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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF INDRA MORRIS

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I, INDRA MORRIS, WILL SAY AS FOLLOWS:

1. Introduction

- 1.1. At the time of the pandemic, I was Director General for Strategy, Disadvantage and Social Mobility at the Department for Education ("DfE"). I had been in the post since 2017. My responsibilities included Children's Social Care ("CSC"), the department's Strategy, Media/Communications and Ministerial Private Office. I had not long taken on Special Educational Needs and Disabilities ("SEND"), behavior and attendance from the Schools Group, who kept mental health, school food and early years ("EYs"). The latter two came to me after the pandemic. I was later DfE Director General for Families Group until I left the civil service in June 2023. I was appointed as the Senior Responsible Officer ("SRO") for vulnerable children during COVID-19 on 3 April 2020: I had earlier made representations at a Cabinet Office ("CO") cross-government meeting (I think this was at the 'top 200 meeting' of top civil servants on 26 March 2020 but I cannot be sure) that the interests of children should be a focus in the pandemic response. I was told that it was unlikely given the primary focus was on the medical risk of COVID-19 and immediate threat to life. I am currently a non-executive, including Chair of a social mobility charity for 16-30 year olds.
- 1.2. I am conscious that there is debate around appropriate language in relation to "vulnerable children," and that some feel strongly that this term wrongly defines or judges the child and downplays the external drivers of vulnerability. I return to this in the 'lessons learned' section below. In this statement I have used the term "vulnerable children and young people" to reflect the language of the time.
- 1.3. Prior to my appointment as SRO, on 17 March 2020, we established the Vulnerable Children's Unit ("VCU") within my Group. The VCU was established to ensure there was effective focus and collaboration on issues affecting vulnerable children and young people across government departments and other relevant bodies, including local government (local authorities ["LAs"] and representative bodies), schools, including Special and Alternative Provision ("APs"), charities, police, and health. The VCU reported to the Minister for Children and Families ("MfCF"), Vicky Ford, who was an active champion, together with the Secretary of State for Education ("SSE").
- 1.4. The VCU's work was initially structured around three strands: attendance, safety, and recovery. There was an early recognition that the risks posed to vulnerable

children by the pandemic extended beyond attendance, including ‘hidden harms’ (addressed further below); and also, far beyond those children who had already had a social worker, or an Education and Health Care Plan (“EHCP”). By June 2020 we had shifted to a focus on four strands: attendance, safety, attainment, and wellbeing.

- 1.5. I wish to acknowledge at the outset the experiences of children and young people throughout the COVID-19 pandemic: it seems inadequate to say that many had an incredibly, almost unimaginably, difficult and challenging time. I would like to recognise children and young people for the incredible resilience they showed. I would like to thank carers, professionals and volunteers in the EYs, education, CSC, health, justice, and voluntary and community sectors. I would also like to thank foster carers, who I do not dwell on in this statement but who I appreciate hugely. I also want to thank my team and colleagues across government, for their commitment and efforts to support children throughout the pandemic and beyond.
- 1.6. It was a privilege and a responsibility to be the SRO for vulnerable children. I welcome the opportunity the Covid-19 Inquiry (“CI”) has given me to reflect. A number of the questions I have been asked by the CI focus on attendance, and I recognise the importance of this issue. Settings such as schools are a place of learning, development, safety, play, friendship, and food. However, it is important to say that the SRO/VCU focus went wider. For example, to babies under the age of one, who we judged to be more vulnerable in lockdown, and to extending support to care leavers. In other ways I felt we stayed too narrow. The post pandemic challenges have shown that there is a case for a more holistic focus on all children and their needs, whilst still retaining a focus on vulnerable children and young people. The child, and not the institutional setting, should be the focus.

2. Working with schools/LAs to identify vulnerable children

- 2.1. Responsibility for identifying vulnerable children rested primarily with schools and LAs. They bear primary responsibility for meeting children's educational and social care needs and remained best placed to identify vulnerable children. They know their communities and their children.
- 2.2. I framed my SRO role in two ways: to support schools and LAs in delivery for vulnerable children and young people during the pandemic; whilst also seeking transparency and assurance that this was happening.
- 2.3. The support from DfE, including the VCU, to schools and LAs, came in a variety of forms. For example: guidance on their duties, underpinned by legislative changes when needed; escalating their experiences to the centre of government to help them deliver where needed e.g. PPE/testing; preparations for what would happen should staffing levels be affected by the pandemic; funding; and at times help in the form of staff redeployed from Ofsted (via the Regional Education and Children's Team ["REACT"], in a non-inspection capacity). We also sought to share and spread good practice on both attendance and contact with vulnerable children with a social worker. We also worked to help charities continue to maintain their services, including their children's homes, helplines, and funding for the Barnardo's *See, Hear, Respond* project.
- 2.4. While schools and LAs were best placed to identify vulnerable children in their areas, DfE liaised with them and monitored measures being put in place to support and safeguard vulnerable children. Liaison with schools was primarily through REACT. REACT grew out of the Regional School Commissioners teams and brought together colleagues working on both education and CSC in order to ensure effective oversight and joined up working. REACT undertook "temperature checks", which were weekly calls with various LAs on different topics (see e.g. Exhibit IM1/01 - INQ000541142).
- 2.5. In terms of monitoring and assurance, the VCU worked hand-in-hand with REACT, to seek assurance that schools and LAs were doing what they needed to do. We did this through a combination of collecting and monitoring data and correlating data with intelligence and discussions with sector leaders and individual schools, LAs and

stakeholders, including SEND.

