

Witness Name: Claire Archbold

Statement No: 1

Exhibits: CA/M8/001 - CA/M8/106

Dated: 22 July 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF CLAIRE ARCHBOLD

I, Claire Archbold, will say as follows: -

1. In this statement I will outline the significance of The Executive Office's (TEO) responsibilities concerning Children and Young People and online safety. TEO has been involved in various matters pertinent to the Inquiry.
2. Due to the diversity of TEO's operations and the involvement of other officials both within and outwith TEO in relation to the issues identified in the TEO Rule 9 request for Module 8, it is not possible for me to comment on every fact and matter arising from my own personal knowledge. I have highlighted where this is the case throughout the course of my statement and confirmed the source for this information in these circumstances.

Part A – Roles and responsibilities of The Executive Office Relevant to Children and Young People Online

3. At the outset, it is worth mentioning that data protection is not a devolved matter in NI (Northern Ireland Act 1998. Schedule 3, para 40) **[Exhibit CA/M8/001 - INQ000147489]**, it is a reserved matter, and the NI institutions can only deal with it with the approval of the Secretary of State. The regulator, Ofcom, operates on a UK-wide basis and the Online Safety Act 2023 **[Exhibit CA/M8/002 - INQ000642745]** is also UK-wide.
4. That said, online safety of children is a multi-faceted subject matter, and many subjects which touch on it are devolved, including policing and criminal law, child protection and education. Below I set out the issues on which the work of TEO has touched on this subject, no matter how marginally.

5. The overarching purpose of TEO is to support the Executive, and to further the departmental mission of wellbeing for all through improved relations, outcomes and governance. Within this, there are three key elements:
 - governance, support and secretariat for the Executive (broadly analogous to the Cabinet Office) under the leadership of the Head of the Civil Service;
 - Private Offices for the First Minister and deputy First Minister (broadly equivalent to 10 Downing Street); and
 - specific policy development and delivery functions on matters relevant to the remit of the Department.
6. The structure and responsibilities of the Executive Office have been detailed within the first Corporate Statement for Module 8, provided by TEO **[Exhibit CA/M8/003 – INQ000642746]**.
7. The Department of Education (DE) in Northern Ireland is the lead Department responsible for pre-primary, primary, post-primary and special education and the youth service. The Department of Health (DoH) is responsible for the health and wellbeing of children and young people. The Department of Justice (DoJ) is responsible for the Youth Justice of children and young people. Consequently, these departments may be better placed to provide further detail on areas in which the Inquiry is interested.

The Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland 2016)

8. The Executive Office was formally known as the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMdfM). OFMdfM held responsibility for the Children and Young People's Unit until 9 May 2016. The legal means of transferring OFMdfM functions relating to Children and Young people to the DE and Department for Communities (DfC) was The Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 **[Exhibit CA/M8/004 - INQ000642747]**.
9. The changes to the Departments were due to a commitment given in the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government 2011 – 2015 **[Exhibit CA/M8/005 – INQ000642748]** to reduce the number of Departments for the next Assembly mandate.
10. The Stormont House Agreement dated 23 December 2014 **[Exhibit CA/M8/006 – INQ000642749]** confirmed that the number of departments should be reduced from 12 to 9 in time for the 2016 Assembly election, with the allocation of departmental functions to be agreed by the parties. In a statement to the Assembly on 2 March 2015 **[Exhibit CA/M8/007 – INQ000642750]**, the First Minister announced the decisions

that had been reached by the Executive on the new departmental structures. The Stormont House Agreement and Implementation Plan, published on 17 November 2015 [**Exhibit CA/M8/008 – INQ000642751**], made some further amendments, which refined the Executive's earlier decisions. These changes had been agreed by the Executive on 17 November 2015 [**Exhibit CA/M8/009 – INQ000642752 and Exhibit CA/M8/010 – INQ000642753**]. In pursuance of the agreement made on 17 November 2015, the Northern Ireland (Stormont Agreement and Implementation Plan) Act 2016 was enacted on 4 May 2016.

