

Witness Name: Rosie Tressler

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: 17

Dated: 29 July 2025

## **UK COVID-19 INQUIRY**

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### **WITNESS STATEMENT OF ROSIE TRESSLER OBE, CEO OF STUDENT MINDS**

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**I, Rosie Tressler, will say as follows: -**

#### **Roles and responsibilities**

1. Student Minds is the UK's student mental health charity. Our purpose is to ensure that no student is held back by their mental health. We create and curate resources, stories and tools and empower students to build their own mental health toolkit to support themselves and their peers through university life and beyond. We challenge the higher education sector, health sector, and government to work with students when making decisions that impact them and we make them accountable for prioritising student mental health. Together with our partners, we're improving university communities so that every student gets the mental health support they need to reach their goals.
2. The charity is registered with the charity commission in England and Wales, however a range of our programmes are also available to students and Higher Education Institutions in Scotland and Northern Ireland.
3. Our team would like to open this witness statement recognising in our thoughts everyone that has been affected by bereavement, and all kinds of loss, grief and trauma due to the pandemic. In particular we would like to pay tribute to the millions of students that have worked hard to complete their studies and join the NHS workforce in these conditions

and hope that years on they are starting to heal. We also want to thank the millions of people across the health system, education sector, charity sector and government departments who worked tirelessly to respond with real compassion, dedication and intelligence during the Covid-19 pandemic, despite the challenging circumstances.

#### **Working with the government and higher education/health sectors prior to and during the pandemic**

4. Student Minds has collaborated with a range of partners across government, the higher education and health sectors for over a decade. We have participated in a variety of coalitions, committees and steering groups for mental health projects that have been led from outside and within government departments. Prior to the pandemic, we experienced a range of constructive collaborations with individuals within key government bodies with a policy responsibility for student wellbeing, such as officials within the Department for Education (DfE) and the Office for Students (OfS). Typically, this involved participation in sector events or relevant committees / APPGs (all party parliamentary groups), exchanging insights, mutual research dissemination, advising on some grant allocations for mental health projects, as well as discussions seeking to increase the prioritisation of student mental health by government departments. This also included Student Minds securing funding support from Government Ministers via the OfS for our initiatives, such as the University Mental Health Charter, a systems-change level programme which was co-produced with the university sector before the pandemic took place, in order to raise standards in universities to create whole-university approaches to mental health and wellbeing.
5. In the main, despite the immense pressures on key individuals over this period, Student Minds' constructive working with relevant government departments remained during the pandemic period, and we were pleased to work directly with committed colleagues within OfS and Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (Now Medr). Close working began in earnest in April 2020, when Student Minds were approached by colleagues at OfS to meet with them and other key bodies within the higher education sector (such as Universities UK and AMOSSHE, the student services organisation) to share the key issues that students were facing, discuss any pressures on providers and NHS provision, and where we would recommend focusing efforts to support students.

6. Following this meeting on the 9th April, we supplied a briefing over email titled 'Listening to Students: a Thematic Analysis of Student Concerns Around Covid-19'. This briefing summarised key issues we were concerned about from our listening work with students and the wider sector, and made some initial recommendations for the possible response that could follow from both OfS and wider government. This covered; students' financial support needs, healthcare students' challenges, pressures on international students, issues with consistency across providers, access to digital teaching, student accommodation issues and continuity of support for students in the NHS. I have included this briefing in full later in this statement as it summarises the breadth of policy issues affecting the university community from the outset. The OfS published a briefing for university staff summarising key sector challenges and some practice recommendations at the end of April 2020, which included some of these insights.
7. Within a few weeks of this briefing being supplied to OfS colleagues, Student Minds was working with a range of partners to refine a proposal for a dedicated programme of support available to university students during the pandemic. It was felt by all parties that a strategic programme was required to complement and integrate with existing provision in the Higher Education sector and NHS, to ensure that students are supported through this unique circumstance, empowering them to still make the most of their experience. We were informed that the OfS' Directors' authorised their team to progress discussions about a national support offer for 6 months in the first instance, roughly to the value of £3 million. We were informed the directors had decided to proceed on a direct grant funding basis with Student Minds, meaning that, depending on the charity completing a successful bid proposal meeting a detailed set of funding criteria, Student Minds would oversee the grant and be permitted to commission different organisations as delivery partners as required. Following a detailed bid process, Student Minds subsequently became responsible for and funded to oversee this complex programme of support, which also involved rapid commissioning of a number of other organisations.
8. There was, however, a shift in the level of engagement we had with politicians in this period. We were invited to join a series of meetings chaired by the Universities Minister, Michelle Donelan, involving various voices across the HE landscape, that met over several months to ensure that insights about how students and universities were