- 2.6. Analysts worked hard to develop (and incrementally improve) a “Vulnerable Children dashboard” which was a summary of data and evidence on vulnerable children (Exhibit IM1/02 - INQ000624440). From an operational perspective this dashboard was a vital tool. Essentially a spreadsheet, that summarised the cumulative national picture of the attendance, including for vulnerable children and young people with social workers or an EHCP and showed that alongside the position for individual LAs. It also included contextual data such as the Ofsted inspection rating for CSC for each LA, and whether the LA had a *Written Statement of Action* (improvement plan) for SEND. Both of these were a proxy for pre pandemic risk. The dashboard later also included reported data on social worker availability.
- 2.7. We had a Red/Amber/Green (“RAG”) rating that we applied to each LA. This was based on the data, and more informal intelligence and feedback, including from LAs themselves as well as DfE staff and Ofsted. It included the LA’s response to survey questions on steps taken to safeguard children; general comments on their survey return; how they were tracking vulnerable children; and comments from them on SEND, EYs, and Further Education (“FE”). We recognised that the pace we were working to meant we could not do the standard of data quality checks we would like. Hence curiosity and ‘intelligent triage’ was even more vital.
- 2.8. This cumulative information was used to help guide our focus to specific local areas as well as give a sense of the national picture. It was imperfect but gave us good insight on where to look and what actions might be needed.
- 2.9. Meetings played an important role in sharing, in moderating data and intelligence and agreeing action.
- 2.10. At different times VCU and REACT met daily or weekly to assess the current status, learning, risks and actions need. VCU also held daily situation reports (“sitreps”) from mid-March 2020 with attendees from across DfE and other Government departments, including CO”, Home Office (“HO”), Department for Work and Pensions, Ministry of Justice (“MoJ”), Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government, Ofsted, Department for Culture, Media and Sport (“DCMS”), NHS England and Public Health England (“PHE”). These later become weekly steering group meetings.

- 2.11. Alongside these, to both inform or follow up from them, I also had regular meetings with the Office of the Children's Commissioner ("OCC"), President of the Association of Directors of Children's Services ("ADCS"), and the Local Government Association ("LGA"). At times I also met individual LA CEOs to discuss our concerns, their challenges and scope for us to help. I also periodically joined my team's regular sessions with SEND stakeholders, including parent organisations, special schools and AP stakeholders. I also met with the National Children's Bureau CEO together with Chief Executives of the big four children's charities (NSPCC, Barnardo's, The Children's Society and Action for Children), initially weekly. From 17 April 2020 we set up the Vulnerable Children and Young People National Board to take a more collective and cross-cutting view.
- 2.12. There was significant focus on attendance, and on contact between vulnerable children and their social workers.
- 2.13. DfE also worked with safeguarding partners (as set out in Annex 1 in the first Corporate Statement provided by Frances Oram dated 29 July 2025 (Exhibit IM1/03 **INQ000587996** LAs, health and police are statutory safeguarding bodies) to address the risks to children and young people that were caused or exacerbated by the pandemic. We also worked closely with Simon Bailey, the Chief Constable and Police Chief's Council lead on child protection, who did a lot of work on the risks of exploitation. He was part of the Vulnerable Children and Young People National Board that I chaired, and the DfE Director in CSC responsible for safeguarding had a number of meetings with him.

Reflections on what worked well in facilitating and encouraging attendance of vulnerable children

- 2.14. The cross government and multi-agency working on attendance (and more) was powered by a sense of shared endeavour, nationally and locally. There was a real sense of commitment to children, and massive amounts of collaboration between schools and LAs in very challenging circumstances. Existing multi-agency collaboration and partnerships locally and nationally, including safeguarding (health, police and local government) were drawn on to enable cross-sector engagement. The mobilisation across central government was supported, challenged and enabled by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster ("CDL"); at the time this was Michael

Gove), the OCC, and the creation of the VCU. We also repurposed the existing cross-government governance/director network and there was freedom to create new governance and teams quickly.

- 2.15. DfE and Ofsted's existing infrastructure, relationships with and knowledge of schools and LAs was a tangible asset. It meant we already had experience of working across the sector and across agencies, could build on this and had some knowledge of which LAs might need support.
- 2.16. The focus on the definition of vulnerable children in relation to their continued attendance at school, and the subsequent clarification that schools/LAs had discretion to identify a wider group of children as vulnerable, was important. This meant that a wider cohort of vulnerable children could benefit from attendance.
- 2.17. The recognition that local agencies such as schools and LAs knew their children best was crucial. A push from central government to overreach and micro-manage could have been damaging. I also felt in some areas where academies and LAs had tensions before the pandemic that they set these aside.
- 2.18. The bringing together of teams working on CSC and education through the REACT teams enabled a focus on a wider and more joined up data and intelligence than if these had remained totally separate. And provided for more joined up engagement with the schools and local government in particular.
- 2.19. Generally, I felt engagement with the sector and wider children's charities, Violence Reduction Units, health bodies, police etc worked well, and all parties demonstrated a willingness and ability to be flexible to adapt and learn from others and give us honest and challenging feedback. My view was that we had a shared endeavour and were all trying to do difficult things at pace. Therefore, we had to be comfortable with having uncomfortable conversations.

Reflections on what worked less well in facilitating and encouraging attendance of vulnerable children

- 2.20. We did not go into the pandemic with a plan and one that was shared across government and agencies, public services and the voluntary and charity sector. So, whilst we mobilised quickly and adapted at pace to learning, intelligence and data,

we lacked preparedness. We lost time – as evidenced in a small way by my SRO role not starting until April 2020, despite DfE having mobilised sooner. This was not limited to the issue of attendance of vulnerable children: the point applies more widely.

