Witness Name: Graham W Hutton
Statement No.: 1
Exhibits: N/A
Dated: 23 July 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF GRAHAM W HUTTON

I, Graham William Hutton, will say as follows: -

1. My name is Graham William Hutton. I am 66 years of age. My contact details are known to the Inquiry. I am the current General Secretary of School Leaders Scotland (SLS). I have been in that role since August 2023. I shall be retiring on 31st August 2025. I was previously President of School Leaders Scotland 2019/20, at the start of the pandemic.
2. I previously worked as the Principal Teacher of Modern Languages and then Depute at Grove Academy, Broughty Ferry, Dundee, between 1994 and 2006. I was then Senior Depute Rector at Braeview Academy in Dundee from January 2006 to October 2008, when I became the Head Teacher of Dumbarton Academy. I then returned to Grove Academy as Head Teacher from 2011 until August 2023. I was therefore a headteacher at a Scottish state secondary school during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Part A - about SLS and its members

The nature and purpose of School Leaders Scotland

3. SLS represents leaders in secondary schools across Scotland. The current membership consists of around 1196 members including head teachers, depute head teachers, principal teachers/faculty heads and business managers. Members also include college lecturers and secondary leaders who have been seconded to local authorities or Education Scotland.

4. When SLS was first formed, the members were all head teachers. It then expanded to include deputies, business managers and faculty heads. Membership is open to anyone with a leadership role in Scottish secondary schools. The membership of SLS increased substantially during the pandemic and school closure periods from 950 to almost 1,200 members.
5. SLS runs with the backing of the Executive, Presidential Team and the SLS Council. SLS has a General Secretary, who runs the Association on a fulltime basis and is the front person for the union. We also have a national officer, formerly called a field officer, who is a full time official. The national officer deals with issues raised by members, such as grievances, disciplinary matters, pensions, policy, and the administration of policy.
6. SLS has an administrative and finance officer who does all the behind-the-scenes work, and who has worked for SLS since 1988. SLS also has a professional learning coordinator who works two days a week.
7. The SLS Presidential Team consists of a president who is elected annually. Most of the time the president is the vice president from the previous year. The presidential team consists of a president, two vice presidents, a past president and an immediate past president. There are five people in that team.
8. SLS also has an Executive which represents the core admin team plus the presidential team and representatives of each of the leadership areas i.e., heads, deputes, principal teachers and business managers. Alongside the Executive we have a minute taker and a treasurer.
9. SLS has a Council, which is the main body of the Association. The Council has representatives from each of the 32 Scottish councils and from the independent sector. The number of Council members from each authority depends on the size of the membership in that authority. For instance, there are three members for Glasgow, as the membership there is quite large. With nearly 70 members, the independent sector also has 3 representatives on the Council.
10. SLS provides members with professional guidance, advice, and support. SLS delivers a bespoke and accredited programme of Professional Learning and Development for members. SLS also represents the views and concerns of members to the Scottish Government, its agencies and to their employers.
11. SLS is affiliated to the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and with ASCL Cymru and ASCL NI in the other home nations of the UK. This is a

very important affiliation to us, and they support us with regard to member support, indemnification and legal support for members when required. For this we pay them part of our membership fees. This has been a very supportive and mutually beneficial arrangement over many years.

SLS' engagement with the Scottish Government on the issue of education

12. SLS fully engages with the Scottish Government on the issue of education. We are one of the six Teacher Professional Unions recognised by the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT), which is the tripartite body dealing in Scotland with teachers' pay and conditions.
13. We meet fairly regularly with the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, both on a one-to-one basis as a union, and also as part of the Professional Associations' Forum (PAF), which encompasses all 6 Teaching Unions.
14. We meet regularly with Scottish Government Civil Servants to discuss current educational matters. We recently met with the Director-General for Education and Justice, the top civil servant with responsibility for Education in the Scottish Government.

How SLS works with other education unions

15. As stated above, we are affiliated with and work closely and collegiately with ASCL, and one of the six recognised unions on the SNCT. We work closely with all other unions (EIS, SSTA, NASUWT, AHDS and Community) as part of the Teachers' Panel of the SNCT. We liaise on many issues and try to develop a united front in all areas affecting our members, particularly with regard to pay and conditions.
16. We have a high regard for each other and our dealings with one another are usually positive and supportive, although there is not always complete unity!
17. During the pandemic we worked very closely with the other unions in order to protect our members and young people whom we all serve. The SLS General Secretary was a member of the overall education committee (CERG) and worked closely with other unions during this time, especially with the then General Secretary of the EIS.
18. The then General Secretary was a member of the SQA NQ Strategy group and the then President was a member of the SQA NQ Working group and there was

very good liaison and collaboration in both these committees during the pandemic (and thereafter) with regard to the SQA exams and the pandemic arrangements (e.g., with regard to the Alternative Certification Model - ACM).

How SLS works with other stakeholders in the education sector

19. We collaborate fully and keenly with the other stakeholders in education such as Education Scotland (ES), His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA), the new Centre for Teaching Excellence, and ADES (Association of Directors of Education in Scotland) amongst others. We are always invited on to committees and working groups on educational matters which involved these agencies. For example, we are members of the Curriculum and Assessment Board, Curriculum Improvement Cycle Working Group, ES Mental Health in Schools Working Group, SQA Transition group, SQA Timetable Advisory Group, Centre for Teaching Excellence Advisory Board. We are also part of the Head Teacher Recruitment and Retention Working Group, Researching Sustainable Leadership Group, Strategic Board for Teacher Education (SBTE), UCAS Scottish Policy Group, UCAS Adviser Advisory Group, Scottish Centre for Language Teaching (SCILT) Advisory Board, and the Scottish Teachers' Pension Board, etc.
20. We have established close partnerships with many other bodies and work closely with them for the benefit of our members and the young people in our schools/colleges. These include SAMH, Columba 1400, Tree of Knowledge, BTS Spark, Quilter, Wesleyan, Connect, Globalbridge, amongst others.

Any additional or different responsibilities, functions or structures taken on by SLS during the pandemic.

21. Schools were not as prepared as they could have been for the pandemic. The closures happened very quickly, and both SLS and its members were not prepared for the immediate closure of schools.
22. Schools have always had two aspects within their communities. One aspect is social care, and the other is learning. The learning aspect was picked up more quickly and the social care aspect was the greatest pressure and stress on school leaders, schools and on SLS as an organisation.

23. SLS had a role in supporting members who tried to maintain the effective functioning of their school as a learning institution. Members also had to accept, develop, and create social care structures that were not in place and could not have been expected of a secondary school at any point pre-pandemic. This involved devising strategies to maintain a level of contact which was far beyond the normal expectation of home/school liaison during a period when physical contact and interaction was challenging/impossible. This left our members exposed, in stressful and often impossible situations in relation how they tried to balance supporting young people, maintaining an educational structure, and keeping the school open. All these pressures eased over time, but in the first two to three weeks of the first lock-down it was challenging, draining, and distressing. This impacted on our members' own personal health and wellbeing, but also impacted the duty of care they had in relation to staff, young people, parents, and the local community.
24. When school closures were announced, headteachers were in uncharted waters. It was important to ensure that they were communicating as best they could with families and supporting them as much as they could do, knowing that parent(s)/carer(s) were at home working, with possibly two or three children in the family also vying for attention and needing a PC or device to do work or homework. SLS encouraged members to do so in the spirit of supporting our young people and their families.