experiencing the pandemic were shared routinely with government and sector organisations. We also directly spoke with the Minister to share our specific concerns about how the cost of living crisis was becoming an increasing concern for our community. In February 2021 Gavin Williamson, Secretary of State for Education, announced that the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families, Vicky Ford MP, and the Minister of State for Universities, Michelle Donelan MP, would be convening a Mental Health in Education Action Group to look at the impact of the pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of children, young people and staff in nurseries, schools, colleges and universities. The group's purpose was to consider how to support mental wellbeing while children and young people are being taught remotely, when they would return to education settings and with the transition period between education settings in September 2021. Reflections on the effectiveness of these interventions will be covered later in this statement.

### **Issues affecting students prior to, and during, the pandemic**

9. Whilst a range of challenges in relation to student mental health and the role of universities and the NHS in supporting this community pre-existed the pandemic, a range were exacerbated further by the conditions created by the pandemic, and there were also a range of novel and complex challenges that arose because of the pandemic itself. There are challenges that we are also seeing emerge today, years on from the beginning of the pandemic, as the next generations of students who were first affected as school-age students enter university campuses.
10. First, thinking about the situation prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, the NHS Adult Psychiatric Morbidity Survey had highlighted the increasing prevalence of mental health problems, such as anxiety and depression, among young people. Young women aged 16 - 24 are more likely to experience common mental health problems than any other population group. The majority of the 2.5 million students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland at the time were under the age of 24 and recognised to be at high risk of developing mental health problems. It was well understood before the pandemic that mental health problems among this group are associated with poor educational outcomes, including prolonged study, dropout and course failure.

11. Prior to the pandemic, we had documented many of the key improvements required concerning university practice in a number of policy and research reports. For example, the University Mental Health Charter Framework summarises the vast research in recent decades into what universities should focus on in relation to how students are taught and learn, the provision of high quality support and accommodation for students, and the culture and working conditions for staff. Prior to Covid-19, most university services were already seeing spikes in demand that outstripped their resource and the move towards more strategic, whole-university approaches was underway in response. We had also collaborated with organisations like Universities UK to document the issues faced by students in our health system, such as how being a transitional population that moves between multiple postcodes means many students are still often falling through the gaps of statutory services.
12. As Covid-19 spread throughout the population, our initial listening and research indicated to our team that the pandemic was having a disproportionate effect on the mental health of university students and was exacerbating the underlying mental health risks. Many universities worked hard and at speed to provide telephone and online support for their students when issued with government guidance to close their campus provision. However, we know that with the NHS focused on Covid as a priority, we were concerned that even more student referrals would fall through the gaps.
13. In our 'Listening to Students: a Thematic Analysis of Student Concerns Around Covid-19' briefing shared with the Office for Students in April 2020 (which is shared in its entirety below in paragraphs 14 - 20), we highlighted a number of complex policy issues that were already apparent early on in the pandemic and possible preventive measures to reduce these risks;
14. "Financial support: Full-time students are currently unable to claim universal credit. Part-time students who are facing hardship often cannot access income support schemes due to working in the gig economy, or are on zero-hours contracts. While Student Minds welcomes the news that Student Finance England will pay summer maintenance loan instalments, many students also rely on income from part-time work to make ends meet, and a high proportion of students who work are employed in sectors particularly exposed

to the economic fallout of Covid-19. Financial pressure for students could be alleviated through a number of means at this time, including:

- a) Exploring the possibility of enabling student tenants to surrender tenancies for accommodation they are no longer occupying, in line with the example set by several universities and private providers.
- b) Clear communication as to what support is available to zero-hours and casual workers and how to access it.
- c) Ensuring all students with part-time work are able to access the Coronavirus Jobs Retention Scheme should their employer wish to furlough them.
- d) Investigating how postgraduate research students, such as PhD students, are impacted financially by the outbreak. Postgraduate research students will feel the financial impact of the outbreak differently from other students. They may be reliant on casual or part-time work as graduate teaching assistants, and also deserve clarity regarding continued access to stipends and grants during the pandemic.

15. Healthcare students: Students working in health and social care Students of medicine, nursing, and other health professions who are now working in the NHS prematurely may experience a negative impact on their mental health. This may be for a variety of reasons, including doubts about own readiness, fear of becoming infected, worries about access to adequate PPE, stress, and post-traumatic stress. In addition to this, these students will be confronted with death, grief and trauma to an extent far greater than originally anticipated at this point in their education. It is highly possible this will be to the detriment of their mental health. We recommend:

- a) The government ensures adequate mental health support is accessible to these students, both for the duration of the pandemic and afterwards where needed.
- b) Adequate PPE is made available to all students working in the NHS (and indeed all staff).
- c) Wherever possible, students working in health and social care retain access to clinical supervision and support, in order to ensure there is minimal detriment to their learning and to assuage self-doubt around a lack of frontline experience.