- 2.21. There was no pre-existing, codified, shared understanding of ‘what works’ in relation to attendance (both why it was important in the circumstances and how it could be encouraged). There was a good understanding of the drivers of persistent absence and risk factors. But I think many of us underestimated how difficult it would be to ensure children were returning to schools, that some children who were doing well not attending in person or were increasingly anxious and did not want to return.
- 2.22. Data collection arrangements were not fit for purpose for a pandemic. They reflected the pre-pandemic ‘stewardship’ role of the department and were not sufficient for the pace and level of monitoring required. Some data collection was annual and some quarterly and so was not sufficiently regular to provide an informed and timely picture on the ground. New regular weekly data collection was introduced but this was burdensome and was resisted in principle by some key LA leaders who did not always recognise the legitimacy of the ask or did not trust how we would use it.
- 2.23. Given the greatest focus was on school attendance, there was less prominence given to EYs and post-16. There was work done on these, but it did not have the same focus as on school attendance. It was harder given the baseline expectation of attendance was less clear cut for both, and we did not collect pre-pandemic attendance data for EYs.

Whether the proportion of children identified and enabled to attend school was affected by pre-existing variations in standards of children’s services across the country

- 2.24. We were acutely aware of the variation in the quality of local services. The department already worked with the best LAs to help other LAs who were not performing as well and were formally intervening with a number that had been persistently rated ‘inadequate’ (an Ofsted rating indicating the service is performing poorly and failing to meet the required standards) and providing support to others. This is partly why we looked to provide support to LAs during the pandemic as well as seeking assurances from them as to how they were meeting their statutory

duties. As at the end of August 2019, half of the 151 LAs were judged 'good' or 'outstanding' (*Ofsted Annual Report 2019/20*) (Exhibit IM1/04 – INQ000598111). The proportion judged inadequate was 14%. Prior to the pandemic, DfE had adopted a target to reduce the number of Inadequate Authority Children's Social Care ("IA CSC") to 10% or lower. This was achieved in 2023. Going into the pandemic, 47 of the 94 LAs inspected in 2019, had a 'Written Statement Of Action' (requirement for improvement) for SEND provision (Exhibit IM1/05 - INQ000621251).

- 2.25. It is also important to acknowledge that LAs do not – and cannot - deliver services alone: they work with education and health partners in respect of children with EHCPs. And CSC also engages with other partners, especially with education, health and police in relation to safeguarding.
- 2.26. We expected that there might be a correlation between an LA's pre-pandemic performance and their ability to support school attendance during the pandemic but did not assume this would necessarily be the case. We were informed by the existing Ofsted ratings but were conscious that things can change. For example, there are lags in inspections. So, you can have an LA which has been judged "good", but which is on a downward trajectory, or vice versa. We were also very worried that LAs might be hit by levels of staff absence that would threaten their provision of care even for the best performing (and there were contingency plans around this, as well as monitoring the contact vulnerable children were having with social workers).
- 2.27. There were times, especially early on, when it seemed like there was a correlation. For example, in the 20 April 2020 VCU sitrep all LAs we thought might be of potentially 'major concern' based on data and intelligence were either rated 'inadequate' or 'requires improvement' (Exhibit IM1/06 - INQ000624441). The group at the other end of our scale thought to be of 'no concern' at that time were all rated 'good' or 'outstanding'.
- 2.28. However, surprisingly perhaps often we saw that there was no clear association between school attendance, levels of contact with a social worker and the LA's Ofsted rating. A July 2020 list of LAs with both lower-than-expected attendance and social worker contact rates included all Ofsted grades (Exhibit IM1/07 - INQ000624442).

- 2.29. Both Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson were killed during the pandemic by those who they should have been able to look to for love and safety. Arthur was known to children's services and seen at home. But he was not deemed in need of a Section 47 ("S47") safeguarding investigation or considered to be vulnerable for the purposes of attending school during the first lockdown (according to local criteria). Arthur did not return to school post lockdown and died on 17 June 2020. My view is that local authority action showed weaknesses that pre-dated COVID-19 as well as ones exacerbated by it (Exhibit IM1/09 - INQ000541052).
- 2.30. It is important to acknowledge the incredible work also done by children's services and social workers during this extremely difficult time.
- 2.31. Anecdotally I would say that the strongest LAs were best at implementing and sharing good practice. For example, one local authority in the north-east took the initiative to proactively engage with children and young people who, while not meeting the official definition of vulnerable, were known to have required support in the past. Others reported that they had RAG rated the risk to their children and used that to inform their approach to contact, with home visits retained in some cases and other methods used in others. The flexibility to use other methods was also reported as increasing the timeliness of 'case work' (engagement with, and assessing, vulnerable children and young people).
- 2.32. As of July 2020, population density seemed the best predictor of whether a vulnerable child with a social worker would attend school. By this point the gap between rural and urban LAs was four times greater than when we started collecting data – with the higher urban absences driven largely by low attendance in London. So, the virus seemed a significant driver of behaviour.
- 2.33. At that point, attendance of children with EHCPs was higher than children with a social worker. EHCP attendance would have been expected to be lower given the increased likelihood of health risks.
- 2.34. In a snapshot survey of school leaders that month, 60% said they had vulnerable children who should be attending but were not (Exhibit IM1/22 - INQ000624778). Unsurprisingly this was highest in secondary schools. It was also highest for those with a higher percentage of pupils receiving free school meals. And for those schools with a 'requires improvement' rating. The top 3 reasons given included: fear

of virus exposure, parents refusing to send their child, and the household self-isolating. This is a reminder that the fear over the virus was still strong and exerting an influence on attendance, as it continued to do for some time.

