

## Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry Witness Statement

Statement of Carol-Ann Crossan Guruge – Witness Number *HSC0254*.

Statement taken at 1400 hours on Monday 5 February 2024.

Witness interviewed by [Irrelevant] Statement noted by [Irrelevant]  
[Irrelevant] Witness interviewed via Microsoft Teams.

There were no legal representatives present.

### **Introduction**

1. My name is Carol-Ann Crossan Guruge, my date of birth is 8 February 1991 and my address is c/o [Personal Data]  
[Personal Data]
2. I am willing to provide a statement, have information contained within reports and am agreeable to this statement being published. I agree to the recording of the statement.
3. I am prepared to provide evidence at the Inquiry, and I would be willing to speak to this statement. I am aware that I can withdraw my consent at any time.
4. I am the Children's Service Manager at Barnardo's Scotland (Highlands & Islands region).

### **Professional Background**

5. I have been working in social care for over 10 years. I began working in residential care (both private companies and private children's homes) while I was studying for my BA in Child and Youth Studies degree at the University of the Highlands and Islands. My other professional qualifications include an SVQ3, SVQ4 as well as an award in Leadership and Management.
6. I moved to Barnardo's Scotland in 2013 and progressed from Project Worker to Senior Practitioner, to Team Manager and then to my current role of Children's Service Manager. At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was a Team Manager (from May 2018 to July 2021) and by the end of the pandemic I had moved into my current role. From summer 2021 I had picked up additional responsibilities and my current post was later confirmed.

## ***Overview of Roles and Responsibilities at Barnardo's Scotland during the Pandemic***

7. As Children's Service Manager I currently have responsibility for services in Barnardo's Highland Children Services. This comprises of a number of different services, one of them being in a residential children's home. In total I have responsibility for 5 services:
  - the residential home known as 'Northern Lights';
  - through care and aftercare at 'Springboard' Service;
  - RISE Highland service, which supports children and young people to recover from sexual abuse and exploitation;
  - a new service called 'The Anchor Service' which works with children and young people that are at risk or involved in exploitation which is a detached youth work service;
  - a partnership service run with Aberlour, Right There and The Highland Council supporting unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.
  
8. Prior to my current role I was the Registered Manager for the residential service and I was in this role at the beginning of the pandemic. The service is registered with the Care Inspectorate. I reported to a senior manager but I had responsibility for managing the team and the day-to-day elements of running the residential home.
  
9. Typical duties of running the residential home at this time included the management of staff, providing supervision support, meeting training needs, facilitating staff development and making sure the staff have quality support. I also worked with CAMHS, providing consultation support for the team so they could deliver safe practice and supporting the running of the house in terms of admin capacity and compliance.
  
10. There are also significant health and safety duties and requirements to meet. My responsibility was to run a large house, but at the same time I was managing a team, reporting issues; whether it be to the Care Inspectorate or internally safeguarding any child protection, liaising with social work, engaging with professionals and generally making sure that the team are coordinating the plan within the house as well as possible.
  
11. In terms of finances, the overall budget at the time did not sit well with me but I had the responsibility for managing the in-house budget and petty cash flow.

## **Guidance and Impacts**

12. There were a lot of the unknowns when the first lockdown hit in 2020. I think the information that was coming out from all sources was quite unclear.
13. We tried our best to manage young people's expectations and meet their needs. We attempted to have a solution focused approach which kept everyone safe and balanced their needs but it was difficult.
14. We were receiving our information internally from Barnardo's Scotland and Public Health Scotland. We were just keeping up-to-date with what information was coming to us and we also connected locally. Internally we had a mountain of our own assessments we had to carry out.
15. I do not believe the guidance provided by the Scottish Government was specific enough. I believe it focused more on care homes for adults rather than care homes for children. There was not enough guidance on care homes for children.
16. Some of the guidance was quite unrealistic. Working with teenagers who have had different life experiences is completely different to working with adults or adults with disabilities. None of the children in our care had any physical disabilities but the rules at the time appeared to be the same. The guidance was geared towards older adults who were maybe in their own rooms a lot and not very mobile, so it was not suitable for all demographics.
17. It was really difficult to manage the needs and expectations of the young people as well as follow guidance from the Scottish Government and our organisation. I think that was probably part of the reason we quickly took a decision to group together and plan how we were going to manage all of this. At the time everything was changing really quickly but we were clear that our priority had to be the young people in our care.
18. It was very early on in the pandemic that we had one young person in particular who was really struggling. They didn't have any family and I remember very clearly him saying to me 'I don't understand why I have to socially distance when you come into work all the time.'
19. Thereafter we comprised a team who volunteered to go into lockdown with the young people. We spoke to our families; we spoke as a team and then we approached the senior management at Barnardo's to put this proposal to them and it was discussed at a higher level and approved and we had a lot of support internally from Barnardo's.
20. Those who volunteered did a week each and then had a week off. We were looking after five young people at the time. Two of our young people were older and they weren't on supervision orders, they were on almost on continued care at that time so we worked closely with a supported

lodgings provider and they had some respite with them and our team supporting.