11. The newly formed nine departments incorporated all the powers, functions and services of their 12 predecessor departments. No functions were eliminated, nor were any policies terminated because of the restructuring. The Departments Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 [**Exhibit CA/M8/011 – INQ000642754**] provided the framework in primary legislation for these changes, by renaming seven of the existing departments and dissolving three others. The Department of Justice and Department of Education titles remained unchanged. The Department of Education kept its existing functions and took over a range of further children's responsibilities, which included the Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 [**Exhibit CA/M8/012 – INQ000642755**]. The Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016 was the legal means of transferring those functions.
12. As a result of the transfer of functions, TEO gained the Strategic Policy and Innovation Unit and retained its role in supporting the Executive and the central institutions, including the coordination of the Programme for Government, International Relations, Civil Contingencies and the Executive Information Service. Policy responsibility for Equality, Good Relations, the Together: Building a United Community strategy and Delivering Social Change also remained. Sponsorship and support of the Attorney General's Office, the Equality Commission, the Commissioner for Public Appointments, the NI Judicial Appointments Commission, the Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry, the Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation, the Victims and Survivors Service and the Commissioner for Victims and Survivors were retained.
13. The following functions relating to Children and Young People were transferred from the department:
 - The Departments (Transfer of functions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2016, transferred statutory provision of The Commissioner for Children and Young People (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 [**Exhibit CA/M8/013 - INQ00042756**], to the new Department for Communities [**Exhibit CA/M8/004 – INQ000642747**].

- The functions of The Child Poverty Act 2010 [Exhibit CA/M8/014 - INQ000642757] were transferred to the Department for Communities (DfC).
- The Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 [Exhibit CA/M8/012 – INQ000642755] transferred to the Department of Education (DE).

14. Information that had been held within OFMdfM's Records Management system regarding the Children and Young People Unit was transferred in its' entirety to the Department of Education [Exhibit CA/M8/015 – INQ000642758]. TEO, therefore, does not hold any information pertaining to the Children and Young People's Unit. The Department of Education would be better placed to provide further relevant information in relation to the time period from January 2015 to present.

Ministerial and Senior Civil Servant Responsibility during the Specified Period

15. The following table identifies the responsible Ministers and senior civil servants within OFMdfM / TEO during the specified periods.

1 January 2015 - 31 December 2019		
Name	Role	Date
Peter Robinson MLA	First Minister	June 2008 - September 2015
Arlene Foster MLA	First Minister	September - October 2015 (Acting)
Peter Robinson MLA	First Minister	October 2015 - January 2016
Arlene Foster MLA	First Minister	January 2016 - January 2017
Martin McGuinness MLA	deputy First Minister	May 2007 - January 2017
Jonathan Bell MLA	Junior Minister	May 2011 – May 2015
Michelle McIlveen MLA	Junior Minister	May 2015 – September 2015
Emma Little -Pengelly MLA	Junior Minister	October 2015 – March 2016
Alastair Ross MLA	Junior Minister	May 2016 – March 2017
Jennifer McCann MLA	Junior Minister	June 2012 – March 2016
Megan Fearon MLA	Junior Minister	May 2016 – March 2017
Sir Malcolm McKibbin	Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service	September 2011 - June 2017
Sir David Sterling	Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service	June 2017 – August 2020

1 January 2020 – 28 June 2022		
There were no First Minister or deputy First Minister in post from February 2022		
There were no Ministers in post from May 2022		
Name	Role	Date
Arlene Foster MLA	First Minister	January 2020 – June 2021
Paul Givan MLA	First Minister	June 2021 – February 2022

