Witness Name: Sir Kevan Collins

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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SIR KEVAN COLLINS

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Chapter 1: Career to date and current role at the Department for Education

Career to date

1.1. I graduated with a BA (Hons) in economics and politics from the University of Lancaster in 1982, before spending a number of years teaching at a primary school in Tower Hamlets Local Authority. Between 1994 and 1998 I was a teacher and then a school leader in Bradford, eventually becoming a Senior Adviser at Bradford Local Authority.

1.2. Between 1996 and 2000, I studied for a Doctorate in Education, specialising in literacy development. During this period, in 1998, I was appointed as National Director of the National Primary Strategy, leading the introduction of the strategy across London, as well as working with government ministers to shape national policy in this area. As part of this role, I developed and implemented national training materials and support for all primary schools in England.

1.3. In 2005, I was appointed as Corporate Director of Children's Services ("DCS") for Tower Hamlets Local Authority, working with 115 schools in the borough to achieve year on year improvements and the best results nationally for children eligible for free school meals. In 2009, I was promoted to become Chief Executive of Tower Hamlets Local Authority.

1.4. In 2011, I was appointed as Chief Executive of the Education Endowment Foundation ("EEF"), a charity set up to break the link between family income and educational achievement. EEF also supports schools, colleges, and early years settings to improve teaching and learning through better use of evidence. In this role, which I held from 2011 to 2019, I led the largest education research programme in England, provided independent advice to the government and policymakers and collaborated with global education partners on research projects in the USA, Australia, India and Latin America.

1.5. Since January 2020 I have held a number of roles including:

1.5.1. Board member, Goodstart Early Learning, Australia (current);

1.5.2. Executive Vice Chair, Learning by Questions, a UK digital learning company (current);

1.5.3. Board Member, EEF (current);

1.5.4. Adviser, South Australian Government External Experts Group (current);

1.5.5. Chair, The Youth Endowment Fund (Chair 2019 to 2022, Board member 2022 to March 2024);

1.5.6. Board Member, The Hg Foundation, a UK education and youth employment charity (current); and

1.5.7. Board Member, Cognita Schools (resigned August 2024).

1.6. In February 2021, I was appointed as the government's Education Recovery Commissioner, to oversee a comprehensive programme of catch-up aimed at young people who had lost out on learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I resigned from this role in June 2021.

Current role at the Department for Education

1.7. In July 2024, following the General Election, I was appointed as Lead Non-Executive Board Member ("NEBM") and Adviser on School Standards to the new Secretary of State for Education ("SSE").

1.8. As a NEBM I advise on:

1.8.1. organisational performance, helping shape DfE's strategy by challenging and supporting senior officials and ministers, including through attendance at departmental board meetings approximately six times per year;

1.8.2. the running of DfE, including the operational and delivery implications of policy proposals; and

1.8.3. the effective management of the department (including succession planning, senior civil service talent and underperformance).

1.9. In addition to the above, as Lead NEBM I:

1.9.1. lead DfE's NEBM team, ensuring that they can fulfil their roles effectively;

1.9.2. meet regularly with the DfE Permanent Secretary and SSE to provide honest, informed feedback on departmental and senior officials' performance, and to provide advice, challenge, and support on departmental strategy, risks, and issues;

1.9.3. hold the DfE to account on strategy, performance and spending, ensuring that the department delivers value for taxpayers' money;

1.9.4. support SSE in their role as Chair of the Board;

1.9.5. support and challenge departmental leaders through regular meetings with Directors General and other senior officials;

1.9.6. chair the quarterly DfE Nominations Committee to support succession planning, senior official talent management and departmental change;

1.9.7. contribute to DfE's annual report and accounts and the Permanent Secretary's performance review; and

1.9.8. work with the government-wide Lead NEBM, and NEBMs across government, to help drive the government's agenda and learn from the experiences of other government departments and comparable organisations.

Chapter 2: The early part of the COVID-19 pandemic

2.1. As set out above, I resigned as Chief Executive of the EEF in December 2019. I did not hold any office with the EEF between December 2019 and when I joined the EEF Board as a trustee in November 2021. Questions related to EEF's response to the pandemic are therefore better answered by the organisation itself.

2.2. My meeting with Victoria Atkins MP, the then Minister for Crime, Safeguarding and Vulnerability at the Home Office ("HO") on 30 June 2020 (Exhibit KC1/001 - INQ000518723) related to the development of the Youth Endowment Fund ("YEF"). At the time I was the Chair of the Fund and together with the CEO, Jon Yates, we updated the Minister on the development of the YEF Toolkit, a synthesis of global evidence on interventions to reduce youth crime. We also sought support from the Minister to promote cross government working between the HO backed YEF and its sister organisation the EEF, which was funded and sponsored by DfE.

2.3. In August 2020, Susan Acland-Hood, in her role as temporary Second Permanent Secretary at DfE, rang me to talk about whether I might join a board to provide guidance on managing exams. We had a constructive conversation, but this proposal went no further at this stage. Senior DfE officials then approached me in early December 2020 to ask if I was willing to join a board including representatives from Ofsted and Ofqual to provide guidance on how to manage school exams. I indicated an in-principle willingness to support the work. The request and discussion did not, however, progress beyond the initial contact (Exhibit KC1/002 - INQ000610362).

