Witness Name: Julie Robinson
Statement No: 1
Exhibits: **JR/01 - JR/17**
Dated: 23 July 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JULIE ROBINSON, CEO INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS COUNCIL

I, Julie Robinson, of **The Independent Schools Council, First Floor, 27 Queen Anne's Gate, London SW1H 9BU** will say as follows:

1. I am the CEO of the Independent Schools Council (**ISC**), a non-profit organisation that represents over 1,400 independent schools in the UK.

2. I have led (as CEO and previously the General Secretary) the ISC since 2015. As CEO of the ISC, I am responsible for the day-to-day management of the organisation, and I answer to the ISC Board and Chairman.

3. Before joining the ISC, I was the head of Ardingly College Junior School and then Vinehall Prep School in Sussex before becoming education and training director for the Independent Association of Preparatory Schools (IAPS). I am currently a governor at a state school (City of London Academy, Highgate Hill) and an independent School (King's College School, Wimbledon).

Part A - About the ISC and its member schools

4. The Independent Schools Council (ISC) brings together seven member associations and four affiliated organisations. It is the umbrella trade body (or 'association of associations') for the independent schools' sector. The ISC's 2024 annual school

Census ***Exhibit JR/01 [INQ000641583]***, based on data from January 2024, showed that across the ISC's member associations there were 556,551 pupils at 1,411 member schools.

5. Not every independent school in the UK is member of an ISC association. We would estimate that around half of UK independent schools are ISC schools, educating around 80% of independent school children.

6. ISC is the recognised stakeholder organisation for the sector to the Department for Education.

Membership and composition of ISC

7. The ISC is a membership organisation that operates as a representative trade body for other membership associations within the independent schools' sector. We are a small team with 13 FTE staff.

8. We have seven member associations and four affiliated organisations. Of our seven member associations, five are associations for headteachers:

- **GSA:** The Girls' Schools Association ('GSA') is a membership organisation that is made up of 313 educational leaders of independent, and state, single-sex girls' schools. Together, these schools educate over 100,000 students.
- **HMC:** HMC represents the heads of boys', girls' and co-educational independent senior schools in the UK. HMC has over 300 members in the British Isles – educating around 300,000 pupils – and around 70 further members across the globe.
- **IAPS:** IAPS represents the heads of 600 independent preparatory schools in the UK, the majority of whose pupils are of prep age (3-to-11 or 3-to-13).
- **ISA:** ISA represents 713 heads from independent preparatory, senior and all-through schools. The schools collectively educate 148,525 pupils and the membership includes a large number of non-charitable schools (around 55% of their membership).
- **Society of Heads:** The Society of Heads represents the heads of just under 150 independent schools. The majority of these are co-educational 3-18 schools.

9. Our other two member associations represent school governors and school bursars. It is the school which is a member of the association:

- **AGBIS:** has 830 independent schools and groups of schools in membership. It supports and advises governing bodies on all aspects of governance.
- **ISBA:** ISBA supports and advises on the wide range of business issues that affect independent schools. There are more than 1,200 independent schools in ISBA membership across the UK and overseas.

10. The ISC's four affiliated organisations are: Boarding Schools' Association (BSA), Council of British International Schools (COBIS), Scottish Council of Independent Schools (SCIS), Welsh Independent Schools Council (WISC).

11. Individual schools are not direct members of ISC. Our members are the seven member associations whose memberships comprise either schools' heads or schools themselves (in the case of AGBIS and ISBA). The term 'ISC school' is therefore technically incorrect as no school is a member of ISC. However, it is a useful shorthand to describe the schools ISC represents, and who are able to access ISC services.

12. The requirements for being considered an 'ISC school' are that the school has the ability to charge fees and that its head is a member of one of the heads' associations (GSA, HMC, IAPS, ISA and The Society of Heads). The only exception to this is that a school can continue on the ISC database for up to a maximum one calendar year through membership of AGBIS. Membership of an association is subject to each association's membership requirements; and each association has a committee considering applications. The school must be located in the UK (we have a small number of schools in the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man) and it must cater for pupils aged between 5 and 18 years. It does not need to include all age ranges, but it is not an ISC school if it caters exclusively for nursery-aged children. Schools can be, and often are, members of more than one of our member associations. Schools pay a subscription to ISC through their association membership to fund ISC's running costs.