1 January 2020 – 28 June 2022		
There were no First Minister or deputy First Minister in post from February 2022		
There were no Ministers in post from May 2022		
Name	Role	Date
Michelle O'Neill MLA	Deputy First Minister	January 2020 – February 2022
Gordon Lyons MLA	Junior Minister	January 2020 - February 2021 and March 2021 – June 2021
Gary Middleton MLA	Junior Minister	February 2021 – March 2021 and June 2021 – May 2022
Declan Kearney MLA	Junior Minister	January 2020 - May 2022
Dr Philip Weir	Special Advisor	January 2020 – February 2022
Emma Little-Pengelly	Special Advisor	January 2020 – June 2021
Lee Reynolds	Special Advisor	November 2020 – June 2021
Kim Ashton	Special Advisor	January 2020 – May 2020
Dr Dara O'Hagan	Special Advisor	January 2020 – February 2022
Stephen McGlade	Special Advisor	January 2020 – February 2022
John Loughran	Special Advisor	January 2020 – February 2022
Michelle Canning	Special Advisor	October 2020 – February 2021
Richard Bullick	Special Advisor	July 2021 – February 2022
Sir David Sterling	Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service	June 2017 – August 2020
Dr Jenny Pyper	(Interim) Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service	December 2020 – September 2021
Dr Jayne Brady	Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service	June 2021 – To date
Dr Denis McMahon	Permanent Secretary	July 2021 – September 2023

28 June 2022 – To Date		
Name	Role	Date
There were no First Minister or deputy First Minister in post February 2022 – February 2024		
There were no Ministers in post May 2022 – February 2024		
Michelle O'Neill MLA	First Minister	February 2024 – to date
Emma Little-Pengelly MLA	deputy First Minister	February 2024 – to date
Aisling Reilly MLA	Junior Minister	February 2024 – to date
Pam Cameron MLA	Junior Minister	February 2024 – to date
Stephen McGlade	Special Advisor	March 2024 – to date
John Loughran	Special Advisor	March 2024 – to date
Ronan McGinley	Special Advisor	March 2024 – to date
Alastair Ross	Special Advisor	March 2024 – to date
Dr Ashleigh Perry	Special Advisor	March 2024 – to date
Dr Jayne Brady	Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service	June 2021 – to date

28 June 2022 – To Date		
Name	Role	Date
Dr Denis McMahon	Permanent Secretary	July 2021 - September 2023
David Malcolm	(Interim Permanent Secretary)	June 2024 - To Date

16. TEO does not have any direct functional responsibilities specifically targeting children and young people in terms of their online lives. Consequently, evidence pertaining to the Executive Office's work in this area has been primarily derived from submissions presented to the First Minister and deputy First Minister by the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) Division, or engagement by the Good Relations and Building a United Community Division. **Exhibit CA/M8/016 - INQ000642759** provides an overview of TEO's activities relating to Children and Young People.

Good Relations and Building a United Community

17. TEO Good Relations and Building a United Community Division provides funding to delivery partners to provide Good Relations programmes to children and young people, within the context of delivering on its wider policy and strategic objectives and plans including those which operate across departments. A key challenge for delivery partners during the Pandemic was to maintain service delivery which at times meant adjusting the ways in which programmes were delivered [**Exhibit CA/M8/017 - INQ000277296** and **Exhibit CA/M8/018 - INQ000642760**].

18. The Executive Office's Good Relations Programmes were cognisant of the impact the pandemic and lockdown potentially had on children and young people in the online environment, particularly in areas of high deprivation and segregation. As a result of lockdown, it was recognised that children and young people were likely to be spending longer periods of time interacting online, and that they were therefore more likely to be exposed to disinformation and harmful material/activities. Whilst this is not specifically documented in any TEO held papers, sources such as The Social Switch Project [**Exhibits CA/M8/019 - INQ000642761**], BBC News [**CA/M8/020 - INQ000642762**] and INEQE Safeguarding Group [**CA/M8/021 - INQ000642763**] helped inform how we assessed risks around increased online activity.

19. There are also academic papers online that point to increased online time amongst young people during lockdown including escapism amongst adolescents, gaming addiction and impacts on mental health [**Exhibit CA/M8/022 - INQ000642764** and **CA/M8/023 - INQ000642765**].