2.4. Also in December 2020, I was approached by the same DfE officials to chair an expert group to advise on how to manage the 2021 implications of COVID on the 2021 school exams. The set-up process was protracted and eventually overtaken by my appointment as the Education Recovery Commissioner in February 2021 (Exhibit KC1/003 - INQ000610363).

Chapter 3: My role as Education Recovery Commissioner

3.1. On 1 February 2021, I was contacted by Number 10 and asked to meet the Prime Minster later that day (Exhibit KC1/004 - INQ000610364). At that meeting, the Prime Minister asked me if I would support his ambition to deliver an education recovery programme. The Prime Minister asked if I would take up post as Education Recovery Commissioner for England and work with his office and SSE to develop a plan to tackle the impact of the pandemic on the education of children and young people in England.

3.2. I agreed that education recovery was a national priority, made it clear that I was willing to play my part and that the work would need the full support of DfE, and I needed to meet SSE before formally accepting the offer.

3.3. I spoke to the DfE Permanent Secretary on the same day and followed this up with an email setting out arrangements to establish an office to begin the work. DfE officials moved very quickly to support the effort and following a conversation with SSE on 3 February 2021, my appointment was confirmed (Exhibits KC1/005 - INQ000542878, KC1/006 - INQ000610371, KC1/007 - INQ000610372, KC1/008 - INQ000542653 and KC1/009 - INQ000610374). Julia Kinniburgh Director General, COVID -19 Response and Recovery Group, Graham Archer, Director for Education Recovery, and Gillian McFarland, Deputy Director, Education and Catch-up Strategy were identified as the key officials to support my work.

3.4. My responsibilities, as set out in my Terms of Reference (KC1/008 - INQ000542653) included:

3.4.1. Providing advice to government on the most effective potential interventions to support education catch-up;

3.4.2. Engaging with parents, teachers and education settings, including early years providers, schools and colleges;

3.4.3. Reporting progress regularly to SSE and the Prime Minister; and

3.4.4. As required, working closely with DfE to provide advice on the catch-up package for the current academic year, and ensure future advice dovetailed with that work.

3.5. As also set out in my Terms of Reference, I was appointed by SSE and reported to SSE and the Prime Minister. I was not presented with a budget for the work. My initial guidance was to *"work out what it will take to deliver a recovery programme in this parliament*". I was encouraged to be ambitious by the Prime Minister and given every indication that the mission was to plan for a full recovery of lost learning.

3.6. I drafted a note in the first few days of my appointment setting out a framework for the work. This note, which provided the initial framing for the work and the approach I planned to take was circulated to DfE officials (Exhibit KC1/010 - INQ000610404). The note set out that I had accepted the post of Education Recovery Commissioner to work with families, educators, and government for 'a fair recovery'. To succeed, our approach to recovery had to be focused, and we had to be fearless. Recovery would push every educator out of their comfort zone, but I was clear that this was a challenge of distributing professional knowledge, not of reinventing education.

3.7. I was confident that my experience, knowledge and skills qualified me to take on the role of Education Recovery Commissioner. Previous work with DfE, my work with the academic community, education research at the EEF and my operational roles as a DCS and local authority chief executive meant I had a broad and appropriate range of experiences to face the unprecedented recovery challenge. I was very aware that I also needed the support of a strong team and guidance from a broad alliance of partners and experts.

3.8. On the day before my appointment as Education Recovery Commissioner, I shared a list of my existing commitments including my role as a member of the Board at the EEF with senior DfE officials. In my view, close working with the EEF as a trusted source of education evidence was a benefit and would support me in the work that I planned to take forward (Exhibit KC1/011 - INQ000610365).

3.9. I was clear from the outset that the unprecedented level of disruption would require a long term, large-scale recovery effort. The Prime Minister confirmed at our initial meeting that he was committed to an ambitious programme and determined that children should recover from the disruption to their education as soon as possible. He recognised the differential impact on children facing education disadvantage and urged me to focus on the full range of lost learning, including social and

academic outcomes. I began the work with a clear view that recovery would need to be broad, focused and fair.

3.10. Following the announcement of my appointment, I agreed to support a round of interviews to set out my initial impressions. A subsequent article published in the Financial Times on 5 February summarised my position well (Exhibit KC1/012 - INQ000610366).

3.11. I sent a short note to the Prime Minister after my first week in the role (Exhibits KC1/013 - INQ000610367 and KC1/014 - INQ000610368) and agreed that I would follow up with a similar short note at the end of each week, which would be shared with DfE colleagues (Exhibit KC1/015 - INQ000610369). My first note set out that my immediate priority was to support the delivery of the short-term recovery package that would eventually be announced by the government on 24 February 2021 (see paragraphs 3.18 to 3.20 of this statement below). In terms of long-term planning, I was clear at this point that the evidence of the severe impact of the pandemic on children was continuing to accumulate. I was beginning to develop options for the longer-term plan that would be needed to address this, which would increase learning time and improve teaching quality.

3.12. Extensive engagement with minsters and senior officials was a key feature of my work during this period. It was my intention to ensure the recovery plan was fully aligned to existing policies and designed to mobilise a wide array of resources and stakeholders.

3.13. As set out above, I continued to send weekly update notes to the Prime Minister, a selection of which (Exhibits KC1/016 - INQ000542857, KC1/017 - INQ000542858, KC1/018 - INQ000542859 and KC1/019 - INQ000542860) are exhibited with this statement as examples. Other update notes are exhibited throughout this statement. From the outset I established a regime where the notes were sent simultaneously to key officials in DfE to ensure the key messages were consistent and transparent.