Applying learning from March to June 2020 to subsequent attendance restrictions

2.35. We were learning and adapting all the time. You can see this in how the data collection and governance changed at different points, sometimes quickly. This learning was helped by both internal debate and external stakeholder insight and challenge. For example, we had a lessons learned item at the 31 July Vulnerable Children and Young People National Board meeting (Exhibit IM1/10 - INQ000540921). The board included other government departments (“OGDs”) such as DCMS, Department of Health and Social Care (“DHSC”), Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, Department for Working Pensions and HO. It also included the Chief Nurse, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, the OCC, and other partner organisations such as the LGA, the Police, the Association of Colleges, the National Parent Carer Forum, the SEND lead from ASCL, Barnardo’s, the London VRU and the NSPCC. At the October 2020 meeting, there was an item on managing the risk of a future lockdown **Error - Removed** **Error - Removed** (Exhibit IM1/11 - INQ000624443). The November 2020 National Board meeting was also used to test planning for a potential future lockdown (even though we had hoped to avoid this) (Exhibit IM1/12 - INQ000624436).

2.36. We learnt a range of lessons that were either a backdrop to, or applied to, the second lockdown. These included that:

2.36.1. Recovering attendance was going to be harder than we had hoped. The pandemic exacerbated and created pressures on both families and local services, including pastoral staff in schools focused on attendance (see also paragraph 3.90 in the first Corporate Statement provided by Frances Oram dated 29 July 2025 (Exhibits IM1/03 - **INQ000587996** and IM1/13 - INQ000540955). It also increased anxiety for some parents and children, reducing their desire, and confidence in, returning to settings. Some parents of children and young people with SEND reported their children doing better at home but needed support services to be restored and do

better (a theme picked up in the SEND review once that was resumed after the pandemic).

2.36.2. Increasing attendance needed visible leadership as part of a 'whole system' approach. Schools, and other settings, could not do it alone. It needed active national and local leadership from health, parents, local government and the OCC as well as education and policing. This approach was reflected in the setting up of the *Attendance Action Alliance* in late 2021, chaired by SSE and designed to show sustained leadership and commit to leadership action not just talk (see para 6.82 of the first Witness Statement of Julia Kinniburgh dated 28 July 2025 (Exhibit IM1/14 - **INQ000651498**)).

2.36.3. Attainment and wellbeing needed greater focus given what we learnt over the first lockdown. By June 2020 we had adopted the 4 pillars focus: attendance, safety, attainment and wellbeing. I also felt that there was greater awareness of the impact on vulnerable children and young people in discussions regarding later sets of attendance restrictions. I remember for example, at a cross-government meeting where I made representations on this, I was supported by Jonathan Van-Tam (I cannot recall the specific date of this meeting). However, this did not prevent the decision to impose attendance restrictions again in January 2021, I also do not think the actions taken in respect of wellbeing and mental health were adequate – which we can see playing out today. There was also a greater (though still insufficient) focus on the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic. For example, we held a webinar with Barnardo's on the impact of the pandemic on children from ethnic minority backgrounds on 14 Jan 2021 (Exhibit IM1/15 - INQ000598041).

2.36.4. Local government and their CSC teams were more resilient than had been expected and LAs had really stepped up to meeting the challenges of the pandemic more widely. However, concern remained about the risk of a sudden increase in referrals when

lockdowns were lifted due to 'hidden harms'.

2.36.5. Operationally, the key central DfE teams worked well together. REACT worked really well as a single point where the picture was brought together and a single interface with local government and schools. We had learnt that we needed to do more to care for our staff, e.g. in using shifts/job shares for key roles with heavy workloads and committing to avoid lunchtime slot for meetings in winter so staff could see some daylight.

2.36.6. Changes to DfE central governance gave the VCU an easier and more effective route to escalate need for PPE/testing.

2.37. I think we could have taken a different approach to closing schools in the second lockdown. For example, having an 'everyone in unless you or your family are clinically vulnerable' approach and then focused on remote learning and other support for them. Although I acknowledge that I am writing this without going back to review the virus rates at the time. I think this could have also helped with post-pandemic attendance by giving us a clearer picture of the extent of likely absence and the challenge that awaited. Challenges included:

2.37.1. COVID-19 recovery and response work were now competing with a push to get other important work back on track, including the SEND review, and the Prime Minister's crime and justice priority. I was also DfE's lead Director General for the Spending Review which concluded at the end of 2020, so my time was now split and no longer focused solely on vulnerable children and COVID-19.

2.37.2. Frustratingly we felt we needed to make the case all over again for prioritisation, e.g. of the CSC workforce for access to PPE/testing, and prioritising education recovery for vulnerable children and young people – this had not been won in first lockdown.

2.37.3. Clearance with the centre of government for key communications and guidance did not feel any easier than in the first lockdown.

- 2.37.4. I saw team members with children or other caring responsibilities bearing a particularly heavy load for a second winter. I think this came at a cost to them personally and perhaps professionally.

3. Impacts of pandemic on delivery

- 3.1. Overall, I felt the VCU had a good understanding of incoming information: our pre-pandemic roles and sector relationships, and the rapid mobilisation of VCU, meant we were in a pretty good position to obtain data and more informal intelligence from those on the ground. I have addressed some of this above.
- 3.2. There was a lot of information coming into the VCU from different sources; in order to establish a way to anchor it in what was going on at the same time we initially adopted three key strands of work: attendance, safeguarding and recovery. This later changed to the four strands of work: attendance, safety, attainment and wellbeing.
- 3.3. The VCU was also generally good at identifying where there were gaps and seeking to fill these, with the useful challenge from charities, the OCC and others. However, there were some difficulties in particular areas, which are reflected below. At times we were also playing catch up with decisions which had already been taken and which affected attendance or safeguarding, for example in relation to birth registrations or the provision of PPE and testing.