13. ISC schools in England are inspected by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI), with separate arrangements for ISC schools in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. ISC schools are sometimes referred to as 'association schools' and – other than in a small number of cases – are not inspected by Ofsted. Non-association independent schools – those outside of ISC – are normally inspected by Ofsted (in England).

Role and function of ISC

14. ISC is an external-facing body that represents the interests of our member associations and ISC schools to government, Parliament and the media. We have three main areas of operation: policy & public affairs, communications and research.

15. As a representative body we have no operational remit over schools who run independently of us. We therefore have no role in taking operational decisions in schools, nor do we collect very detailed operational data. As a trade body representing schools, our work is very different to that of a Multi Academy Trust, for example.

16. The majority of ISC's day-to-day interactions will be with the CEOs and staff at our member associations. Individual schools will sometimes be in contact with us to raise a query on a press matter or an aspect of government policy, and we will likewise contact schools when responding to a media story (providing relevant context) or when responding to a government policy consultation so that we are informed by practice on the ground.

17. As the representative body for the sector, we are the main conduit of information with government. We meet with Ministers and officials on the sector's behalf, and we represent members' views on relevant government advisory groups.

ISC's role during the Covid pandemic (the specified period)

18. During the pandemic, ISC's primary functions were as set out in paragraphs 19-24 below.

19. **Sector co-ordination**: ISC convened a regular online meeting bringing together our member associations and external legal advisers. This was a forum to discuss government guidance and its interpretation, queries to raise with the Department for Education and other matters that were relevant to schools at the time (for example, issues around business interruption insurance and school closures). Between March 2020 and April 2021 this forum met 27 times, at first weekly and then every few weeks.

20. **Information and signposting:** During the specified period, ISC signposted schools to guidance from the Department for Education on school operations, and from other relevant bodies, for example Ofqual, in relation to public exams. Our role was to signpost the guidance and highlight key points or changes from previous versions. It was then for individual schools to plan how to implement guidance operationally within their setting.

21. We signposted information to schools in two ways. Email alerts were sent to 1,400 member schools when there was new guidance or a new announcement. These would highlight links to new guidance and information with a summary of key points. There was also a dedicated section on the ISC website for schools which was regularly updated to provide both information and, where possible, answers to common questions. This included information on over-arching Department for Education guidance, issues around public exams and changes to visa rules for overseas students, amongst other matters.

22. **Sector representation:** Throughout the pandemic we maintained regular communication with the Department for Education. This included meetings with the Minister responsible for independent schools (Baroness Berridge), regular meetings and email correspondence with officials, and attendance at the department's COVID stakeholder advisory group which brought together teaching unions and various stakeholders across education and was led by the Schools Minister Nick Gibb and senior officials.

23. **Sector queries**: ISC acted as an interface with the Department for Education to get questions answered, with queries received directly from individual schools or via our member associations when they became a matter of concern for a number of schools. We were able to help officials communicate information to schools and solve problems. For example, during February and March 2021, ISC worked with officials at the Department for Education to resolve a problem with some ISC schools receiving an insufficient number of at-home COVID testing kits for staff. It transpired that the issue arose because the Department's data on independent school staff numbers did not include non-teaching staff. In this instance, our associations were able to collect information from schools experiencing shortages, which ISC was able to pass to the Department.

24. **Support for schools:** As outlined, ISC does not have detailed operational involvement with schools. However, we did respond to emails and calls from schools about government guidance or to signpost them to broader sources of information and support. The associations in membership of ISC would have had a closer role working with individual schools. Our member associations would have provided advice on implementing guidance and at times provided pastoral support for individual heads/senior school staff. But they would not normally intervene directly on operational matters.

25. Key staff in post at ISC during the pandemic were:

Name	Role	Duties	Tenure
Barnaby Lenon	Chairman	Strategic oversight of ISC	Stood down as Chair 03/25
Julie Robinson	CEO	Day to day leadership of organisation; managing relationships with Ministers and senior officials.	Still in post

Simon Nathan	Head of Policy	Relationships with officials; maintaining up-to-date knowledge of government guidance and supporting communication of content with schools.	Still in post
Ian Mason	Head of Communications	Managed internal flow of information to associations and schools; responding to external queries for media comment.	Left ISC August 2022

Data on ISC schools

26. The inquiry requested some specific pieces of data about ISC schools which are set out below. What I would like to emphasise is the diversity of ISC schools, and indeed the independent schools sector as a whole. There is often a focus on a narrow cohort of large well-known schools, but most schools in the sector are relatively small, with a diversity of provision encompassing day/boarding, co-educational and single-sex, SEND provision, faith schools, etc. This diversity of provision meant different parts of the sector faced distinct challenges during the pandemic – for example, schools with overseas boarders were tackling issues around visas and immigration, while for a small day prep school the challenges may have been more around staff absence.