3.14. I focused my attention on securing support and endorsement for the plan from the Prime Minister and DfE. I appreciated that the successful delivery of the proposals would fall to DfE, and they would lead the recovery programme. I worked closely with DfE policy teams, lead officials and SSE to ensure that the proposals had their endorsement and support. As the plans took shape and secured the support of the

Prime Minister, HM Treasury ("HMT") took notice and began to scrutinise and challenge the proposals. I welcomed the challenge and engaged in a range of debates with colleagues from HMT.

3.15. DfE had established good arrangements to monitor the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic performance. I was fortunate to begin my work informed by a range of data and assessments. Regular literacy and numeracy assessments from a large sample of children were used to calculate the impact of school closure and independent organisations including the National Foundation of Education Research ("NFER"), the EEF and the Education Policy Institute ("EPI") were given access to the data and produced a number of informative reports. An example of the reading lists and supporting documents provided to me by DfE in the week after my appointment is exhibited with this statement (Exhibit KC1/020 - INQ000610405). I felt at this stage, therefore, the department had a good understanding of the impact on academic performance. However, I did not feel that there was a systematic measure of non-academic development within the department. The information available at this time was anecdotal and unverified. The absence of standardised, independent information meant that the department was less well informed on the social and emotional effects of the pandemic and long-term school absence.

3.16. From the outset I was clear that I would work closely with DfE. Although I was accountable to the Prime Minister, as well as SSE, I worked hard to build strong relationships with SSE and key DfE officials. As set out in paragraph 3.14 above, I was fully aware that the successful delivery of the proposals would fall to DfE, and they would lead the recovery programme. My insistence that I would not accept the role without the explicit agreement of SSE and that my work would be based in DFE was as a result of my ambition to build on the department's COVID-19 support programme. My aim was to align the recovery with the accountability and support arrangements that drive and inform our system.

3.17. The DfE Permanent Secretary invited me to join her Permanent Secretary Stakeholder Group ("PSSG") soon after my appointment (Exhibit KC1/021 – INQ000542668). This provided an ideal opportunity for engagement with a broad range of partners and provided invaluable insights to inform my plans. It was reassuring to note that the minutes from the PSSG meeting on 25 February 2021 included reflections from the members that my initial approach had their support (Exhibit KC1/022 - INQ000542682).

3.18. On 24 February 2021 the government announced a £700 million package to support education recovery. This included a Recovery Premium for state primary and secondary schools, which built on DfE's Pupil Premium, and would be provided to schools to use as they saw best to support disadvantaged pupils.

3.19. A great deal of the work preparing for this announcement was in train before my appointment. I was encouraged to influence the final decisions, with my efforts focused on better targeting of the funds to children facing economic disadvantage; directing funding towards additional tutoring; and supporting the allocation of additional funds for summer schools. As part of the government's official announcement, I was able to make it clear that the award was just the beginning and much more was to come. The inclusion of my quote in the official press release indicating a commitment to a long-term programme and additional funding reinforced my view that the government was ambitious and committed to deliver a comprehensive recovery programme (Exhibit KC1/023 - INQ000541082).

3.20. The 24 February 2021 announcement and funding package aimed to support schools through to the end of the 2021 summer term through:

3.20.1. Additional funding through the Recovery Premium that had been announced on 24 February, to be allocated to all schools with additional resources directed to areas of need.

3.20.2. Tutoring highlighted as an evidence informed recovery approach; and

3.20.3. Social activities including sport, arts and play based programmes included as part of the recovery approach.

3.21. It was agreed by the Prime Minister and SSE that my work would focus on preparing for a major recovery announcement in May/June 2021. In taking this work forward, I was keen to build on the key principles that had been established in the February 2021 announcement.

3.22. Throughout February 2021 my team and I gathered evidence to inform my emerging plan. I was fortunate to work with a group of brilliant colleagues including a pro bono team from Boston Consulting Group (BCG), colleagues from DfE, EEF and with support from a recently retired DCS, Sir Alan Wood. In addition to the dedicated team, I was supported and guided by an Education Recovery Advisory Group ("ERAG") including ex ministers, leading academics and the Children's Commissioner (Exhibits KC1/024 - INQ000610377, KC1/025 - INQ000610378,

KS1/008 - INQ000542653, KC1/027 - INQ000610380 and KC1/028 - INQ000610381). The level of support for the endeavour was humbling, every door was open, and the education community was generous and supportive. As part of my work, I held meetings and conversations with well over one thousand school leaders, national parent groups, charities, and young people during this period.

3.23. My note to the Prime Minister on 26 February 2021 (KC1/016 - INQ000542857) included the findings from an Institute for Fiscal Studies ("IFS") Covid Generation report which indicated that learning loss and resulting lower skills could cost the economy as much as £350 billion (Exhibit KC1/029 - INQ000610420). The IFS findings were consistent with reports from the US and the World Bank. The note also highlighted the impact on secondary school literacy levels and my team's estimate that in September 2021, 200,000 pupils were likely to arrive in year 7 without the ability to read fluently. 100,000 19-year-olds (1 in 5) would also leave formal education without the minimum level 2 qualifications needed to begin a high-quality apprenticeship.