Part B – learning and education prior to the pandemic

Trends and Challenges in Scottish Education prior to the pandemic

25. Prior to the pandemic, it is fair to say that Scottish Education was making slow progress in the right direction. With regard to the curriculum, progress was being made on mainstreaming Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). Secondary schools had adapted to the Broad General Education (BGE), but there was a feeling that the experiences and Outcomes (E's and O's) were dominating teaching and were too unwieldy. The OECD was in the process of reviewing CfE and SLS contributed to that report. The disconnect between the BGE (up to the end of S3) and the

Senior Phase (S4-6) was also a concern, as teaching and learning was then adapted to teach to the SQA exams.

26. Some schools had pursued a widening of the curriculum offer in both the BGE (particularly with regard to inter-disciplinary learning) and in the Senior Phase, where courses more suited to the pupils' needs were being initiated- an attempt to ensure that the "courses suited the horses". The curriculum had started changing and continues to do so. But we are not convinced that COVID derailed it much. The system just needs to be modernised.

27. The disparity between vocational and academic courses was being highlighted and the lack of a parity of esteem between them was a serious concern. The lack of esteem for other SCQF Level 6 course, which were not SQA "Higher" courses, but which were more suited to an increasing number of learners also needed to be addressed.

28. This in turn led to a concern about the poverty-related attainment gap, which was being highlighted by the Scottish Government. This was the focus of all schools and the introduction of the Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) and Pupil Equity Funding (PEF) aimed to address this. There was a hopeful feeling abroad. However, the measurements used in the National Improvement Framework (NIF) to improve attainment were an issue for many progressive school leaders as the metrics focus on 5+ at Level 6 (Higher), which is the requirement for entry to university, and which does not impact on over half of Scotland's learners. Attainment was generally seen as moving in the right direction, albeit slowly, but it all depended on the school and the local authority. It is however worth emphasising more that while attainment broadly held post-COVID, the most vulnerable pupils suffered the most, causing a widening attainment gap which has never really recovered.

29. Attendance was generally seen as satisfactory although a traditional report might have said "could do better". Attendance trends went downwards in all groups post Covid, but struggled the most to recover in vulnerable groups and is still struggling. There were processes and initiatives in place in many local authorities to try to improve attendance, but again the need for an appropriate curriculum,

pastoral support and quality teaching and learning to hook young people back into school was required and recognised by many SLS members.

30. The behaviour of secondary school pupils was by and large seen as acceptable and built on positive relationships. Most schools had developed positive relationships policies rather than restrictive and punitive discipline policies. There was some increase in low-level level misbehaviour, but nothing compared to what occurred after the pandemic. The deterioration in behaviour and disengagement are, we believe, connected to general societal issues which are not necessarily COVID linked and again these areas are struggling to recover in the most vulnerable groups. This is definitely also linked to ASN. There was a slight increase in the number of pupils with ASN going through schools, but even in 2020 the resources to meet their needs were not always available, particularly in some local authorities. Concerns were beginning to be raised about this, although this is probably not caused directly by COVID but is more a result of systemic cuts to education and social services over a 20-year period.
31. The Empowerment agenda was also moving forward. The then Cabinet Secretary for Education and Depute First Minister, John Swinney, had pursued this agenda with the strong support of SLS. The *Head Teacher's Charter* was seen by the Association as a very positive way forward to ensure that schools could deliver better for their young people and meet their needs in a more positive and fruitful way. School leaders felt that there was very good school and HT empowerment for curriculum development and school improvement, but not at all for school budgets and staffing, which were still controlled by local authorities. The advent of PEF, which put monies under direct control of Head Teachers, was and remains the way forward in our opinion. A recent SLS survey highlighted that this position with regard to empowerment had not improved at all, and if anything, has slipped backwards.
32. As we have said elsewhere in this statement, the stress test of Covid-19 found a lot of our educational agencies and processes, and the system in general, did not pass muster and was outdated and unresponsive to change. The advent of the many reports since (OECD, Muir, Hayward, Withers, etc.,) pointed the way forward to a better, more responsive education system, suitable for the 21st century. Alas, this seems to have been a golden opportunity missed – so far!

SLS members' experience and capacity to deliver remote learning prior to the pandemic.

33. In general, our members (and all other colleagues in schools) had little experience and limited capacity to deliver lessons or learning remotely. At the start of the pandemic, we looked at digital learning and understood that there was a large part of the country in which broadband was unavailable, which meant it would be very difficult for young people to access learning. We knew that in terms of the hardware available out there, not all young people had access to it or the means to buy it. We also knew that the software that was available was not brilliant.
34. We had always known that digital poverty was a major problem for certain sections of the population, and we suspected that Education Scotland, the national body tasked with providing digital learning, was not up to scratch. Education Scotland was founded with the aim of being flexible, expansive, and having a base of materials available to take this forward in a meaningful way for the majority of young people. When schools closed, Education Scotland was unable to deliver on these aims, with the quality of the online learning resource and the level of crucial online support for teachers and young people being poor to non-existent. It took a very long time for it to come up to standard, if it ever did. E-sgoil filled a significant part of that gap.
35. Some schools and local authorities were better able to develop their digital technology. There had been no national roll out of access to digital learning.
36. In the early stages of the pandemic, it became apparent very quickly, that teachers were not skilled enough to be able to interact digitally with children in a way that was as detailed and comprehensive as was required by the situation. Many teachers were ill-equipped and lacking in confidence to take this forward and a lot of make-shift training had to be developed in schools, with colleagues in Computing departments coming to the rescue in a piecemeal way.

<u>Part C – planning for the pandemic</u>

37. As an Association, SLS did not take a position between January and 18 March 2020 in respect of whether schools should be closed and how teachers could continue to deliver education in response to Covid-19. There was some discussion between the General Secretary and the Presidential Team at the time about rumours circulating, but no position was taken, as the situation was very fluid, and no one was sure how things would go. We were not privy to an in-depth awareness of the possible thinking in the Scottish Government and thus could only follow the decisions of the Scottish Government when they came.
38. There are no correspondence or minutes of meetings available. The General Secretary at the time retired two years ago and his email address is defunct.
39. I am unaware of any advice provided by SLS to the Scottish Government about planning for schools' response to Covid-19 between January and 17 March 2020.

Part D - learning and education during the pandemic Information and support

SLS members' experience concerning the communication of Scottish Government's decisions made to close / open schools

40. The communication that was going out at the start of the pandemic was predicated on the notion that schools were going to start up again soon, as opposed to the fact that schools were going to be, for the large part, closed. As time went on communication became focused on what could be done, bearing in mind the circumstances of particular schools and starting to look at having some year groups in school in certain circumstances, if schools could meet certain conditions. This opened the system up and gave schools the opportunity to start making decisions that were best suited to their own circumstances. There was pressure on schools because school A was doing one thing and school B was doing things slightly differently, so parents who lived half a mile apart from one another were starting to ask why there were differences. This was a different type of communication, which recognised that the school estate is varied and systemically different across the country. School headteachers were at that point being given the opportunity to exercise their professional judgement, having a set

of parameters within national guidance in relation to what is safe in the context of bringing young people back into school.

41. The initial guidance we were given at a national level based on medical advice was 'shut it down'. The next set of guidance was based on medical advice saying that steps could be followed to re-open schools. The system learned a way of communicating which understood what the restrictions were, but also that the school estate was such that individual schools could start to make their own decisions.

42. Communication between schools and parents and their young people varied between schools and local authorities. Most schools used their websites to inform parents of changes to the regulations from the Scottish Government.

