

Witness Name: Sam Lister

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UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SAM LISTER

I, Sam Lister, will say as follows:

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Part 0: Preface

- 0.1. I was formerly the Director General for Strategy and Operations at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), previously the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport. I held this role from August 2019 to November 2024, after which I began my current role as Director General at the Department for Business and Trade. I make this statement as the former Director General in post during the specified period of 1 January 2020 and 28 June 2022.
- 0.2. The 'digital' part of DCMS was moved across to the newly created Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) as a result of the machinery of government changes announced on 7 February 2023. Throughout this statement, when I refer to DCMS I am referring to the department's previous functions prior to the machinery of government changes.
- 0.3. Similarly, I will refer to other government departments and agencies by the title that was correct at the time.
- 0.4. I make this statement pursuant to a Rule 9 request from the Inquiry dated 10 December 2024 for a witness statement covering the issues raised in the Provisional Outline of Scope for Module eight (M8) of the Covid-19 Inquiry. M8 is concerned with the impact of the pandemic on children and young people, focusing on the specific period of 1 January 2020 until 28 June 2022. The contents of this statement relate primarily to matters that occurred within this date range, unless indicated otherwise.

Part A: Role and responsibilities of the department

Background

- 1.1. DCMS supports culture, arts, media, sport, tourism and civil society across every part of England — recognising the UK’s world-leading position in these areas and the importance of these sectors in contributing to our economy, way of life and the global reputation of the country.
- 1.2. DCMS leads on the media and creative industry sectors, including advertising, architecture, crafts, design, fashion, film and high-end television, music, publishing and video games. DCMS also has wider policy responsibilities in relation to media, including general policy responsibility for TV, radio and press.
- 1.3. DCMS’s general remit was covered in our previous statements, particularly Module one (6 July 2023) and Module seven ([21 October 2024]). The below focuses on the department’s remit in relation to children and young people.
- 1.4. DCMS oversees and/or partners with a large number of public bodies. This stood at 47 before the machinery of government change in February 2023, and the dissolution of the Organising Committee for the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games, and is now at 42¹. This is the largest number of any government department. These public bodies may not specifically focus on children and young people, though their work may impact them directly or indirectly. Engagement with all our public bodies is primarily through senior civil servants and working-level sponsors.

Remit in relation to children and young people

- 1.5. DCMS’s youth team holds responsibility for policy around services for young people aged 11 to 18 (or young people up to 25 years old with special educational needs and disability) to develop their social and emotional wellbeing. The Department for Education (DfE) is the lead government department for children’s services and education. The DCMS team is responsible for:
 - a) the youth sector and its workforce - ensuring that the right organisations and right people, from volunteers to qualified practitioners, deliver those activities and support for young people in a safe, impactful, and sustainable way;
 - b) local authorities’ statutory duty for youth services - which states a duty to: secure, so far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient provision of educational and

¹The full list of public bodies can be found on Gov.uk.

recreational leisure-time activities for young people in their area - and produces the guidance provides greater clarity on what is required of Local Authorities, specifying the need for high quality and effective practice provided by trained youth workers; and

c) championing and amplifying youth voice.

- 1.6. The youth team's role and responsibilities during the pandemic are discussed further below.
- 1.7. Beyond the youth team, DCMS does not include a specific focus on children or young people within its sectors. However, there are areas in which DCMS has targeted support for this group or worked with other government departments to deliver for children and young people, which are discussed under the headings below.

Access to technology, wellbeing and online safety

- 1.8. Prior to the machinery of government changes in February 2023, DCMS was responsible for the majority of the communications sector including telecommunications (fixed line communications, mobile communications and internet service providers), digital and tech policy and infrastructure, online harms, counter disinformation policy, the cyber and AI sectors, data infrastructure, and broadcasting. Following the machinery of government changes, responsibility for the bulk of these policy areas was transferred to the newly created DSIT. However, DCMS has retained responsibility for broadcast services.
- 1.9. The Communications Act 2003 and the Wireless Telegraphy Act 2006 outlines the department's responsibilities in relation to telecoms policy. The Communications Act 2003 governs the regulation of telecommunications markets, establishing end-user rights, and outlines the powers and duties of the Secretary of State and Ofcom, the telecoms regulator. This includes managing radio spectrum and ensuring compliance with regulatory conditions for electronic communications networks and services. The Wireless Telegraphy Act 2006 complements this by setting the regulatory framework for radio spectrum and the operation of radio apparatus. It mandates that users of spectrum and operators of radio apparatus obtain a licence from Ofcom, unless an exemption applies.
- 1.10. The department's remit in relation to children's access to and safety using technology primarily related to online harms. As set out further below at Part D, DCMS worked in collaboration with the Home Office (HO) to undertake an online harms consultation in

2019. This work evolved to the development of the Online Safety Bill and later the Online Safety Act 2023, led by DCMS (and now DSIT), which I discuss further under Part D below.

- 1.11. DCMS has undertaken work in relation to the provision of devices to tackle digital exclusion, though its focus has been adults. Since 2019, the department's digital inclusion team has aimed to deliver on a number of objectives, including to build confidence in and continue to help grow the sector in light of Covid-19 and the EU Exit, to make the UK a great place to start, grow and run a digital business, and to be a world-leader in digital innovation. This digital inclusion work is detailed further at Part C.
- 1.12. As detailed further at Part D, DCMS gave significant thought to children and young people in its work to tackle online harms during the pandemic, including through the development of the Online Safety Bill and later the Online Safety Act. This work had started prior to the pandemic with the Online Safety White Paper published in 2019.
- 1.13. Telecoms policy is reserved to the UK government. Online safety policy is also predominantly a reserved matter, while media literacy policy is devolved as it falls under 'education'. During the pandemic, officials from the Digital Infrastructure directorate engaged with officials from the devolved governments on telecoms and online safety policy on a monthly basis, meeting more frequently if required.

Media and creative industries, including libraries

- 1.14. At the start of the pandemic, DCMS was the lead government department for the majority of the communications sector, which is part of the UK's Critical National Infrastructure. The sector includes telecommunications, the internet, broadcasting and postal services, with DCMS holding responsibility for all of these apart from postal services, which came under the then Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS). Following the machinery of government changes of February 2023, DCMS now has oversight of broadcast services, with telecommunications and the internet transferring to DSIT.
- 1.15. The role of DCMS's media policy team during the pandemic was primarily to monitor impacts on the department's sectors and ensure that media companies/organisations could continue to operate. As a result, policy decisions were largely taken to support a continuation of radio and TV broadcasting services as a whole, as opposed to being taken for specific demographics, such as children and young people. This included

ensuring that TV production was able get back up and running safely and to ensure news journalists could continue to travel/report. While the team took an interest in the types of TV content available for children and how they accessed it, the team did not actively monitor or track how much time children spend online or what they are doing more generally. In terms of ensuring content standards, this is ultimately a matter for Ofcom as the broadcasting regulator.

- 1.16. DCMS leads on creative industries sectors, including advertising, architecture, crafts, design, fashion, film and high-end television, music, publishing and video games. Within the definition of creative industries, DCMS also has policy responsibility for the arts (i.e. performing arts & contemporary visual arts). DCMS does not hold policy responsibility for creative and arts education in school settings, which is held by DfE.
- 1.17. The department has oversight of national arts policy in England, including funding for the sector, and holds sponsorship responsibility for Arts Council England (ACE), an executive non-departmental public body of the department. ACE has a range of investments and policies to encourage and support children and young people's engagement with arts and culture.
- 1.18. DCMS is responsible for public libraries policy and sponsors the British Library which, in turn, supports the development of libraries nationally. DCMS also sponsors the National Archives (a non-ministerial department). The Secretary of State is statutorily responsible for the superintendence of the public library network in England (meaning that they need to ensure that councils are delivering against their own statutory duties to deliver a comprehensive and efficient library service to people who live, work or study in their area). This work does not include a specific focus on children or young people, however, children and young people are an important group of library users and the provision of arts and libraries for the wider public will similarly benefit children and young people. The position of DCMS on superintendence is set out in *Libraries as a Statutory Service* [SL-8/01 INQ000623086]. The department does not have responsibility for day-to-day operational issues, this falls to the councils or operators responsible for the service (such as community-managed library management).
- 1.19. While DCMS has no direct operational responsibilities for the delivery of public library services, the Secretary of State does have a duty, in addition to their superintendence role, to promote the improvement of the sector. As such, DCMS's libraries team works closely with sector organisations to identify and promote good practice across the various aspects of public library services. The team also represents the sector and advocates for its work and needs across government. This was started via the DCMS

and Local Government Association sponsored Libraries Taskforce in 2015, and has been developed and continued since then [SL-8/02 INQ000623079]². Further detail on DCMS engagement with the sector is at Part F.

- 1.20. A key role for DCMS's libraries team during the pandemic was advocating for the libraries sector in central government's design and delivery of restrictions and guidance, highlighting to the Cabinet Office (CO) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) evidence of negative impacts of Covid-19 measures on people who might be precluded from using libraries during various stages of lockdown (which included children and young people as a critical set of library users).
- 1.21. Arts, culture and libraries are devolved policy areas and as such the department did not frequently work with the devolved administrations. However, during the Covid-19 period, DCMS's libraries team held periodic calls with the teams leading on libraries in each of the three devolved administrations, primarily to compare experiences and share information.

Sport and leisure

- 1.22. The department's responsibilities for sport cover elite and professional sport, international sport, sports participation, diversity in sport, sport integrity and football regulation. DCMS sponsors four public bodies within this area:
 - a) Sport England which aims to transform lives and communities through sport and physical activity
 - b) UK Sport is the nation's high-performance sports agency, investing in the UK's elite athletes, teams, sports and events to achieve success
 - c) UK Anti-Doping works with athletes and national sports bodies to promote clean sport and ensure compliance with the World Anti-Doping Code
 - d) the Sports Ground Safety Authority is the government's expert advisory and regulatory body on safety at sports grounds - it has a statutory responsibility for issuing licences to all Premier League and English Football League grounds, Wembley and

²The Libraries Taskforce was active from 2015 to 2020 and therefore did not play a role during the pandemic. However, much of the work the taskforce started was subsequently taken forward by Arts Council England. During the pandemic, the Libraries Working Group, formed to support the DCMS Cultural Renewal Taskforce, convened most of the members of the previous Libraries Taskforce.

the Principality Stadium and oversight of local authority duties to sports grounds safety and safety certification

- 1.23. Of the above bodies, Sport England in particular has a focus on children and young people. It is a DCMS-sponsored public body responsible for growing and developing grassroots sport and getting more people active across England. Sport England aims to give everyone in England the chance to benefit from sport and physical activity, which includes provision for children and young people across the nation. DCMS provides the majority of its funding for grassroots sport through Sport England, which currently invests over £250 million in Exchequer and Lottery funding each year.
- 1.24. DCMS also supports the bidding for and hosting of major sporting events in the UK. This can include providing government funding through UK Sport, as well as working with other government departments on guarantees and delivery governance arrangements.
- 1.25. DfE has responsibility for sport in school, such as curriculum physical education, and DCMS has responsibility for sport outside of the school day. DCMS works closely with DfE and DHSC to fund school sport provision. Specifically, DCMS has jointly funded the School Games programme with DHSC, with £11 million provided annually (£4 million from DCMS and £7 million from DHSC) to provide local and accessible sport and physical activity competitions. As covered further in Part F, although DfE leads on sport in schools, during the pandemic DCMS helped to support a move to online physical education (PE) and sport by passing on useful resources and support from sport organisations and providing advice to DfE where needed.
- 1.26. The term 'leisure' is broad and incorporates areas led by other departments - for example, responsibility for zoos, national parks and forests sits with the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra). Within the leisure sector, DCMS's responsibilities include bowling alleys, theme parks and other attractions (for example Harry Potter World, Go Ape), outdoor events (for example air shows, fun fairs, car boot sales, flower shows, pet and animal shows), as well as tours and other experiences (for example escape rooms, laser tag, go-karting tracks). Other areas include gyms, soft play centres, trampoline parks, outdoor light trails and heritage railways. Many of these policy areas will have impacted children and young people. As with the other sectors for which DCMS was responsible, during the specified period the department's role included advocating for the sector and ensuring that restrictions were understood and able to be implemented.