On referrals

- 3.4. In relation to referrals, this was an area where the VCU was concerned about the risks of reduced referrals from an early stage, especially given that schools were the largest source of referrals before the pandemic. Although there had been work pre-pandemic looking at reducing the number of referrals safely, we considered that in the context of the pandemic, we couldn't assume that reduced referrals would be reflecting reduced need. This was for three main reasons:

- 3.4.1. That referrals which should have been made would not be, as children were "out of sight" with most children not attending schools. And low attendance rates even among vulnerable children who were eligible to attend.

- 3.4.2. That LA Children's Services might not be able to deal with referrals effectively or convert them to S47 safeguarding proceedings when needed.
- 3.4.3. That following the end of lockdown there would be a surge in referrals which would overwhelm capacity of services to respond effectively.
- 3.5. Alongside this are those referrals from families seeking support for their children with specific disabilities. The concern here – borne out – was that the challenges families already faced in getting support would get worse.
- 3.6. We put in place the collection of more timely data through the weekly Vulnerable Children and Young People's survey. This was combined with more informal intelligence/feedback about LAs to consider whether action was needed, for example in specific LAs and/or via a national response, such as funding, enrolling more social workers and engaging safeguarding partners nationally.
- 3.7. The pre-pandemic understanding of referrals data combined with strong relationships with LAs and safeguarding partners put us in a strong position to be able to ask the right questions to aid rapid gathering of intelligence from on the ground. Relationships with local government, their Directors of Children Services, ADCS, charities and the police were especially crucial in that.
- 3.8. We knew that lower referral numbers were not necessarily reflecting lower risk, so there was a focus on actions which could be taken to understand the risks children were facing and ensure other safeguarding bodies were playing their role. This included work on 'hidden harms' (set out in more detail below), encouraging collaboration between schools and LAs in relation to identifying vulnerable children, funding helpline extensions such as the NSPCC and the Barnardo's *See, Hear, Respond* project, work with safeguarding partnerships and police on risks and working with Public Health England's ("PHE") Chief Nurse (Viv Bennett) in relation to ensure health visitors were still visiting face to face.
- 3.9. There was a real fear that the virus would deplete the workforce to a point that service delivery would be at significant risk. To support LA capacity, legislative easements were introduced which gave LAs more flexibility (judicial review

proceedings were brought in relation to these for both the SEND and CSC regulations. The latter was partially successful on appeal - further details are set out in the first Corporate Statement provided by Frances Oram dated 29 July 2025 (Exhibit IM1/03 - **INQ000587996**) DfE supported plans for social workers whose registrations had lapsed or who had retired to return to work so that they could be enrolled by LAs. By 22 April 2020, 1,119 had registered interest. 125 LAs had registered interest and 65 had applied formally. As I recall this had only limited take up and did not make much difference at scale.

3.10. In terms of the concerns around a later increase in referrals once lockdown ended, although volumes of referrals did increase and (as set out para 8.40 of the third Corporate Statement of Susan Acland-Hood dated 16 July 2025) social workers did increasingly report that cases were becoming more complex because of the pandemic (Exhibit IM1/16 - **INQ000587992**) there was not an overwhelming surge, and the CSC system proved to be more robust than had been feared. The reasons behind the volume not materialising as anticipated are complex. However, my view is that this does not mean we can be confident there was not risk or un-met need wider than safeguarding. By July 2020 referrals were approximately 10% lower than the historical average. Referrals reached their lowest point between January to February 2021, coinciding with the second lockdown. The drop is not surprising but the fact it is lower than the first lockdown is.

3.11. In terms of action following a referral, the pandemic did not seem to affect the overall percentage of 'no further action' decisions.

3.12. Later on in the pandemic there was more understanding of increased pressures within families as a risk factor given financial and other pressures, and risks of domestic violence (also a focus of the Prime Minister's 'Hidden Harms' Virtual Summit - below) or impacts on mental health. If you look at the drivers of persistent absence from school before the pandemic, similar factors are present. The need to support families was reflected in the later Independent Review of CSC.

On 'hidden harms'

3.13. There was early awareness of the risk of 'hidden harms' across government from DfE, the HO and wider partners, including the police. It was a concern for the VCU and I from the outset, as it was raised in our discussions with the OCC, CO and

others. The primary lens for 'hidden harms' was safeguarding – which was one of the three original 'key strands' in the VCU delivery plan.

- 3.14. There were concerns that vulnerable children who were already at risk would be 'hidden' at home and that we might see a rise in domestic violence or online harms. In 'ordinary times' there is a threshold for the state being involved in family life. But in 'ordinary times' most children are more visible in schools, nurseries and healthcare. Lockdown changed that profoundly. We worked hard to understand the risks and mitigate as best we could. But there were significant limits as to what was possible, and I think it is important to acknowledge that.
- 3.15. There was also concern about changes in numbers of referrals to CSC, as the closure of schools and other settings would mean there was reduced visibility of children. That meant there would be fewer opportunities for the risk of harm to be identified in the ways which had been most common before the pandemic, including through referrals from schools. It was recognised too that new or greater harms could emerge from the pandemic, including risks to children's mental health. Alongside that there was a strong fear that children and young people with SEND would suffer from a loss of practical and therapeutic support, with the system already strained. There was also concern about the risk of disproportionate impacts (for example some ethnic groups being disproportionately affected by the pandemic).
- 3.16. Although there was a high degree of awareness around the risks of 'hidden harms' increasing in the pandemic, I felt it was an area in which it was difficult to obtain both reliable data about the scale of the risks, and to agree tangible action to address them beyond supporting services designed to identify and respond. Gauging the extent of this risk is and was extremely challenging. Steps which DfE took to address 'hidden harms' included:
- 3.16.1. Focusing on maximising attendance of vulnerable children at school, to minimise the risks to them from reduced visibility.
 - 3.16.2. Monitoring, supporting and challenging LAs on social worker contact with children;

- 3.16.3. Securing support from the Prime Minister for a high-profile focus on 'hidden harms' (paragraph 3.17).
- 3.16.4. Identifying under 1s and teenagers as key 'at risk' age groups (paragraphs 3.20 to 3.22).
- 3.16.5. Making efforts to reach communities, for example through the £7.3 million provided for Barnardo's *See, Hear, Respond* programme; and
- 3.16.6. Bringing together an inclusive multi-agency coalition for both intelligence and action - this included police, health bodies, and charities. We recognised the risk of increased domestic violence and the risk this posed to children, and the importance of health checks and health visitors going back out into the community.