27. In terms of the data requested by the inquiry, my source is the ISC Census 2024 ***Exhibit JR/01 [INQ000641583]*** which is conducted every year and completed by all

ISC schools. It provides data on issues such as school type, pupil numbers and fee levels that together paint a picture of the size and shape of the sector. The Census does not collect operational-level data from schools.

28. The 2024 ISC Census ***Exhibit JR/01 [INQ000641583]*** showed that there were 556,551 pupils at 1,411 ISC member schools. Schools are predominantly located in London and the South of England (See Appendix 1 of the Census, table 5, page 32). The modal group of schools is in London (318 schools, 23% of total). In total over half of schools – 834 or 59% - are located in London or Southern England.

29. In terms of the type of schools within ISC, the table below breaks data down by school type and mean size of that category of school:

630 junior schools (all pupils in year 8 & below)	Mean size: 237
272 senior schools (all pupils in year 7 & above)	Mean size: 468
509 mixed age schools (schools with mixed age ranges)	Mean size: 550
1,155 co-educational schools	Mean size: 377
155 single sex girls' schools	Mean size (all single sex schools): 474
101 single sex boys' schools	
973 day schools	Mean size: 351
438 boarding schools	Mean size: 492
1,411 schools	Mean size: 394

30. Overall, one quarter of ISC schools have fewer than 153 pupils, half of schools have fewer than 285 pupils, and three quarters of schools have fewer than 530 pupils. Only 7% of schools have 1,000 pupils or more.

31. In terms of early years provision, 792 schools had nursery groups (29,304 nursey pupils) and 967 schools had reception classes (20,470 reception pupils).

32. ISC schools provide SEND support to 111,154 pupils (20% of all ISC pupils). Of these, 95,332 pupils have been identified with one or more specific SEND, with the remaining pupils receiving support but without a specific SEND identification. In addition, 7,646 pupils at ISC schools have an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP).

33. In line with the broader education system, our schools have seen an increase in pupils needing SEND support over recent years. Comparing the 2024 ISC Census to 2019, the proportion of pupils receiving SEND support has increased by 32% and those having EHCPs by 108%. In considering the reason for this increase, anecdotally we have heard from schools that Covid lockdowns may have had an impact both on learning progression and pupil wellbeing, e.g. emotional anxieties about attending school.

34. A total of 38,547 pupils received means-tested bursary support worth a total of just under £500m. This represents 7% of all ISC pupils. Of these pupils, 12,918 receive a bursary worth over 75% of the fee.

35. We do not collect data on pupils for whom English is an additional language, or the number of pupils eligible for free school meals.

36. One area where we do have data, and which is important to highlight, is the number of international pupils in our schools. The 2024 Census shows 62,708 non-British pupils in ISC schools. Of these, 36,513 have parents in the UK, so families may have relocated for work purposes, for example. A further 26,195 have parents living overseas and will predominantly be overseas boarders. The 2019 ISC Census ***Exhibit JR/02 [INQ000641582]*** – the year before lockdown - showed 55,280 international pupils (28,910 had parents overseas, and 26,370 parents in the UK). For children with parents overseas, the most common countries of origin were China, Hong Kong, and European countries such as Spain or Germany.

Part B – Learning and education prior to the pandemic

37. ISC schools, and the broader independent sector, have a record of delivering academic excellence to pupils. Public exam results for 2019 published by Ofqual ***Exhibit JR/03 [INQ000641585]***, as the last set of results before the pandemic, showed for example that 48% of GCSE entries in independent schools were awarded grade 7 or above (only selective state secondaries performed higher). Similarly in 2019, 45% of A level entries in independent schools were awarded A or A* (the best performing cohort) ***Exhibit JR/04 [INQ000641584]***.

38. My understanding is that schools were not experiencing significant difficulties with children's behaviour or attendance. I have consulted Department for Education data on pupil absence for 2019 ***Exhibit JR/05 [INQ000641571]*** but it does not provide a breakdown for independent schools.