- 1.27. In addition, during the pandemic, DCMS worked with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to allocate financial support to local authorities across England for public sector leisure centres, through the National Leisure Recovery Fund³ ⁴.
- 1.28. Sport and leisure are devolved policy areas. However, the sport team did engage with the devolved administrations regularly, ordinarily on a weekly basis. This engagement allowed DCMS to share information with its devolved administration counterparts, including discussing best practice and intel on the likely direction of guidance.

Other aspects of safety, wellbeing, physical and mental health or attainment of children and young people

Recreation

- 1.29. In the early phases of the response to the pandemic, in April 2020, CO created nine cross-government workstreams, one of which was 'Safer places'. Within this workstream was responsibility for recreational activities, termed 'Recreation' (led by DCMS), 'Safer workplaces' (led by BEIS), 'Public spaces' (led by MHCLG), 'Schools' (led by DfE) and 'Transport' (led by the Department for Transport (DfT)). The 'Recreation' project aimed to support the adaptation and effective management of recreational activities to minimise Covid-19 transmission, maximise the number of participants where appropriate, and minimise the economic impacts on affected sectors.
- 1.30. Recreation within this context was defined as "indoor or outdoor activities for non-work purposes, excluding the household settings". It had four sub-domains: sport and physical activity; entertainment and creative industries; culture and domestic tourism/hospitality; and youth. BEIS led a separate workstream covering pubs and restaurants. The workstream brought together the department's work internally and within Whitehall to support and address the pandemic's impact on those DCMS sectors which are reliant on social activity [SL-8/03 INQ000182306]. It involved regular engagement with representatives of affected sectors at different ministerial and official levels. As part of that engagement, the team discussed and assessed impacts on the

³MHCLG was renamed the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) in September 2021, but reverted to its former name of MHCLG in July 2024. For clarity and consistency, this statement refers to MHCLG throughout.

⁴The £100 million National Leisure Recovery Fund sought to support eligible public sector leisure centres to reopen to the public and was administered by Sport England.

relevant sectors, the strategic development of guidance, and as the case for economic support and adaptations in restrictions.

Advocacy

- 1.31. As detailed above, DCMS's youth team holds responsibility for policy around services for young people aged 11 to 18 (or young people up to 25 years old with special educational needs and disabilities) to develop their social and emotional wellbeing.
- 1.32. The Civil Society and Youth (CSY) directorate within DCMS established the Civil Society Stakeholder Group at the start of the pandemic to provide the department with insight and perspectives from the sector. This stakeholder group had a number of time-limited, focused subgroups that brought together expertise to provide input across a range of issues including funding, finance, young people and inclusion.
- 1.33. A key role for DCMS's youth team during the pandemic was advocating for the youth sector in central government's design and delivery of restrictions and guidance, highlighting to CO and DHSC the evidence of negative impacts upon young people and those accessing youth services. This included advocating for exemptions to national regulations, as detailed further at Part E.
- 1.34. In April 2020, DCMS, in partnership with DfE, published guidance on Covid-19 Online Safety on Gov.uk, which focused on how to keep children and young people safe online and build their ability to spot harmful false narratives online [SL-8/04 INQ000361191].
- 1.35. As detailed further at Part D, DCMS gave significant thought to children and young people in its work to tackle online harms, including through the development of the Online Safety Bill and later the Online Safety Act.

Safety, wellbeing, physical and mental health or attainment of children and young people

- 1.36. Through making the case for its sector, DCMS successfully influenced policy and the development of secondary legislation regarding key worker status to ensure that appropriate exemptions were in place allowing volunteers to leave home to provide services to neighbours and communities. As detailed further in Part E, this allowed library staff, volunteers and youth workers to access certain key worker provisions such as testing and access to school places [SL-8/05 INQ000182289].

- 1.37. The Youth Working Group was set up to cover a range of youth service provision, including youth clubs and youth organisations such as the Scouts and Guides; as well as targeted youth work interventions for vulnerable young people. As detailed further at Part E, a key role for the group was to agree the process for drafting and publishing guidance, as well as developing a plan for dissemination. The group was also used by DCMS and the National Youth Agency (NYA) to explain current guidance to key sector bodies.
- 1.38. DCMS also worked closely with the NYA, which published sector specific guidance discussed further at Part E [SL-8/06: INQ000623055].
- 1.39. As a public body, DCMS is subject to the public sector equality duty ("PSED") as outlined within Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010. DCMS complies with this duty to ensure that due consideration is given to the potential impact of policy or programmes, particularly on people with protected characteristics, including age. DCMS was not the ultimate decision-maker on most matters related to the government's Covid-19 policy response, but instead sought to influence and implement decisions made by other departments. As such, the obligation to consider PSED generally lay with those other departments. However, DCMS did undertake relevant assessments for its own programmes, such as the various funding streams DCMS was responsible for as part of the £750 million Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) funding package, and was also involved in cross-Whitehall initiatives concerning assessments of vulnerable categories of people.

Working with other government departments

- 1.40. I have discussed the cross-government workstreams created by CO in April 2020 above. DCMS worked with BEIS, MHCLG, DfE and DfT as part of the 'Safer Places' workstream.
- 1.41. DCMS's youth team, which is responsible for policy around youth services and education and leisure time activities for young people, engages with DfE on programmes with aligned objectives, meeting on an ad hoc basis. For example, during the pandemic, the team worked particularly closely with DfE's life skills and out of school settings teams which focus on enrichment activities such as sports and leisure activities, tutoring and faith-based provision, for children and young people. DCMS also reviewed and suggested changes to guidance produced by DfE in March 2020 related to key workers and their ability to send their children to school. The suggested

changes focused on ensuring that volunteers in pandemic-response roles were classified as key workers and had the same freedom of movement.

- 1.42. The department also works across government on shared policy objectives, for example with DfE to improve access to cultural education and career outcomes for children and young people. Additionally, during the pandemic, DCMS worked to promote, via schools and early years professionals, the extensive library offer kept available by library services through channels such as 'click and collect' or grab bag arrangement, and the plethora of online sessions being recorded and made available by library staff. For example, we worked with DfE to secure references to libraries' services in the home schooling guidance in February 2021, covered in further detail at Part F.
- 1.43. With regards to digital infrastructure, the department engages regularly with other government departments, including outside of the Covid-19 pandemic, however this engagement does not tend to focus on children and young people. As detailed further in Part C, the team does engage on this topic when specifically requested by other departments, such as the work undertaken with DfE to zero-rate (a practice where a mobile operator does not count certain data usage against a user's data cap) during the pandemic, meaning that usage of its online resources would not count against a user's data cap.
- 1.44. DCMS also worked with DfE and the telecoms industry in early April 2020 on measures to provide internet access to disadvantaged families, by exempting selected educational resources from data charges, providing free internet access to those without broadband through additional mobile data and access to BT's WiFi hotspots. This was part of the Online Learning Support package, announced by the Secretary of State for Education in April 2020 [SL-8/07 INQ000236179]. Public libraries also received exemptions from regulations to allow public entry to library buildings to allow access to free public PCs and wifi, to help make essential services available to families.
- 1.45. Prior to the pandemic, DCMS did not generally work with other government departments specifically in relation to digital inclusion regarding children and young people. However, DSIT does now engage with teams across government to ensure that everyone has the access, skills, support and confidence to participate in and benefit from the modern digital society, including children and young people. For example, the team has engaged with DfE on the Corporate Parenting Working Group and with DfE's curriculum team to discuss digital skills support for children in schools.

- 1.46. DCMS also engaged with CO and others on policy as required, which in some cases resulted in changes to policy and/or regulations, some of which may have directly or indirectly impacted children and young people. For example, ice skating rinks were separated from other sport facilities from the beginning of the pandemic and were subject to tighter restrictions and reopened much later. DCMS's intervention extended the same provisions to skating rinks as other sport facilities (access for disability sport, under 18 year olds, education etc) [SL-8/08 INQ000623044]. In later iterations of the regulations, these provisions were defined separately, not as recreation or leisure, and were treated in the same way as other sport facilities. This made skating rinks more accessible, including for children and young people.
- 1.47. Outside of the pandemic, the department works with other government departments relating to sport as required. For example, the overarching government strategy for school sport was known as the School Sport and Activity Action Plan, which was published in July 2019 and jointly owned by DCMS, DfE and DHSC [SL-8/09 INQ000623092]. DCMS also works closely with DfE and DHSC to fund school sport provision.
- 1.48. In May 2020, DCMS successfully led on engagement with Downing Street, which was done in collaboration with Defra and MHCLG, so that parks and gardens which the public must pay to access, such as Kew Gardens, were allowed to reopen at the end of the month [SL-8/10 INQ000182310]. This was in order to increase the green amenity space available to the public. While this work did not specifically target children and young people, data from the Office for National Statistics indicated that one in eight households in Britain has no garden, and therefore it can be expected that children and young people would be among the beneficiaries of reopening. Likewise, in a survey published by Natural England, in May 2021, after this work took place, it was noted that parks and gardens are amongst children's favourite places to spend time and that local parks and private gardens were important ways of accessing green and natural spaces during lockdown.

Ministers and senior civil servants in post

- 1.49. The below sets out the key figures and decision makers in post during the specific period, in relation to the topics covered in this statement. I was the senior official responsible for the department's overall Covid-19 response throughout the pandemic.