43. At a national level, in terms of the way guidance was going out to schools, the implementation of that guidance was different. Part of this was circumstantial and part was related to the way the guidance was drafted and the learning gained about the way to communicate things out into the system. The circumstantial part was that in the first lockdown, the information we were feeding into the system and the discussions we were having related to health and well-being, not catching Covid-19 and how the hubs would work. It was a different kind of communication because it was a skeleton system to protect a certain group of people and keep learning going. The second type of communication was to get the system back up and running again. There was perhaps a naive belief that the system could get back to what was seen as normality before the pandemic.

44. With regard to consultation with SLS members, we were told by the Scottish Government what the guidelines were, and members had to follow it. There was really no consultation on the guidelines.

Communications between SLS and the Scottish Government

45. With regard to communications between SLS and SG, in his statement to the Scottish Covid Inquiry, the former General Secretary, Mr James Thewliss, said the following: "I could not speak more highly of the level of communication with SLS [from the Scottish Government]. I feel that the SG engaged at every level in relation to everything that was happening. I find it very difficult to remember a

phone call or email from a member where they asked what was happening. SLS, was informed and consulted by the SG throughout the pandemic".

46. The then General Secretary attended the SG Covid-19 groups (CERG) on behalf of SLS. At the highest level, he was involved in the CERG. Out with CERG, there were nine SG education working groups on which SLS was represented. The then General Secretary attended weekly strategic meetings with SQA. He also met with COSLA weekly throughout the pandemic. There were one or two subgroups COSLA initiated that were short-lived, looking at particular issues on which SLS had representatives. Unfortunately, we cannot recall the names of these subgroups or who the SLS representatives were on these subgroups, but they were short-lived, and issue related.

Attendance and school closures

47. As far as I am aware, the SLS position with regard to decisions and proposals to limit attendance to schools and or re-open schools on occasions after 18 March 2020 was to follow the advice of the Scottish Government on limiting attendance to schools and/or the re-opening of schools.
48. The role of schools in supporting families and communities did not change completely during the pandemic. Children were still in school, albeit online, except, of course, vulnerable children and the children of key workers who were able to come into the "hubs".
49. During the pandemic, SLS was dealing with this from a different perspective and on a national level. In the early stages of the pandemic, SLS's main concern, shared with that of the public, was that people were dying with COVID-19 and trying to re-open schools from a social care aspect, given that teachers knew vulnerable young people were at risk but were either not known to or being supported by social services.
50. The then General Secretary was involved in discussions aimed at mitigating the risk from and spread of infection, but also in relation to trying to get schools to open again.
51. However, I am unaware of what advice, if any, the then General Secretary gave to the Scottish Government at the time, but I would think it would mainly be accepting the one-way advice from the SG to the education system in general. The whole thrust of SLS position was to follow the advice and guidance of the SG

and to try and get pupils back into school without endangering them, the staff or the public in general.

Guidance and regulations regarding the closure of schools

Attendance for those children who were entitled to attend school throughout the pandemic.

52. SLS members rose very admirably to the challenge of implementing and managing the ever-changing guidance and regulations regarding the closure of schools (to the vast majority of children) and the modified arrangements for attendance at school in the "Hubs" for those children of key workers and for vulnerable children. However, schools were not as prepared as they could have been. The closures happened very quickly, and both SLS and its members were not prepared for the immediate closure of schools.

The challenges SLS's members faced in this regard.

53. SLS issued guidance to its members who were dealing with members of staff who were genuinely concerned and frightened. Some of them were unable to come to work due underlying health problems and they were very concerned. We also worried about young people and tried to organise a structure whereby schools could be open to deliver a basic level of social care. So, for example, nurses could be in hospitals and doctors could work with the emergency services, as their children would have a place to be.
54. We had to balance the overall national concern about health and well-being, in respect of both young people and SLS members. The death rate was enormous at the time, and SLS was working to get people back into schools who were potentially vulnerable in the early stages. In the early stages there was not enough Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) available. Some SLS members work in special needs schools where intimate personal care is part of the expectations placed on staff. The responsibility for providing this is with local authorities.

55. A lot of young people who were coming into school required personal care at a high level where transmission of disease was going to be the greatest. We did not know at that time what levels of transmission there would be from or between young people so there were a lot of unknowns. We were really making it up as we went along because we found out things on a day-to-day basis. Due to that, the then General Secretary of SLS issued information to all member as soon as regulations or information changed. There was underlying stress, a lack of understanding and lack of knowledge there, whilst trying to do something with the best of intentions.
56. It took time to get to a point where we had enough background knowledge to understand what the regulations meant and what was safe to do. We were also able to estimate where restrictions might be lifted in the very near future. Conversations at a national level became more sophisticated the further we got into the pandemic. Non-teachers became more aware of how schools worked, and we had the benefit of an evidence base and previous trends upon which to decide on next steps.

Key differences between the experience of the March 2020 school closures and the January 2021 school closures

57. The re-opening of schools was difficult because the plans and guidance kept changing. After the first lockdown, secondary schools returned part-time, with the emphasis on senior students because of exams.
58. The changes impacted a lot on young people; For instance, in one school there was a total school roll of around 1,310 pupils, with 5th and 6th year pupils having to come in at least two days a week. The 3rd years had to come in two afternoons a week and 1st and 2nd years came in here and there. This was done in this way, so there were not too many pupils in school at a certain point in time and pupils could move freely, without touching each other. The issue was that once school finished, they were mingling anyway outside school.
59. When the school re-opened, methodologies had to change. For instance, cooperative learning had to be adapted; whereby pupils had to face the front instead of facing each other. This impacted on the young people and their learning.

60. Each school had to plan their regulations and adapt to their pupil numbers and building. This included planning how pupils moved around the school.
61. Part-time timetables were not as successful as we had hoped, as it still resulted in gaps in learning. Every year group was initially back at school for several half days per week. The senior phase pupils had more time in school than the S1 – 3 pupils but schools had to keep them in their bubbles. However, this did get the young people back into school from August 2020.
62. When the schools re-opened, some staff were still shielding but wanted to return. This created difficulty over whether they should come back for their own health's sake. If staff were determined to come back in, they were allowed to do so but were strongly advised against it. Some staff members struggled with their mental health and were not coming into school, others were shielding or had family members who were immune compromised. Asking those staff members to come in could have affected their mental health, so a balance had to be found between going into school and staying at home. By and large, school leaders tried to prioritise going back into school.
63. With a greater understanding and knowledge of both the COVID-19 virus and of what was needed in respect of the delivery of education during a pandemic, there were improvements made between the first and second lockdowns. The resources were better, staff were more resilient, the systems set up within schools were more able to cope and we were more confident, and people were more confident of us in relation to what was happening. It was a natural evolution of what was happening in terms of learning how to live with COVID-19.
64. The word confidence is important here. We were unsure where we were going in the first lockdown, how long it was going to last and if we were doing things right. When the second lockdown came people were more confident and used to the fact that things could change.

Trends in attendance rates

65. Pupil attendance in the Hubs was erratic and depended on whether the vulnerable pupils came in but on whether key workers were on duty or not, and if not, they looked after their children at home rather than sending them into the hubs. Registers were taken each day in the hub by the staff. Numbers of children

attending were relayed each day to the local authority, who in turn passed these figures on to the Scottish Government.