16. International students in the UK: There is a need for clarity and consistency across higher education providers regarding the rights of international students to remain in the

United Kingdom or return to their home country. International students might be worried about overstaying their visa and their immigration status. Some international students will not have reliable, unrestricted access to the internet in their home country, and will therefore not be able to access digital learning and assessments. We recommend:

- a) The government continues to consult with UKCISA (UK Council for International Student Affairs), UUK, NUS, Student Minds and other bodies to understand the needs of international students at this time.
- b) International students should not be penalised if events cause them to overstay their visa; this must be clearly communicated to all international students (potentially via universities and students' unions).
- c) Mental health support made available to students must be culturally competent to be inclusive of variations in how mental health is conceptualised and supported in different communities.
- d) Ensure any students experiencing hate crime, racism or xenophobia receive appropriate support.

17. Consistency across providers Our listening insight suggests that students are paying attention to what is happening across different higher education institutions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and where differences between institutional responses arise, there is a considerable degree of frustration amongst students. We understand that staff are working very hard in universities to support their students, staff and the wider coronavirus efforts across the UK. We recommend:

- a) The government supports and facilitates work to ensure best practice is learnt from and replicated across the sector, and is informed by deliberate listening and co-production work with students and sector staff.
- b) The government works with the NUS, Student Minds, students' unions, UMHAN, AMOSSHE, UUK and sector representative bodies to ensure the needs of students are understood and addressed.

18. Access to digital teaching: Not all students have equitable access to online learning. Some disabled students have additional access needs which are not facilitated through digital delivery. Students from a lower socio- economic background might not have access to a reliable internet connection or a personal computer. Care-experienced students and student survivors of domestic abuse, amongst others, might not have a

safe space from which to conduct their studies. Assessed work by these students may not reflect their true academic ability. We recommend:

- a) The government ensures all institutions are providing disabled and low-income students with the adequate tools they need to access online learning and where necessary provides funds to enable this.
- b) Where students cannot access reliable, unrestricted internet, they are not penalised for this, and are able to access their learning and fair assessments through alternative methods (or at a later date).

19. Student accommodation: Many students will currently be living in rented properties, with their tenancy likely to expire in the next six months. Not all students will be able to remain in their property beyond the initial term, such as if they are final year students who will not be receiving further funding from Student Finance England. We are aware that the National Union of Students is conducting an investigation into this particular area. We recommend:

- a) The government works with the NUS and individual students' unions to ensure students have clarity as to how to make new living arrangements, and whether they will be allowed to move to their non-university address in the summer.
- b) Further investigation is done into the experiences of students who cannot return to a non- university address, or who experience negative mental health consequences as a result of doing so. This includes many of the above-mentioned groups, such as student survivors of abuse, care-experienced students, estranged students and international students.
- c) Further investigation is particularly done into the experience of LGBT+ students who may be returning to a home where they do not feel safe and are not "out", or who feel pressured to return to such environments. Insight from our Clinical Advisory Group suggests that these students may suffer negative mental health impacts as a consequence of such dynamics.
- d) We also recommend that any policy interventions designed to support students and higher education staff throughout this difficult time are co-produced with those groups. Due to the highly unprecedented nature of these circumstances, it is more important than ever that we listen to those with lived experience and utilise their expertise, as experts by experience, to create policy and support interventions that are fit for purpose.



20. Continuity of Care: Drawing upon our previous research, we expect continuity of care to present a significant challenge for students who have been accessing ongoing mental health support. This is for multiple reasons. It is likely that more students are seeking to access support, both from their institutions and the NHS, at a point where institutions will also be managing a rapid transition to digital delivery. Some support interventions might be more difficult to safely deliver through digital means. In addition to this, not all students have reliable internet access or the hardware necessary to engage with digital support. Some estimates suggest 85%-90% of students have returned to their non-university address. It is unclear whether they can continue to access NHS support through their university address, or whether they will have to be re-referred and join waiting lists at their non- university address. NHS services will likely experience the same increases in demand and transition management challenges faced by university support services. We hear from our Clinical Advisory Group that many pregnant students are struggling to meet their basic health needs at present. We also hear from our CAG that some students are finding themselves unable to re-register with their "home" GP upon return from their university address. In these circumstances, some university general practitioners may still be able and willing to support students remotely. For further insight into how university support staff are working to address the mental health impact of the outbreak, we recommend you consult AMOSSHE and UMHAN in addition to ourselves, the NUS, UUK, and other sector representative bodies."
21. As the pandemic continued, we and the wider sector gained a more nuanced and detailed understanding of additional issues that were affecting the student community. It was clear to us that Covid-19 was exacerbating existing health inequalities, and various segments of the student population were experiencing particular difficulties. Groups differently or disproportionately affected include: international students, students in healthcare disciplines, care leavers, students from ethnic minority backgrounds, disabled students, and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as well as students experiencing domestic violence or with difficult relationships with family members. As a result, as part of the Student Space programme, we also worked with specialised charity partners representing underserved communities.
22. In addition, during the period October - December 2020, the new cohort of first year students in particular were affected by loneliness, with many facing the second lockdown