Secretaries of State

- 1.50. Nicky Morgan was the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, July 2019 - February 2020
- 1.51. Oliver Dowden was the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, February 2020 - September 2021
- 1.52. Nadine Dorries was the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, September 2021 - September 2022

Ministers

- 1.53. Matt Warman, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Digital Infrastructure, July 2019 – September 2021; and Minister of State, July 2022 - September 2022
- 1.54. Chris Philp, Minister for Tech and the Digital Economy, September 2021 - July 2022
- 1.55. John Whittingdale, Minister of State for Media and Data, February 2020 - September 2021 and May 2023 - December 2023
- 1.56. Julia Lopez, Minister of State for Media and Digital, September 2021 – July 2022
- 1.57. Caroline Dinenage, Minister of State for Digital and Culture, February 2020 - September 2021
- 1.58. Baroness Barran, Minister for Civil Society and Loneliness, July 2019 - September 2021
- 1.59. Lord Parkinson, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Arts, September 2021 - September 2022
- 1.60. Nigel Huddleston, Minister for Sport, Tourism, Heritage and Civil Society, February 2020 - September 2022

Permanent Secretaries

- 1.61. Sarah Healey, DCMS Permanent Secretary from April 2019 - February 2023
- 1.62. Polly Payne and Ruth Hannant, jobshare cover as interim DCMS Permanent Secretary, February 2023 to June 2023
- 1.63. Susannah Storey, DCMS Permanent Secretary, June 2023 - present
- 1.64. Sarah Munby, DSIT Permanent Secretary, February 2023 - present

Directors General

- 1.65. Scott McPherson, interim DG of Volunteering and Civil Society, March 2020 - July 2020
- 1.66. Helen Judge, DG of Culture, Sport and Civil Society, June 2020 - November 2020 (previously DG for Performance and Strategy, April 2017 - August 2019)
- 1.67. Emma Squire, interim DG of Culture, Sport and Civil Society, November 2020 - March 2021
- 1.68. Polly Payne and Ruth Hannant, jobshare DGs of Culture, Sport and Civil Society, March 2021 - February 2023
- 1.69. Susannah Storey, DG of Digital and Media, July 2019 - February 2023
- 1.70. Susannah Storey, DG of Digital, Technology and Telecoms, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, February 2023 - June 2023

Directors

- 1.71. Sarah Connolly, Director for Security and Online Harms from May 2018 - December 2023
- 1.72. James Heath, Director for Digital Infrastructure – September 2017 - May 2020
- 1.73. Henry Shennan, Interim Director for Digital Infrastructure in May 2020 - June 2021
- 1.74. Imran Shafi, Director for Digital Infrastructure, June 2021 - July 2023
- 1.75. David Knott, Director of OCS Youth, March 2020 - September 2020
- 1.76. Erika Lewis, Director of OCS Funding and Engagement, March 2020 to May 2020
- 1.77. Anna Wechsberg, Director of Volunteering, March 2020 - June 2020
- 1.78. Hannah Malik and Becky Morrison, jobshare Director of Civil Society and Youth - June 2020 - December 2023.
- 1.79. Ben Dean, Director of Sport and Gambling, September 2019 - present, also concurrently Director of the Covid-19 Hub, March 2020 - December 2020
- 1.80. Nico Heslop, Director of Corporate Strategy, March 2020 - April 2022 (this Director role took on responsibility of the Covid-19 Hub from December 2020)

Part B: Pre-pandemic planning in relation to children and young people

Volunteering, civil society and youth

- 2.1. As detailed above, DCMS leads on government policy relating to the voluntary and community sector and volunteering through its Civil Society and Youth (CSY) directorate. My Module one statement gives further detail on the team and department's wider work and pre-pandemic planning in this area, and the below focuses on pre-pandemic work relevant to children and young people.
- 2.2. The CSY directorate uses expert advice from relevant civil society organisations such as infrastructure bodies, civil society data experts, funding bodies, regulators, special interest organisations and groups which focus on specific civil society areas, for example, volunteering, youth and loneliness. That advice helps the CSY directorate to identify areas of risk and inform policy to strengthen civil society resilience and sector health. The data and insights used by the CSY directorate tend to be drawn more from responses to previous disasters, such as the Grenfell Tower fire and the Manchester Arena bombing, than from specific pandemic-related work.
- 2.3. Beyond this, the CSY team did not undertake specific pre-pandemic planning which focused on children and young people. In December 2020, DCMS commissioned a 'Youth Evidence Review' to understand the challenges and opportunities facing young people at the time and in the future, and to inform government thinking on youth policy [SL-8/11 INQ000623101]. DCMS engaged with approximately 6,000 young people, over 170 Youth Sector organisations, 32 academics/researchers and other government departments, concluding in May 2021, during the pandemic. The findings showed that young people would like the government to prioritise, above all else: regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home, and volunteering opportunities. This work was not undertaken in direct response to the pandemic.
- 2.4. Whilst not pandemic planning, the findings of the 'Youth Evidence Review' set the direction of our support for young people during the pandemic, including development of the National Youth Guarantee to support regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home and youth volunteering opportunities. It enabled us to advocate for youth sector residential guidance to be proportionate and in line with schools' residential guidance, to ensure young people had access to the adventures away from home that were so important to them.

Sport

- 2.5. DCMS did not undertake pre-pandemic planning specifically in relation to children and young people's access to sport. However, DCMS did undertake work in the preceding years which set out its principles in relation to access to sport for children and young people.
- 2.6. In 2019, DCMS, DfE and DHSC jointly published the School Sport and Action Activity Plan [SL-8/9 INQ000623092]. The Plan stated that: 'This action plan is a statement of intent, setting out a joint commitment from Department for Education, Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), and Department for Health and Social Care (DHSC), to ongoing collaboration at national level to ensure that sport and physical activity are an integral part of both the school day and after-school activities, so that all children have the opportunity to take part in at least 60 minutes of physical activity every day.' The plan included a list of actions and set out a joint commitment from the three departments to ongoing collaboration at national level to ensure that sport and physical activity are an integral part of both the school day and after-school activities.

Technology and online safety

- 2.7. DCMS did not undertake pre-pandemic planning specifically in relation to technology and online safety for children and young people.
- 2.8. As is detailed further below at Part D, the Online Harms White Paper was published in 2019, which included a full public consultation, the outcome of which was published on Gov.uk, followed by the development of the Online Safety Bill in 2021. Although not carried out specifically to prepare for a pandemic, the bill included a number of measures focused on children and young people, for example, ensuring illegal content on social media sites would be prevented or removed quickly, and ensuring children are protected from harmful content even where this does not meet a criminal threshold. This work took place prior to the pandemic but was critical in the development of the bill throughout Covid-19 and subsequently the Online Safety Act which was enacted in 2023.

Libraries

- 2.9. Prior to the pandemic, the Libraries Taskforce ran between 2015 and 2020 and was co-sponsored by DCMS and the Local Government Association (LGA). The Taskforce membership covered DCMS, LGA, Society of Chief Librarians (later Libraries Connected), Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), Chief

Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA) and partner organisations such as the Reading Agency, BookTrust, Public Health England (PHE) and the NHS⁵ ⁶. Among other things, the taskforce developed a sector strategy (*Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016-2021*). The taskforce developed a wide range of material to promote and amplify good practice via the Libraries, including:

- a) the Opportunities for Everyone fund which funded a range of projects, many of which were focused on children and young people - examples include code clubs in Telford; mental wellbeing projects in East Sussex; and School readiness work in Tameside [SL-8/12 INQ000623104].
- b) a blog which disseminated good practice on a wide variety of library issues, including early years work, digital work with children in areas of deprivation in Kent, and reading for pleasure activities in Islington [SL-8/13 INQ000623105/SL-8/14 INQ000623106 /SL-8/15 INQ000623107].

2.10. While not specifically pre-pandemic planning, and though it ended in 2020, the development and work of the taskforce created closer joint working and a shared focus across the sector to a greater extent than in previous years. These strengthened relationships assisted a rapid shift to the close collaboration and joint working needed to respond to the pandemic.

Part C: Online learning and access to technology

School closures

- 3.1. DfE is responsible for children's services and education, including early years, schools, higher and further education policy. DCMS did not have a role in the decision to close schools and move to remote education. DCMS also did not undertake work to assess the ability of schools to provide education remotely or what infrastructure to do so was available in schools. However, DCMS did support DfE, and indirectly schools, in specific areas following the decision that schools should close, focusing on the provision of remote learning.
- 3.2. In March 2020, DCMS was approached by DfE which was seeking the BBC's help with its 'continuity of education project' to support remote learning in anticipation of potential

⁵Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP) is an independent library and information association.

⁶Chief Cultural & Leisure Officers Association (CLOA) is a professional organisation that advocates for libraries and other cultural and leisure services

school closures as a result of lockdown⁷. DCMS ministers agreed to support DfE's request and to facilitate its engagement with the BBC [SL-8/16 INQ000623046, SL-8/17 INQ000623034]

- 3.3. On 24 March 2020, DCMS facilitated a call between DfE and the BBC to discuss how the BBC could help support teachers and home learning and provide parents with resources relevant to the curriculum [SL-8/18 INQ000623035]. Following this, the BBC announced in April 2020 that it would be expanding its educational provision for the summer term [SL-8/19 INQ000623047]. It should be said that the BBC had, before this point, already announced changes to their programming on 18 March 2020, which included increased educational programming for school children across iPlayer and the red button, with a daily educational programme for different key stages/year groups [SL-8/20 INQ000623077].
- 3.4. As detailed further at Part F, because of the extensive efforts made to maintain access to physical library resources via 'click and collect' or grab bag arrangements, and the availability of online material via e-book lending or recorded storytime or rhymetime sessions, through DCMS's support and advocacy on behalf of the sector, public libraries were able to contribute significantly to families needing to home school children during lockdown, and to provide wider reading material for pleasure and entertainment. School library services were permitted to operate on a no- or low-contact basis, allowing them to deliver class sets of material to schools to issue as part of resource packs.
- 3.5. Additionally, DCMS engaged with CO regarding who was included in the definition of key workers, noting that key workers were able to access certain provisions including access to school places. The DCMS Covid-19 Hub successfully engaged CO to ensure that, for example, telecoms engineers, some security staff and UK data centre workers were included under the definition of 'key workers', and later youth workers and library staff were also included, as detailed in Parts E and F.

Oak National Academy

- 3.6. The Oak National Academy was created as an independent public body in April 2020 in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and specifically in response to school closures resulting from the pandemic. It aimed to make "the best curriculum thinking, the

⁷The BBC is a public corporation for which the government has certain legal responsibilities, as set out in the BBC's Royal Charter, and is regulated by Ofcom. The BBC is operationally and editorially independent, with its Mission and Public Purposes also set out in its Royal Charter

deepest subject expertise and the smartest learning design” available to teachers by providing free access to “thousands of teacher-made, fully-resourced lessons”. These lessons were designed for students from the beginning of primary up to the end of key stage four. The Oak National Academy was the lead designated online educational provider during the pandemic.

- 3.7. DCMS did not have a role in Oak National Academy’s creation. It is now an executive non-departmental public body and was established as an arm’s length body (ALB) to DfE in September 2022 [SL-8/21 INQ000623087].

DCMS involvement

- 3.8. In January 2021, DCMS was approached by DfE and Downing Street who formally requested DCMS’s support to zero-rate Oak National Academy [SL-8/22 INQ000623041]. Zero-rating is a practice where a mobile operator does not count certain data usage against a user’s data cap. This means that specific apps, websites, or services can be used without affecting the user’s data allowance. This meant that any child using Oak National Academy’s online resources via mobile data would not consume any data allowance.
- 3.9. At the beginning of January 2021, Oak National Academy publicly requested that mobile network operators zero-rate their services. At that point, fixed network operators had already removed data caps, and the request from Oak National Academy and DfE centred on mobile network operators.
- 3.10. DCMS’s digital infrastructure team worked with DfE to convene a roundtable on 5 January 2021, jointly chaired by the Minister for Digital Infrastructure and the Minister for School Standards and attended by Oak National Academy and the UK’s four major mobile network operators (EE, Vodafone, Three and O2) [SL-8/23 INQ000623062]. Following the meeting, all four organisations zero-rated Oak National Academy, with the transfer of the educational content to a separate platform, and EE and Vodafone also zero-rated BBC Bitesize. On this basis, DCMS considered that the objectives of zero-rating Oak National Academy were met.
- 3.11. As detailed below, DCMS was led by requests by other government departments in relation to zero-rating, and therefore did not undertake work to zero-rate Oak Academy earlier in the pandemic as it had not been requested.
- 3.12. DCMS’s role in this work was primarily to facilitate requests between various government departments and the mobile sector. We acted upon the requests of other

government departments, which were responsible for identifying the relevant resources, such as NHS digital services or support for victims of abuse, that they wanted the mobile sector to zero-rate. The digital infrastructure team did not play a role in determining which individual families and or children or young people might potentially benefit from such measures.