20. TEO was also informed by Ofcom's research '*UK's internet use surges to record levels*' which followed surges in online activity during the pandemic [**CA/M8/024 -**

INQ000642766]. The following focuses on engaging with disinformation **[Exhibits CA/M8/025 - INQ000642767, CA/M8/026 - INQ000642768 and CA/M8/027 - INQ000642769].**

21. Delivery flexibilities were introduced to the Good Relations programmes during the pandemic lockdown, which led to significantly more delivery online. This was to ensure the continuation of engaging young people with positive alternatives and healthy interactions through focused good relations work **[Exhibit CA/M8/028 - INQ000289116].** Many of the Good Relations projects delivered during the pandemic and continue to this day included workshops addressing broader issues impacting young people including online safety, media (including social media) disinformation, and mental health Exhibited at **[CA/M8/029 - INQ000642770 and CA/M8/030 - INQ000642771].**
22. The Good Relations Division are currently conducting a strategic review of TEO's Good Relations policy. This review includes the growing importance of tackling misinformation, disinformation and improving media literacy, as there is evidence that online actions act as a catalyst for rioting **[Exhibit CA/M8/031 - INQ000615316].** The Division has been engaging with Ofcom through a Media Literacy group, specific to Northern Ireland, to promote and collaborate on activities to improve media literacy here **[Exhibit CA/M8/032 - INQ000642773].** The Media Literacy Group aims to build media literacy into a refreshed strategic framework on Good Relations.
23. TEO's Departmental Children's Champion, Mr Chris Gardner who leads the TEO Good Relations division, regularly engages with the Northern Ireland Children's Commissioner and other departmental children's champions through Children's Champions meetings facilitated by the NI Commission for Children and Young People (NICCY) **[Exhibit CA/M8/033 - INQ000642774]** and participation forums **[Exhibit CA/M8/034 - INQ000642775].** These engagements focus on issues pertinent to young people and will continue to do so as work continues to progress on media literacy. Meeting notes from the NICCY Participation forum provide evidence of engagement and discussion by a range of stakeholders and departmental officials on issues related to online safety [examples are provided at **Exhibit CA/M8/035 - INQ000642776].**

Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Division (EVAWG)

24. In March 2021, the Northern Ireland Executive directed that a Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls (EVAWG) be developed. The Executive Office leads on this using a whole of Government and whole of society approach. The EVAWG Strategic Framework 2024 – 2031 **[Exhibit CA/M8/036 – INQ000642777]** has been co-

designed by a wide range of people representing different organisations and viewpoints from across society and Government, the community and voluntary sector and other sectors, including people with lived experiences. The Strategic Framework sets out a 7-year roadmap to develop the society wide transformation needed to end violence against women and girls and will be supported by a series of Delivery Plans.

25. The first Delivery Plan **[Exhibit CA/M8/037 – INQ000642778]**, which covers 2024 to 2026, includes key actions to drive community investment, increase collaboration, raise awareness and support change through bespoke campaigns and messaging.
26. The Executive mandate for the EVAWG Strategic Framework **[Exhibit CA/M8/036 – INQ000642777]** is gender-specific, and it works closely with the DoJ/DoH-led Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy which is gender-inclusive. The EVAWG Strategic Framework focuses on actions to prevent violence against women and girls and recognises that this will include actions such as relationship education, which target men and boys as well. It relates to harms to women and girls of all ages.
27. Online harm is a significant concern within the Strategic Framework. The primary responsibility for this matter lies with the Department of Health – led Online Safety Strategy. The EVAWG Strategic Framework has six Outcomes, of which two are *Healthy, respectful relationships* and *women and girls being safe and feeling safe everywhere*. Within this pillar (being and feeling safe), online abuse is identified as a specific area of risk.
28. Responses from Northern Ireland Young Life and Times and the Northern Ireland Life and Times Surveys on online abuse questions, 2022 to 2024 **[CA/M8/038 - INQ000642779]** highlight the psychological impact of cyberbullying, the spread of misinformation, and the importance of protecting personal information to prevent privacy breaches. It advocates for a safer and more responsible online environment.
29. In August 2022, the EVAWG division commissioned two research reports ‘*Every Voice Matters! Violence Against Women in Northern Ireland*’ and ‘*It’s Just What Happens’ Girls’ and young women’s views and experiences of violence in Northern Ireland*’ **[Exhibits CA/M8/039 – INQ000642780 and CA/M8/040 – INQ000642781]**, both of which focussed on women and girls’ experiences of violence across Northern Ireland. The report entitled ‘*It’s just what happens’ - Girls’ and young women’s views and experiences of violence in Northern Ireland*’, published in August 2023 **CA/M8/040 – INQ000642781]**, acknowledged that social media was useful as a platform for learning about particular forms of violence. However, it was also recognised that social media

exposed girls / young women to misogyny, objectification and high-profile cases where reporting violence was shown to be ineffective.