Prime Minister 'Hidden Harms' Virtual Summit May 2020

- 3.17. My team helped organise the virtual 'Hidden Harms' Summit hosted by the Prime Minister on 21 May 2020. This was attended by over 70 representatives from across government, NHS, law enforcement, charities, frontline services and survivors of 'hidden harms'. I was also present, as was the OCC, the Domestic Abuse Commissioner, Victims' Commissioner, and Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner. It reflected a good deal of work in the months preceding and led to a published report (26 June 2020) (Exhibit IM1/17 - INQ000623398).
- 3.18. There were three ministerial-led roundtables on safeguarding, policing, and victim and survivor support – the safeguarding session was led by SSE. The Summit noted that measures put in place to deal with COVID-19 risked making crimes such as child abuse, child sexual exploitation, domestic abuse, sexual violence and modern slavery more prevalent and less visible.
- 3.19. Recommendations from that session included calls for more actions, including a national recovery programme for vulnerable children and their families, and that changes to social care regulations introduced in April should be reversed.

Under 1s

- 3.20. One cohort that the VCU had particular concerns about was the visibility of children under 1. MfCF raised this with colleagues at the 17 April 2020 General Public Sector Ministerial Implementation Group (as set out in paragraph 3.51 of the first Corporate Statement provided by Frances Oram dated 29 July 2025 (Exhibit IM1/03 - **INQ000587996**). This concern was in part driven by our knowledge of the relatively high incidence of *Serious Incident Notifications* raised for this age group pre-pandemic and a concern that they would be more hidden in lockdown. In addition, the requirement to register births had been suspended in the initial pandemic response and there was a risk that children were therefore not known about. This was later reversed. The risk was compounded by health visitors not attending as they had been redeployed to COVID-19 response roles.
- 3.21. By July 2020 a virtual team had been established across DfE, DHSC and HO to focus on this group led out of my CSC. We also worked closely through the pandemic with the Chief Nurse at PHE in relation to this group, who wrote to trusts to advise that health visitors should not be redeployed to COVID-19 response roles in winter 2020/21. The Chief Nurse was also a member of the Vulnerable Children and Young People National Board and was an active and engaged ally.

Teenagers

- 3.22. We were also concerned about the risks to teenagers and their vulnerability to exploitation and violence. Their attendance at settings was inherently less predictable. It was also unclear early on to what extent they would adhere to lockdown, and we were keen to avoid them being penalised. We worked closely with the HO and police and for this reason involved VRUs in the National Board. HO and DfE ministers also wrote to police and Crime Commissioners and VRU directors on 30 June 2020 to ask for their focus on the risk to teenagers. The department also secured funding for summer 2020 programmes, including for AP.

What worked well

- 3.23. We secured a sustained and increased focus on 'hidden harms' across government, as demonstrated by the Prime Minister's 'Hidden Harms' Virtual Summit in May 2020.
- 3.24. The VCU's identification of the specific risks to, and advocacy for, children under 1 led to concrete action being taken through the partial reinstatement of birth registrations in May 2020 at our request; the HO agreed that partial registrations could be taken over the telephone. We also secured exceptions for parents/carers with children under the age of 1 in national legislation in November 2020.
- 3.25. I felt there was a greater focus on 'hidden harms' in the second lockdown and in planning for recovery.

Challenges

- 3.26. The fact that it is impossible to fully know the extent of the risks facing vulnerable children it makes dealing with them more challenging and I do not think we have a full picture to this day.
- 3.27. While multi-agency/sector teams and structures worked well once set up, there were not pre-existing frameworks or plans for this.
- 3.28. Youth policy sat with DCMS. I do think the lack of priority in this area generally in the run up to the pandemic was a challenge for securing support to teenagers. The focus on teenagers was sustained beyond the pandemic, e.g. the funding for SAFE and AP taskforces in the years that followed, but I think that was too narrow.

In relation to delays in the Family Courts

- 3.29. Family Courts are important to children and families. The pandemic driven closure of courts impacted care proceedings and adoptions (a route by which children leave the care system). As SRO for vulnerable children and young people during COVID-19 this mattered to me, and again I felt this was an area that the VCU and DfE could advocate for, and liaise with, but didn't have direct levers to achieve concrete outcomes. The President of the Family Division, Andrew McFarlane, was aware of

and active in addressing these concerns. The Family Division moved to permitting remote hearings and I recall that there was some discussion about making Adoption Order hearings a priority.