39. Our schools would have supported children with SEND in mainstream and more specialist settings. Those receiving specialist support often have significant and multifaceted needs. Specialist schools, in particular, offer a bespoke approach tailored to the needs of the individual child, small classes and 1-1 or small group support, and a range of therapeutic interventions. In mainstream schools, there will be pupils with or without EHCPs who have SEND needs. For many of these pupils, being in smaller classes provides a sense of quiet calm and belonging that allows them to access learning better (sensitive pupils would be overwhelmed in bigger settings). Teachers have to adapt their teaching so it is accessible to all children (with or without SEND) in the classroom, while those with more severe SEND needs usually receive additional support.

40. While schools had to adapt to the challenges of delivering online learning, it was not a method of delivery that was particularly apparent in the sector prior to the pandemic.

Part C – Planning for the pandemic

41. Our schools did not receive any official guidance on how to plan for, or operate during, a possible pandemic, prior to the first period of school closures. Like other organisations, our schools were reliant on public health advice emerging from government ahead of schools closing in March 2020. This type of global health pandemic was not likely to be a scenario schools would have anticipated in their contingency planning and so school leaders had to work very quickly once the crisis began to unfold.

42. ISC first sent an alert to schools about Coronavirus on the 27 January 2020. In total, we sent 10 alerts to our schools prior to the Education Secretary Gavin Willaimson announcing that schools would close from 20th March. ISC's early alerts were often produced with the Boarding Schools' Association because, initially, a lot of information centred around travel to and from at-risk countries, and how to support international pupils. Our alerts also served the purpose of highlighting advice coming from Public Health England.

Part D – During the pandemic

Information and support

43. On the decisions made by government and the guidance issued to schools about opening/closing I can only comment within my sphere as ISC CEO. Our role was to signpost decisions and changes in guidance to schools through our information channels. The far more difficult task was for schools themselves to translate that guidance into operational plans, and I would like to pay tribute to the efforts of school leaders and staff in making plans effective under what were tremendously stressful conditions. Online learning, facemasks, testing, social distancing, one-way systems in corridors and other issues were all new concepts to staff and pupils, and all had to adapt very quickly. This was an unprecedented situation for school leaders who would not have experienced this before.

44. We know that schools would have done their best to communicate decisions to parents and families in as timely and sensitively a manner as possible. As ISC, we did not collect information on how schools were communicating with parents, so I am

not able to comment in any more detail. However, one dimension in parental communications facing independent schools which was different to our colleagues in the state sector was the question of school fees. Parents, who were themselves often under increased financial pressures during lockdown, understandably put pressure on schools for fee discounts during school closures as they were not receiving the usual or full in-person offering. Heads and senior staff spoke to parents individually if they contacted the school unhappy about fee levels. Schools would have sought to reduce costs for parents where possible and most would have provided fee discounts. But there were also limitations. Even during periods of closure, school buildings were still open during the day for children who were vulnerable or whose parents were key workers. Staff were still required on site and schools were still paying fixed costs on services such as heating.

45. Reflecting the pressure school leaders were under, I would like to quote from the ISC alert sent to schools on the 20th March 2020 ***Exhibit JR/06 [INQ000641575].*** The mood was very much one of uncertainty. I said:

"The scale of the challenges you are working so hard to overcome cannot be underestimated. You will have been dealing with an unprecedented storm of critical issues ranging from staff welfare to school operations when the buildings close, the long list of key workers for whom you want to provide some childcare and online learning access to financial fears for your own school and your parents' livelihoods, alongside what to do about fees invoices for the summer term.

School leaders, heads, bursars and governors/proprietors have had to risk assess and take decisions in a fast-moving and complex context, sometimes against a backdrop of conflicting advice and lack of detail from the authorities. Many of you were already planning to close yet none of us knows when schools will reopen".

46. That feeling of anxiety amongst school leaders would have pervaded throughout the pandemic. I believe Ministers and officials at the Department for Education were working as hard as they could and themselves were having to work out how to address a scenario in schools and wider society not seen before. However, guidance for schools did change frequently, often left questions unanswered and was not

always published in good time. This was exacerbated further by a need for schools to consult their insurers over practical decisions in assessing risk. I would like to highlight some particular issues with guidance in paragraphs 47-62 below.

