reception. At times, teachers felt that pupils used technology and its challenges as a pretext for non-attendance.

36. UCAC was aware of the challenges that these new methods of instruction posed to individuals and in an e-mail sent to members, we reassured members by stating that we had thoroughly examined the impact of any new methods of teaching and assessment introduced because of the pandemic [DER/17 - INQ000649264].

37. In a message to members on 9 June 2020, we shared a list of questions which we deemed necessary to share with the Welsh Government as they were contemplating reopening schools and where there was a possibility of a hybrid situation. Amongst the questions posed were the following:

- a) Who will be responsible for preparing and delivering distance learning when many teachers will be expected to be present in schools teaching face to face?
- b) What advice will be provided for mainstream schools in relation to pupils with ALN – especially those who normally receive one to one support?

38. For some, technology provided the means of 'seeing' someone from outside the family and the fact that they could meet their teachers and friends on-line offered reassurance at a turbulent time. Some primary school pupils did, however, feel unsure and were rather wary of learning via technology, especially as they were required, in some cases, to sit in a room on their own whilst their siblings and parents were seated in another room and working on their own devices. Younger pupils are more tactile and active and need more direct stimuli – aspects which are more challenging to deliver electronically.

39. The challenges of adapting to the new digital way of working were referred to in the union's newsletter in June 2020 [DER/18 - INQ000649265]:

"Distance learning raises several issues. The main source of satisfaction in teachers' daily work is the opportunity to work with pupils. Not being able to see our pupils is just as difficult for teachers as it is for the pupils in our schools. In addition, there is the challenge of ensuring that we are ready to get to grips with the digital challenges; I am now an expert on various digital platforms, and I respond to numerous e-mails every week. Teachers and school leaders feel that they are working longer hours during the pandemic."

40. In our Covid panel, held in March 2025, we heard from members that they felt that there were some positive consequences to the technological skills acquired and the electronic means of teaching which were enforced upon schools during the pandemic [DER/19 - INQ000649266] [DER/20 - INQ000649267]. The skills acquired have been put to good use to enhance face-to-face lessons in schools. The possibilities of Teams and Zoom have also provided opportunities for distance learning, which has alleviated some of the problems associated with small classes and the delivery of minority subjects (especially in sixth forms). In the current financial climate, digital learning offers a solution to some

budgetary challenges. However, we must bear in mind that face-to-face delivery is the optimum method of instruction and serious consideration needs to be given to other options – weighing the pros and cons and examining whether distance learning is a viable and fair option. Not all learners find it easy to engage with distance learning. Distance learning post-Covid can only realistically be considered for post-16 courses and should be carefully organised and supplemented with regular face-to-face input.

Safeguarding and food security

41. The vast majority of school staff were very concerned about the safety of their pupils and went above and beyond the requirements of their job to ensure their wellbeing. During our meeting with our Covid panel, referenced above, members spoke of making regular phone calls to those who did not buy into the on-line lessons and Headteachers keeping in touch with pupils and parents on a daily basis. In some schools, teachers were asked to phone their form/class to make sure that all was well. These individual phone calls were a means to identify any matters of concern. Some pupils in rural areas felt isolated and very lonely. One primary school headteacher stated, *“Now [during Covid] they were not seeing anyone, as they lived in remote places. At one time, some children came to the door just to see someone other than their parents”*. Another teacher on our Covid panel said, *“Wellbeing was the key thing. Initially, no one was concerned about the academic progress”*. There was also reference to a school’s concern about pupils accessing free school meals, *“There were many FSM pupils at the school and an attempt was made to send them food and laptops. They wanted to give the children opportunities and make sure they didn’t get more lost. The school worked hard, but it is difficult to say how effective all the efforts were, under the circumstances”*.

Examinations and grading

42. On 14 January 2021, UCAC wrote to Qualifications Wales expressing serious concerns about any attempt to conduct external assessments rather than examinations before the end of the academic year [DER/21 - INQ000649268]. We pressed for an announcement regarding the arrangements for the summer assessments. Not only did the union demand specific arrangements, but we also noted that the arrangements should be unalterable and able to withstand the worst-case scenario of no face-to-face teaching during the following weeks and months. We favoured a system dependent on teacher assessment and based on a variety of evidence, with internal moderation as well as school to school moderation

in order to ensure consistency and integrity of results, which would consequently lead to confidence in the system and the outcomes.