30. Learning about online safety in schools was highlighted within the August 2023 report. While young women were generally aware of the procedures for reporting social media accounts for sending unwanted requests, online harassment or sending unsolicited images, and how this action could be completed promptly, it was recognised that new accounts could be easily created, often resulting in the online abuse resuming. The respondents felt that there was a lack of focus on the harasser and instead the onus was placed upon them to contact the Police, tell a teacher or remove themselves from the social media platform.

31. Ofcom was a member of the TEO EVAWG co-design process and since then, officials within TEO have continued to have ongoing engagement with Ofcom, in particular in relation to its new UK-wide roles under the UK Online Safety Act. EVAWG regularly receives Ofcom reports once they have been published. Examples of this are:

- Ofcom annual Children's Media Lives research **[Exhibit CA/M8/041 – INQ000642782]**.
- Ofcom research – Violent Content and Children **[Exhibit CA/M8/042 – INQ000642783]**.
- An Introduction to the Online Safety Act and Protection of Children Consultation **[Exhibit CA/M8/043 – INQ000642784]**.

32. In addition, TEO EVAWG has assisted with Ofcom's online safety consultations by providing responses on behalf of TEO and by helping to publicise them to stakeholders.

33. Four consultations are relevant:

- In November 2023, Ofcom published a consultation report entitled '*Protecting People from Illegal Harms Online*' **[Exhibit CA/M8/044 – INQ000642662]**. Subsequently, a submission entitled '*Response to Ofcom Consultation on Protecting People from Illegal Harms Online*' **[Exhibit CA/M8/045 – INQ000642664]** was presented to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in February 2024.
- In December 2023, Ofcom informed TEO that they would be launching a consultation on draft guidance for service providers publishing pornography on their online services **[Exhibit CA/M8/046 – INQ000642788]**. This guidance set out

to assist providers in complying with their legal obligations, including age assurance under the Online Safety Act 2023 **[Exhibit CA/M8/047 – INQ000642791]**.

- In April 2024, Ofcom launched a consultation on ‘Ofcom’s *Three-Year Media Literacy Strategy*’ **[Exhibit CA/M8/048 – INQ000642677]**.
- In May 2025, Ofcom launched a consultation on “*Draft Guidance – A Safer Life Online for Women and Girls*”. Subsequently, a submission providing a TEO response to this consultation was presented to the First Minister and deputy First Minister in May 2025 and it is hoped that the response will issue to Ofcom in June.

Executive Minutes and Papers

34. The following paragraphs set out the Executive Committee meetings detailing decisions made related to children and young people's online lives. The papers provided were presented to the Executive Committee by various Northern Ireland Executive Ministers.

Executive papers discussed from 1 January 2015 – 31 December 2019

- 29 January 2015 - the Executive Committee agreed to the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety commissioning the Safeguarding Board for NI to develop a draft NI e-safety strategy and action plan on behalf of the Executive **[Exhibits CA/M8/049 – INQ000642793 and CA/M8/050 – INQ000642794]**.
- 28 May 2015 - the Executive agreed to the paper on Addressing Bullying in Schools presented by the Minister for Education **[Exhibits CA/M8/051 – INQ000642795 and CA/M8/052 – INQ000642796]**. The paper set out to identify a single definition of bullying. This would enable the Department to tailor and update guidance to schools on best practice to deal with emerging forms of bullying such as cyber bullying.
- 24 March 2016 - the Executive agreed to the publication of Co-operating to Safeguard Children and Young People in NI paper presented by the Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety **[Exhibits CA/M8/053– INQ000642797 and CA/M8/054 – INQ000642798]**. This paper acknowledged the risks of children and young people misusing digital technologies. The Executive also agreed the Child Poverty Strategy **[Exhibits CA/M8/055 – INQ000642799 and CA/M8/056 - INQ000642800]** and the Child Poverty Annual Report 2014-2015 presented by OFMdFM **[Exhibits CA/M8/057 – INQ000642801 and CA/M8/058 - INQ000642802]**.