3.24. In this note I introduced the emerging pillars of my plan, the 'Three Ts':

3.24.1. Increased learning time;

3.24.2. Improved teaching quality; and

3.24.3. Further access to tutoring.

3.25. In his response to this note on 1 March 2021 (Exhibit KC1/030 - INQ000610375), the Prime Minister's Private Secretary noted that:

> *"The PM noted the points you made in the note about the potential scale of the challenge.*
>
> *The PM was pleased to see your initial thinking on possible targets for recovery.*
>
> *The PM was happy with the trajectory of the work. They key now will be adding detail and timelines – we have an existing plan for a note on 8 March."*

3.26. My next note to the Prime Minister, sent on 5 March 2021 (KC1/017 - INQ000542858), set out the aim to plan for a recovery that would deliver a stronger and fairer system. My initial estimates suggested that:

3.26.1. Learning time should be increased by a minimum of 100 hours every year;

3.26.2. 300,000 teachers should have access to additional professional development;

3.26.3. The tutoring programme should be extended to include five million pupils by 2024; and

3.26.4. We should focus on and extend the range of education experiences to improve social and emotional health.

3.27. I made it clear in the note that we should work with the broad alliance of support for the work and aim to announce the package in May 2021 to enable a September 2021 start. I estimated that the cost over the then current parliament would be £12 to £15 billion.

3.28. I attended a meeting of the National Economy and Recovery Taskforce ("NERT") on 8 March 2021. The meeting, chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster ("CDL"), was an opportunity for me to determine if the DfE analysis of the education impact of the pandemic and recovery approach to date had cross government support. It was reassuring to note in the meeting that CDL and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury ("CST") reiterated the position that education recovery was one of the government's top priorities. There was full agreement on the scale and critically, the differential impact on children's learning and social development (Exhibits KC1/031 - INQ000528261 and KC1/032 - INQ000528258).

3.29. I took the steer from the NERT meeting on 8 March 2021 to review the impact of attendance restrictions on education recovery. The Implementation Unit based at Number 10 supported this work. We were fortunate that DfE had wisely established a relationship with a company called Renaissance Learning to gather reading and maths assessments. This data provided vital insights. I was, however, concerned that the results gathered via online assessment did not capture the full impact of the disruption for children facing economic disadvantage who were less likely to have access to technology.

3.30. The reading and mathematics assessments were good proxies to measure academic learning loss. However, in many meetings which I took part in with teachers and parents, I also considered the impact on non-academic outcomes. Although we received a great deal of anecdotal information, reliable empirical

information was scant. We were fortunate to get some information from the NHS, who reported that in 2020 overall one in six children aged five to sixteen had a probable mental health disorder, up from one in nine in 2017 (Exhibit KC1/033 - INQ000588417). Sport England found that during the period of school closure a third of children took less than 30 minutes of exercise a day (Exhibit KC1/034 - INQ000610428).

3.31. On 11 March 2021, President Biden awarded $130 billion to education as part of the American Rescue Plan (Exhibit KC1/035 - INQ000610421). The announcement presented the opportunity for me, in my note to the Prime Minister of 19 March 2021 (Exhibit KC1/036 - INQ000610419) to make the case for pace and the need for greater engagement with parents and families. I argued that the recovery plan should be announced in May 2021 giving schools maximum opportunity to plan for the start of the new academic year in September. Setting out the framework for a long term, broad and comprehensive recovery in May 2021 would signal a beginning of a shared endeavour to deliver the recovery our children deserved. The 'Three Ts' provided a shared framework that schools, families and the wider public could easily understand, for example the proposal that schools would open for an additional 30 minutes a day for extended enrichment activities and additional tutoring.

3.32. The broad support for the 'Three Ts' model that I was seeing in meetings, including with the ERAG (Exhibit KC1/037 - INQ000610382) and with parents and teachers, encouraged a shift in attention from what the plan might include to the challenge of delivery and implementation. The scale and pace of change that I proposed included all phases of learning, the largest ever teacher training programme and establishing a tutoring programme in every school supporting five million children. My note to the Prime Minister of 26 March 2021 (Exhibits KC1/038 - INQ000610383 and KC1/039 - INQ000610384), and his read out to me on 28 March 2021, set out clearly the need to refine the implementation approach and socialise the scale of the challenge to prepare the ground and build support (Exhibit KC1/040 - INQ000610385).

3.33. On 30 March 2021, the day before I was due to meet the Prime Minister and SSE to discuss the recovery plan, officials at Number 10 forwarded on to me two notes giving HMT and CDL's views on education recovery and lost learning. I began to become concerned at this point that the Chancellor and CDL did not fully accept the evidence that we were presenting and that they would not support making

available the levels of funding that I felt were essential to deliver a comprehensive recovery plan (Exhibits KC1/041 - INQ000610387, KC1/042 - INQ000610388 and KC1/043 - INQ000610389).

3.34. I met the Prime Minister and SSE on 31 March 2021 to present the outline of the recovery plan (Exhibit KC1/044 - INQ000546738). The meeting focused on questions of detail and the implementation challenge. The readout from the meeting indicates the level of broad support for the approach (Exhibit KC1/045 - INQ000610390). My follow up note to the Prime Minister responded to some of the issues raised at the meeting (Exhibit KC1/046 - INQ000610422).