- 3.13. DCMS did not undertake any specific monitoring or assessment following the initial work to broker an agreement between Oak National Academy and the mobile operators. DfE is the lead department for children's access to educational resources, and DCMS was available to support that work where needed. Working with DfE and the mobile sector to zero-rate Oak National Academy became part of the wider ongoing work of the Digital Infrastructure directorate to improve access to connectivity and digital infrastructure and improve access to internet services for vulnerable consumers, in particular for those in low-income households. DCMS also continued to work closely with Ofcom which has a legal duty under the Communications Act 2003 to monitor affordability in the telecoms market. As such, DCMS's work with Ofcom involved monitoring and addressing affordability concerns within the sector. This included regular engagement with Ofcom to discuss policy matters relating to the number of people who were facing affordability issues with their fixed or mobile bills during this time. These discussions were held in general terms, and did not specifically cover children and young people.
- 3.14. In October 2021, DCMS was approached by DfE with a request to consider whether it might be possible to broadcast some Oak National Academy lessons on television, either on the BBC or on a separate or new channel. DCMS shared an initial view which was to not create a new channel but to explore collaboration with the BBC [SL-8/24 INQ000623048]. DCMS engaged with DfE on the request, but ultimately DfE took the decision to pause the work and not take it forward.
- 3.15. The Oak National Academy made a weekly e-book available for students; the libraries team successfully worked with DfE colleagues to ensure that the landing page for this resource also included information promoting the availability of the wide range of e-books available through public libraries (in addition to access to physical books via 'click and collect' or grab bag arrangements) to supplement this resource. This was achieved in January 2021, and refreshed in June 2021 to cover the summer holiday period.

Comparison with work undertaken for online resources concerning victims of crime and domestic abuse

- 3.16. During the first lockdown (March 2020), charities, particularly those offering support to victims of crime and domestic violence, were reporting (to the Ministry of Justice (MoJ)) significant increases in visits to their websites and resources. To facilitate access to these resources, MoJ approached DCMS to explore whether measures could be taken to zero-rate access to these websites.
- 3.17. DCMS facilitated collaboration between the four main mobile operators, MoJ, the Victims' Commissioner for England and charities, to enable them to identify those websites most visited by victims of crime and domestic abuse. The mobile operators made a commitment that these measures would be in effect until at least 31 October 2020, though some continued to zero-rate the websites beyond that date.
- 3.18. DCMS did not take a decision to approach the zero-rating of online learning resources in a different way or at a different time to the zero-rating of resources concerning victims of crime and domestic abuse. As with Oak National Academy, the digital infrastructure team's role was to act upon the requests of other government departments and help facilitate support from mobile operators. DCMS's role was not to initiate the zero-rating of any sites or agree the order in which this was carried out, though the department did work with other government departments to ensure that support was delivered quickly when required. For online resources concerning victims of crime and domestic abuse services websites, the MoJ had approached DCMS for support in zero-rating earlier in the pandemic.

Provision of internet access to disadvantaged families

- 3.19. From March 2020, with schools closed due to the lockdown and the move to remote learning, the government wanted to ensure all children were able to access online learning resources and classes. DCMS worked with DfE and the telecoms industry in early April 2020 on measures to provide internet access to disadvantaged families, by exempting selected educational resources from data charges, providing free internet access to those without broadband through additional mobile data and access to BT's WiFi hotspots. This was part of the Online Learning Support package, announced by the Secretary of State for Education in April 2020 [SL-8/25 INQ000623084]. The package announced that disadvantaged children across England were set to receive laptops and tablets as part of a push to make remote education accessible for pupils staying at home during the pandemic. It also announced that the government would

provide 4G routers to make sure disadvantaged secondary school pupils and care leavers could access the internet – where those families did not already have mobile or broadband internet in the household.

- 3.20. Free or low-cost internet access for disadvantaged families was also offered by operators through several schemes throughout the pandemic. These initiatives included Virgin Media O2's work with the Good Things Foundation to launch the National Databank to provide free data to people experiencing data poverty or living on a low income, and Sky's provision of free sim-cards to low-income families. Internet service providers also removed data caps on educational content on fixed networks. This was in addition to all four mobile operators zero-rating Oak National Academy and BBC Bitzsize, as detailed above.
- 3.21. DCMS's role in this work was primarily one of convening and facilitating connections, as well as working with the industry to lay the foundations so that they were ready and able to engage with DfE. The department briefed the industry on requests - for example zero-rating the NHS app and the work on Oak National Academy - from other government departments, including DfE. The digital infrastructure team would then facilitate discussions on how to deliver on the requests, making introductions between the operators and government departments. The delivery of the Online Learning Support package was led by DfE.
- 3.22. In April 2020, in collaboration with other government departments (CO, Downing Street, NHSX, DfE, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), MHCLG) DCMS explored ways in which devices could be provided to support vulnerable households, school children and frontline NHS staff, though DCMS did not have a role in identifying potential beneficiaries⁸. The Minister of State for Digital and Culture, Caroline Dinenage wrote to key industry stakeholders highlighting the importance of digital inclusion during the pandemic and encouraged their organisations to consider financial and device donations to initiatives that aimed at overcoming the challenge, such as FutureDotNow's campaign DevicesDotNow [SL-8/26 INQ000623036]. DCMS did not own these initiatives, however DCMS's digital inclusion team did later work with the organisations on supporting vulnerable households via the development of the £2.5 million Digital Lifeline Fund, providing tablets, connectivity and digital support to around 5,500 people with learning disabilities, enabling them to connect virtually with others

⁸NHSX was a Government unit from early 2019 to early 2022, with responsibility for setting national policy and developing best practice for National Health Service (NHS) technology, digital and data, including data sharing and transparency.

and access online services, in a safe and secure way. This is covered in further detail in the following section.

- 3.23. In addition, DCMS worked with mobile network operators and fixed internet service providers to secure voluntary commitments to protect vulnerable consumers, including offering new low-cost packages and data boosts [SL-8/27 INQ000623066].
- 3.24. Further to this, public libraries played a part in combating digital exclusion during this period. DCMS negotiated an exemption from lockdown regulations for libraries which enabled people to enter their buildings to use free public PCs and wi-fi to access essential services (further covered at Part F).

DevicesDotNow and the Digital Lifeline Fund

- 3.25. DevicesDotNow was an emergency campaign which was rapidly stood up by the FutureDotNow digital skills coalition in response to the emerging issue of data poverty and lack of devices⁹. DevicesDotNow connected those without the means to get online with donated devices and connectivity solutions. Good Things Foundation was the operational arm¹⁰. It distributed over 10,000 devices and internet data packages¹¹. DCMS did not have a role in the campaign's design or delivery and did not play a role in which recipients might benefit from its work.
- 3.26. Nonetheless, DCMS was supportive of the campaign and the department championed the work by sending letters to key industry stakeholders, encouraging them to get involved [SL-8/26 INQ000623036].
- 3.27. The department also worked with The Good Things Foundation on the Digital Lifeline Fund. The decision was taken for DCMS to provide £2.5 million in February 2021 as an emergency fund to reduce the digital exclusion of people with learning disabilities. DCMS also funded the evaluation of the fund, which is described further below.
- 3.28. The Digital Lifeline Fund aimed to enable digitally excluded people with learning disabilities to access technology and digital skills support to improve health and wellbeing and mitigate the negative impacts on Covid-19 on disabled people. The fund was designed and delivered by Good Things Foundation, in partnership with Ability

⁹A coalition of industry leaders focused on closing the digital skills gap for working age adults.

¹⁰A charity working to make the benefits of digital technology more accessible.

¹¹www.goodthingsfoundation.org/policy-and-research/research-and-evidence/research-2024/devicesdotnow-impact-report.html.

Net¹². It was supported by Learning Disability England, Voluntary Organisations Disability Group and Digital Unite. The foundation also engaged 146 community and coordination partners in the project. The Digital Lifeline Fund provided 5,500 people with devices in under four months, and 2,354 pieces of adaptive hardware were distributed.

- 3.29. The Fund did not target children or young people. It provided devices, data and support to people over 18 with a learning disability, living in England, who were digitally excluded. This group was chosen as there was evidence that people with learning disabilities had experienced a particularly disproportionate impact due to Covid-19.

Monitoring and assessment

- 3.30. As detailed above, the department's work in relation to the accessibility of remote learning was limited, as education is a DfE lead. DCMS did not undertake significant monitoring and/or assessment of the ability of children to access and effectively use remote learning and any associated technology. However, DCMS did support work to zero-rate the Oak National Academy and funded the Digital Lifeline Fund.
- 3.31. As I have explained above, DCMS funded a full evaluation of the Digital Lifetime Fund which was undertaken by the Good Things Foundation, University of East London and RIX Social Researchers and published on the Good Things Foundation's website and Gov.uk on 24 March 2022 [SL-8/28 INQ000623081].
- 3.32. As above, while the Digital Lifeline Fund did not target children or young people, the evaluation did consider where children may have indirectly benefited. This showed that some recipients lived in households with children, though the majority of recipients lived alone or with other adults. 191 recipients reported living with children, out of a total of 5,500 (3.47 per cent of recipients) and 20 per cent of recipients were aged 18-24. The evaluation found that people living with children typically reported better outcomes than those living alone, and younger adults typically require fewer hours of digital skills support from the programme than older people. Additionally, younger people reported being more likely to use their devices for learning, training, work or business.

¹²AbilityNet is a UK charity which aims to empower disabled and older people to use technology at home, at work and in education.

Part D: Children and young people's wellbeing

Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Fund

- 4.1. From the earliest stages of the pandemic, DCMS provided feedback and analysis to His Majesty's Treasury (HMT) on how pan-economy measures were supporting DCMS sectors. That feedback contributed, in some cases, to various packages of sector-specific financial support being announced including the £750 million package of support for the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector, which was announced on 8 April 2020. This package was made up of multiple funding streams and was intended to be a one-off funding award, allocated and distributed quickly in order to target those areas where it was most needed at the time.
- 4.2. The VCSE sector covers a range of government sub-sectors and service delivery areas. In the early days of the Covid-19 response, departments were considering the likely funding needed to maintain service delivery. In order to prevent potential duplication and streamline the process of departments bidding to HMT for new funding, DCMS (as the government lead for the VCSE sector) worked with HMT and coordinated a cross-government process for all of the VCSE sector.
- 4.3. Although DCMS worked with HMT initially in providing feedback and analysis, the decision to make £750 million of funding available to the VCSE sector was taken by HMT. Additionally, some of the funding was allocated by HMT directly (to DHSC to support hospices and the devolved administrations as per the Barnett formula) and DCMS had no responsibility or oversight for how this funding was spent¹³. In relation to funding streams provided to other government departments (excluding the specific DHSC hospice funding), while DCMS designed and oversaw the process through which funding was allocated, responsibility was then assumed by the relevant department.
- 4.4. The funding was not designed to be a rescue package for the entirety of the VCSE sector, rather, the fund's objectives were to:
 - a. ensure essential services were provided to vulnerable people through increased community support
 - b. provide critical frontline services to vulnerable groups affected by Covid-19

¹³The Barnett formula is a UK government mechanism that adjusts the amount of public money given to Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. It's used to reflect changes in spending levels for public services in England, Scotland, and Wales.