in flats with people they had just met and/or unable to meet people in person and therefore make friends (unlike those students already at university when the pandemic started who had already formed some connections). It was also a time of restrictions being placed on students that were often more severe than those being enforced on the wider population, particularly in relation to student accommodation quarantines.

23. To bring to life the experiences of students living with mental health conditions during the pandemic further, I would like to include a story directly from a student at that time:

“COVID-19 brought back for me old fears surrounding contamination, illness, and not being able to protect loved ones. Therefore, I felt as though if I didn’t wash my hands enough times, then there was an actual chance that I could contribute to a family member getting ill or even dying, by spreading the virus. This led to me giving into a lot of my OCD behaviours and compulsions more frequently, which I had before been able to overcome gradually over many years. Unfortunately, my OCD became stronger, feeding off the most recent facts and figures broadcasted on the news, and this had a majorly negative impact on my relationships with those around me, my university work and grades, and severely damaged my self-esteem.”

24. Finally, the longer term impact on mental health began to be of concern across the sector from very early on in the pandemic. We engaged in various conversations across the sector about the long-term sustainability of the higher education sector. It was recognised that consequences likely to impact student mental health in the longer term could include: the adaptation or withdrawal of courses; the loss of placements, years abroad and lab work; a delayed return to face-to-face delivery; the loss of the wider ‘student experience’ such as volunteering, extracurricular academic opportunities and social activity; cuts to pastoral and mental health services (while demand for services is expected to increase), and the risk of the closure of institutions.

**Work undertaken by Student Minds to engage with decision-makers in the government, health, or higher education sectors**

25. As described earlier, Student Minds informed the Office for Students of key concerns for the student and university population. Following discussions and a bid process were appointed to lead the Student Space programme, which led to us coordinating an

ongoing dialogue and planning with over 40 organisations with a clear stake in student wellbeing. Once Student Space was underway we collaborated with a range of organisations such as Guild HE, IHE, CASE, AoC, UKCISA, and UCAS to deliver talks or events to reach students and sector colleagues and wrote a number of blogs to promote Student Space such as on NHS England's website, the (former) government body Public Health England and through the University Minister's communications channels with the sector with thanks to colleagues at DfE/Ofs/ HefcW who supported this process. The programme was supported by a comprehensive communications and digital marketing strategy focused on reaching students on the social platforms they were using.

26. In order to positively influence the university sector's approach, we published guidance for universities 'Planning for a Sustainable Future' on June 4th 2020. We expanded on this by hosting online events for university staff and Students' Unions in mid June 2020. For the University Mental Health Charter (UMHC), we also had the steering group (UUK, AMOSSHE, NUS, OfS, etc.) to ensure long-term strategic change was still a priority for the sector. We piloted the UMHc at three universities despite the restrictions involved with the pandemic and launched the UMHc Programme to support universities to embed a strategic, whole-university approach. We also adapted our Students Unions' support and training programmes for online delivery to equip SU and university staff with the skills and expertise to support the mental health of their communities.
27. We also collaborated with over 50 mental health charities and organisations on the development of a sector wide mental health 'social contract' and a letter to the Prime Minister, aiming to influence government policy and encouraging recovery planning to put the mental health of the nation at its heart (released late June 2020). See Exhibit RT/04 [INQ000621080].
28. In terms of engaging with parliamentarians, when invited, we attended calls with sector colleagues hosted by the Universities Minister. Following the final Government Mental Health in Education Action Group meeting in July 2021, the Minister stated "We know how challenging the last year has been for our students and university staff, and so supporting them as we recover from the pandemic remains a priority for this government. See Exhibit RT/05 [INQ000621081]. The government's mental health COVID-19 mental health and wellbeing recovery action plan also directly referenced the

ongoing need for the University Mental Health Charter. See Exhibit RT/06 [INQ000591315].