- 14 December 2016 - the Executive agreed to proposals within the Draft Children's & Young People's Strategy for 2017-2027 - for Public Consultation paper presented by the Minister of Education [**Exhibits CA/M8/059 – INQ000642803, CA/M8/060 – INQ000642804, CA/M8/061 - INQ000642805 and CA/M8/062 - INQ000642806**]. The consultation recognised the 'online world' that children and young people currently live in, and identified the associated risks, including, cyberbullying, exposure to harmful material and dangers of online grooming.

The following Executive Papers were discussed from 1 January 2020 – 28 June 2022

- 24 April 2020 – The Executive approved the creation of, and joint funding for, a Mental Health Champion. As contained in the Executive paper presented by the Minister for Health; Covid-19 and Psychological Wellbeing and Mental Health, and Creation of a Mental health Champion [**Exhibits CA/M8/063 - INQ000048459 and Exhibit CA/M8/064 – INQ000086905**].
- 10 September 2020 - The Executive agreed [**Exhibit CA/M8/065 – INQ000065451**] the following papers presented by the Minister for Communities. Child Poverty Annual Report 2019-20 [**Exhibit CA/M8/066 – INQ000642807**] and to Extending the Child Poverty Strategy 2016-19 to May 2022 [**Exhibit CA/M8/067 – INQ000642808**].
- 19 November 2020 - The Executive discussed the Department of Justice Legislative Programme - Approval for Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill [**Exhibits CA/M8/068 – INQ000065441 and CA/M8/069 – INQ000642809**]. The handwritten minutes show that the Minister of Justice discussed a review of law relating to sexual exploitation of children and upskirting [**Exhibit CA/M8/070 – INQ000642810**].
- 10 December 2020 - The Executive agreed the paper presented by the Minister of Education 'The Executive Children and Young People's Strategy 2020-2030' [**Exhibits CA/M8/071 – INQ000048503 and CA/M8/072 – INQ000642811**].
- 4 February 2021 - The Executive agreed to the publication of the Strategy for Looked After Children: A Life Deserved: 'Caring for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland'. The paper was circulated jointly by the Minister of Education and Minister of Health [**Exhibits CA/M8/073 – INQ000048514, CA/M8/074 – INQ000649489 and CA/M8/075- INQ000649490**].

- 15 April 2021 - The Executive agreed the Child Poverty Annual Report 2020-21, introduced by the Minister for Communities **[Exhibits CA/M8/076 – INQ000048525, CA/M8/077 – INQ000649491 and CA/M8/078 - INQ000649492]**.
- 20 May 2021 - The Executive agreed the Cross-Departmental Covid-19 Vulnerable Children and Young People's Plan, introduced by the Minister of Health. This paper set out to promote the safety and well-being of children and young people including the use of online technology. **[Exhibits CA/M8/079 – INQ000236751, CA/M8/080 – INQ000212970 and Exhibit CA/M8/081 - INQ000649504]**.
- 27 May 2021 - The Executive agreed and endorsed the paper introduced by the Minister of Education, Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement – “*A fair Start*” - *Final Report and Action Plan* **[Exhibits CA/M8/082 – INQ000236752, Exhibit CA/M8/083 – INQ000649505, CA/M8/084 - INQ000649506 and Exhibit CA/M8/085 - INQ000649507]**.
- 16 December 2021 - The Executive agreed the paper introduced by the Minister of Education and that the Executive Children and Young People's Strategy 2020 - 2030 draft three-year Delivery Plan for the period 2021 – 2024 could be issued for public consultation **[Exhibits CA/M8/086 – INQ000065552 and CA/M8/087 – INQ000642812]**.