3.35. On 12 April 2021, I shared a note with SSE that set out the five core principles that I believed should guide the next stage of the recovery plan's development, alongside a proposed lead position and set of reflections (Exhibit KC1/047 - INQ000610424). On 13 April 2020 I then met SSE to talk this note and accompanying slides (Exhibit KC1/048 - INQ000610434) through in detail. DfE officials provided excellent support including full access to current plans and funding models. I was keen to align my proposals with the DfE approach and ensure that the estimates and costings were verified and consistent. In the supporting note I attempted to set out the rationale for the approach and reinforce the case for a multi-year funding agreement.

3.36. I then presented a detailed draft plan with supporting evidence to the Prime Minister on 27 April 2021 (Exhibits KC1/049 - INQ000610392, KC1/018 - INQ000542859 and KC1/051 - INQ000610394). The presentation set out a response to his initial challenge 'what will it take to recover'. The proposal explained why we needed a comprehensive recovery plan, the case and evidence supporting the 'Three Ts' model and a framework to deliver and implement the plan from September.

3.37. My proposal to fund additional time emerged as a key point of challenge. As set out in paragraph 3.33 of this statement above, I was concerned that HMT officials did not fully support the proposals, and I felt that they did not appreciate how the components worked together as a coherent package. The Prime Minister and I met the Chancellor on 28 April 2021. Following the meeting, I provided a note to the Prime Minister and HMT officials to support the case for additional time to be in the package. The paper set out the evidence that research evidence identified additional time as an enabler of rapid and significant improvement: time acts a

multiplier creating space for children to benefit from other elements of the plan, for example, tutoring and enrichment activities. The supporting evidence and proposals describing the implementation and monitoring arrangements are included in the note and slides that I shared with Number 10 officials on 6 May 2021 (Exhibits KC1/052 - INQ000610395, KC1/019 - INQ000542860) and KC1/054 - INQ000542718).

3.38. Working with colleagues in DfE, HMT and Number 10, we then produced detailed funding proposals that I confirmed with DfE policy and finance teams before including them in a summary briefing table, which set out in detail each element of the 'Three Ts', what each would involve, how much it would cost and why it was important for recovery. This was shared with officials at Number 10 on 12 May 2021 (Exhibits KC1/055 - INQ000610398 and KC1/056 - INQ000610399). At the same time, I remained focused on the feedback I'd received from officials at Number 10 and meeting the exam question set by the Prime Minister to provide a plan to deliver a full recovery in the current parliament, i.e. by the end of 2024.

3.39. My note to the Prime Minister of 14 May 2021 set out my final assessment of the options for the Education Recovery Plan. I made it clear in the note that the estimated cost for a comprehensive plan would be £15.9 billion over three years. The minimum viable plan would cost £10.4 billion. In the summary, I stated that options below this point would not be credible and that a failure to deliver a full recovery would represent a false economy, as learning losses accrued during the pandemic would be likely to compound (Exhibit KC1/057 - INQ000610423).

3.40. My estimate that a full and comprehensive recovery plan would cost £15.9 billion over three years meant there would need to be an approximate 10% increase in education funding each year during that period. This figure should not have been a surprise – in my fourth weekly note to the Prime Minister sent back in early March 2021 (Exhibit KC1/017 – INQ000542858), I had set an estimate of between £12-15 billion. The figures presented in the final plan were verified by policy teams in DfE, scrutinised by HMT officials and shared in a number of government forums. At no point during this period was I advised to reframe the plan to an alternative funding envelope.

3.41. However, the Prime Minister, Chancellor and SSE were the key decision makers. I reported to the Prime Minister, reported to and worked with SSE and responded to the Chancellor. As we moved towards the June 2021 announcement it became

increasingly evident to me that the Chancellor was taking the lead and ultimately determined not to support the full plan.

3.42. On 27 May 2021 I was included in a series of notes from the Prime Minister to HMT, the DfE and Sir Michael Barber, a former Chief Adviser to SSE on school standards from 1997 to 2001 and Head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit from 2001 to 2005).The notes indicated that Sir Michael Barber had been asked to review the evidence and implementation approach to the tutoring and teaching elements of the recovery plan and that the Prime Minister was keen to make an announcement in the first week of June 2021 (Exhibit KC1/058 - INQ000610400).

3.43. Following the Prime Minister's invitation, Sir Michael Barber worked with HMT officials to review elements of the recovery programme. I was not directly involved in the discussions, and it became increasingly clear that HMT and Number 10 were keen to curtail the programme and limit the scale and scope of the work. For example, a note from HMT officials to Number 10 and DfE (included in the email chain of the document exhibited in paragraph 3.42 of this statement above – I wasn't copied in at that stage) set out the Chancellor's position: to taper funding for tutoring, shift some of the teacher training funding to the DfE's budget and remove funding for college pupils to repeat missed year 13. Additional funding to increase the school day was completely dropped from the considerations (Exhibit KC1/059 - INQ000610401).

3.44. The government planned to announce the package on 2 June 2021. In the days immediately before this date, I was keen to secure the investment available and prepared to endorse individual elements of the government's plan. My understanding was that the 2 June 2021 package provided a down payment for recovery. The significant investment in tutoring that was announced was a good idea – tutoring is a proven intervention yielding additional benefit to children from disadvantaged communities. Allocating £400 million to support early years and professional development for teachers was also consistent with the evidence and my view was that the best route to recovery would be great teaching. I was particularly pleased to support the announcement of funding for further education ("FE") colleges to fund the option for students to repeat year 13.