66. After the lock downs, not all children returned to school. Pupil attendance dropped between 5% to 10% since the pandemic across Scotland, depending on the school. Young people think that there are now alternative ways to learn and that they do not need to be in school every day.
67. School leaders were concerned about attendance throughout the lockdowns, re-openings and post-pandemic. Pupil Support/Guidance staff in schools endeavoured to do their best to improve attendance, but there seemed to be a wider malaise amongst society about school attendance and that former imperative to attend schools weakened. The social contract between parents, young people and schools was in our opinion severely damaged during the various lockdowns.
68. The Scottish Government encouraged school leaders to do their best to improve attendance, but there was no overall strategy to increase it other than the usual tried and tested methods.

Children's Wellbeing

69. SLS members feel that the pandemic had a very deep and lasting impact on our young people, and although many adapted back to the new normality, there are a lot of hidden issues which may only come to the surface over time.
70. There was a profound impact on the mental well-being of many young people, their lack of relationships, their social and emotional development and on their behaviour, especially on return to school. Some young people were overjoyed to be back, the majority pleased to be back in a "normal" routine, but some voted with their feet and did not return, although some did return but were disillusioned and wandered the corridors in school avoiding classes.
71. We do not believe that children with ASN were catered for within the hubs. We do not believe that this lack of provision was anyone's fault, but it was instead driven by the circumstances of the pandemic. Given the dynamics of the situation which required a high-level response, it took time and understanding of the dangers posed by the virus until we were able to respond more appropriately to the specific needs of individual young people.

72. Most young people with protected characteristics are also the most vulnerable pupils and not all of them came into school during the pandemic, which was a concern. In many schools, Guidance teachers were tasked with keeping in contact with these pupils, so they were not forgotten. When these pupils did come into school, there was always someone there for them and the school tried to keep things as normal as possible. This person could be the Guidance teacher, their House Head, a pupil support worker, a support for learning assistant, or a member of staff whom they liked and bonded with. This helped these young people to cope with the pandemic.
73. School leaders still looked to support for their young people out with the school to the many partnerships schools had. Things had to be either done online or stopped completely. This had a detrimental effect on already stretched services, particularly social work and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). There was a huge increase in mental health issues because of the pandemic and CAMHS is still struggling now. Access to agencies such as social work was always difficult, and the pandemic certainly did not help.
74. During the pandemic, getting a hold of social work was very difficult. Direct contact was possible for those young people who had an already open file. However, as is increasingly the case, social work closes cases as soon as they can, so it was difficult to get in touch with anybody. CAMHS were also difficult to get in touch with, mainly because people were working from home. It became clear that there was some resentment building up as we were working in schools, whereas social work, CAMHS and other agencies were all working from home. These other agencies were not dealing with young people first hand, but from a distance and this contributed to a lack of understanding of what was going on at the frontline.
75. With regard to institutions such as Education Scotland and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE), they were unsupportive and effectively missing in action. Schools had very little to nil contact with either of these bodies during the pandemic.
76. COVID-19 tested systems. Education Scotland was not particularly responsive or foresighted. The learning resources available from Education Scotland, in terms of materials made available to young people and teachers on their website, were not nearly where they should have been. There was always some suspicion and

concern within that system and suddenly it was tested and found to be lacking. The inspection system, which prides itself on providing support, was suddenly revealed to be a system which was challenged and there was very little support provided by Education Scotland. Systems picked up slowly with the offering from e-Sgoil. At the time e-Sgoil's existence was not widely known within the system and it was given a wider profile to compensate for the lack of online support for pupils.

77. Education Scotland's work encompasses His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE). Inspections stopped during the pandemic and HMIE started to evaluate what had happened post-pandemic. They did not feed much of their evaluation back into the system because by that time things had moved on. Overall, Education Scotland did not contribute much in relation to supporting schools and teachers as institutions and individuals interacting with young people. Education Scotland's response was always lacking but it failed when it came under stress from the pandemic.

78. The former General Secretary of SLS in his statement to the Scottish Covid Inquiry stated this with regard to HMIE: *"I recall one day in the later stages of the pandemic when I was on call with Janie McManus of the HMI arm of Education Scotland, and she asked what they should be doing. HMIE was seeking to re-engage and ingather information on how schools were dealing with the situation at that time. I made the point that if they called any head teacher in Scotland, they would say they were looking for teachers, because there were so many teachers absent from school. Education Scotland was saying they wanted to engage with schools to find out how things are and how they were coping, and I made this point to give HMIE the opportunity to become part of the solution rather than adding to the problem. I said that if they wanted to engage with schools, they should go and meet with headteachers for a couple of hours. I did mention however that I believed this would be counterproductive, as headteachers at the time were extremely busy. I cannot confirm if any meetings happened. I suggested that since Education Scotland had a lot of registered teachers on their workforce, these teachers could make themselves available. I also offered to find them schools which they could go to. This suggestion was made on a Teams call. These teachers could cover classes, observe, and get a*

flavour of what was happening in schools because they would be embedded in the school. Education Scotland was not prepared to engage in that way".

79. There had been the potential for things to be done better, quicker, and more effectively in supporting the system than they were. However, there was reticence rather than proactivity from Education Scotland, including both the curriculum arm and the HMI arm.
80. SLS did not take up any specific position in respect of how schools were meeting children's wellbeing needs during the pandemic. We did not, as best I know, consciously give advice to the Scottish Government on this, apart from what I have stated above.

Safeguarding and food security

81. Throughout the pandemic SLS members had concerns about the situation of young people not being in school for lengths of time. I can only say in a general way that these concerns were voiced at meetings of the Presidential Team and Executive and were clearly underlying our thoughts. The main aim, however, was to try and ensure some sort of learning and teaching continued.
82. School leaders and teachers were concerned about how children were working at home, and many staff members volunteered to work in the hubs along with support staff. They did so for two reasons - one was to ensure that they were supporting young people educationally, but also secondly, from a wellbeing point of view. The support was there but what we were dealing with was completely unknown and we were in the dark in many ways. Things could have done better but the intention was there.
83. Some pupils were less willing to participate in online learning than others. Loneliness was the biggest impact the young people were suffering from, and the lack of social interaction for pupils was a huge concern for leaders and teachers in schools. Guidance/Pupil Support staff were asked in many schools to get in touch with pupils to ensure staff knew how they were doing. Schools also attempted to do personal and social education classes on-line, to ensure contact with as many young people, as possible, to check on their well-being.
84. During the early stages of the pandemic, all the professional teaching associations in Scotland made representations to the SG about young people who were entitled to free school meals not getting their entitlement. It was one of

those things that could not be changed quickly. The process simply did not exist, as it never had to. The Scottish Govrnment understood this and responded quickly.

85. Many schools attempted to continue the delivery of free school meals during the first lockdown. As an example, in one school, there were no hot meals provided. The catering staff numbers were reduced, as some of them had been furloughed so the capacity was limited. Catering staff at the school produced sandwiches for the prerequisite number and the office staff called eligible pupils to come into school to pick them up. Some pupils did not come to pick up their meals due to the stigma attached to it. This was very concerning, as for some pupils this was their main meal of the day. Some schools were able to deliver meals, however it was not possible for schools to do this due to capacity and funds. There was a lack of catering staff available at the time as the company who provided these staff to the school had cut their staffing numbers. Due to many pupils not picking up the food parcels, there was a lot of food waste.
86. During the second lockdown, automatic payments for free meals entitlement were introduced. An issue arising from this is that the number of pupils entitled to free school meals did not match the number of pupils who took advantage of this entitlement, which was much lower. Direct payments made it easier for schools as the schools were not involved in the process. It was easier for pupils and families as they could use the money to buy what they wanted nearby, rather than having to come to the school. The schools did not have the manpower or ability to check up on those not taking up their entitlement to free school meals.
87. As far I am aware, SLS did not take a particular position on behalf of members with regard to children's safeguarding and/or food security during the pandemic, other than I have outlined above in paragraphs 81-86.