47. **Not addressing the needs of boarding schools:** Guidance did not always fully understand the unique situation of boarding schools for whom, the school environment was also 'home' for pupils. Some of the initial guidance did not always fully consider the needs of residential pupils.

48. Issues included questions around how overseas boarders should self-isolate in boarding houses (on arrival in the UK) which would mean they were socially cut-off from friends and teachers. Or the logistical questions on how to manage travel arrangements for overseas boarders who may have to wait in boarding houses because of delays getting flights home.

49. The January 2021 lockdown was particularly difficult as international pupils were allowed to return and then schools were immediately closed. Schools also faced tinkering with the red list and red list guidance. Countries were graded as red, amber or green based on the Covid immigration policy at the time. It related to both travel and to acceptance of vaccines for the purposes of entering the country. There were also often different policies for over 18s and under 18s. The Department for Education provided schools with letters to prove that schools had a legitimate reason for allowing children in.

50. Boarding pupils also suffered from a lack of cohesion between different sectors and providers. There were examples of pupils being turned away by carriers and airports against current guidance at the time and then being stranded, sometimes mid journey. These were isolated cases but sufficient numbers to be of wider concern.

51. **Timing of the publication of guidance:** Guidance was not always timely and schools did not always have clear information when preparing for changing arrangements. An example was the proposed re-opening of schools in January 2021, which included testing for staff and pupils and a staggered approach to re-opening.

52. Our email alert to ISC schools on the 23 December 2020 ***Exhibit JR/07 [INQ000641576]*** highlighted changing arrangements for schools saying:

"The Government has made two major policy announcements on COVID testing in schools in the last 10 days. For clarity, on the 15 December they announced plans for weekly testing of secondary school staff and 'serial testing' of staff and pupils (daily testing of staff/pupils if they are in close contact of a positive COVID case). On 17 December came these latest plans for a staggered start to term and the testing of staff and secondary age pupils in the first week of January. Further detailed policy guidance on the 17 December announcement has also been published".

53. Schools were being asked to test secondary age pupils from the first week of January. However, detailed guidance came very late and over the Christmas period. Our school alert of 23 December 2020 said:

"The Department for Education (DfE) has published further information for schools on testing all staff and secondary age pupils for coronavirus in the week of 4 January. The information includes a thirty page handbook outlining practical arrangements for rapid lateral flow testing, alongside consent forms and parental letters. A document sharing area has also been set up, where the DfE will place additional information. It currently contains a workforce planning tool".

54. Confusion over the arrangements for January re-opening continued. The government published plans on the 17 December for a staggered return, but these were revised on 30 December following the spread of a more transmissible strain of the virus. It is appreciated that the government was responding to a very fast changing situation. However, at the time it was very difficult for schools to plan with any clarity. This caused pressure and distress. ISC worked through that new year period and sent an alert to schools at 9pm on the 30 December ***Exhibit JR/08 [INQ000641579]*** setting out information we had on January opening. In the end, circumstances changed again with a further lockdown in January 2021.

55. **Multiple and overlapping pieces of guidance:** Schools were contending with numerous pieces of guidance and information scattered across different documents. As an example, this is list of relevant guidance we needed to highlight at end of school alert on 28th May 2020 ***Exhibit JR/09 [INQ000641578]***, the day the Pime Minister confirmed partial school re-opening for the start of June.

"The Department for Education has published a series of guidance notes to support schools in their planning for wider opening:

Early years provision - Planning guide for early years and childcare settings
Primary schools - Planning guide for primary schools
Secondary schools - Guidance for secondary school provision from 15 June 2020

Broader guidance includes:

- *Actions for educational and childcare settings to prepare for wider opening from 1 June 2020.*
- *Initial planning framework for schools in England to prepare for wider opening.*
- *Supporting children and young people with SEND as schools and colleges prepare for wider opening.*
- *Actions for schools during the coronavirus outbreak (main Q&A document for schools).*
- *SAGE paper on re-opening schools; and DfE commentary.*
- *Coronavirus (COVID-19): implementing protective measures in education and childcare settings.*
- *Safe working in education, childcare and children's social care settings, including the use of personal protective equipment (PPE).*
- *Coronavirus (COVID-19): guidance on isolation for residential educational settings.*
- *Department for Transport: safer travel guidance for passengers (including guidance for children using public transport).*
- *OUR PLAN TO REBUILD: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy – see page 30 for references to schools re-opening".*

56. **Lack of understanding of the independent sector:** There were differences between state and independent schools which were not always fully appreciated in guidance. An example was the partial re-opening of schools in June 2020. Originally the plan was for primary schools to begin opening for Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 6 pupils on 1 June. Year 6 had been identified as the transition year between primary and secondary school even though a number of independent preparatory schools have Year 8 classes.