3.45. As plans for the announcement were finalised in the 24 hours immediately preceding this, it became clear to me that the package to be announced was not going to be part of a wider comprehensive recovery programme and the Prime

Minister was supporting the Chancellor's advice not to back my plan. At this point I decided that I had no choice but to resign, which I did on the day the announcement was made. I was deeply disappointed with the scale, range, and depth of the 2 June announcement. I made it clear in my resignation letter to the Prime Minister (Exhibit KC1/060 - INQ000542974), as well as a statement that I published (Exhibit KC1/061 - INQ000610435) on the same day, that the funding fell far short of the £15 billion plan I proposed as the amount required to tackle lost learning caused by the pandemic.

3.46. As I also set out in my resignation letter to the Prime Minister of 2 June 2021, I believed that an urgent and above all a comprehensive response was needed to deliver effective education recovery in England. The government's incremental approach to recovery represented a false economy, with learning losses not addressed quickly being likely to increase and become more serious over time.

3.47. I was clear in my letter that while the package of measures announced by the government on 2 June 2021 provided valuable support, I did not believe that it was credible that a successful recovery on the scale needed could be achieved with a programme of support of the size that had been announced by the government. As set out in one of the equality impact assessments ("EIA") drafted by DfE officials as part of this work (KC1/062 - INQ000542725) the allocations ranged from £44 to £77 per child. My plan estimated a figure in the region of £1000 per child over three years to make good missing on average 115 days of school.

3.48. The conclusions of the EIAs drafted by DfE officials for the education recovery packages announced by SSE are accurate. They correctly report that tutoring and additional teacher training were likely to have a positive impact. However, the assessments fail to report the scale of learning loss and the impact on social and emotional development.

3.49. Strong evidence confirms that 'skills beget skills'. School programmes of study are crafted to sequence the introduction of new learning. Accumulating knowledge and skills can be seen as interlocking building blocks. If blocks are missing, the child's framework of knowing becomes fragile and weak. I was concerned that failing to support teachers and provide time for children to secure core aspects of missed learning would compound as children moved through the curriculum with a weak grasp of the knowledge and skills they missed during the disruption.

3.50. From the outset I was impressed with the Prime Minister's level of ambition and determination to provide a comprehensive recovery programme. As set out in this statement, I wrote to the Prime Minister every week updating him on the progress of my work. At all our meetings he was encouraging and urged me to be ambitious.

3.51. I have now seen the WhatsApp messages referred to in Q20 of the Rule 9 request submitted to me by the Covid-19 Inquiry. Obviously I was not party to them at the time. I am surprised at the views expressed because throughout my time as Education Recovery Commissioner I had received positive feedback from the Prime Minister and his team. When it became clear that I intended to resign I was asked to reconsider and support the delivery of the 2 June 2021 recovery package. When I spoke to the Prime Minister confirming my decision to resign, he thanked me for my work and we parted on appropriate, professional terms.

Chapter 4: The impact of education disruption on children and young people

4.1. I drew on a range of evidence to inform my assessment of how much of an impact extended school closure would have on children and young people through the pandemic. Sources of evidence included from meetings with parents, teachers and other education stakeholders that I arranged, as part of my role, as well as reports, publications and statistics published by DfE and education charities and organisations.

Learning loss and disadvantage

4.2. I was aware that evidence showed that missing school for extended periods would produce scarring effects that were likely to be observed long after the return to school and college.

4.3. DfE estimates indicated children in England missed almost half a year (115 days) (KC1/051 - INQ000610394) of in-person schooling on average in the first year of the pandemic. It is worth noting that during autumn 2020 when schools and colleges fully reopened again, attendance was poor (between 70 to 90%) particularly in areas serving disadvantaged children.

4.4. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UK had made progress in narrowing the disadvantage gap (the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers). Evidence indicated, however that during the pandemic, narrowing of the gap had been reversed and the gap was once again widening.

4.5. The data that I saw, including in the *Understanding progress in the 2020/21 academic year* study by Renaissance Learning and the EPI indicated significant geographical variation in the impact of the disruption on children facing disadvantage. Children living in disadvantaged communities in the north of England were most affected and faced an additional 1 to 1.2 months of learning loss than similar children in the south-east of England (Exhibit KC1/063 - INQ000542835).

4.6. Data from the same study estimated that in reading, children in the primary phase of education were estimated to have suffered 2 months of learning loss, for pupils in the secondary phase of education the loss was greater at 2.5 months. The estimated learning loss for children attending primary schools was 4 months. Data published by DfE in September 2022 showed that after a steady increase in the

percentage of pupils at the end of key stage 2 meeting the expected standard and the higher standard in reading, writing and mathematics between academic years 2015/2016 to 2018/19, from 53% to 65%, this had fallen to 59% in academic year 2021/2022 (Exhibit KC1/064 - INQ000610437).

4.7. I am not aware of any clear evidence that indicates that particular subjects are more susceptible to learning loss. I support DfE's decision to fund Renaissance Learning to monitor and provide insights into literacy and mathematics, which are widely accepted as the best proxy measures for general attainment.

4.8. The EPI report on the impact of COVID-19, *Covid-19 and disadvantage gaps in England 2021* concludes that the pandemic widened education inequalities for children with special educational needs and disabilities ("SEND") and an education and health care plan ("EHCP") (Exhibit KC1/065 - INQ000588350). Reports from experts working with families and children learning with additional needs and disabilities reported that the non-academic effects of the disruption included poorer mental health, increased social isolation and physical deterioration (Exhibit KC1/066 - INQ000610436).