### **Pre-pandemic planning**

29. As an independent charity, Student Minds is not privy to the details of risk management planning in individual institutions, colleges or HE sector bodies. We were also not aware of any coordinated attempt to preempt the specific needs of the university student population and potential mental health impacts within any of the government's previous pandemic readiness planning. That said, the HE sector routinely conducts strategic, cross-sector partnership working across a range of priorities, and some of these established relationships enabled a swift response when the news developed.
30. We also suspect that those universities that were already deeply engaged with the University Mental Health Charter and the underpinning whole-university approach policy framing (from Student Minds and organisations like UUK in the previous years) had been building the culture that enables more effective management of emergencies like a pandemic. This includes, for example; empathetic and honest leadership, strong regular communications and a co-production approach, a developed support offering, well trained staff, and a strategic imperative to put people's health first.
31. As mentioned earlier in this statement, from January 2020 onwards we were engaged with a number of sector bodies in conversation with OfS about emergent concerns for our community and months later once we were tasked with leading a programme in response, we established a large independent governance group and programme advisory group to support a coordinated sector-wide plan. We also delivered a range of events for stakeholders across the sector to provide them with supportive spaces to work out how they would navigate the pandemic in a way that was supportive to the wellbeing of students and staff. We are aware that a number of sector bodies like UUK, AoC (Association of Colleges), IHE (Independent HE), GuildHE, AMOSSHE, UMHAN (University Mental Health Advisors Network), also provided guidance, supportive planning spaces and online webinars over this period to help universities with their planning.

## **Policy, guidance and support during the specified period**

### **Student involvement in decision making by government or by university bodies in respect of higher education during the pandemic**

32. It is unclear to our team whether there was direct engagement with students or student representatives by the government in certain policy decisions over this period in relation to closing university facilities, travel bans, for instance. Our impression from how changes were communicated at the time is that the engagement took place predominantly with university leadership groups.
33. Regarding the membership of the Universities Ministers' task group, for example, we do not always recall NUS or Students Unions being invited to present despite a range of organisations, including ourselves, recommending joined-up thinking. There were lots of different organisations in the virtual meeting room with co-production strategies who could speak to the key issues they were hearing about, and we certainly fed in insights from our own Student Advisory Committee for example, however, we always recommend that decision making bodies genuinely involve students and elected representatives for students.
34. At an individual institution level, we are aware of a mixed approach, with some university leaders working very much in unison with student leaders and staff representative bodies, whereas there were others where students and staff felt their voice was less represented in decision making processes.

### **Measures by government bodies or by universities to prioritise or protect student mental health during the pandemic**

35. A key measure taken by the government was to fund Student Minds to establish Student Space. Student Space, supported by an initial available £3 million grant from OfS and HefCW was developed in collaboration with services, higher education professionals, researchers and students. It comprised several support elements, including advice and information, student stories, direct support services (from commissioned phone lines to text to peer support services) and signposting to university and students' union services.

Plus, in recognition of the fact that the pandemic had impacted groups of students in different ways, a range of tailored services and content were also created. Student Space is available in English or Welsh via a toggle at the top of the homepage. The original programme was due to last 6 months in total, but through a no-cost extension and smaller follow up grant we were able to provide support throughout the whole of the pandemic period.

36. Between August 2020 and July 2022, over 347,224 unique visitors accessed the site. Focus groups independently conducted by the Centre for Mental Health found that students considered the content 'really helpful', 'current' and 'authentic.' (Exhibit RT/02 INQ000607650)
37. The government was also supporting and promoting the University Mental Health Charter during this period, which assisted our efforts to maintain strategic focus on mental health. Student Minds provided guidance to the sector 'Planning for a Sustainable Future' to outline how universities could make mental health a priority in the context of Covid-19 and hosted two well attended webinar events to explore the guidance in more detail.
38. Universities continued to deliver support and guidance for students during this period using online technologies and communications. Anecdotally, we know that in some institutions, there were delays to students receiving support whilst the infrastructure was set up. In June 2020 the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) published these findings in a briefing note: 44% of student respondents said they were quite satisfied, or very satisfied, with the delivery of non-academic support services (such as mental health services) during the lockdown, compared to 20% being quite or very unsatisfied. Given the speed at which the transition to support online needed to occur, we recognise this was a significant achievement for staff and educators in our sector. See Exhibit RT/07 [INQ000621083].