- c. reduce the closure of charities providing essential services to vulnerable people by ensuring they had the financial resources to operate, thereby reducing the burden on public services
 - d. provide key services specific to supporting the Covid-19 response, to reduce the burden on the NHS or other public services
- 4.5. For the VCSE funding delivered by other government departments, DCMS worked with the departments to ensure that the full range of policy considerations for funding were taken into account, by following the star chamber system¹⁴. This gave DCMS the opportunity to question the departments which submitted bids and then allowed officials and special advisers from DCMS, HMT and Downing Street to feed in views collectively.
- 4.6. To meet the objectives (set out at paragraph 5.4) of the various packages which formed the £750 million, grantholders used the funding to deliver services that provided support to a diverse range of service user groups, with a particular focus on the most vulnerable people in society. Vulnerable was taken to mean those who were at risk of being marginalised or who faced multiple disadvantages as a result of the pandemic (for example, those from lower socio-economic households, people with disabilities/long-term health conditions, people from minority backgrounds (and often underserved by public services), those at risk of domestic violence or in homes where domestic violence was prevalent). Children and young people fell into several, if not all, of these categories. As such, even if funds from the various packages did not explicitly target children and young people, they were likely to fund services and support from which children and young people benefitted.
- 4.7. For instance, excluding the Coronavirus Community Support Fund, 58 per cent of all grantholders across the various packages supported children and young people in some way, providing mental health support and related services, education-related activities, youth/extra-curricular activities, and support with other urgent needs¹⁵. The evaluation of the VCSE funding found 58 per cent of its grantholders also supported children and young people [SL-8/29 INQ000623064].
- 4.8. Aside from the Youth Covid-19 Support Fund, the Vulnerable Children National Charities Strategic Relief Fund, and the Big Night In match-fund, the remainder of the

¹⁴A star chamber is an informal, high-level meeting of cabinet members and senior officials, used to discuss and scrutinise important issues like spending plans, often looking to ensure efficiency and value for money

¹⁵A separate evaluation was undertaken for the Coronavirus Community Support Fund so this is not included in the 58 per cent figure.

funding did not have a specific focus on supporting children. However, as most of the remaining funding streams supported vulnerable people, this did incidentally fund services which supported vulnerable children and young people.

- 4.9. DCMS commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), in partnership with RSM UK¹⁶, to carry out an evaluation of the £750 million funding package¹⁷. Published in April 2022, the evaluation found strong evidence to conclude that the funding did contribute to the financial position of grantholders, supporting more than 14,000 organisations and reaching a diverse range of service users [SL-8/29 INQ000623064].

Big Night In

- 4.10. The Big Night In was a British telethon appeal, broadcast by BBC One on 23 April 2020, with the aim of raising money to support those affected by the pandemic. It was the first joint initiative between two BBC telethon charities, Children in Need and Comic Relief. At the same time, the Chancellor announced the £750 million VCSE funding package, and the government committed to matching pound for pound the amount raised via the Big Night In, resulting in £37 million in government match funding of public donations received during the appeal.
- 4.11. The first £20 million of match funds went directly to the National Emergencies Trust, with the remainder distributed evenly between Comic Relief and Children in Need¹⁸. DCMS oversaw the management of these two funds, ensuring they were used appropriately, and also managed their evaluation.
- 4.12. The Children in Need sub-fund of the Big Night In funding responded to the needs of vulnerable and marginalised children who were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, including: those who were affected by poor mental health and wellbeing; disabled children and young people facing self-isolation restrictions; and those affected by domestic abuse and bereavement while in the home [SL-8/30 INQ000623094].
- 4.13. The Comic Relief sub-fund also focused on supporting families and communities to meet the needs of young children [SL-8/31 INQ000623097]. The sub-fund focused on ensuring the sustainability and continued operation of organisations that were providing essential services to young people, at a time when VCSE organisations were

¹⁶RSM UK is a provider of audit, tax, and consulting services

¹⁷NatCen is a UK based not-for-profit social research charity.

¹⁸The National Emergencies Trust is a charity established to coordinate charitable fundraising and distribution in the event of a domestic disaster or emergency

facing increasing demand for their services and financial hardship as a result of the pandemic.

The Vulnerable Children National Charities Strategic Relief Fund

- 4.14. DCMS awarded £34.15 million (from the £750m package) to HO and DfE to deliver the Vulnerable Children Fund. It was led by HO, which was responsible for decisions around allocation of funding, timing, and monitoring and assessment. This fund supported work to safeguard vulnerable children who were spending more time at home in less secure environments during lockdowns, including children with disabilities, those who were critically ill, care leavers and children in the early years. Funding also allowed charities to offer support services in new ways, using remote working and technology solutions, for example, to help tackle criminal threats and mitigate the risks to vulnerable children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic [SL-8/32 INQ000484932].

Youth Covid-19 Support Fund

- 4.15. The Youth Covid-19 Support Fund (YCSF) was one element of the £750 million funding package. The £16.5 million fund was launched to support a mixture of grassroots youth clubs, uniformed youth groups, national youth and umbrella organisations supporting young people between the ages of five and 19 [SL-8/33 INQ000623068].
- 4.16. It was intended to mitigate the impact of lost income for youth organisations in England, during the winter period of the Covid-19 pandemic. DCMS was asked by Downing Street to develop the fund to sustain access to youth services, covering the essential business expenditure of uniformed and other grassroots youth organisations in order to keep them open. This was with the rationale of prioritising the stabilisation of youth sector organisations as if otherwise financially viable youth organisations closed down due to the impacts of the pandemic, it would become significantly more challenging to invest in youth provision at a later date.
- 4.17. The funding was available to cover eligible expenses incurred between November 2020 and March 2021, that had not been funded by other sources. For example, rent, utilities, core staffing costs and equipment, rather than to fund activities.
- 4.18. In total, £15.6 million of funding was allocated to 551 youth organisations including 540 small, grassroots youth groups and services, and 11 national and umbrella organisations. Of this funding, £2 million was allocated to vital youth work qualifications and training, including bursaries for students training to become qualified youth

workers. This was to ensure the emergency funding could be maximised within the youth sector.

- 4.19. In August 2021, NatCen carried out an independent evaluation of the YCSF which involved analysing application data, a survey with successful grantees, focus groups, interviews and case studies of successful organisations [SL-8/34 INQ000623058].
- 4.20. In terms of the fund meeting its objectives, the evaluation found:
- a. most grantees reported the fund had helped them either 'a great deal' (51 per cent) or 'quite a bit' (36 per cent). Grantees advised the fund was most helpful in covering core costs they would have struggled to pay otherwise, which meant services could be kept open
 - b. as a result of the fund, a majority of grant recipients reported feeling more confident about their financial sustainability in the short term. This included lower risk of closure, not needing to use reserves, and general improvements to their cash flow. However, around one in five grantees still had concerns about their ability to continue in three to six months
 - c. a noteworthy finding is that the proportion of organisations fully open and providing services increased from 27 per cent before the grant to 65 per cent after the grant

Reading Agency

- 4.21. In December 2020, the government announced a £7.5 million funding package to help tackle loneliness over the winter period [SL-8/35 INQ000623076]. As with the VCSE package, this funding package was intended to be a one-off funding to help provide immediate and targeted relief to those most at risk of loneliness, including children and young people. As above, although children and young people were not the specific beneficiaries of the fund, they were at heightened risk of loneliness due to the reduction in social contact during lockdown, and as such qualified for support through the funding. The funding was distributed via three existing schemes:
- a. £5 million to ACE for arts and library services
 - b. £2 million to extend the government's Loneliness Fund originally launched in May 2020
 - c. £500,000 distributed between the Audio Content Fund and the Community

Radio Fund^{19 20}

- 4.22. £3.5 million of the £5 million awarded to ACE, was used to support The Reading Agency to expand two of its programmes - Reading Friends (a programme which tackles loneliness through reading) and Reading Well Books on Prescription, which delivered three clinically-curated mental health collections (targeted to adults, young people and children) to all public libraries in England, enabling those experiencing poor mental health to access self-directed support²¹. Over 300,000 books were sent out to 2,800 branches.
- 4.23. During the pandemic, the Reading Agency reached deals with a wide range of publishers to allow access to e-book licences that were not available to the sector previously.
- 4.24. DCMS engaged extensively with various youth sector bodies throughout the process, including inviting a wide range of youth sector leaders and young people to the review panels for the fund. Applicants evidencing accessibility or reach to the most disadvantaged young people were prioritised.

Youth work

- 4.25. As the lead government department responsible for youth policy and the youth workforce, DCMS engaged effectively with CO to influence policy and the development of secondary legislation regarding key worker status, to ensure appropriate exemptions were in place allowing volunteers to leave home to provide services to neighbours and communities. The Youth Working Group also outlined that key worker status would allow the sector to operate safely and continue to reach young people. This enabled volunteers and youth workers to access certain key worker provisions such as testing and access to school places. In particular:
- a. following the Prime Minister's announcement of a further national lockdown on 4 January 2021, DCMS secured key worker status for youth workers with recognised qualifications [SL-8/36 INQ000623070].
 - b. DCMS also made the case for volunteers who were undertaking key roles to be included in the definition of 'key worker'

¹⁹Audio Content Fund is a scheme which was originally supported by a grant from DCMS. It is a not for profit organisation which funds independent producers making public service content for commercial and community radio.

²⁰Fund which supports the core costs of running Ofcom-licensed community radio stations

²¹Reading Well Books on Prescription is a reading scheme which focuses on making self-help publications more readily available to patients suffering with a range of health problems.

- c. additionally, DCMS negotiated with CO to ensure libraries, their staff and volunteers were included as key workers - from 11 January 2021, staff and volunteers operating in libraries and providing essential services such as computer access, 'order and collect' services, home and school library services and visa checking were able to continue undertaking those roles

Detached and digital delivery of youth work

- 4.26. Online and digital youth services were delivered throughout the pandemic, and many youth sector bodies and voluntary organisations quickly pivoted to digital delivery. National Youth Agency Covid-19 guidance for those working in the youth sectors clearly outlined that digital delivery was a viable option during this time [SL-8/06 INQ000623055]²². This guidance was developed with the support of the Youth Working Group, DCMS, other youth sector organisations, union representatives and health and safety experts. While not published on Gov.uk, DCMS, PHE and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) provided advice to the National Youth Agency, to ensure coherence with existing government guidance at that time, ensuring this sub-sector guidance reflected current government policy.
- 4.27. On 22 February 2021, the government's *Covid-19 Response - Spring 2021* (which I will refer to as the 'Spring 2021 Roadmap') was published. From March 2021, CO published guidance for the four steps of the Spring 2021 Roadmap (Step 1 in March, Step 2 in April, Step 3 in May and Step 4 in July).
- 4.28. Detached outdoor youth services, defined as those that take place in community settings rather than a fixed youth facility, were permitted during phases one and two of the Spring 2021 Roadmap. During Step 3 of the roadmap, when those over 18 were not permitted to meet indoors in groups of over 6, there was an exemption for youth provision for over 18s identified as vulnerable, who could attend invitation-only 'support groups' in groups of up to 30 (plus staff, volunteers, and carers). These vulnerabilities were self-identified, rather than intersecting formally with other protected characteristics.
- 4.29. DCMS did not undertake monitoring or assessment of the impact of the detached and online delivery of youth work at any stage during the pandemic. However, some youth

²²NYA is the national body for youth work in England

sector organisations such as UK Youth did explore the impact of this through its own research²³.