4.9. In my role as Education Recovery Commissioner, I advised schools to use the summer term in 2021 to 'assess and learn'. My plan included a proposal that all schools would complete diagnostic assessments to identify gaps in pupils' learning and inform their school recovery plan. I was impressed by the way schools were already focusing doing this and their willingness to adapt the curriculum to revisit core objectives to ensure that all children established firm foundations for further learning.

Attendance and behaviour

4.10. We know that attendance is a good measure of engagement and that children who fail to attend regularly are more likely to disrupt the learning of others, fall behind and display poor behaviour. Attendance rates fell dramatically after the full return to schools and colleges, with more than twice the number of children identified with persistent absence (missing more than half a day of school each week) (Exhibit KC1/067 - INQ000610432). Despite the efforts of schools and DfE, absence remains almost twice pre-pandemic levels.

4.11. Schools reported significant behaviour issues as all children returned to school. They therefore had to focus on rebuilding the habits of learning. I'm not aware of

data that captures the rate of low-level disruption, but we do know that school suspension and permanent exclusion rates doubled between the summer term in 2021 and the autumn of 2023 (Exhibit KC1/068 - INQ000610433).

Play and wellbeing

4.12. In the meetings that I held with well over one thousand school leaders, national parent groups, charities, and young people as part of my Education Recovery Commissioner role, the social impact of missing school was a recurring theme.

4.13. The *Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2020: Wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey* report produced by the NHS Digital and the office for National Statistics found that in 2020 overall one in six children aged 5 to 16 had a probable mental health disorder, up from one in nine in 2017 (Exhibit KC1/033 - INQ000588417). In January 2021, the Children's Commissioner published a report on the damage to children's long term mental health caused by the COVID crisis (Exhibit KC1/069 - INQ000610431). In launching this report, she said:

> *"It is widely accepted that lockdown and school closures have had a detrimental effect on the mental health of many children. Since the NHS study in July 2020 estimating one in six children in England have a probable mental health condition, we have had another long lockdown. Sadly, this will be causing even more damage to many children's mental wellbeing and putting even greater strains on mental health services, potentially for years to come."* (Exhibit KC1/070 - INQ000610430)

4.14. The closure of schools and restrictions on use of play facilities increased sedentary behaviours and there has been a reported increase in childhood obesity. According to the *National Child Measurement Programme, England 2020/21 School Year* report, published by NHS Digital in November 2021, obesity levels in reception children have risen from 9.9% to 14.4% between 2019 and 2021, with children living in deprived areas being two times more likely to be obese than those living in the least deprived postcodes (Exhibit KC1/071 - INQ000610429). The Sport England 2019/20 Children's Survey reported a 1.9% decline in levels of active play 60 minutes + a day for infants and primary aged children, with 86.500 fewer children engaging in active play for more than 60 minutes a day compared to the same period 12 months earlier (Exhibit KC1/034 - INQ000610428).

Exams and study time

4.15. A submission sent on 16 March 2021 to the Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills at DfE set out the implications of college closures. I worked closely with DfE's 16 to 19 policy team to consider the risks faced by young people on the threshold of entering FE and the labour market. The key recommendations included extending study time in years 12 and 13 and providing an option to repeat year 13 to complete vocational programmes (Exhibit KC1/072 - INQ000610376).

4.16. I was concerned about the implications of failing to complete the practical elements of vocational courses and the added stress of cancelled exams and the predicted economic downturn. My recovery plan included an additional one hundred hours of contact time for FE students, investment to support improved teaching in the FE sector and the introduction of a 16 to 19 student premium for the most disadvantaged.

4.17. I was concerned that pupils sitting their GCSEs in 2021 faced added stress due to the cancellation of exams. The results awarded in 2020 failed to secure a reliable standard and young people attending some schools benefited from generous teacher awards. The data indicated significant variation, leaving some teachers anxious about not underscoring their pupils. However, advising on the arrangements and delivery of the 2021 exams was not in my brief.

Remote education and online learning

4.18. The overwhelming evidence that I saw indicated that children facing disadvantage suffered greater levels of learning loss, social isolation, and restricted access to technology to support online education.

4.19. Limited data was available to me to be able to assess the effectiveness of remote education. I think that feedback from schools and Ofsted's *Remote Education Research* report published in February 2021 provided the best available evidence on the effectiveness of remote learning (Exhibit KC1/073 - INQ000610427).

4.20. The Ofsted report set out the considerable progress made during the disruption when, from a standing start, teachers switched to deliver online learning. It sets out the challenge of the digital divide and the risk of education exclusion faced by children without access to suitable technology. Throughout this period, I think the government acted quickly and decisively to support online learning. Laptops were

distributed to close the digital divide, DfE negotiated free internet access for children to join the brilliant Oak lessons generously shared by our best teachers and for the second lockdown set a mandatory obligation on all schools to provide 3 to 5 hours of online learning per day.

4.21. From the lessons I observed prior to taking up my post as Education Recovery Commissioner I saw teachers employing a wide range of approaches to deliver online learning. Online streaming, pre-recorded material, play time in the virtual classroom and other examples were used to promote engagement and learning.