The following Executive Papers were discussed from 28 June 2022 – to present

- 9 May 2024 - The Executive noted the “*A Fair Start*” *Final Report and Action Plan - Progress Report #5* to Executive, presented by the Minister of Education **[Exhibits CA/M8/088 – INQ000642813 and CA/M8/089 – INQ000642814]**.
- 21 November 2024 - The Executive noted the “*A Fair Start*” *Final Report and Action Plan - Progress Report #6 paper* presented by the Minister of Education **[Exhibits CA/M8/090 – INQ000642815, CA/M8/091 – INQ000642816 and CA/M8/092 - INQ000642817]**.

Departmental Budget Concerns

35. Although not specifically relating to children's online lives, there has been departmental budget concerns relating to Children's services which could have had an impact on providing services to educate on and enhance children's online lives.
36. Children in Northern Ireland (CiNI) wrote to HOCS on 18 May 2023 **[Exhibit CA/M8/093 – INQ000642819]** to express serious concerns around the cessation of programmes which included Happy Healthy Minds; and of the detrimental impact of the budget set for 2023/24 on Children. HOCS replied to CiNI on 3 August 2023

[Exhibit CA/M8/094 – INQ000642821] advising that the Executive Departments were collectively facing the most challenging budget in recent history and provided assurance that the Department of Education would not be proceeding with the full scale of proposed cuts.

37. The same concerns were voiced by Ms Mairead McCafferty, Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Commission for Children and Young People (NICCY), in her correspondence with HOCS dated 30 June 2023 **[Exhibit CA/M8/095 – INQ000642824]**. This outlined how cuts to the Northern Ireland budget, particularly in the education and health budgets, would have a significant detrimental impact on vulnerable children and young people. HOCS response issued on 25 July 2023 **[Exhibit CA/M8/096 – INQ000642825]** and explained that the budget was set by the Secretary of State (SoS), and the process by which the decision was made was scrutinised by Westminster, rather than by NI Ministers or departments. HOCS assured Ms McCafferty that following the SoS announcement of the budget, NI departments had engaged in equality screenings and, where applicable, Equality Impact Assessments. She advised that this information would be shared with the SoS and was being used by departments to shape how they cope with the challenging financial climate.

38. In October 2023, HOCS met with the newly appointed NI Children's Commissioner, Mr Chris Quinn. During the introductory meeting **[Exhibit CA/M8/097 – INQ000642826]**, Mr Quinn expressed concern regarding the cumulative impact of budget cuts on children and young people. At that meeting Mr Quinn stated that throughout his recent engagement with organisations, the issue of budget pressures and limited funding was prevalent. HOCS advised that ultimately budget decisions sit with the UK Treasury, short term funding is not a long-term solution, and that there is a need to advocate for improved baselining of NI allocations by Treasury. HOCS further advised that any solution going forward would require three key aspects:

- A new baseline level for NI budgets;
- Addressing the harm of current underfunding; and
- Identifying key priority actions to impact in children and young people.

39. The first Children's Champions meeting during Mr Quinns tenure as Children's Commissioner was held on 16 November 2023 **[Exhibit CA/M8/035 - INQ000642776]**. Mr Quinn provided an overview of the engagement he had had with a range of stakeholders, which included schools, youth clubs, Permanent Secretaries, party leaders and the SOS to discuss his concerns regarding the impact of budget cuts. Mr

Quinn also noted that he had spoken to young people who had reported the impact of Covid as a big issue and that young people had reported paramilitary recruitment, child sex exploitation and related issues.