57. Our alert to schools on 28th May 2020 ***Exhibit JR/09 [INQ000641578]*** on the June re-opening arrangements said:

"We raised at an early stage the concern that many junior schools in the independent sector have "transition years" that are not Year 6. The DfE has confirmed through Baroness Berridge that, well before a decision was taken, they were fully aware of the differing structures of schools in our sector - with different exam years and transition years from the state system. The ISC raised this issue on your behalf during the decision-making process and continued to do so after the decision was made to nominate Year 6 as the priority year for primary phase education. We asked that Year 8 and other year groups be permitted. However, in full knowledge of the situation, it has been confirmed - and restated when we sought to reopen the issue - that the Government's decision on this is final and, for the sake of parity across the school population, it will not offer flexibility for those schools who focus on Year 8 as a transition year. Like you, we have received parental complaints as well as school queries about this but we have been told that it is not open to further consideration. I appreciate this is frustrating and disappointing".

58. On the 15th June 2020 ***Exhibit JR/10 [INQ000641574]*** we provided an update to schools via an alert which covered an update to primary school guidance which said:

"Where schools have capacity, they may choose to welcome back additional pupils."

The updated document said schools could welcome back Year 8 pupils provided they followed measures set out in primary school guidance.

59. **Confusion over how guidance should be implemented:** Interpreting guidance to understand how measures should be implemented was sometimes confusing – with multiple conversations needed with officials to clarify matters. An example was the advice that a quarter of Year 10 and 12 pupils could attend schools on-site during school re-opening in June 2020.

60. Our alert to schools on the 26th May 2020 ***Exhibit JR/11 [INQ000641577]*** said:

"Further details have also been announced for secondary schools, with plans for some face-to-face provision for Year 10 and 12 pupils from 15 June. Only "a quarter" of each year group will be allowed back at any one time, with remote education remaining the predominant form of education for these year groups".

61. A further ISC alert on 28th May 2020 ***Exhibit JR/09 [INQ000641578]*** clarified:

"The DfE has now confirmed that a quarter of Year 10 and 12 pupils returning means a maximum of a quarter in each year group. Schools would not be permitted, for example, to have half their Year 12s but no Year 10s. We have questioned the "25%" of Year 10 and Year 12 respectively maxim and other details in the secondary school guidance published last week and made the point that independent schools in many cases are in a position to accommodate larger numbers of pupils safely".

62. However, as late as 11 June, ISC sent an alert to schools ***Exhibit JR/12 [INQ000641573]*** setting out information received from the Department for Education relating to the 25% rule and schools with small year group cohorts (who could therefore accommodate more than a quarter of pupils).

Attendance

63. At ISC, we do not hold attendance data for our member schools, so I am not in a position to provide any operational comment on attendance and trends for particular groups of children. While I do not have a specific number, my expectation is very much that most (if not all) ISC schools would have remained open for groups

specified in government guidance – primarily vulnerable children and those of key workers.

Wellbeing

64. ISC does not have operational data from schools on pupil wellbeing during the pandemic. Anecdotally, and in line with what has been shared widely, we know there were additional challenges to teaching very young children online (e.g. reception and Year 1) at a time when they would have been learning the building blocks of reading and writing, and that the experience of lockdown, detached from normal social interactions at school, had an emotional impact on children of all ages. For adolescents being cut off from social norms at school may have led to feelings of isolation and anxiety, while for younger children it may have impacted social development and communication skills.

65. During this period, ISC did not receive concerns from schools about pupils' safety. However, pupil wellbeing and safeguarding will always be a priority matter for schools.

Online learning

66. As stated in paragraph 40, my understanding is that independent schools would not have been providing online learning very much or systematically prior to the pandemic. In terms of schools' experiences of providing online provision once the pandemic began, I can share my broad impressions but do not have access to detailed data from schools on the number of hours of online learning provided by schools.

67. Delivering online education and support was a learning experience for schools, with different skills required by teachers. Certainly, by the second national lockdown and school closures in January 2021, schools were more adept and able to provide a greater amount of online provision. Provision for younger age groups – particularly Reception and Key stage 1 pupils - was more difficult. Pupils at independent schools

probably had better access to online devices at home and access to quieter places to study.