### **Access to primary care or crisis services**

39. Given the NHS' focus on treating patients with COVID, and the limitations on the movement of people, there was undoubtedly disruption to access to mental health

support in the NHS throughout this period. Members of the Student Space governance group shared examples of students waiting for longer periods of time on waiting lists for treatment for diagnosed mental health conditions. We do not have data from this period in relation to crisis referrals over this period and colleagues in NHS A&E departments do not routinely capture student status in their monitoring data, but we do know that we saw a huge increase in students' accessing text support over this period which may act as an indicator of other routes being less accessible. According to NHS Providers, in addition to the 1.6 million people already on the official waiting list for mental health treatment on the NHS in England, an estimated 8 million people have been deemed not sick enough to qualify for support, despite a recognition that they would benefit from treatment. See Exhibit RT/08 [INQ000621084]. These statistics demonstrate that the NHS was struggling to cope with the mental health demands placed on them. In addition to this, of the 27,600 students who have sought support for their mental health from our commissioned 'STUDENT' SHOUT phoneline between January and September 2021, 75% of them texted outside of the hours of 9 am - 5 pm. A survey by UHMAN (University Mental Health Advisors Network) of over 400 of their members found that well over half of respondents had seen an increase in caseload over the past 12 months, again indicating increasing pressure on university support systems, perhaps due to gaps elsewhere in the health system. See Exhibit RT/09 [INQ000587904].

### **Differences in approach between the four nations of the UK**

40. Student Minds' Student Space initiative was funded by the English and Welsh governments, and as a result much of our engagement was with English and Welsh students and institutions. The Northern Irish and Scottish government bodies for students opted to take different approaches, but we are unable to comment on any strategies as we were not privy to these conversations. As a charity, we would not (and could not) prohibit any students in these nations from accessing Student Space, and we certainly had a proportion of users in these nations, but our funding boundaries did mean our marketing and engagement activities were specific to England and Wales.

### **Impact on students' mental health and well-being**

### **Changes to students' overall levels of mental wellbeing**

41. There are some challenges in accessing clear data about how student wellbeing changed during the pandemic, not least because certain measures are contested and the issues of data collation during lockdowns. That said, we do however, have a range of useful research that demonstrates the impact of the pandemic on student mental health.

42. Key data includes the following;

- In the June 2021 iteration of the monthly ONS Student Covid-19 Insights Survey, 50% of students reported a worsening in their mental health and wellbeing since the beginning of the autumn term 2020. See Exhibit RT/10 [INQ000271390]
- Alongside this, in Young Minds' January 2021 survey of young people with a history of mental health needs, 67% of respondents believed that the pandemic would have a long-term negative effect on their mental health.
- In 2020, the Mental Health Foundation found that students, in particular, have been more likely to feel anxious, hopeless, experience suicidal thoughts, and self-harm during the pandemic. See Exhibit RT/11 [INQ000621086].
- In 2020 the RSPH found that many students and young adults are experiencing increased social isolation and loneliness. See Exhibit RT/12 [INQ000621087].

43. These statistics demonstrate not only that students continued to feel the negative impact of the pandemic on their mental health, but also that many students began to believe that these impacts will continue into the long term.

44. NUS (National Union of Students) survey in 2020 found that while students were very appreciative of the efforts of their universities to transfer learning and services online, many have found it difficult to successfully engage with online delivery, extract learning and maintain motivation. See Exhibit RT/13 [INQ000621088]

### **Differential impact on certain groups of young people**

45. Certain communities of students faced greater barriers and challenges during the pandemic. In the Centre for Mental Health's independent evaluation of Student Space, interviews with key stakeholders and focus groups with students identified for example that students from racialised communities, wider participation groups generally, disabled



students and international students faced greater challenges. We captured some data in relation to these communities, in our 'Life in a Pandemic' research referenced later in this statement. Further research includes Exhibit RT/14 [INQ000587903] and research by Byrom, N, & Metcalfe, J. (2020) 'Impact of COVID 19 on Doctoral and Early Career Researchers' (See Exhibit RT/15 [INQ000587905]).

### **Main causes of decline in mental health during the pandemic**

46. There are a range of factors in the decline in students' wellbeing over this period, which have already been outlined in this statement. In terms of the main impact, some of the distress can be attributed to the understandable sadness and grief at the severe loss of life in the UK. Many students were bereaved during this period. There was also the feeling of loss from the university and learning experience students had expected to experience, not being possible. For instance, a poll of 960 UK university applicants by The Sutton Trust shows that a high proportion of the incoming cohort of students were concerned about feeling behind where they would/should be (69%) and feeling unprepared for university (34%). (See Exhibit RT/15 - INQ000587905)
47. Finances were also a strong contributor. Research by Blackbullion in January 2021 survey of 1,000 students, 75% of respondents said they were worried about their finances and, of these, 67% said this negatively impacted their mental health. Further, almost half of all respondents (48%) said they had considered dropping out or deferring their studies due to financial constraints. See Exhibit RT/17 [INQ000650957].
48. The impact of the pandemic on already high loneliness levels within the student population has also been a key cause. Student loneliness has been shown to be the strongest overall predictor of mental distress in the student population (University Mental Health Charter, 2019). Student Minds' research with Alterline found that since March 2020, two thirds of students had often felt isolated or lonely. This scale of loneliness has fuelled increasing levels of social anxiety amongst students, which made the return to campus and in-person teaching a difficult experience for many.