Online learning

What SLS members consider remote learning encompassed in practice

88. It became apparent that teachers were not skilled enough to be able to digitally interact with children in a way that was as detailed and comprehensive as was required in the early stages of the pandemic.

89. The teaching profession learned as quickly as we could. It took a bit of time, as the support structure was not there. Some teachers' trade unions were good in terms of exerting pressure on the SG and Education Scotland to have resources/support provided. The unions also stepped in to provide support and guidance to members.
90. Teachers found delivering live lessons difficult, as few pupils turned up. They took to recording lessons and putting them on MS Teams and this helped pupil engagement. When pupils were not engaging over time, staff were encouraged to contact them by email to see how they were doing and if there was no response, to contact home, either themselves or through the guidance teacher.
91. Teachers were a bit lost too - they had to learn to use systems they had never used before - Zoom, Teams or Google Meet - to give lessons but were unfamiliar with the systems. In some schools, training courses were set up for staff online; often the computing and IT departments in schools had a role in supporting their colleagues and explaining how to use various IT software.
92. Young people were also not comfortable using something new. There was also uncertainty as to whether teachers should be recording lessons. In some schools, teachers recorded lessons so that pupils who did not attend live lessons could watch these in their own time.

Challenges in respect of children's access to technology and the internet

93. One of the things the pandemic did across society was to test the systems already in place. Some systems were found to be robust, while others were not. It would be fair to say that the testing found education systems to be less than robust. For example, at the start of the pandemic we looked at digital learning and understood that there was a large part of the country in which broadband was unavailable, which meant it would be very difficult for young people to access learning. We knew that in terms of the hardware available out there, not all young people had access to it or the means to buy it. We also knew that the software that was available was not brilliant.
94. We have always known that digital poverty was a major problem for certain sections of the population, and we suspected that Education. Scotland, the national agency tasked with providing digital learning di9d not have the capability or expertise so to do. Education Scotland was founded with the aim of being

flexible, expansive, and having a base of materials available to take this forward in a meaningful way for the majority of young people. When schools closed Education Scotland were unable to deliver on these aims, with the quality of the online learning resource and the level of online support for teachers and young people being poor to non- existent. It took very long time for it to come up to standard, if it ever did. E-sgoil filled a significant part of that gap.

95. Some schools and local authorities were better able to develop their digital technology. There was no national roll out of access to digital learning.
96. One prevalent impact for many pupils was that their Wi-Fi connectivity was poor, or they had no connectivity at all, at home. Therefore, not all young people were able to access the learning resources provided and there was inequitable access to online learning.
97. In terms of communication between teachers and learners, online teaching meant that this was not as immediate or as free flowing as it would be in a classroom setting. There was a delay in young people emailing their teachers for help and support and then having to wait until teachers got back to them. A lot of young people found this frustrating.
98. It was assumed that young people are all digitally literate, but this was, and still is, not entirely true. There is a high risk of being unable to get hold of young people due to them either not having devices, having poor connectivity or just not being able to use their device. Staff phoned pupils' homes to find out who was experiencing these issues, and this issue was also raised at the SG COVID-19 Education Recovery Group (the CERG).
99. In many schools MS Teams or Google Meet was used to deliver remote learning. If I can give an example of what happened in one school: the teachers communicated with pupils via GLOW email addresses and set up departmental and class Teams. They used the GLOW email addresses and Groupcall to communicate with pupils and parents and to bring to their attention the school's portal - a one-stop-shop for online access. The portal held timetables for year groups, Teams classes, plus other links and resources and let pupils know what, who, when, and how with regard to their learning. The portal also included assessment details and timetable changes. The school could not fulfil the full timetable with staff online due to their duties in the hubs and staff illness. However, there were some live classes and indications of work available for

learners. Pupil engagement via Teams was monitored, so they knew which pupils were online and those who were not. They targeted those not online and guidance/pastoral staff contacted them.

Differences in Pupil Engagement

100. Online learning was a challenge for both pupils and staff. Many pupils did not engage regularly with the online lessons, if provided. They picked and chose which lessons they did. They were frustrated that teachers could not answer their questions right away when they were stuck and there could be a delay in the response coming. Some pupils found it better to work on their own and not be distracted by others in the class, and so made better progress. Some pupils' days changed, and they got up later and worked into the wee small hours as suited them. Staff were amazed to see work being sent in the very early hours of the morning.

101. There were issues around resources, whereby for a family with two or more children only one device may have been available. The inequity was compounded for those pupils living in areas of deprivation.

Support from Scottish Government

102. The Scottish Government, through E-Sgoil fed the system at a point in time and in a way which engaged with the system and enabled it to support young people. It was by no means perfect and never could be, but it was a system in a scheme which is capable of upscaling and did that in a way in which was made more accessible and immediately available.

103. There was very little support initially regarding IT from the Scottish Government. Some schools put out information via Groupcall, their website and social media to parents/carers to get in contact if their child needed a device. One school by way of example said: "We put together a spreadsheet of those in need of IT resources and then used every IT resource we had in school – laptops and iPads - to supply these pupils with a device. We also purchased Wi-Fi dongles to allow pupils who had no Wi-Fi connectivity at home to get online. This was before the Scottish Government or local authority provided 1-2-1 devices. The school also obtained free SIM cards from BT for pupils in need". The supply of hardware from the Scottish Government was inadequate.

Differences between the experience of the two closures

104. The situation regarding remote learning was better resourced, better organised, and better understood in the January 2021 closures than in the March 2020 closures, as teachers, support workers, pupils and parents were more experienced in remote learning.

Impact on children's learning of school closures and remote learning

105. SLS members consider there was an overall, definite and negative impact on children's learning due to school closures and remote learning. Pupils had missed much of their learning, either because it had not been covered by the teacher or because they had not been engaging with their learning. If pupils were not engaging with their learning, the teachers had to go back over things and were getting frustrated because they needed to move the syllabus on and were under pressure to get to the exams at a later stage. Furthermore, because there had been a lack of communication with primary schools about what pupils had covered there, these pupils were repeating things when they entered S1 in Secondary. Learning and teaching did not just restart but had to be recalibrated, and this added considerably to teachers' workload.

106. Rather than talking about transitions, the whole notion of progression and learning should be considered. This was undoubtedly disrupted by lockdown and the way in which schools accommodated moving back out of lockdown into an approaching normality. The disruption was to all young people and the system needs to recover from this. Young people know there are gaps in their learning and feel short-changed.

107. Another issue schools faced on re-opening was the lack of supply teachers. Usually, supply teachers are either young teachers who have not yet got a permanent job or retired teachers. For the older teachers, it was a problem to come into schools due to the risk of catching COVID-19 before the vaccination system had been rolled out, therefore most retired teachers refused to come into school.

108. There was more awareness of harms when pupils were off school ill during the pandemic. Due to the developed IT and online learning, there was more pressure from parents to provide young people with something to do at home if they were off sick. Although this was not a bad thing, it added to pressure on the staff. Overall, parents and staff realised that with the advent of online learning there was no excuse for pupils off ill at home, but able to work, not being able to do work when it suited them and then not fall behind. Parents were then keen to pressurise the school into providing work for pupils when they were off for reasons other than COVID-19. In fact, this is quite understandable. Staff were encouraged in many schools to put work online in the class Teams/ Google Meet group so pupils, whether at school or not, could catch up and revise easily.