68. As supporting evidence, I would like to draw attention to an advice note for schools produced by the law firm HCR from January 2021 entitled 'Hosting and recording online lessons during the Coronavirus pandemic: What should schools consider in lockdown 3?' ***Exhibit JR/13 [INQ000641572].*** HCR are a respected law firm working with a number of independent schools. As ISC we would have circulated their guidance notes – on a range of topics – throughout the pandemic.

69. The HCR note makes clear at the outset that:

"In contrast to the first national lockdown in April 2020, schools are now generally more experienced and equipped to deliver online learning, with resources for delivering educational provision remotely".

70. The guidance on online learning from the Department for Education evolved. By January 2021, HCR noted that:

"The [government] guidance dictates that schools should provide remote education that is equivalent in length to the core teaching pupils would receive in school and will include both recorded or live direct teaching time, and time for pupils to complete tasks and assignments independently".

71. My understanding was that independent schools would have been able to comply with the minimum teaching time requirements in government guidance and often went beyond.

72. Independent schools might have more resources available generally for online provision. Parental expectation was a factor, as HCR noted:

"In April, our view was that for independent schools, where parents are paying for the provision of education for their children, it was more likely to be considered necessary and appropriate to provide an alternative educational provision for their pupils that is more akin to classroom style learning whilst the school remains closed.

This may be challenging for schools with international students who will likely be in a different time zone. This remains our view. There is likely to be an increased parental expectation this time around given that independent schools have "done this before" and have had time to prepare and manage their online provision".

73. I would note the reference above to international pupils and the difficulties faced by pupils logging in from different time zones. This sometimes meant pupils logging in outside normal school hours.

74. The safeguarding dimension of remote provision was something schools would have discussed and it is highlighted in the HCR note. General advice to schools was for staff to maintain professionalism in their interactions with pupils and to adhere to the principles of the staff code of conduct. Government guidance also highlighted the need for schools to review safeguarding policies and ensure they followed the requirements of Keeping Children Safe in Education (statutory safeguarding guidance for schools) applied to an online context.

75. Many of the questions with which schools were grappling would have been around applying safeguarding principles through a new mode of education delivery. Some of these would have been practical – do pupils keep their cameras on or off? Staff would have been advised on checking what was in the background when online. I know schools generally managed to navigate these challenges, but the inquiry would need to take evidence from individual schools to understand how schools coped in more detail.

The use of non-pharmaceutical interventions in schools and classrooms

76. Schools would have worked hard to implement recommended measures – on issues such as face coverings and testing – as effectively as possible. I don't have specific operational feedback from schools. My comments are best addressed in paragraphs 47-62 in respect of schools' experiences of government guidance. One broad point I would make is that independent schools did not always receive the same funding as our state colleagues – for example funding for schools to help cover some of the costs for testing pupils on-site. The feedback from government was often that our

schools were the equivalent to small businesses even though the majority are educational charities. I appreciate our schools are independent and do not get core government funding, but we felt that some of the additional costs during the pandemic were for pupil welfare and protecting public health and different to normal circumstances. At the same time there were also schemes our schools could access – such as furlough- which were very practical and helpful.

Exams and grades

77. The experience of public exams in 2020 and 2021 was difficult for schools and pupils. Particularly in 2020, the government tried to develop a method for fairly assessing grades at short notice. Details appeared over time with schools having to respond in terms of how best to build and assess portfolios of student evidence. Our view was that schools should continue to set and mark work in the summer term 2020 to support evidence gathering. There was confusion and anxiety over this on the part of schools, teachers, families and pupils.

78. For pupils, there was the disappointment of not being able to sit exams they had been preparing for, and to show what they had learnt. The publication then withdrawal of A-level results in 2020, due to issues with the proposed algorithm, put more stress on everyone concerned.

79. The cancellation of public exams and the move to assessed grades in 2020 and 2021 led to political and media debate over the grades that centres awarded. Particularly in 2021 there was some criticism of the number of top grades awarded to independent school pupils. We felt this was unfair on schools and individual pupils in particular who were working hard during an unprecedented period of disruption. The schools we represent complied with exactly the same system as other types of school. Every grade was backed up by evidence, with the final grades determined by the schools and supplied to the appropriate exam board for approval.