49. Finally, we witnessed in many student engagement activities that some students also experienced the added frustration where they felt the government or individual universities or student accommodation providers had acted in a way that they felt undermined their agency or didn't fully consider their needs.

### **Student Minds' report University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic**

50. Student Minds Insights Report called 'University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic' (Exhibit RT/01 [INQ000621077]) was released on the 2nd August. It reflects on the experience of students during the pandemic and incorporates data and insights from across the Student Space programme. Through our research, we found:

- 74% of students reported that Covid-19 has had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing at university
- 49% of students reported that the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted their financial situation
- Two thirds of respondents say they have 'often felt isolated or lonely since March 2020'
- 82% of respondents say the Covid-19 pandemic has negatively impacted their academic experience
- 65% of respondents say they needed additional help/advice during the Covid-19 pandemic. Of these, just 19% actually got the help they needed.

51. In our first wave of research, it became clear that there were also unequal impacts according to ethnicity, sex, disability, age, socio-economic deprivation or other characteristics. For example, a higher percentage of LGB+ students say the pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing compared with heterosexual students (84% Vs 70%) and 40% of students with a mental, cognitive or learning disability expected the impact of the new term on them to be negative compared to just 21% of students without a disability. Students with dependents who were over 18 were also most likely to report low life satisfaction and a current mental health issue, and 81% of international students reported being concerned or very concerned about their mental wellbeing in the 2021/22 academic year, compared to 63% of UK domiciled students. Our report findings are explored throughout the report, which covers topics including (but not limited to): the Black and Minority Ethnic Experience in the last year,

Women's Safety at University, accommodation, finances, experiences of online learning, staff wellbeing, and access to support.

52. The report includes a set of policy recommendations aimed at supporting the higher education and health sectors to move beyond the pandemic positively. These included the following recommendations:

- The government should provide universal and targeted financial support for students, with a minimum £500 payment for all students as well as top-up funding for those disproportionately impacted.
- Universities should co-produce approaches to pedagogy, with flexibility and sensitivity to students' individual needs and preferences.
- Universities and the government should put measures in place to tackle and prevent digital poverty.
- The government and universities should prioritise prevention and early intervention of mental health problems through greater funding and active cultural change.
- Universities, the government and the NHS should plan for the mental health impacts of the pandemic to outlast the pandemic itself. A full, detailed list of our recommendations is also available from page 69 of the report, and in our executive summary. The full report is submitted with this witness statement.

(Exhibit RT/01 [INQ000621077])

53. Since publishing 'University Mental Health: Life in a Pandemic', we witnessed the end of coronavirus restrictions in England along with the beginning of a new academic year. We conducted further research in July 2022, just at the end of the Inquiries investigation period. In our July 2022 survey with 500 university students, key themes include students' mental health, support, financial wellbeing and social life. Headline findings include;

- The rising cost of living is the number one issue impacting students' mental health - above studying, loneliness and Covid.
- Almost 1 in 3 students surveyed said that being at university has a negative impact on their mental health.
- Over half of students surveyed said that they were currently experiencing a mental health issue.

## **Obtaining and sharing student perspectives**

54. From the start of the pandemic we began collating, coding and analysing hundreds of sources of information about students' experiences. These sources were gathered through social media monitoring and listening to students, sector staff and stakeholders. We have a Student Advisory Committee composed of students across a range of universities, courses and life experiences that we consulted throughout the period.
55. Once we took on the role of coordinating the Student Space programme, we also brought together over 40 organisations to collate students' experiences and relevant data analytics, including professional bodies, representative organisations, research networks and third sector organisations. Our listening team undertook regular, rapid analysis of the best available evidence of what students are experiencing. Student Minds communicated relevant insights regularly to university bodies and to the government. University representative bodies engaged positively as members of our governance group.
56. The Office for Students and Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (now Medr) responded proactively to our insights recognising the ongoing need for support and following further requested cases for ongoing support, made several no-cost extensions to the funded period as the pandemic continued much longer than was initially anticipated.
57. In terms of our engagement with government Ministers and MP's, whilst we recognise that leaders faced challenging circumstances over this period and building working relationships at speed online is challenging, at times we felt that the input that was provided by ourselves and sector colleagues was being asked for but not being truly heard or it seemed unlikely they would be acted upon. We did not always receive detailed written copies of minutes and actions, and remain unclear on which discussions were or weren't addressed proactively.