Youth clubs and youth centres

- 4.30. Youth centres and youth clubs closed during the first national lockdown in March 2020. Many other premises typically utilised by youth services were also closed including community centres and places of worship. The youth team at DCMS engaged with CO and DHSC to advocate for the sector and young people with the goal to reopen youth centres and youth services when safe. Youth centres and youth clubs were permitted to reopen on 4 July 2020.
- 4.31. Managing youth sector spaces (including youth clubs and youth centres) during Covid-19 was set out in the National Youth Agency Covid-19 guidance, published in June 2020. The youth team also reviewed youth sector guidance produced by the National Youth Agency, establishing a Youth Working Group to discuss this guidance with other youth sector organisations, union representatives and health and safety experts²⁴. The guidance aimed to support the youth sector's response as lockdown rules changed, including a framework on which services could be delivered during which stage of restrictions. While not published on Gov.uk, DCMS, PHE and the HSE provided advice to the National Youth Agency, to ensure coherence with existing government guidance so that this sub-sector guidance reflected current government policy²⁵.
- 4.32. DCMS did not undertake monitoring or assessment of the impact of the closure and subsequent reopening of youth clubs and youth centres. However, some youth sector organisations such as UK Youth did explore the impact of this through its own research.

Youth Working Group

- 4.33. The Youth Working Group was established in May 2020, one of eight DCMS working groups set up to support the work of the Cultural Renewal Taskforce²⁶. The group covered a range of youth service provision, including youth clubs and youth

²³UK Youth is a youth work charity operating across the UK

²⁴The National Youth Agency is the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body for youth work in England.

²⁵PHE was disbanded in October 2021. Its health protection functions were transferred to the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA), and its health improvement functions were transferred to the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, NHS England, and NHS Digital

²⁶The Cultural Renewal Taskforce was set up on 20 May 2020 by the Secretary of State for DCMS with the aim of supporting the renewal of DCMS sectors and helping to develop Covid-19 guidance for the reopening of public places and services, including those relating to youth work, services and venues.

organisations such as the Scouts and Guides, as well as exploring potential targeted youth work interventions for vulnerable young people [SL-8/37 INQ000623063].

- 4.34. The Youth Working Group's aims were to:
- a. provide a forum for sector specialists and other experts to help develop guidance
 - b. identify and resolve practical, sector-specific guidance-related issues
 - c. develop a sector-wide plan for disseminating and implementing guidance
 - d. discuss actions and updates arising from the Cultural Renewal Taskforce
 - e. give stakeholders the opportunity to put questions and suggestions to ministers
- 4.35. The Minister for Civil Society and Loneliness, Baroness Barran was the lead DCMS minister and as such attended and chaired a number of the working group's meetings [SL-8/38 INQ000623039/ SL-8/39 INQ000623038/ SL-8/40 INQ000623042/ SL-8/41 INQ000623043/ SL-8/42 INQ000623060/ SL-8/43 INQ000623053/ SL-8/44 INQ000623050/ SL-8/45 INQ000623051/ SL-8/46 INQ000623054/ SL-8/47 INQ000623056]. Members of the group were: DfE; Duke of Edinburgh's Award; Local Government Association; National Citizen Service; National Youth Agency; OnSide; Prince's Trust; Scout Association; Street Games; UK Youth; Unison; UNITE; Youth United and youth ambassadors from OnSide, the Scouts and the DCMS Youth Steering Group^{27 28 29 30 31}.
- 4.36. The working group was also utilised by DCMS and the National Youth Agency to explain Covid-19 guidance to key sector bodies including local authorities, uniformed youth groups and VCSE sector youth providers, and to ensure their cooperation and messaging to their own members and workforce was aligned with government policies at the time [SL-8/48 INQ000623037].
- 4.37. A key success of the group was the granting of key worker status for youth workers in January 2021 as a result of group members using the forum to lobby the minister on this issue. The National Youth Agency's *Out of Sight: Vulnerable Young People: Covid-19 Response* published in April 2020, and which called for youth workers to be

²⁷ OnSide is a national youth charity

²⁸ Street Games is a charity working with young people living in low-income, underserved communities through sport and physical activity

²⁹ Youth United is a charity working with young people to increase opportunities for them to join a uniformed youth organisation

³⁰ A youth ambassador is a young agent, representative and/or steward for the charity for which they work

³¹ The DCMS Youth Steering Group is a group of young people who advise DCMS on policy making

designated as key workers, and highlighted the potential impact of the pandemic upon young people, helped support the working group's position on this. Key worker status for youth workers led to a stronger position for DCMS when advocating for youth work as a whole during the pandemic, particularly in relation to the removal of outdoor gathering caps and ensuring there was parity between youth work policy and DfE/out of school settings policy.

Further or different work related to youth services

- 4.38. DCMS funded the National Citizen Service, a key government programme reaching around 100,000 young people a year with a mix of face-to-face residential experiences and volunteering in their local communities. During the pandemic this programme was pivoted to be socially distanced for the volunteering elements and to have a new digital 'mixing' element where young people undertook group activities virtually, supporting their wellbeing and helping them to develop life skills that improve their confidence and employability. Extensive digital content was created by and for young people to help deal with issues arising from the pandemic and was accessed over 1 million times.
- 4.39. Following the pandemic, the #iwill fund (a joint National Lottery Community Fund and DCMS funded youth social action movement) granted £6 million between 2022 and 2025 to support youth social action opportunities, pivoting its criteria to focus on reaching young people facing increased impacts and vulnerability as a result of Covid-19 [SL-8/49 INQ000623112]³².
- 4.40. No specific monitoring or evidence of impact was undertaken by DCMS in relation to the work described above. However, the public body National Citizen Service Trust conducted its own evaluation of its 2020 programme; DCMS did not have a role in this.
- 4.41. The Dormant Assets Scheme aims to reunite people with their financial assets, including bank and building society accounts and insurance and pensions products. Where this is not possible, the money is unlocked for important social and environmental initiatives across the UK. Dormant assets funding allows the government, in partnership with firms from the financial services sector, to support long-term, innovative programmes that Exchequer money is unlikely to fund. Policy responsibility for the Dormant Assets Scheme is shared between DCMS and HMT.

³²The #iwill Fund is a joint investment by DCMS and The National Lottery Community Fund to support young people who face disadvantage or barriers to inclusion to take part in social action projects

- 4.42. In England, funding is currently allocated to expert organisations to deliver innovative projects addressing entrenched social challenges: tackling youth unemployment, improving financial inclusion and capability, social investment wholesalers and community wealth funds. Support for youth is delivered primarily by Youth Futures Foundation (YFF).
- 4.43. In 2020, YFF identified £44 million of their existing £90 million dormant assets allocation to direct to Covid-related activity. £10 million was used to launch an emergency levelling up fund for young people from the communities hit hardest by the crisis, and the remainder to scale YFF's work on youth employment provisions and partnerships.

Part E: Children and young people's access to recreation and sports

Sport

- 5.1. The department's responsibilities for sport cover elite and professional sport, international sport, sport participation, diversity in sport, sport integrity and football regulation. DCMS also supports the bidding for and hosting of major sporting events in the UK.
- 5.2. Sport England is a DCMS public body responsible for growing and developing grassroots sport and getting more people active across England. The department provides the majority of its funding for grassroots sport through Sport England, which currently invests over £250 million in Exchequer and Lottery funding each year. This includes provision for children and young people across the nation.
- 5.3. DCMS also works closely with DfE and DHSC to fund school sport provision. Specifically, DCMS provides joint funding for the School Games programme with DHSC, with £11 million provided annually (£4 million from DCMS and £7 million from DHSC) to provide local and accessible sport and physical activity competitions.
- 5.4. The department holds the statutory duty for local authorities to secure, so far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient provision of educational and recreational leisure-time activities for young people in their area [SL-8/50 INQ000623096/SL-8/51 INQ000623109]³³. Youth work may take place in grassroots sports facilities, or in wider youth and community focused facilities, but the department is not specifically

³³Section 507B of the Education Act 1996

responsible for the provision of grassroots sports within the wider framework of youth policy.

Access to grassroots sport during the pandemic

National Leisure Recovery Fund

- 5.5. The potential collapse of the public leisure sector due to the closure and mothballing of public leisure facilities as a result of Covid-19 restrictions posed the greatest threat to reducing future access to grassroots sport for children and young people, as well as adults.
- 5.6. To help address this, on 14 December 2020 DCMS announced the National Leisure Recovery Fund. In March 2021, £100 million of funding was allocated to 266 local authorities across England and was designed to enable them to support the recovery of publicly-owned leisure centres and gyms [SL-8/52 INQ000623074]. Restrictions introduced to control the spread of the virus had a very significant impact on the financial viability of many services, including those vital services which allow children and young people to be active such as swimming pools and sports halls. Although the funding principles did not explicitly mention children and young people, they did provide for a core level of leisure provision in all local authority areas, enabling activities such as swimming for example, ensuring children and young people could continue to access facilities to be able to learn to swim³⁴.

The UK government's Covid-19 recovery strategy

- 5.7. Published on 11 May 2020, *Our plan to rebuild: The UK Government's COVID-19 recovery strategy* set out a roadmap to easing restrictions using a phased approach [SL-8/53/ INQ000086693]. From 11 July 2020, and subject to agreed guidance setting out relevant social distancing measures and mitigations, this included the reopening of outdoor organised team sports, outdoor waterparks and swimming pools and grassroots sport. From 25 July 2020, indoor gyms, fitness and dance studios, indoor sport venues and facilities and indoor swimming pools were permitted to reopen. All these measures would affect children and young people's access to grassroots sports.

³⁴The fund's principles were: to prevent immediate collapse of the public leisure sector by enabling reopening post second lockdown; ensure a core level of leisure provision for general public in all local authority areas; sustain activities such as swimming; ensure people can continue to exercise bringing associated health, wellbeing and social benefits; and prevent failure due to uncertainty and the burdens that would place on the Exchequer.

- 5.8. DCMS was responsible for developing guidance working with CO and DHSC (including the then Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Jonathan Van-Tam). I will discuss guidance from paragraph 6.9 below. The decision to allow sport to return came from CO as part of the wider Covid-19 recovery strategy. DCMS did not have a direct role in key decision-making relating to the imposition or easing of non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs), although, we did contribute to the development of policy, at both a ministerial and official level, on a range of NPIs.

Local lockdowns and tiers

- 5.9. In July 2020, the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson announced the introduction of local lockdowns. On 23 November 2020, he further announced that on 2 December 2020, the national restrictions which had been in place since 5 November 2020 would be replaced by a regional ‘three tier’ system (with different rules for areas in each tier). However, all supervised activities for under 18 year olds, including indoor and outdoor sports and exercise groups, were exempt from restrictions placed on other groups, subject to the relevant guidance and appropriate social distancing measures being followed. DCMS worked with CO and DfE to agree this exemption across the three tiers to enable children and young people to be able to continue participating in sporting activities, given the negative impact of limiting physical activity on children’s wellbeing, until a further national lockdown was announced by the Prime Minister on 4 January 2021.
- 5.10. On 22 February 2021, the government’s Spring 2021 Roadmap was published and from March 2021, CO published guidance for the four steps of the Spring 2021 Roadmap (Step 1 in March, Step 2 in April, Step 3 in May and Step 4 in July). The restrictions for sport and physical activity were gradually lifted over the four steps. As part of Step 1, from 8 March 2021, schools and colleges were open for all students and wraparound activities restarted³⁵. This enabled school sport to resume meaning that children could take part in exercise and activity. From 29 March 2021, outdoor grassroots sport facilities were able to reopen and formally organised outdoor sports were able to resume for adults and children. These were not subject to gathering limits but needed to be compliant with sport specific guidance. This prioritisation of sport was to enable adults and children to come back from the pandemic healthier and stronger. This decision was taken by CO as part of the Spring 2021 Roadmap, although DCMS was consulted. Data from Sport England’s Active Lives survey, which measures the

³⁵ Childcare services that extend before and after regular school hours

activity levels of people across England, was presented to CO, DfE and DHSC to demonstrate the impact of the pandemic on activity levels and to support the early reintroduction of sport [SL-8/54 INQ000593459, SL-8/55 INQ000623108, SL-8/56 INQ000623110]³⁶. The monitoring of the impact of the changes on children and young people's access to grassroots sport during the pandemic is discussed from paragraph 6.15 below.