43. Later that month, we welcomed Welsh Government's announcement that learners would receive grades awarded by their school or college, based on a range of tasks completed during GCSE, AS and A level courses [DER/22 - INQ000649269]. However, we noted some concern and stressed that clarification was needed regarding the finer details. In particular, we highlighted the need for external moderation arrangements, between schools, to be part of the plans, in order to reinforce confidence, consistency and credibility in the grades.
44. In March 2021, we expressed serious concern regarding the summer assessment arrangements. As the final details and arrangements for schools unfolded, UCAC sent letters to the Education Minister [DER/23 - INQ000649270] and the Children's Commissioner [DER/24 - INQ000649271]. In these letters we stated that, although we had welcomed the decision to cancel formal examinations, developments during the month of March and the implications of the final arrangements had led to concerns regarding the further workload which would be incurred by schools and pupils.
45. In January 2022, the Minister for Education announced the return of formal examinations in the summer. We welcomed this as providing as much assurance as possible to pupils and staff in the circumstances [DR/16 - INQ000649263].

(D) Keeping schools safe – non-pharmaceutical interventions and infection prevention and control

Face coverings

46. Following an announcement in August 2020 that Local Authorities and individual schools would decide whether face coverings would be mandatory in schools, UCAC welcomed the statement, but criticised its timing and the additional responsibility it would place on headteachers.

Testing

47. On 22 December 2020, we sent a joint-union letter to the Welsh Government regarding lateral flow tests, noting that it was not reasonable to expect staff to organise, manage and staff Covid testing centres, whilst they were also having to provide vital education and pastoral support [DER/25 - INQ000649273].
48. Furthermore, in September 2021, we flagged that some of the advice shared with schools needed to be reconsidered [DER/26 - INQ000649274]. Amongst the concerns expressed by UCAC was the advice regarding self-isolation when household members had Covid symptoms. We called for a balance between ensuring that as many pupils as possible receive face-to-face education and slowing down the spread of the virus and urged the Welsh Government to reconsider self-isolation for pupils as they awaited the result of PCR tests. At the time, pupils were allowed to attend school whilst they waited for the result.

(E) Impact of the pandemic

49. As we look back, it is evident that the pandemic has adversely impacted the wellbeing of pupils and staff. Staff and parents have noticed that young people's social skills have deteriorated, as have attitudes such as respect and resilience. A cohort of pupils did not sit important examinations and have found it difficult to adapt to traditional assessments and examinations. Teachers' morale is low and due to the additional workload and stress experienced during Covid, there is an increasing number of teachers suffering from 'burnout', which has led to an increase in teacher attrition.

Pupils

50. Teachers are very aware of the issues facing vulnerable children and students and the pandemic heightened our members' concerns for learners whose circumstances at home further exacerbated an already challenging situation. The union was eager to assist members and drew members' attention to relevant literature, containing pertinent information as to how to assist disadvantaged pupils [DER/27 - INQ000649275].
51. During the union's Covid panel (referenced above), members expressed the view that online lessons in the initial weeks of lockdown were more important in wellbeing terms than in terms of pedagogical value [DER/19 - INQ000649266]. Listening to their thoughts

and reflections on the pandemic, it was obvious that the wellbeing of vulnerable pupils was at the forefront of the workforce's minds. In some instances, teachers were telephoning vulnerable pupils individually, on a daily basis to ensure all was well, a task which evidently increased the workforce's workload, but which was accomplished out of a true concern for pupils. These telephone calls also revealed some difficulties which pupils were encountering in an unprecedented situation, such as the loneliness of rural children, as well as fraught domestic relationships.

52. Our members feel that Covid has had a far-reaching impact on pupils – their social and emotional skills, their behaviour and their attitude towards their work. School attendance has deteriorated and consequently educational standards have declined [DER/28 - INQ000649276] [DER/29 - INQ000649277] [DER/30 - INQ000530901] [DER/31 - INQ000649279]. Poor attendance leads to a deterioration of educational standards which can potentially have a direct impact on behaviour. Teachers constantly refer to a decline in standards of behaviour, with a lack of respect towards members of staff and an absence of self-discipline. During a meeting of our Covid panel, teachers referred to an increasing tendency for pupils to walk away when being reprimanded. There seems to be a general lack of resilience and an inability to face any difficult or unpleasant situation.

53. Mobile phones and social media are often blamed for children's worsening behaviour and are often a reason for a confrontation between pupils and staff. Pupils seem to derive 'comfort' and 'reassurance' from their phones and are unwilling in some instances to leave their phones out of their sight. On the other hand, mobile phones often play a pivotal role in disputes and bullying amongst peers.