## **Lessons Learned**

## **Continuing or enduring impacts of the pandemic on student mental health and recommendations for the future**

58. As a modestly sized team that worked tirelessly during the pandemic to provide something meaningful and helpful to students and the sector in incredibly demanding circumstances, we are pleased that the inquiry is focusing on our communities and are proud of the work over 40 organisations undertook together and we are also proud of the legacy and how we have maintained many aspects of Student Space in the three years that followed the dates being investigated by the inquiry. However, we believe that the previous government's decision to delay the start of the inquiry has meant a significant passage of time from the events and therefore unfortunately many insights and lessons to learn will likely have been lost across the sector.
59. The aftereffects of the pandemic are still widely felt. It is clear that there has been a risk of burnout for staff and leaders who have had to navigate Covid and are now in the midst of navigating unprecedented financial challenges. There is a risk of this meaning that hard fought progress to ensure mental health and wellbeing is a strategic priority for every institution will be undermined. As such, we recommend that the financial stability of the sector is urgently addressed to protect the educational opportunities for young people. Universities are the learning and training environment for many of the teachers, health professionals, researchers and leaders of the future so a thriving economy relies on the health of this sector.
60. We also remain concerned about inequalities having further deepened since the pandemic due to the economic instability caused by the previous governments' economic policies. The funding from the English and Welsh governments for Student Space enabled us to commission specialist services based on needs and gaps and to learn more about how to best support intersectional approaches to student mental health and wellbeing. Organisations with this deep expertise are often small in size and can be missed in traditional funding schemes. We took a supportive yet challenging approach with our organisations, enabling them to explore with us where help is most needed, the delivery methods that will be most effective and safe, and to leave a legacy for particular communities that experience health inequalities for the future. Since the pandemic however we, like many third sector organisations, have also found that many funding

routes to sustaining this effort have either ended, changed or not been forthcoming, and we are concerned that the mental health charity sector is increasingly being asked to do more with less. As such, we encourage government and universities to do all they can to protect funding for crucial mental health and inequalities work delivered by specialist third sector organisations.

61. In terms of wider recommendations, we refer to our 'Student Mental Health Manifesto'(Exhibit RT/03 [INQ000621079]) published in 2024. This report articulates many of the substantial structural issues that are still negatively affecting students' wellbeing which have been accentuated by the pandemic, from NHS pressures and service accessibility issues to the cost of living challenges. The Manifesto lays out our vision for how the government can improve student mental health. It's ambitious, long-term and evidence-led, covering five main themes:
- Healthcare - all students need access to quality and timely mental health support.
  - Financial hardship - all students need enough money to support them through their studies.
  - Higher education - our higher education institutions need improved support and investment.
  - Inclusive education and healthcare - all students need access to inclusive education and healthcare without facing barriers.
  - A mentally healthier nation - we must reach a holistic approach to the mental health and wellbeing of the nation, improving support, prevention and equality.

62. Our Manifesto recommendations include urgent, targeted changes that can provide instant relief for students, and longer-term reforms that will tackle the systems and structures which make students unwell. The Manifesto treats students as citizens, not just learners, which is why we look at every aspect of student life and challenge politicians and policymakers across government to do their part. The Manifesto is built upon layers of research, ranging from oral evidence sessions to "online community" exercises. We draw on the testimony of hundreds of students, staff, and experts in the HE and charity sector. We recommend that all decision makers with the potential to influence the lives of students and the sustainability of universities and NHS draw on this manifesto in their strategic planning for the future.

63. Finally, there are going to be further substantial challenges to our sector in the years ahead, and at Student Minds, another major risk which we are anticipating that will be even more devastating than Covid-19, is the effect on our community and health systems of the continued progression towards climate breakdown. We believe that the Covid-19 pandemic shows that we need governments to act far earlier at the sign of a potential crisis, and that with good support, many people can and do work together to find solutions to what can feel like impossible situations. We would hope to see the Inquiry recommending how learning from the pandemic might not only help us in dealing with future pandemics but also enable us to take a greater pace on preventing climate breakdown and acting preventatively and strategically now to avoid crisis in the not too distant future. Students and universities already hold immense expertise in these areas and would be well placed to act as partners in this future-focused effort.

#### **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.**

Personal Data

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Rosie Tressler OBE \_\_\_\_\_

Dated: \_\_\_\_\_ 29/07/25 \_\_\_\_\_