80. I would like to draw attention to a press statement published by Ofqual on 10 August 2021 regarding A Level results ***Exhibit JR/14 [INQ000641586].*** This stated:

"Exam boards put in place external quality assurance arrangements, checking each centre's policy, reviewing the profile of grades submitted, and reviewing samples of student work". It further added, *"Exam boards looked at student work from all types of school and college as part of the external quality assurance process. They did not find that any type of school or college was more likely than others to have provided grades that did not reflect the standard of their students' work. Indeed, they found that, irrespective of the type of school or college, the grades were largely supported by the quality of students' work".*

81. On the A Level grades awarded to independent school students, the same Ofqual press statement said:

"We have compared the results of different types of centre across 2021, 2020 and 2019. Outcomes for all types of centre have increased compared to 2020. The extent to which they have increased may partly reflect longstanding differences in the distribution of grades for different centre types. For example, in normal years, the distribution of grades for students attending independent centres is clustered around the top grades. A uniform increase in grades awarded across all types of school and college is therefore most likely to benefit students attending independent schools at the top grades".

Part E - Overall impact on children

82. The ISC does not collect data on pupil progression. Therefore, I don't have specific observations on how the pandemic impacted learning in our member schools. I am confident that schools across ISC would have taken steps to assess impacts on pupils and provide support. However more broadly I am aware of the wider debates around the impact the pandemic had on children and young people, on which a number of reports have been published. I would draw attention to recent research commissioned by the teaching union ASCL by Tim Oates CBE, of Cambridge University Press & Assessment ***Exhibit JR/15 [INQ000641587].*** This found that 'that the lingering effects of the pandemic are deep, widespread and persistent, with different age groups affected in different ways'.

83. When the National Tutoring Programme was established, we asked whether independent schools could be involved as tutoring providers. However, the design of the programme was aimed at high-volume external tutoring providers. While some ISC schools may have been able to provide tutoring support-and were keen to contribute- they were unable to because they could not commit to the minimum number of pupils required by the scheme.

84. During 2020 and 2021, some ISC schools provided summer catch-up courses for state pupils at both primary and secondary level. These are set out in our annual Celebrating Partnership reports for 2020 ***Exhibit JR/16 [INQ000641580]*** and 2021 ***Exhibit JR/17 [INQ000641581].***

85. While schools have returned to face-to-face learning, the pandemic was a stimulus for a greater use of technology and hybrid working. It will certainly be the case now that most pupils at secondary level in ISC schools will have access to a laptop (whether their own or a school device) which will sometime be used in lessons, and almost certainly to research and complete homework outside the classroom. Parents evenings and parental consultations are now also often conducted online.

Part F - Lessons learned

86. Anxiety amongst school leaders would have been reduced if government guidance had been provided simply and in a timely fashion through email, phone calls and online meetings, perhaps through themed helplines.

87. We found officials to be responsive during the Covid-19 pandemic and appreciated their efforts to resolve concerns, but schools needed speedier internal sign-off on answers to questions. School leaders needed clarity about government guidance so that they could reassure and direct their communities. Efficient communications would help reduce the stress in such situations.

88. Schools would have valued sharing experiences with their peers and learning from each other on how to implement government guidance. Opportunities for different types of schools to meet in regional, online sessions would have helped with the

sharing of best practice, strategies and available resources. This would have provided a system of mutual support.

89. School leaders, teachers, support staff, parents and family members were all under pressure, but they were also all trying to best support children. Online sessions about mental health and wellbeing would have benefited communities.

90. Since the pandemic, schools have developed improved online working strategies which can be deployed in the event of a future pandemic. To support this future planning, the government could produce draft advice based on lessons learned nationally from the pandemic, in the form of a resource that school leaders can refer to as part of crisis management processes should the need arise.

91. If a pandemic or similar should happen again, independent school pupils should receive exactly the same support in terms of testing, special needs hardware and other provision from the state for vulnerable children. School type should never be a barrier to ensuring children have support.

92. Wellbeing of staff, wider families and pupils should be paramount. With this in mind, all kinds of schools (including independent schools) might convene local cluster meetings online to discuss joint responses and support across communities. These could be planned in strategic groups across the country and set up ready to be deployed in the event of a national incident such as a pandemic. Then, every school leader might feel plugged into a local community of support.

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: 23rd July 2025