40. In December 2023, Mr Quinn (NICCY) wrote to HOCS **[Exhibit CA/M8/098 – INQ000642382]** to reiterate his concern at the overall cuts to the Northern Ireland budget, highlighting the implications of the budget on the delivery of the Executive's Children and Young People Strategy and how those cuts would adversely impact services and provision for children and young people. Mr Quinn noted that there had been a 'disproportionate impact of the budget cuts to the Department of Education, all of which impacted children and young people.'
41. In his response to the concerns raised by NICCY, Mr Gareth Johnston wrote to NICCY in February 2024. The response explained TEO's remit **[Exhibit CA/M8/099 - INQ000642839]** and TEO's assessment of Equality impacts of 2022-23 Budget including Children and Young People.
42. Due to a potential overspend against the Education budget on 17 July 2024, the Minister for Education set out options to make cuts to non-statutory spend. Table 2 of **Exhibit CA/M8/100 - INQ000642841** details the proposed cessation of non-statutory programmes, such as Sure Start, Extended Schools on-line safety, addressing bullying in schools and the cessation of mental health and emotional wellbeing REACH programme **[Exhibit CA/M8/100 – INQ000642841]**. The Minister requested the Executive to urge the Secretary of State for the additional funding required to meet the needs of public services. The paper was not included on the Executive Committee meeting agenda and was withdrawn by the Minister for Education later in the year.

Children and Young People's Strategy

43. The Children's Services Co-operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 **[Exhibit CA/M8/012 – INQ000642755]** requires the Northern Ireland Executive to adopt a strategy for improving the well-being of children and young people. The Executive Children and Young People's Strategy **[Exhibit CA/M8/101 – INQ000582983]** was approved by the Executive on 10 December 2020 **[Exhibit CA/M8/071– INQ000048503]**. The strategy provides the strategic framework through which departments work together to improve the well-being of all children and young people here. Responsibility for delivery of the Strategy lies with all nine Departments, with the Department of Education taking the lead in overseeing its effective delivery. The Strategy acknowledges that the Pandemic has had a significant impact on children and young people, exacerbating existing challenges and creating fresh ones. Some of these are associated with isolation,

uncertainty, fear and bereavement, increased risk to children and young people's emotional and mental wellbeing, safety, educational achievement, which created challenges for families and placed some children and young people at greater risk of harm. Delivery of Good Relations programmes and projects during the pandemic were discussed regularly with TEO senior management throughout the specified period [Exhibit CA/M8/102 - INQ000642845].

Keeping Children and young people safe: an online safety strategy for Northern Ireland

44. In January 2015, the NI Executive commissioned the Safeguarding Board for NI (SBNI) to develop an Online Safety and Action Plan on its behalf. Development had been delayed on a number of occasions. The development of the Online Safety Strategy and Action Plan was overseen by the Department of Health [Exhibit CA/M8/103 - INQ000642849]. The strategy [Exhibit CA/M8/104 - INQ000642850], published 9 April 2021, defines online safety as relating to all engagement in the online world and actions within the plan cut across the responsibility of five departments. These are DoJ, DE, Department for the Economy (DfE), DoH and Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

Mental Health Champion

45. The Mental Health Champion role falls within the remit of the Department of Health. Professor Siobhan O'Neill was appointed the Mental Health Champion on 8 September 2021 by Robin Swann, the then Minister of Health and is fully supported by the Northern Ireland Executive [Exhibits CA/M8/064 - INQ000086905 and CA/M8/063 - INQ000048459]. The role of the Mental Health Champion is to help to integrate a mental health friendly ethos across all policies and services developed and delivered by the Northern Ireland Executive.
46. The EVAWG division in TEO met with the NI Mental Health Champion on 15 March 2022. During this meeting [Exhibit CA/M8/105 - INQ000642851] there was discussion regarding the need for social media/technology related abuse to be addressed in the EVAWG Strategic Framework. The Online Safety Bill and the need to address suicide awareness and risk of harmful information online related to suicide was also discussed.
47. The Office of the Mental Health Champion launched a report on '*Factors Affecting Mental Health and Wellbeing in Children and Young People in Northern Ireland 2023*' [Exhibit CA/M8/106 - INQ000642852]. The study highlighted that young people have concerns about the safety of the online environment, particularly about receiving inappropriate content, and that further research is required to understand prevalence

of young people in NI who experience inappropriate contact online and the impact this has on young people.

Lessons Learned

48. TEO does not have specific responsibility for children and young people. As such, we can only provide comments on work or research considering the impacts of the pandemic on children's online lives that have been shared with us by other departments in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

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: 22 July 2025