- 3.30. As well as contact at official level, ministers were also involved in raising issues around delays in the Family Courts. For example, MfCF and the President met in April 2020 to discuss these challenges, and on 19 May 2020 SSE wrote to him articulating the impact delays were having on children, asking for action and also offering thanks and support (Exhibit IM1/18 - INQ000624447).
- 3.31. This remained a focus into autumn and winter 2020, as reflected in the Vulnerable Children and Young People National Board papers dated 9 November 2020 (which flagged the Family Court backlog, along with the ongoing risks of 'hidden harms') (Exhibit IM1/19 - INQ000624444) and also at the Board meeting dated 9 November 2020 (Exhibit IM1/12 - INQ000624436). And my SRO assessment was sent to CO on 19 November 2020 (Exhibit IM1/20 - INQ000624437). Through the latter, I escalated the issue to CO for action by MoJ. We wrote to the CO again Christmas Eve to note *"[i]mmediately following Christmas assistance will be needed to ensure family courts get back up and running again and are working, as quickly as possible, through backlogs – this is due to increasingly worrying evidence this week of LAs having very limited placement capacity. DfE working with ADCS and Ofsted now to pre-empt issues over coming week."* I would say this is one of many pressure points that existed before the pandemic, was made worse by it and remains a challenge today (Exhibit IM1/21 - INQ000624438).

4. Children in secure accommodation

- 4.1. During the pandemic we focused on Secure Children's Homes ("SCH"). SCH are run by LAs and have both welfare and justice 'beds'. They also provide education on site. Our focus was mainly to maintain continuity of care for young people resident there, for example by securing access to PPE and testing. As set out in graph 3.23 of the first Corporate Statement provided by Frances Oram dated 29 July 2025 (Exhibit IM1/03 - INQ000587996) the decision was taken on 18 March 2020 to treat all SCH as secure settings, with the intention that they would have the same access to equipment such as PPE.
- 4.2. There was less focus in DfE on young people in MoJ's custodial settings, such as the Young Offender Institutions ("YOIs") mentioned in the OCC's letter of [25/2/21]. This was an area which primarily fell under the ambit of MoJ, although the VCU was engaged in its cross-government capacity.
- 4.3. An exception was April 2020 when there were plans for early release schemes. The number of children to be released early had not been finalised but was estimated as 20 or under. Approximately eight of these children would need accommodation to be provided by an LA. We were involved with a view to ensuring that any young people that were released early were safe and supported in the community. That meant seeking views from LAs (who were to be responsible for this) and making the case for MoJ providing LAs with funding to do so.
- 4.4. The OCC raised the issue of children in custody not being included in the definition of vulnerable children who should be prioritised for face-to-face education, in a letter dated 25 February 2021 to MfCF (Exhibit IM1/08 - INQ000541093). This was also discussed at one of my regular meetings with the OCC on 12 January 2021. I cannot remember this meeting in any detail (and we met often), but I have seen the minute of it. That, shared with the OCC, suggests DfE did not agree that there was a case for widening the definition in the guidance given the very different context. I do not completely agree with the OCC's characterisation of the responsibilities of DfE in her letter. The Youth Custody Service, which is part of HM Prison and Probation Service, is primarily responsible for the provision of education in the institutions it oversees. The letter does not appear to be copied to the Youth Justice Board or MoJ.

- 4.5. However, given our commitment to both children and supporting the OCC's efforts with OGDs, the minute notes that both DfE ministers and officials had raised with MoJ to seek assurance on their plans for enabling access to education. It is not clear to me what I or others did to follow this up.
- 4.6. I do agree that education in custodial settings is a long-standing problem and that the OCC's focus on getting this to a much better place for young people was right. I did not agree that changing the definition was the vehicle to achieve this because the guidance was for a very different (and devolved) audience and setting.

5. Cross-government co-operation

- 5.1. We set up the VCU at a time when it was unclear whether vulnerable children and young people would be a priority across government. Indeed, when I raised it, I was told it was unlikely given the low risk to children from COVID-19 itself. The VCU predated my appointment as SRO and came from a view, shared by the driving force behind it, the DfE Strategy Director, that we needed a joined-up approach across the Group, OGDs and stakeholders. The creation of the VCU was essential in making that happen and was praised by external stakeholders. It was underpinned by specific areas (CSC and SEND) creating teams dedicated to COVID-19. In the first lockdown all other work was slowed down or halted, including for example on the SEND review, and efforts deployed to COVID-19.
- 5.2. My SRO role was welcome, especially given the earlier rebuff to my raising the wider risks to children. I cannot be sure, but I do think the CDL and his advisor (loaned from office of the OCC) were likely key to this rethink and their support and robust challenge was important as was SSE's.
- 5.3. Due to the lack of an existing cross-government plan or structure for a pandemic, co-operation on issues affecting vulnerable children was reliant on good will and finding good people in different departments.
- 5.4. In general, this worked well, and we were fortunate that people were highly committed to promoting the interests of children. However, there were challenges. It is important to recall that the pandemic was initially seen overwhelmingly as a health matter, and decisions were made in the context of the need to act in the interests of public health, and to prevent people from dying. It did feel that our escalations were often overlooked by central government due to bandwidth and a lack of priority. In autumn/winter 2020/2021 schools remained a Tier 1 priority on the government plans, vulnerable children and young people were only a Tier 2 priority. For example, on effective communications, we and the OCC lobbied for a Prime Minister press conference for children, and although I was told in August 2020 by our Head of Communications that this was agreed ahead of the return to school, I do not recall it happening. Similarly on other escalations, such as delays in Family Courts. At other times though CO were superb, for example the helpful push to collect timely data, the support to host the Prime Minister Virtual Summit on 'Hidden Harms' in May

2020, and scheduling cross-government ministerial recovery meetings on issues such as Mental Health and Attendance.