DCMS's role relating to school sport³⁷

- 5.11. DCMS covers out-of-school sport, meaning non-curriculum, which includes after-school clubs which may take place in school facilities. DfE leads on sport in schools, but when the pandemic hit, had little provision for a rapid move to online-only physical education and sport. DCMS helped to coordinate this access with the grassroots sport sector, passing on useful resources and support from sport organisations and providing advice to DfE where needed. Some of these resources were included in DfE's online physical education delivery.
- 5.12. Annual funding of £11 million is provided to the School Games Organisers network by DCMS (£4 million) and DHSC (£7 million)³⁸. This funding enables the network to work in schools three days per week, delivering and engaging in intra- and inter-school events, supporting children's progression through their school careers, running events to create opportunities to tackle inequalities and developing children's physical literacy.
- 5.13. During the first national lockdown in spring 2020, the School Games Organisers pivoted the provision of their activities online providing significant additional support for schools. The Youth Sport Trust also produced online and other resources for schools³⁹. DCMS did not determine the most appropriate use of the funding, this was led by the School Games Organisers themselves.
- 5.14. DCMS and DfE engaged closely during the implementation of the Spring 2021 Roadmap to enable school sport to resume as part of Step 1. Prior to this decision being made, a ministerial roundtable was held with DfE, 10 national governing bodies and sector experts such as Sport England and UK Active in March 2021 [SL-8/57

³⁶Sport England is a DCMS public body which aims to transform lives and communities through sport and physical activity

³⁷Non-elite sport including school sport is classed as grassroots sport

³⁸Also funded by Sport England and delivered by the Youth Sport Trust, the School Games is a framework delivered locally by a national network of 450 School Games Organisers who aspire to make a positive and meaningful difference to the lives of children and young people through sport and physical activity

³⁹The Youth Sport Trust is a UK children's charity working to improve the education and development of children through play and sport

INQ000623049]. At this roundtable, the impact of Covid-19 on children's sport as shown by Sport England's Active Lives Survey was discussed.

Monitoring and assessment of the impact and recommendations to mitigate this

- 5.15. DCMS's work in monitoring Covid-19 impacts relied on secondary data sources, as well as insights and engagement from partners. We did not commission new primary data collection.
- 5.16. Where data sources were available, as well as through surveys and stakeholder engagement (Sport England, DfE), the department, specifically the sport team, did attempt to monitor the impact on children and young people caused by reduced access to facilities.
- 5.17. The annual 'Active Lives' survey, undertaken by Sport England, was used to track national physical activity levels pre-pandemic (and was continued during and post pandemic). The government sport strategy, *Sporting Future*, published in 2015 specifically referred to Active Lives as the source of data for key metrics and metrics and performance against the strategy's key performance indicators were published on an annual basis using 'Active Lives; results [SL-8/58 INQ000623040].
- 5.18. During the pandemic, DCMS supplemented the survey data by also making use of the children's survey undertaken by Childwise which gave useful insight on children and young people's activity levels on a more regular basis⁴⁰. It covered both school and out of school sport so was also used by DfE. DCMS specifically used the data in conversations with CO and others around children and young people's policy and the impact of Covid-19 restrictions upon these groups [SL-8/59 INQ000623078].

Sport guidance

- 5.19. DCMS developed and contributed to large volumes of guidance across all of its sectors during the pandemic. The guidance was categorised based on authorship and clearance processes.
- 5.20. Guidance for grassroots sport was set at Category 1 guidance, meaning it was authored by DCMS, cleared by DCMS policy and legal teams and then cleared by CO, Downing Street, DHSC and PHE - these departments (not DCMS) made the final decisions on guidance content. The guidance was published on Gov.uk.

⁴⁰Childwise is a full service research agency that specialises in speaking with children and young people to uncover valuable insights and trends

- 5.21. DfE was responsible for all school related guidance, including guidance on managing physical education and physical activity in schools, but DCMS and Sport England provided advice and support where relevant.
- 5.22. DCMS also worked closely with the National Youth Agency, which published sector specific guidance (discussed above at paragraph 5.31. This guidance focused on access to youth facilities, some of which would have been used for grassroots sport, when in the realm of educational and social development rather than competitive or professional sport.

Sport Survival Package

- 5.23. The Sport Survival Package ran from 1 December 2020 to 31 March 2022. It provided a package of loans and grants to sport organisations, with the aim of helping professional and community sport clubs survive the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns, ensuring the continuation of sport competitions and events.
- 5.24. This was as a direct result of sport clubs and national governing bodies proactively raising their precarious financial positions with DCMS, leading to a data collection exercise, undertaken by Deloitte on behalf of DCMS⁴¹. Evidence was collected in two phases:
- a. an initial needs assessment of the sector examined the potential impact of the Covid-19 spectator restrictions on the sector's ability to survive without matchday revenues
 - b. a second more forensic phase, where sensitive financial information such as balance sheets and statements were considered
- 5.25. Following the initial needs assessment, applications were invited against the estimated budget. The fund was managed and delivered by Sport England, with all funding decisions taken by an independent board on behalf of DCMS's Secretary of State
- 5.26. The funding package had three main objectives:
- a. to ensure as many sports or sport clubs survive the period of restrictions preventing spectators from attending professional matches
 - b. to minimise the long-term damage to participation and investment in grassroots and women's sport

⁴¹Professional services network providing audit and assurance, consulting, tax and related services

c. to minimise the cost of the intervention to the Exchequer

5.27. The programme delivered one-off emergency funding payments to clubs and organisations across many sports, with numerous clubs and organisations facing severe financial issues and the risk of failure.

The Sport Survival Package in relation to children and young people

5.28. There were no specific objectives related to children and young people as part of the Sport Survival Package, although there were indirect benefits of the intervention which supported children and young people, mainly the preservation of professional sport for future generations.

5.29. The largest indirect benefit to children and young people was protecting the elite sport system including governing bodies and professional leagues from collapse, thereby, enabling future generations to develop and participate in professional sport for years to come.

5.30. A specific example of one of these indirect benefits was the decision to provide the Rugby Football Union (RFU) with grant funding⁴². While its role is primarily as the national governing body, it also plays a significant role in the development of the grassroots game. Providing a grant to the RFU helped maintain the objective of "supporting rugby from grassroots to performance level", therefore, allowing children and young people to benefit from RFU funding at the grassroots level.

5.31. An evaluation of the Sport Survival Package was undertaken by DCMS and published in November 2023 [SL-8/60 INQ000647730]. It considered the impact, process and value for money of the Sport Survival Package. It found that investments in grassroots sport had been preserved and have generally returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Recreation

5.32. As the Inquiry has noted, DCMS experienced a widening of its conventional policy domain after restrictions were introduced in March 2020 and the department's responsibilities expanded to accommodate some 'sub-sector' businesses that did not have a relationship with a particular government department prior to Covid-19. These sub-sectors were subsumed into various DCMS teams' policy areas. The Inquiry has asked about places that catered for the play and leisure of children and young people.

⁴²The Rugby Football Union is the national governing body for rugby union in England

Sectors such as soft-play centres, go-karting tracks and trampoline parks became the responsibility of DCMS's visitor economy team during the pandemic.

- 5.33. DCMS was not involved in decision-making specifically in relation to these types of venues and activities; instead, they were included in the visitor economy team's general pandemic work. As previously stated, DCMS did not have a direct role in key decision-making relating to the imposition or easing of NPIs, although, we did contribute to the development of policy (at both a ministerial and official level including input from DCMS lawyers) on a range of NPIs.

Recreation guidance

- 5.34. A key early aim of the work was to generate, publish and manage up-to-date guidance to support reopenings and the continued operation of relevant sectors.
- 5.35. The production of guidance during this period was led by the DCMS Covid-19 hub, working with the Cultural Renewal Taskforce and other policy officials in order to ensure all relevant expertise was available when guidance was developed [SL-8/61 INQ000182641].
- 5.36. DCMS guidance was categorised based on authorship and clearance processes, as follows:
- a) Category 1 guidance was authored by DCMS and Category 2 guidance by DCMS in collaboration with its public bodies. Both were published on GOV.UK. Category 1 and 2 guidance was cleared by DCMS policy and legal teams, then cleared by other government departments. This clearance method was referred to as 'triple lock' and saw drafts (when approved by CO) cleared by Downing Street, DHSC and PHE. Guidance could not be published without the 'triple lock', and CO, Downing Street, DHSC and PHE (not DCMS) made the final decisions on the content. Guidance was shaped by a standardised 'working safely' template, and was designed to be included within an initial set of publications developed by BEIS. It included guidance for the visitor economy, hotels and other guest accommodation, heritage locations and the performing arts. DCMS also developed other stand-alone pieces of guidance which sat outside this workplace-based framework, principally in relation to elite sport, grassroots sport and volunteering.
 - b) Category 3 guidance was drafted by key sector stakeholders and hosted on external websites. Category 3 guidance was cleared by PHE and the Health

and Safety Executive (HSE) in the first instance, with updates checked by DCMS legal advisers. The development of this guidance was supported by DCMS officials, with consultants from Ernst & Young working on a short-term project basis for DCMS in May and June 2020. Its purpose was to apply overarching Covid-19 guidance to specific workplace and consumer-facing settings (for example, those with an in-person audience). Guidance within this category included events, cinemas, theatres, TV production, film and high-end TV production, music production and public libraries.

- c) Separately, DCMS sport team officials assisted with the high level review of a range of sport-specific sector guidance produced by the sector (for example British Gymnastics and England Rugby), which was sometimes referred to as Category 4 guidance. The media and creative industries team also engaged with a range of creative sub-sectors (for example, the UK Cinema Association and Music Producers Guild) on guidance of a similar nature.

5.37. Other guidance was drafted by key sector stakeholders with support from DCMS and hosted on external websites. Its purpose was to apply overarching Covid-19 guidance to specific workplace and consumer-facing settings and guidance within this category covered public libraries.

5.38. We also worked with CO and other departments (including BEIS and DHSC) to ensure guidance produced by those departments was appropriate for DCMS sectors. For example, DCMS worked with DfE to ensure that guidance to schools on physical education and sport was consistent with DCMS grassroots sport guidance.

5.39. DCMS sector-related guidance was not specifically aimed at children and young people, but included references to this cohort where relevant. For instance, various sector specific guidance would set out the general restrictions on social contact, but then provide clarification that this did not apply to supervised activities for children.

Libraries

5.40. DCMS oversees library superintendence, promotion of sector improvement and sponsorship of ACE (national development agency for libraries), the British Library (which also supports library services through its Living Knowledge Network⁴³) and the

⁴³A partnership between public and national libraries in the UK, created by the British Library

National Archives. Nearly all funding for local libraries comes from local authorities - using local government finance settlement funding from MHCLG⁴⁴.

Decisions affecting children and young people's access to libraries

- 5.41. The operation of library services is devolved to local authorities. No decisions were made which linked directly to children and young people's access, as libraries are universal services. However the work DCMS undertook with DfE to promote the continued availability of some no- or low- contact library services over the pandemic period supported their use by these groups for both homeschooling purposes and general health and well-being.

