

Witness Name: Judith Turbyne

Statement No.:

Exhibits:

Dated:

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF Judith Turbyne

I, Judith Turbyne, will say as follows: -

Introduction

1. Children in Scotland is a national membership organisation. Our members are organisations working with and for babies, children and young people across Scotland.
2. By bringing together a network of people and organisations working with and for children, alongside children and young people themselves, we offer a broad, balanced and independent voice. We create solutions, provide support and develop positive changes across areas affecting babies, children and young people in Scotland.
3. We do this by listening, gathering evidence, and applying and sharing our learning, while always working to uphold children's rights. Our range of knowledge and expertise means we can provide trusted support on a wide range of issues impacting the children and young people we work with and for.
4. We welcome this opportunity to contribute to the COVID-19 Inquiry, module 07. We are aware that much of the evidence we have on the impact on the pandemic is not specific to Test and Protect. In the evidence, therefore, we have brought out the key themes from our learning that illuminate some of the impacts of the implementation of Test and Protect in Scotland. This should be read on the understanding that for many children, Test and Protect helped ensure that life could start to return to normal.

Our work during the pandemic period 2020-2022

5. Our priorities during the pandemic period were as follows:
 - Continuing to maintain the viability and sustainability of the organisation with a particular emphasis on supporting the safety and wellbeing of our staff and the children and young people we worked with.
 - Moving our services, projects, policy activities and learning and events programme to digital delivery and then exploring hybrid approaches as restrictions eased.
 - Gathering evidence from our members and children and young people about the experiences of the pandemic and using this evidence to inform national decision makers, including the Scottish Government and COSLA (The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities).

It is on this last priority that the evidence will be based.

Key Themes

6. The key themes that came out through the length of the pandemic experience were education; relationships with friends and families; and hobbies and pastimes.
7. Overall, our key reflection is that the pandemic had a significant impact on the access of children and young people to services and support mechanisms and ultimately affected the realisation of children's rights. As noted below, it caused significant challenges for children in accessing their right to education, especially for those children and young people with additional support needs. This includes the impact of Test and Protect.
8. The reflections of children and young people about their experience during each phase of the pandemic, including Test and Protect, was that there was a lack of participation and engagement of children and young people in decision-making around policies impacting on them, particularly education.
9. As is frequently the case, the impacts were different for different children and young people across Scotland in each phase of the pandemic. Specifically, those children and young people experiencing poverty, children with disabilities and additional support needs, care-experience children and those from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Education

10. Throughout the pandemic, the disruption in learning was very relevant for children and young people. What was significant was that the impacts were not uniform.
11. We have a lot of evidence about children with additional support needs. This group was highly impacted by lockdown for many reasons. For those using the hubs, there was a level of inconsistency and confusion about eligibility. For those at home, there was a lack of individualised home learning appropriate to children's needs. While this was understandable, particularly at the start, it nevertheless meant that for some children and young people, the relationship between them and the school became fractured. The lack of routine on its own was a significant challenging factor for many children and young people.
12. On the return to school, children with additional support needs were proportionally further behind in their learning. This often had a correlation with higher levels of anxiety.
13. Test and Protect was a useful tool for preventing the spread of infection. Nevertheless, it tended to further feed into the fracturing of the relationship of children/young people with school and learning. There appeared to be different approaches across the school estate, with some children having long periods out of school due to their perceived proximity to those who were infected. For some children who were already distanced from the learning experience, this further fractured their relationship and made it difficult for them to engage in the learning process later.
14. There was a hope that the remote learning that developed through lockdown would help provide continuity in learning and help retain the child/young person connection with schools. However, in practice it was difficult for schools to maintain both face-to-face and online learning, particularly when their resources were also impacted by the impact of Test and Protect with teachers often having to spend significant periods away from school.
15. Clearly, there was also a high level of impact in terms of the resources within the schools. This made it more difficult for teachers and support workers to respond to all children, with an increased impact on those with additional support needs.

16. All this has made it difficult for some children and young people to re-engage with school. Current levels of resourcing for supporting children with additional support needs are less than optimal, and therefore it has been difficult for schools to invest in supporting children and young people to re-integrate into their learning journey.

Friends, families and relationships

17. One of the overall impacts on children and young people during the whole pandemic was the impact on their relationships with friends and families.
18. Social isolation was one of the most difficult aspects of the pandemic for some children and young people. Test and Protect was one of the tools that allowed children and young people to start to re-engaging face-to-face and to loosen that isolation. However, the continuing impact of Test and Protect, with many children and young people spending significant periods of time out of school, meant that many children and young people remained relatively isolated.

Hobbies, activities and volunteering

19. This was something that came out in our work with Children and Young people, particularly around the Strategic Recovery Framework. While lockdown had the biggest impact on this area, the Test and Protect regime continued to impact on the access that children and young people had to these activities.
20. One of the challenges was clarity about implementing the policies, with different clubs and groups interpreting things in different ways. This meant that for some children, the ability to access activities was limited for a longer time than might have been necessary. Where activity was offered, it was often only being offered to those who, for instance, were playing competitively, rather than being offered more widely, as this was easier to manage and control. This is not so much about Test and Protect itself, but the way it was understood by those, often volunteers, running these different activities for children and young people.

Conclusion

21. Our analysis of the impact of the pandemic has tended to be across the whole raft of experiences that children and young people have

faced, therefore it is difficult to bring out only the impacts of Test and Protect.

22. The positive outcome of Test and Protect was to allow children and young people to begin to come together again. However, because of the unequal impacts of the pandemic, it did have ramifications for particular groups of children and young people which it would be important to learn from in terms of preparing for any future pandemic or similar.

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 in its truth.

Personal Data

Signed:

Judith Turbyne, CEO, Children in Scotland

Date: 22 April 2025