- 5.5. At times it did feel that the VCU was a bit of an afterthought in departments' thinking and was very much being driven by me as SRO with limited oversight, other than from MfCF and CO (ministers, officials and advisors).
- 5.6. In addition, departments are always most interested in the areas for which they have primary responsibility. This was particularly so in the context of the pandemic where everyone was faced with trying to respond to the varied challenges raised and a rapidly changing factual picture. It is easier to galvanise people in a shared structure, and I felt this improved as the VCU bedded in.
- 5.7. I have some sympathy with the view expressed by Frances Oram as set out in her corporate statement, that the later arrangement of reporting to CO alongside schools' policy and other areas, via the DfE central governance was better. The later DfE central governance was a different beast to the earlier incarnation. It had matured and reflected on the lessons learnt. It was especially supportive and more effective helping with discussions with DHSC and CO on testing and PPE for CSC. That will have been appreciated by Frances and others in CSC who spent a great deal of time on this issue which was vital but massively frustrating and time consuming. This was especially so when you felt you had to make the case over and over again.
- 5.8. From an SRO and VCU perspective the direct working with CO in the first wave, and working with MfCF, was useful for mobilising colleagues across government and to some extent signalling the priority to external stakeholders. It was also speedy. The VCU were still plugged into the central DfE governance – all guidance was cleared through the same routes as schools, as were communications etc. But having a direct and speedy channel with the CO helped with pace, something that was critical at that time.
- 5.9. There is a wider issue in relation to SROs. I certainly felt that I had influence but not levers on OGDs. To some extent this was already embedded in the nature of my role in respect of devolved services like CSC and SEND. I do not think this was limited to me. The promised Cabinet Secretary letter with my appointment and role did not

materialise. In hindsight this could have been useful when working with OGDs but at the time it did not worry me.

- 5.10. I think if we had planned for a pandemic with a clearer view on potential impacts for vulnerable children and young people then this would have improved the effectiveness of our mobilisation.

6. Lessons for the future

- 6.1. In terms of lessons for the future, I hope planning proceeds from the starting point that schools and educational and care settings should remain open. However, even if they do, as we experienced with this pandemic, parents and children can “vote with their feet” so robust contingency planning is also important.

My main reflections for the future

- 6.2. Be prepared. Having a clear, cross-sector plan in advance would have assisted with COVID-19 response and will be important in any future pandemic. Operational measures could have been improved if we already had agreed mechanisms for data collection and analysis, for multi-agency collaboration, governance and the role of the SRO. I would also like named officials to be formally appointed to lead on the needs of children in each government department, working with the overarching SRO. Instead, arrangements developed and adapted as we went along, we relied on goodwill and time was lost. Having a plan in place would also help with focusing on recovery earlier and in a more sustained way.
- 6.3. Put the child and young person at the heart of the planning, delivery and learning. There should be a proper focus on allowing the voices of children and young people themselves to be heard, and to inform any measures taken. The importance of engagement with children and young people, and their parents, was underestimated. The persistent lack of communications for parents, carers, and children and young people themselves was in my view a strategic weakness. The OCC also called for a children-focused No.10 press conference. At one point we had this confirmed for August 2020, ahead of the return to school, but it never happened. Communications and engagement, including listening, is relevant to attendance because confidence was a big driver behind children and young people not attending. The National Children’s Bureau convened a group of children and young people for the VCU and colleagues across government, but this met only once or twice.
- 6.4. The voice of children in some of the most difficult situations was missing, including those in special residential settings, under Deprivation of Liberty orders or unaccompanied asylum seeking children. In short, the voice of children and young people was not as prominent as it should have been.

- 6.5. Related to this is the point I have made already about language. The Chief Social Worker amongst others, raised concerns about the 'label' of being identified as a vulnerable child. Children and young people have since told me that they felt it defined them when the focus should have been the risks to them as well as their talents. *'Would I want to go to school if in doing so it labelled me vulnerable? And if I do attend is the experience positive or am I just stuck in a room with not much to do?'* This is more than a point of principle. It's about designing and delivering an effective response that works for children and young people. And for their families and carers.
- 6.6. There was insufficient focus on 'holistic' recovery. There was a strong focus on work to recover lost time on individual areas, including SEND and CSC reforms, rather than consideration in the round of the needs of vulnerable children and young people post pandemic. I also felt it was harder than it should have been for the VCU to influence decisions and the design of education recovery. I feel we lacked an overarching child-focused recovery plan that would also take account of longer-term impacts, including mental health. Instead, there was a hankering for things to be 'back to normal', and to recover lost time with the centre of gravity pulling the focus on to new reforms.
- 6.7. Guard against optimism bias: although pessimistic on some issues, for example on the ability of local government services to sustain in the light of feared high staff shortages, I think we were overly optimistic about how quickly the pandemic would end and normality (including on attendance and SEND) return. Though 'normality' pre-pandemic was not without problems.
- 6.8. Planning should include robust risk analysis of current risks on the performance of public services: while the pandemic was a catalyst for action in certain areas, it was not possible to reverse underlying issues such as SEND provision, delays in Family Courts, funding for local government or the lack of priority given to youth work. A number of these were the subject of escalations from myself as SRO and the VCU to CO during the pandemic. Linked to this we should ensure the focus is not just on schools as a mechanism for addressing the needs of vulnerable children; the connection to schools and attendance at schools has been weakened for a lot of children. This understanding is reflected in the ongoing work on attendance. Also, could we have looked at more practical steps to get children into settings during the first lockdown, for example organising transport to get them there.

- 6.9. We need to sustain the focus on drivers of vulnerability. The impacts of the pandemic did not end in 2021, I retained the VCU following the pandemic, despite budget pressures. It is important for it to be retained and embedded in order to help ensure that the needs and experiences of vulnerable children can be considered at a cross-government level in any future pandemic (and more widely).
- 6.10. I would like to end by thanking my team and those colleagues and stakeholders who worked so hard and generously with us. My team recognised, but never accepted or reconciled to, the limits of our ability to influence or make a difference. My team never gave up. The pandemic may be over, but its legacy continues for children and young people born and growing up during that time. Some of whom are now young adults making their way in the world. We owe it to them to learn from what we did well, the mistakes we made and how we can do better.

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: 01 Aug 2025