Engagement with the sector

- 5.42. The Libraries Working Group was established in May 2020, one of eight DCMS working groups set up to support the work of the Cultural Renewal Taskforce. Caroline Dinenage, the then Minister of State for Digital and Culture (with responsibility for libraries) chaired five working group meetings between May 2020 and September 2021.
- 5.43. Building on relationships developed through the earlier Libraries Taskforce, which assisted a rapid shift to the close collaboration and joint working needed to respond to the pandemic, DCMS held regular - initially daily, and over time moving to weekly - calls with library sector stakeholders. This engagement was to provide advice, field questions and gather intelligence from the sector. Stakeholders included in these calls were ACE, Libraries Connected, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), the Local Government Association, the Association of Senior Children and Educational Librarians, a representative of libraries trusts and the chair of the community managed libraries national peer network. In addition to this there was also attendance by a rotating cast of heads of services, library sector unions and a library worker representative. As a member of the group, the Association of Senior Children and Education Librarians represented the specialists in this field and therefore, DCMS utilised this organisation's intelligence, alongside that of Libraries Connected, which represents the heads of all library services across England.
- 5.44. Advice to the sector was provided via the regular calls and relayed out to library services primarily via Libraries Connected. Libraries Connected also held regular webinars for library staff (some themed and others for more general Covid-19

⁴⁴The local government finance settlement is the annual determination of funding to local government

guidance) many of which were attended by the DCMS Head of Libraries Strategy and Delivery.

- 5.45. DCMS's libraries team acted as a focal point for library services seeking advice via Libraries Connected, and the department handled queries that required advice from other departments, such as PHE and CO. It also handled queries coming in from the British Library and the National Archives, and worked on their behalf to establish protocols around the operation of reading rooms in line with arrangements achieved for public libraries.

Mitigation measures

- 5.46. DCMS engaged with CO to secure exemptions to national lockdown regulations, for example to ensure that public libraries could continue to host some young people's activities that had a significant health or wellbeing benefit (such as meetings of youth groups for more vulnerable young people, some run by library services and others where libraries hosted sessions run by others). DCMS negotiated with CO to ensure libraries, their staff and volunteers were included as key workers [SL-8/05 INQ000182289]. From 11 January 2021, staff and volunteers operating in libraries and providing essential services such as computer access, 'order and collect' services, home and school library services and visa checking were able to continue undertaking those roles.
- 5.47. Ultimately, the role for DCMS was one of an advocate; and ensuring that there was access to public PCs and wifi to enable access to essential services, many of which had implications for family wellbeing.
- 5.48. Many children's activities take place in libraries (ranging from early years, primary and secondary school age students, and youth facilities). For example, there was an impact on Rhymetime services for young families. Many libraries moved rapidly to offer resources online and stream events such as Rhymetime and Storytime or book groups, assisted by concessions made by publishers to allow their books to be featured in these sessions without having to pay extra for rights to do so. The sector set up a Libraries TV online channel to make these available more widely (in addition to people accessing them through their own council library website) with some achieving thousands of views. These included multilingual events. The Summer Reading Challenge which focuses primarily on primary age children took place, albeit pivoted to a largely online delivery form, although there was still some availability of physical

books via 'click and collect' or grab bag facilities. For all of these activities, DCMS supported and amplified their availability via social media.

- 5.49. As detailed above, as part of the £7.5 million loneliness package DCMS supported The Reading Agency with £3.5 million to expand two of its impactful programmes. Reading Friends is a programme which tackles loneliness through reading. In addition, Reading Well Books on Prescription delivered three clinically-curated mental health collections (targeted to adults, young people and children) to all public libraries (over 300,000 books were sent out to over 2,800 branches) in England, enabling those experiencing the effects of poor mental health to access self-directed support.
- 5.50. DCMS's libraries team held daily update calls with the main library organisations and led on the operations of the library services working group which supported the central DCMS Cultural Renewal Taskforce, which drew together sector organisation representatives but also other heads of service, and library worker and union representatives⁴⁵.
- 5.51. DCMS worked with Libraries Connected (the organisation representing library services across England) on a detailed guidance toolkit which included helping to establish what the toolkit should cover, working through the drafts, suggesting amendments to ensure the toolkit was in alignment with changing government regulations, and also passing on advice from CO and PHE enabling the guidance to be kept fully up to date and authoritative. The guidance document was published on the Libraries Connected website, and went through 14 iterations during the pandemic.
- 5.52. The guidance was founded on material produced by various working groups made up of library heads of service and specialist library staff to ensure its practicality in application. It covered not only physical operations but also outreach such as home and school library services. It was used by local authority run or commissioned library services and also the network of community managed libraries across the country, as well as acting as a point of reference for independent libraries, archives and other specialist libraries⁴⁶. This guidance was supplemented by regular webinars run by Libraries Connected (and attended by the DCMS head of libraries strategy and delivery

⁴⁵A Head of Library Service (put forward by Libraries Connected on a rotating basis); Arts Council England; Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals; CIVIC; Community Managed Libraries Peer Network; Cultural and Leisure Officers Association / Community Leisure UK (representing trusts); Good Things Foundation; Libraries Connected; Libraries Unlimited; Local Government Association; Suffolk Libraries; UNISON; UNITE

⁴⁶A commissioned library service is funded and run by a local government, but managed by a commissioner. The commissioner is responsible for ensuring the service meets the needs of the local community.

to listen to issues and respond to questions on government regulations), a steady stream of discussion via Libraries Connected and the DCMS libraries team, seeking advice from other government departments (such as CO and PHE) for the sector on specific issues.

- 5.53. DCMS liaised with DfE colleagues to ensure they were aware of the public library resources available to families over the pandemic. In February 2021, libraries were included in the home schooling guidance published by DfE [SL-8/62 INQ000623100]. Also in January 2021, the Oak National Virtual Library Service urged people to sign up to their library (with one notice on the parent focused page and one on the children's page) – this included a link so people could find their local library service and sign up to use it.

Assessment of the impact of a loss or change in access to libraries on children

- 5.54. DCMS did not undertake any independent assessment of the impact of a loss or change in access to libraries on children. The department utilised intelligence provided by library services, which engaged closely with schools, early years providers and other children's services providers. This was done via daily contact with the representative body for library services, Libraries Connected, which gathered information from members (for example, on patterns in children's usage and e-lending over the pandemic period); and also from discussions with the Association of Senior Children and Education Librarians.

Parks and gardens

- 5.55. DCMS did not have a role in decisions that affected children and young people's access to parks and gardens.
- 5.56. As part of its responsibility for heritage policy, DCMS did have an interest where the closed heritage sector may have an open space such as a park or garden (for example, historic houses and sites owned by English Heritage or the National Trust) which were closed to the public during the first national lockdown, but where reopening those outdoor spaces would provide benefit to the public and the heritage sector. In May 2020, DCMS successfully led on engagement with Downing Street so that paid-for parks and gardens were allowed to reopen at the end of the month [SL-8/10 INQ000182310]. This was in order to increase the green amenity space available to the public, and was done in collaboration with Defra and MHCLG. However, this work was not specifically targeted at children and young people, although some of this cohort may have benefited from the access.

Part F: General assessment drawing the specified period and lessons learned

- 6.1. As detailed above, the remit of DCMS was to support and benefit its sectors as a whole, and policy decisions were largely taken to support a continuation of these sectors and services. In many instances, this did not include specific work or decisions being taken for particular demographics, including children and young people. However, as set out in this statement, the department did deliver some areas of work which included a focus on children, or which had a beneficial impact on sectors and their users including children and young people.
- 6.2. Similarly, the department delivered a number of funding packages over the pandemic with the aim of supporting and maintaining its sectors and stakeholders. Some such interventions benefitted children and young people, even if this was not the primary aim.

Lessons learned and post-pandemic activity

- 6.3. As detailed at paragraph 5.9, a full evaluation was undertaken for the £750 million VCSE Covid-19 Emergency Funding Package [SL-8/29 INQ000623064]. This identified a series of lessons which will help inform how emergency funding packages can be designed and delivered in future. These lessons include:
 - a. drawing on the networks and expertise of established and new funders, which was identified as a success of the funding package;
 - b. a desire from funding leads for the government to place more trust in the sector and those organisations working within it, including in existing grant systems and processes; and that
 - c. flexibility is a key strength, with many funding partners highlighting the flexibility of the packages to use funding to meet needs where they arose.
- 6.4. Beyond this evaluation, no formal review was undertaken for decisions relating to youth programmes or children and young people more generally. However, the evidence base which informed government online safety policy was developed during the pandemic, and strengthened the view that there was a case for a regulatory framework for online safety. This was reflected in the impact assessments associated with online safety legislation. Building on this work, there remain areas where further evidence could inform government online safety policy, and recently the government launched a feasibility study to better understand the impacts of social media and smartphones on children.

- 6.5. The 2022 impact assessment was conducted to inform the passage of the Online Safety Bill, and included DSIT and HO estimates of the costs of a subset of illegal online harms experienced by children during the pandemic [SL-8/63 INQ000610028]. These estimates were updated in the 2024 Online Safety Act: Enactment impact assessment [SL-8/64 INQ000610030]. As a way to continually develop our understanding of this area, we continue to monitor available data on children's experiences of online harms, mainly via regular Ofcom publications such as the Online Experiences Tracker⁴⁷.
- 6.6. In addition, ahead of Ofcom implementing and enforcing the laws set out in the Online Safety Act, and as a response to our awareness of the limited nature of the evidence on the impact on children of social media and smartphones, on 20 November 2024 DSIT announced a feasibility study on methods and data to assess this [SL-8/65 INQ000610040]. The study began on 2 December 2024 and will run for six months, until May 2025. The central question of the study is: 'which methods will be most effective in determining the causal effects of social media and smartphones on children's (3-21 years) developmental outcomes in the next two to three years?' The study will use evidence appraisal techniques, and a workshop with academic experts, government stakeholders and youth advisers to assess the evidence and generate discussion on the research question.
- 6.7. Alongside the study, DSIT published a Statement of Strategic Priorities setting out the Technology Secretary's priorities for Ofcom, including embedding safety by design to deliver safe online experiences for all users and especially children.
- 6.8. A wide range of lessons learned were utilised across the individual youth programmes that responded to the pandemic, or adapted delivery during the pandemic. This included reflecting on the funding criteria of the Youth Covid-19 Support Fund and its support for a broad range of uniformed youth and VCSE organisations delivering youth services, leading to the development of similar longer-term programmes such as the Million Hours Fund⁴⁸. In addition, the National Citizen Service pivot to online provision was seen as successful and led the service to develop a new delivery model which was 75 per cent cheaper than the pre-pandemic provision.

⁴⁷The Online Experiences Tracker is a quantitative tracking survey that examines people's attitudes to, and experiences of using online services www.ofcom.org.uk/media-use-and-attitudes/online-habits/internet-users-experience-of-harm-online

⁴⁸National Lottery Fund for organisations to give extra support to young people in areas where they may be at risk of anti-social behaviour

- 6.9. DCMS announced plans for a new National Youth Strategy on 12 November 2024, with the pandemic and its effect upon young people being one of the drivers [SL-8/66 INQ000623072].
- 6.10. Additionally, £100 million from the next tranche of dormant assets funding will be used to deliver youth outcomes between 2024 and 2028, supporting the provision of services, facilities and opportunities for young people across the country.

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: _____

Dated: 31/07/2025