109. Overall, there were no major concerns from members in SLS about young people's online safety during periods of school closure. Teachers were advised however to ensure they used their official school/Glow accounts when communicating with pupils, and not to use their personal email addresses, etc.

110. School Leaders Scotland did not issue any further advice to members on issues to do with remote learning and online safety during the pandemic other than the above, as we felt that the 32 Scottish Local Authorities, as the employers and with different policies with regard to IRT, would be best placed to do so. We also did not issue any advice to the Scottish Government on this matter.

The use of non-pharmaceutical interventions in schools and classrooms

The challenges SLS members faced implementing NPIs

111. At the outset of the pandemic, the PPE was not adequate or supplied as quickly as it could have been. A significant number of young people with health and personal care needs who could have been supported within school were not, due to it being unsafe to do so at the outset. The missed learning of these young people was difficult to catch up on.

112. After some time and within the level of priority PPE got in the national system, schools were eventually well provided for. The way the professional associations worked together on this in the early stages was critical in the way this improved quickly within education.

113. The ever-changing guidance from SG was also a challenge and Head Teachers worried constantly if they were getting it right. Staff and pupils for the most part complied with face-coverings in school, but some pupils did not wear them properly. The ventilation in classrooms was a concern, and schools often abandoned the need for pupils to remove coats/jackets in class, as the rooms were cold due to open windows.

114. The pressures of Track and Trace, especially at weekends, took its toll on school leaders. They had to ensure they had accurate contact information in order to contact parents of pupils in classes where there was an infected pupil. There was also the need to go into school and measure the two-metre distance in some classrooms and then make a decision on who had to isolate. There had to be accurate seating plans for every class, so Heads/Deputes could easily tell who had been within the two-metre distance for contamination. Getting staff to keep these seating plans accurate and for Heads/Deputes to take copies home at the weekend was a logistical stressor.

115. The two-metre distancing was also stressful in terms of trying to enforce this in corridors. The provision of PPE and getting pupils to use hand gel was also stressful. Another stressor was keeping pupils in bubbles (e.g., S1 in the hall, S2/3 in dining hall). Schools had to split breaks and lunches, so there was more supervision required to keep pupils in bubbles. That doubled the amount of supervision senior staff had to do, taking away from other areas of responsibility. School leaders also had to be at each school entrance every morning to welcome the young people into school, check on masks, and give out masks, if required.

116. Having to keep pupils isolated as they were waiting to be picked up before going home, if they had tested positive for COVID-19 or had been in the vicinity of someone who had tested positive, created more worry and stress.

117. The constant worry about staff absence increasing due to COVID-19 played a part, and this was particularly true after the second lockdown when staff absence increased dramatically. Other stress was caused with trying to work with the colleges to ensure pupils got onto their college courses. Work experience was also abandoned.

118. Institutions such as Education Scotland and His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE) were unsupportive and effectively missing in action.

119. A lot of school leaders struggled with their own mental health during the pandemic due to the constantly changing rules. SLS offered immense support during the pandemic and local authorities did their best but were a bit behind the curve. Jim Thewliss, the then General Secretary of SLS, was on the ball with informing members at great speed of what was happening; members always were informed the same day when he learned something new which impacted on schools. Local authorities were by all accounts far slower in passing on information from the same sources, i.e., the Scottish Government.

The impact of NPIs in schools and classrooms on children (i.e., their ability to learn, attendance, health, wellbeing and development);

120. Most young people with protected characteristics are also the most vulnerable pupils and not all of them came into school during the pandemic, which was a concern. Guidance teachers were tasked with keeping in contact with these pupils, so they were not forgotten. When these pupils did come into school, there was usually someone there for them and schools tried to keep things as normal as possible. This person could be the guidance teacher, their House Head, a pupil support worker, a support for learning assistant, or a member of staff whom they liked and bonded with.

121. Every school has a transition programme, for vulnerable young people especially, who are in the programme from primary six or seven or even before that. During the pandemic this came to a halt. There were no transitions and no induction days. Almost all transition work was being done online and so guidance teachers from the secondary school were not visiting primary schools as regularly as they usually did at the time of primary-secondary transition. There were still some transition visits for vulnerable pupils, but otherwise everything was online, including parent information evenings.

122. Transitions happen all the way through school. The transitions that are focused on are from primary to secondary and then to higher education or work. Certainly, these are crucial times for young people, involving a lot of angst not just amongst pupils but also amongst parents.

123. The young people were lost when they came to secondary school, with no preparation for it. There were different rules within secondary schools when they re-opened, including bubbles, with some year groups not mixing and having no

contact with other year groups. This had an impact on pupils in terms of socialising. The behaviour of younger pupils worsened, as they did not have the older pupils to set an example.

124. The rigour and thoroughness that schools usually have around subject choice was not there for pupils during the pandemic. As a result, pupils did not know what was best for them. For S6, they did not get the rites of passage - they did not have a dance and did not finish their school career on a high.

Support from the Scottish Government

125. While PPE provision improved over time, this relied heavily on collaboration between professional bodies, not just Scottish Government direction. Direct support from the Scottish Government was inconsistent; SLS provided critical real-time updates to its members. Local authorities also tried to support, albeit more slowly. Institutions like Education Scotland and HMIE were notably absent during the pandemic, leaving school leaders feeling unsupported at a strategic level.

Exams and grades

Quality of information and support received by SLS members

126. SQA was at a disadvantage from the start of the pandemic because what it does is dependent upon continuity of learning in an institution leading towards, for most people, a diet of exams at the end.

127. Pre-pandemic, communication by SQA within the system in which it operated was good. Within that system and structure, SQA communicated in the context of telling people what was going to happen, what would happen next, and what they could expect. There was a shared understanding and a shared expectation on the part of SQA, school leaders, teachers, pupils, and parents.

128. When the pandemic began, because young people were not in schools and exams were not going to happen, SQA carried out the same level of communication by telling people what was going to happen. What the SQA failed to do was to communicate and provide, on a regular and ongoing basis, reassurance that what they said was happening was actually happening. In that

vacuum of communication, people made things up. The press made things up. People who were prepared to make mischief and some politicians made things up. SQA constantly found itself being wrong footed in relation to the communications they put out because they did not confirm and reaffirm that things were under control. It took them a long time to grasp the fact that communication is not just something that you do regularly in the context of the next stage of an event and that it is something that needs to be done when there is huge uncertainty out there.

129. When SQA did communicate with schools and colleges, it would typically be on a Friday at 5:45pm when everyone had gone home. SQA now has a communications strategy and director. We believe that SQA has learned the lessons and there is an improvement.

130. A lot of the problems SQA faced during the pandemic were due to poor communication. The ultimate downfall was at the end of the first exam diet, when they did not communicate effectively exactly what was happening and how qualifications were going to awarded. This was a harsh lesson for SQA to learn. As SQA moved into the second year of the pandemic and onto the next set of qualifications they did things entirely differently. This included early engagement with the professional associations and local authorities and ongoing communication.

131. Every Friday morning during the second year of the pandemic there was a strategic group meeting, attended by the General Secretary of SLS, in relation to what was happening that finished with a reminder from the Strategy Group to the SQA to communicate what was happening. The SQA will be able to confirm who attended these meetings. Following these meetings, the working group worked on whatever the strategic group had told them to implement. The SLS President was part of this Working Group.