4.22. I believe that the planned use of technology mitigated, to an extent, the impact of COVID-19 on the learning of many children – enabling them to take part in lessons and follow learning from home. In many schools, teachers and children transitioned well to remote learning. For some the move was less successful. Teachers without sufficient expertise, training and support found the move stressful and challenging. Children without access to technology and connectivity were at risk of falling behind. The capability of technology to support whole class teaching through Microsoft Teams, Zoom and other programmes helped to secure the familiar teacher/class relationship that works so well. Although access to technology established a key education response to school closure, it restricted the range of teaching strategies and learning activities. Sustaining the engagement of young children was particularly difficult. For example, purposeful play with friends to develop social, communication and physical skills could not happen online. Older pupils were unable to conduct science experiments and field work in geography studies limited to the virtual world.

4.23. Teachers provided feedback as part of online learning. Lessons were marked, grades awarded, and teachers provided written and verbal feedback. Feedback that relates to behaviour and learning habits was challenging. Through the transition to remote learning we learnt that while feedback on learning is critical, the interactions we have with children as we guide, reward and challenge their behaviour in the classroom and around school helps to create relationships for learning.

4.24. As I have said above, I think that the transition to online learning was a huge success and helped to mitigate the impact of school closure. As with so much learning from the pandemic, however, children facing disadvantage were hardest hit. Despite the best efforts of schools and the government, too many were

excluded from the opportunity to enjoy online lessons. Some learning loss observed in children from disadvantaged communities may be attributed to the impact of the digital divide.

The continuing impact of COVID-19

4.25. I am reluctant to comment on the detail of the implementation and delivery of the package that was announced on 2 June 2021. Following my resignation, I withdrew from any engagement with DfE and any official role in the recovery programme.

4.26. Many studies have been produced setting out the long-term impact of the biggest disruption to education since the second world war. In my view the full extent of the impact is unknown. There is no doubt that the disruption caused by the pandemic will impact children for years to come. The fall in primary education outcomes will roll through to GCSE grades. A report from the London School of Economics, Exeter University and the University of Strathclyde published in April 2024 predicts that in England less than 40% of young people will achieve a grade 5 or above in English and Mathematics GCSE in 2030, lower than the 45% who achieved the grade in 2022/2023 (Exhibit KC1/074 - INQ000610402).

4.27. Finding from a NFER/EEF report on the impact on key stage 1 pupils reported the good news that by spring 2024 primary aged pupils had recovered any learning loss and their reading and mathematics was in line with pre-pandemic outcomes. However, they point out that gaps between disadvantaged pupils and their peers remains persistently wide (Exhibit KC1/026 - INQ000610403).

4.28. The 2023 Annual Report from EPI set out the evidence that since the pandemic, learning gaps had widened for children living in families eligible for free school meals for more than 80% of their time at school. Worryingly their evidence indicates that these children are 12 months of learning behind their peers at the end of primary education and almost 23 months behind at the end of secondary school. These gaps are equivalent to more than four grades across their best 8 GCSEs (Exhibits KC1/050 - INQ000610425 and KC1/053 - INQ000610426).

4.29. As set out in paragraph 4.10 of this statement, persistent school absence rates have doubled since the pandemic. One in five children are registered as persistently absent missing 20% of their time at school and more than 170,000 children are recorded as severely absent missing 50% of school.

Chapter 5: Lessons learned

5.1. Following the 'Three Ts' recovery plan framework that I cover in chapter 3 of this statement I would like to highlight three lessons learned:

Teaching

5.2. The pandemic revealed the very best in our teachers. Their capacity to innovate and adapt mitigated the impact of the disruption and delivered recovery for many children. However, we also learnt that teachers need support and access to appropriate resources. Investing in teachers to secure and maintain their capacity to switch to online learning should be included in school contingency planning. Access to technology for learning should be regarded as a child entitlement and the state should intervene to ensure every child can participate when schools need to close and deploy online learning.

5.3. The impact on social and emotional development and the loss of learning habits has reinforced the value of a broad and rich education. Our accountability framework is too narrow and should be reformed to measure achievement and non-academic aspects of a thriving childhood. An education that promotes achievement and thriving offers the best protection against future disruption and school closures.

Tutoring

5.4. The pandemic revealed the best and worst of our system. Many teachers turned on a sixpence to deliver online learning and children demonstrated their resilience and ability to adapt to new ways of learning. However, for others the experience was very different. Education disadvantage acted as a dividing line and children eligible for free school meals suffered the greatest impact of the disruption. We must do more to close the attainment gap and direct additional investment to communities facing deep and sustained disadvantage. Tutoring is a well evidenced approach that can help to accelerate education performance. Access to tutoring and additional learning to supplement (never replace) great teaching should be provided for children at risk of falling behind.

Time

5.5. Schools are key institutions to support the social and emotional development of children. Reclaiming the attention of children and encouraging them to move

from isolated sedentary activities to participate in a wide range of social activities will require all schools to extend beyond the taught curriculum. Many schools have responded to the COVID-19 disruption by extending their enrichment offer. The learning that when schools closed to the majority of pupils, children lost far more then access to academic lessons has informed a new appreciation for the importance of play for younger children, competitive sport, creative arts, volunteering and community action for all ages. Investing in extending the school day should be seen as creating opportunities to enrich and expand childhood.

5.6. We should adopt the mantra that schools will be the 'last to close and first to open' in any future pandemic.

5.7. Tackling education disadvantage will help to build a more resilient education system. Children facing disadvantage were hardest hit and suffered additional learning loss. We must do more to improve outcomes for children and young people who are at risk of falling behind. Resilient learners are the foundation to a resilient system.

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 verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signature: Personal Data

Dated: 7/7/2025