54. In UCAC's annual conference in 2025, behaviour was an important theme for the attendees. There was a general concern about pupils' and parents' behaviour and the impact of poor behaviour on teachers' safety and morale. Seven out of the twenty-two (32%) motions were linked to behaviour [DER/32 - INQ000649280]. It seems that something must be done immediately to address the problems faced by schools. It is difficult to evaluate the extent to which the pandemic is to blame for the decline in behaviour, however it certainly is a contributory factor. The report published by Estyn in May 2025 substantiates many of the points made by our members in various forums and calls on Welsh Government to take firm steps to address the issue [DER/33 - INQ000649281].

Staff

55. As the initial rumours of a highly infectious virus escalated into headline news of a global pandemic, UCAC quickly took steps to protect the safety and wellbeing of its members. A decision to postpone our annual conference was made before any national restrictions. It was emphasised that this decision was being made as the union's priority was the health and wellbeing of our members [DER/34 - INQ000649282]. We called for consistency throughout Wales in terms of teachers' wellbeing, health and expectations, and provided constant reassurance that union staff members were at hand to assist and support members [DER/35 - INQ000649283]. Members were also signposted to other specialist agencies, such as Education Support [DER/36 - INQ000649284].
56. Every important announcement from Welsh Government was supplemented by a message from UCAC to its members, directing members to relevant documentation and providing the necessary assurance that they were not facing this unprecedented situation alone.
57. Concern for the workforce's wellbeing led to the distribution of a questionnaire in November 2020 [DER/37 - INQ000649285]. The motive for this questionnaire was a concern about the potential impact on staff members and pupils should they have to self-isolate during the Christmas period. The timing of school terms meant that there was a genuine risk of self-isolation at Christmas and the dates of school terms also meant that school leaders would be under an obligation to 'track and trace' at Christmas. This was at a time when teachers and leaders were exhausted after a period of working relentlessly at all hours, for the benefit of pupils, parents and the community.
58. The union was eager to ensure that there were no financial disadvantages for staff as a result of the pandemic and addressed issues such as the extra costs incurred (for example as a result of travelling further distances to the 'hubs') and the possibility of claiming tax relief for additional household costs as a result of working from home [DER/38 - INQ000649286]. Supply teachers found themselves in a very difficult position – many did not have contracts and therefore found themselves with no source of income. UCAC members and officers brought pressure on the agencies and the Local Authorities and campaigned hard on behalf of supply teachers. These campaigns bore fruit, resulting in agencies paying 'furlough' and some Local Authorities supporting and remunerating their supply teachers [DER/18 - INQ000649265].

59. Long Covid was recognised by TUC Cymru at quite an early stage, and UCAC urged members to contribute to a union questionnaire on the matter [DER/39 - INQ000649287].
60. The prevalence of mental health issues affecting school staff and pupils led to wellbeing being the theme of UCAC's Annual Conference in 2021, which was held on-line for the second consecutive year.

(F) Lessons learned and recommendations

61. It became evident during the pandemic that political decisions were made without due attention to the practical details and logistics. The voice of the unions was key in this respect – drawing attention to matters that had been neglected or overlooked, wittingly or unwittingly. UCAC was at the forefront of all efforts to uphold the wellbeing of teachers, school leaders and college lecturers, drawing attention to the challenges faced on the chalkface, as well as the complexities of employment terms and conditions at such an unprecedented time. This, in turn, highlights the commitment of the workforce to the wellbeing of pupils.
62. Welsh Government seemed to be more willing to listen than some other UK administrations. There were regular meetings and opportunities to present arguments and some of these meetings did lead to changes and improved conditions for the education workforce. However, there were also a number of disappointments; at times it was difficult to understand the reasoning behind the decisions made.
63. The pandemic has had far-reaching consequences, which have outlasted the regulations and restrictions of the Covid years. It seems that we have now reached a crisis point, with teachers complaining of deteriorating behaviour and attitudes, resulting in teacher attrition and fewer applicants for teacher training courses. Consideration needs to be given to the reason for the depleting numbers. Were teachers valued sufficiently during the pandemic? For example, teachers were not amongst the workers prioritised to receive the Covid vaccination, although they were expected to return to school.
64. As the only teaching union which offers all our services through the medium of Welsh, we are particularly concerned about the Welsh language and Welsh medium education. It is doubtful whether the Welsh Government paid adequate attention to the challenges faced by pupils, parents and staff when the language of instruction was not the same as the

language of the home. More work needs to be done to cater adequately for such circumstances.

65. Teachers play a vital role in society and this needs to be sufficiently acknowledged by the Welsh Government. It is not enough to just listen to the education workforce, the workforce needs to feel that those who listen are willing to take action. It is through working in tandem that the young people of Wales will enjoy the highest possible standard of education, and that teaching will be a valued and worthwhile career and will therefore attract new recruits.

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

Dilwyn Ellis Roberts

Dated: 6 August 2025