132. SQA is now struggling to have an identity of where they want to go because they are trying to build up the trust that was lost between teachers, lecturers and SQA, and to look forward. When issues were brought by members to SLS and other professional associations, they were at the working group. If SQA did not get the response they wanted or expected, they would bring it back for further discussion the following week. There was sometimes a feeling of déjà vu which

was very frustrating. That is why the SLS President met up with EIS and ADES colleagues separately, to join forces and ensure our voice was heard.

How teachers were assisted to make assessments

133. SLS was involved in the changes to the curriculum that were made by the SQA. The SQA set up a strategic Group which was tasked with making strategic decisions in relation to examinations and qualifications. SLS was aware of curricular amendments that were being made and there was a certain logic behind most of these changes.

134. The SQA made use of the word 'co-created', which they used to mean that decisions on issues such as exam cancellations and the Alternative Certification Model (ACM) were made in consultation with the professional associations. The cooperation between the SQA and the professional associations increased throughout the pandemic. The strategic overview group led to the creation of a communications group and several other short life groups. So, if anyone is to blame, the co-creators are also guilty.

135. In fairness to SQA, it is both true and untrue to say it they stripped parts out to the core. I will take maths as an example – if the maths curriculum contained three units of work, with only one unit of that work being examined, maths departments would teach all three units. The idea behind it was that young people would be able to access all the learning and gain full knowledge of the three units despite being tested for only one. During the pandemic SQA decided to only have two units, considering how much school children had missed. It was a compromise between comprehensive learning or a course that took young people towards an examination and obtaining a qualification. The choice was made to strip out the alternatives, to provide certainty to learning that could be covered within the time available to award the qualification.

136. SLS was involved in this decision and being aware of the genuine angst that existed within the SQA at that time, the decision was made with the best will in the world given the information available at the time, which was gathered by speaking to other people. We were in a group with other professional associations where we made a joint decision that this was the best way. None of

us knew what was going to happen. We believe that SQA made the best decision on the information they had at that point in time.

137. We would like to mention the time it took the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to realise, understand and adapt its systems to the challenges, particularly in relation to practical subjects and their assessment. In fairness to the SQA, they eventually got there, but they were repeatedly warned to move things quickly because young people were not learning in the way they were accustomed to learning. We believe that if they were going to assess young people, they had to amend the structure in place for learning to ensure the assessment system aligns with the restrictions on learning. For a while, there was a mismatch there, with assessments being limited in scope to exclude what the lockdown response had prevented from being taught. At one point there was a sudden realisation that this was the case, and they did shift, but it would have helped reduce stress levels within schools and on young people if this had been done earlier, when we started to highlight to them what the challenges were going to be.

The overall effectiveness, fairness and feasibility of the approach

138. There were a lot of stressors for school leaders at the time. SQA and the move to the Alternative Certification Model (ACM) put pressure on school leaders, as there was more scrutiny both at school and local authority level to ensure the results were fair and the monitoring at all levels was intense. The constant worry about staff absence increasing due to COVID-19 played a part, and this was particularly true after the second lockdown when staff absence increased dramatically.

139. The ACM was a successful process. There was less stress for pupils with a high stakes' final exam, but the spread of assessments in each subject across the year also caused stress to pupils. Staff were also stressed in trying to get evidence at short notice.

140. In schools that sussed out that there would, in all likelihood, be no exams, they had proceeded to gather evidence throughout the year, and thus the ACM did not present huge issues. In other schools that thought the exams would actually take place in 2021, there was more pressure and stress to find that evidence for the ACM. There was also added moderation and quality assurance at school and local authority level which added to pressure on school leaders.

141. There was also the difficulty of ensuring there was enough evidence for practical subjects, where pupils' internal assessment had not been completed due to them being off school.

142. School leaders also found it stressful in informing parents via Tracking and Monitoring in order to update them and pupils about their progress so pupils knew where they were, what their grade would be and so there would be no surprises when the results were published in August.

Impact on Learners

143. SQA removed some things from the curriculum during the pandemic, that they did not consider to be core. Since the pandemic, SQA has been more aware of what is going on in the other UK nations. However, at the time SQA was more concerned about the currency of the exams as opposed to what other nations were doing. It was about what suited our young people best. When SQA took things out of the exams to make them more accessible, some pupils in Scotland turned out to be at a high disadvantage when the elements that had been removed were reintroduced. Some pupils did not have any experience of doing assignments at National 5 or Higher level and were then expected to be able to do these at Advanced Higher level. Usually, these skills are built up over the years, but due to the changes in the curriculum, young people were unable to build upon that. Young people who went on to university after the pandemic could also be found to be at a disadvantage, compared to English or International students who did not have changes in their learning curricula.

144. SQA is a traditional organisation that has been built on routine, whereby year after year they did the same thing. They struggled to see that things were different in schools and that they had to adapt. Communication by SQA was not as good as it should have been. When SQA did communicate, it was through the NQ Working Group, which included an SLS representative, who was for most of the time the only member of that group working in a school. This did not always provide the full picture.

145. Any advice on exams and alternative certification models during the pandemic given by the then General Secretary to the Scottish Qualifications Authority Strategy Group or given by the then SLS President to the SQA Working

Group will be contained in minutes of these meetings which are held by SQA. We do not have these on record.

Part E - overall impacts and education recovery

146. We have over the last few years been finding out what the long-term impacts of COVID-19 and lockdown have been and more things that COVID-19 has left within the education system, and how this system relates to, and interacts with, society. Not only is it impacting on individuals, but it is also impacting on the way in which the system works, as the normality within the system now is a different normality than in 2019.

147. We now have a cohort of young people who have not experienced normal schooling e.g., early years; primary, secondary, further and higher education, and all the various transition points. The group of young people who were not in school during lockdown were definitely impacted. The behaviour they are exhibiting within the system is now starting to affect the system itself and this is a much longer-term, insidious harm that will continue if the level of resource going into the system is not enough to sustain what would have been normal. The Scottish Government has begun to investigate and understand how the school system is evolving and the kind of challenges and pressures this puts on schools. The Consequences report published by the Scottish Government in June 2025 is an attempt to address this issue.

148. During the pandemic, things had to be either done online or stop completely. This had a detrimental effect on already stretched services, particularly social work and the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). There was a huge increase in mental health issues because of the pandemic. In many schools, pre-pandemic mental health issues were already high which compounded the situation and after Covid, CAMHS was struggling and continues to struggle now. Access to agencies such as social work was always difficult, and the pandemic certainly did not help.

149. During the pandemic, getting a hold of social work was very difficult. Direct contact was possible for those young people who had an already open file. However, as is increasingly the case, social work closes cases as soon as they can, so it was difficult to get in touch with anybody. CAMHS were also difficult to

get in touch with, mainly because people were working from home. It became clear that there was some resentment building up as we were working in schools, whereas social work, CAMHS and other agencies were all working from home. These other agencies were not dealing with young people first hand, but from a distance and this contributed to a lack of understanding of what was going on at the frontline. Partnership working was a stressed situation before the pandemic, related to the lack of resource there. The pandemic made partnership working unworkable at times and it has not recovered since.

150. Mental health issues across Scotland during the pandemic took different forms of how young people and staff reacted. Everyone wanted to get back some sense of normality, but there is no normality anymore. COVID-19 has changed everything; how we take things forward, the connection to third parties, and even the young people who we thought were fine were also affected. I saw this from my experience as a Head Teacher during and after the pandemic when having very regular conversations with pupils, and from my SLS role as President and then General Secretary when networking with other SLS members.

151. In many schools we saw a reluctance at times to conform and follow rules in a subtle way. Pupils wanted to socialise with peers after being isolated for so long. They struggled at times to keep in their bubbles. A lot of learning had been missed and pupils were increasingly aware of this. As time passed, we realised that psychologically lockdown had done an enormous amount of damage to the mental health of our young people. Guidance staff had their work cut out for them and noticed an increasing number of pupils coming to them for help and support.

152. There was more absence from school and both parents and children do not see anything wrong with that. There is more parental conflict than there used to be with schools. Some parents could not cope with children being at home during the pandemic and maybe let the children do what they wanted.

153. The loneliness that young people felt in terms of lack of contact with their friends, teachers and family was immense. Some young people struggled with not being able to go to school and this had a significant long-term impact on them. With hindsight, in 2020 we were unable to know and predict all the possible impacts the pandemic could have had. There were unknown unknowns, and more things will surface which we will lack the resources to deal with.

154. There was a lack of confidence in young people to move forward to a degree. They were aware of missed learning, and of the gaps in their knowledge and skills. Family life had also become a bit more dysfunctional. Families were out of their usual routines due to societal pressures, and this impacted on pupils, as some parents, even with the best will in the world, were unable to support their child's learning at home for various reasons, including no IT connectivity, lack of devices, too many children running about plus them having to do their own job.

155. A lot of children are more disengaged and are "lapping" in schools. Lapping refers to pupils who refuse to go to class and spend their time walking round the school, hiding in toilets, corridors, small rooms, etc. These pupils can attract followers so there can be a number of them going round school buildings throughout the day. Senior staff have to be on duty to patrol the relevant areas and take pupils back to class. This is very time consuming for senior staff, but it is crucial in getting pupils back to class and learning. The "lappers" will often run off so there has to be a coordinated approach from school leaders to get them back to class. Peter Bain, now SLS Immediate Past President, wrote an article about lapping recently in the Times Education Supplement (Scotland) on how we can approach this and engage pupils who were disengaged during the pandemic to get them back in to learn. Despite a number of attempts by the Scottish Government to address these in partnership with the Teacher Unions, these issues are not going away anytime soon.

National initiatives for education recovery and learning 'catch up'.

156. Initiatives such as learning 'catch up', while common in other jurisdictions in the UK, were not part of the Scottish Recovery plan. Most schools in their Working Time Agreements with Unions included a Covid Recovery Plan which matched the needs of the young people in that school.

Evolution of use of technology in the classroom post-pandemic

157. SLS members generally acknowledge that technology use in classrooms has evolved since the pandemic, with a noticeable shift toward more in-class teaching

and far fewer online learning opportunities. However, concerns persist about equity—particularly the lack of universal access to one-to-one devices, as the SG's earlier manifesto commitments appear to have been sidelined. Access and connectivity still depend heavily on the local authority, leading to a "postcode lottery" in digital provision. While fully remote learning is far less common, it continues in the form of online campus links, consortia teaching models, and specific offers like those from Robert Gordon's College supporting a more flexible educational landscape, particularly in subjects which are not being widely offered due to teacher shortages, hence Computing Science, Latin and RMPS, as well as English and Maths. It is live taught in the evenings, so compatible with the school day.

Part F - union activity during the pandemic

158. As a professional association that was asking members to go far beyond the normal demands of professionalism, members of SLS must get some public recognition of the work they did to make sure that schools operated, young people were protected, and their learning and social well-being was enhanced by what was done. There was no conflict in SLS members' minds that the interests of the young people and their own interests were different. We were all putting our shoulders to the wheel to get through a very difficult, stressful and unprecedented experience.

159. It is important to mention that the stress and pressure put on secondary school leaders throughout the pandemic, particularly head teachers, was at times intolerable. This was particularly so when schools were closed, and we had to make the "hubs" work. We had members who were either physically in the school five days a week, sometimes more, and who were on call seven days a week over the entire period of lockdown. It was above and beyond in terms of how the expectation on school leaders influenced their life and their lifestyle. It is important to say that some school leaders unfortunately sunk underneath that pressure.

160. During the pandemic the then General Secretary was sending emails to members almost daily, bringing them up to date with things and being well ahead of the local authorities in many cases. He was sending pages and pages of stuff out daily and tried to direct members to different parts. The expectation of what

was coming meant that members seldom objected to receiving this advice, albeit he did receive the occasional request for clarity. SLS members wholeheartedly and widely appreciated his efforts to keep them in the loop throughout the pandemic.

161. It is worth mentioning that on a national level, the relationship between professional associations within teaching in Scotland has sometimes been tense and fraught. When we use the term professional associations, we are referring to all the teaching unions in Scotland, including SLS, the Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland (AHDS), the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS), the Scottish Secondary Teachers Association (SSTA) and the National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT). The level of understanding and cooperation that developed between the professional associations in the education industry during the pandemic was exemplary. If something came to us from discussions with the Scottish Government (SG) that was an issue for schools, we understood that the amount of time available for discussion on it was not great and that aspects related to leadership were ours and others related to classroom practise or the ways in which teachers were interacting with young people belonged to the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS). We operated on that basis with the understanding of both parties that things had been dealt with at a higher level, so that at school level there was not as much friction as potentially might have existed. There was solidarity across the profession.

Part G - lessons learned

162. According to the then General Secretary of SLS, Jim Thewliss, the epidemiologists spoke first at CERG meetings. They told the meeting what had happened, what was happening and what would happen. The epidemiologists were on the ball all the time and were always pretty accurate. What they did say was that they had been telling us for a long time that something like Covid-19 was going to happen. The greatest lesson to be learned is preparation. If we are not learning that things like this can happen, then we have not learned at all.

163. The second lesson relates not only to the SG but also to all the groups SLS was on. Constant, accurate and regular communication is crucial because if we

do not grab, and maintain hold of, the agenda, other people will do so. It took a great deal more work than it should have to fend off the nonsense and mischief-making that was going on due to various public bodies not communicating with the public accurately, continuously and in a way which was comprehensible. Communication with the public during the pandemic was a learning process, with some bodies learning quickly, others taking longer and some never learning at all.

164. It is critical to understand that the traditional model of teaching cannot be sustained. The world now expects teachers and teaching institutions to operate in a much more responsive and flexible way to deliver learning to the community. In these circumstances, collegiality is all. The more collegiate you are, the better you can deal with a situation because the system becomes empowered through collegiality. People gain confidence and develop trust if confidence and trust are shared.

165. Most schools have a business continuity plan which sets out what to do in case of emergency, for example, a fire. SLS believed that these plans must be expanded and developed to cover something like a pandemic.

166. With better developed IT and online resources, it is a good opportunity to ensure that these can be strengthened. There is a need to ensure that every young person in a school has equal access to IT provision, connectivity, and digital devices. However, this seems to be faltering already due to the dire financial constraints of the Scottish Government and of the 32 Scottish local authorities.

167. There must be better support for leaders in schools. Education Scotland and HMIE must step up to the plate - they were not seen or heard from during the pandemic. These bodies could have gone into their local schools and supported leaders there, as they are, after all, education leaders themselves. SQA, or its successor Qualifications Scotland, needs to be more adaptive, flexible, and empathetic to learners and teachers. They must learn to trust teachers and their judgements.

168. Local authorities should also support their head teachers better by providing help and encouragement. The pressure for head teachers to man hubs during the summer holidays was unacceptable, as they too need their holidays from a health and wellbeing perspective, particularly given the stress they were under as

outlined above. Local authorities also need to redeploy more staff to schools during such times to help spread the burden of stress and responsibility.

169. The notion that COVID-19 is done, and we are done with it, is not correct. The impact of the pandemic remains in schools.

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: 23/07/25