21. We all slept over in the house so we just made amendments to the accommodation so that we all had a room to sleep in. We had the luxury to do that because of the size of the house.
22. We did sleep in the offices but it was fine as we had beds and enough bathrooms. We understood that this arrangement would only work if everyone wanted to do it and felt it was to help rather than feeling they were pressured into it.
23. Barnardo's supported us and made sure that we had everything we needed to implement our plan safely. We recognised it was important to make sure that staff had time out while on shift. We made sure staff could go out for walks on their own so they had space. We were very lucky with where the house is located as it is in a semi-rural area with huge outdoor spaces.
24. In terms of supplies, we got supermarket shops delivered. We had a couple of the workers who had opted out of the lockdown for personal reasons. They did bulk shopping and dropped it off at the gate.
25. We did not have cooks and cleaners, so we would do all of that ourselves. This worked out quite well and when I look back I recognise that we might have been a bit mad to suggest the lockdown plan and that it was a big ask from staff but only those who volunteered and were happy to do it were part of the lockdown team.
26. There was no pressure on people to do it. It was a better option for me in terms of my family circumstances. I had a grandparent who was in her 80s living with me at the time and I had a young daughter at home as well. My husband had been furloughed as he worked in construction so he could be at home. It was hard to leave my family for a week at a time but I enjoyed then having a whole week with them. I think most staff welcomed the opportunity to work this way and it worked really well for the young people.
27. This week about rota system went on for around four months. Then as things started to relax, we reduced the days as well slightly and there was a period of time where we ran the same system but we cut the days down.
28. When the second lockdown was announced, staff tended to do two days on - two full days sleeping over - and then a third day where they were working and then they would go home. This meant that they had three days on and the staff liked the pattern and it worked really well for the young people. We knew we could not go to a seven-day period again and we had a consultation with the staff and the young people about it. This pattern was the decision of the group. This pattern has remained in place since covid restrictions ended.



29. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, staff were generally on a 12-hour shift pattern with days off in between. Now they have more days together. This works better because staff have more time off when they're finished and we just have to put safeguards in to account for that. Sometimes depending on the nature of the service and what's going on, we have to increase staffing levels and we have to pull other people in but in general the pattern now works well.
30. In terms of guidance at the time we were constantly keeping an eye on the media and on the Scottish Government website. We also referred to our health and safety team who were also doing their bit to inform us of what was going on.
31. Workloads during this period certainly increased and I can totally understand why. Every time something came out from the Scottish Government, Barnardo's had to respond to it and then we had to respond to that direction locally. We were constantly updating risk assessments and COVID plans while trying to manage young people and just trying to keep everyone safe and happy.

### ***Northern Lights Residential Home***

32. Barnardo's Northern Lights is a residential children's home on the outskirts of Inverness providing a safe, warm and supportive environment for up to five young people who have had adverse childhood experiences. The service seeks to improve the lives of these young people through the use of a rights-based trauma informed approach. The staff team seek to enrich the lives of young people placed with us through support and activities aimed at promoting recovery, raising self-esteem and enabling young people to have childhood experiences in line with their age and stage of development. The service works in partnership with The Highland Council to also ensure that educational needs are met.
33. At the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the residential house had 10 full-time staff. We had five young people accommodated, which is the capacity. We do run mostly at capacity. Generally we have young people aged 15 upwards but we can take younger. At the time of the pandemic our age range was from 15 to 18.
34. The young people are referred through the Highland Council and we are commissioned fully for five beds.

35. Most of the young people accommodated by us during the pandemic were on supervision orders at the time. During this period we had a number of young people who came off their supervision order but stayed with us on a voluntary basis and then past the age of 18 they opted for continued care.
36. The service itself was originally set up to bring children who were out of the local authority back to the Highlands. We have accommodated a number of young people who haven't had foster care arrangements secured for them or they have been removed from their families due to parental substance misuse, domestic violence, or a number of reasons.
37. It's varied demographic but generally we have a matching process. We try and match young people to the service however, most come to us via the Children's Hearing System.
38. In terms of aftercare services at Northern Lights. Barnardos have another service in Highland and we take on the statutory responsibility for delivering on aftercare in terms of the pathway coordination for each young person. What changed during COVID was the outreach elements. This service works closely with Northern Lights.
39. Young people who were moving into tenancies for example needed somebody by their side to go and help them pick furniture and to be measuring it up, along with other practical tasks. This sort of went out the window during COVID and so our aftercare work picked up a lot of that and they required to meet socially distanced.

### ***Northern Lights Case study***

40. We had one young person who turned 18 during lockdown. She was very into Instagram and liked her fancy 'Instagram-worthy' posts. We would normally have a celebration for the young people's birthdays. We ordered lots of decorations online from Amazon and had an 18<sup>th</sup> birthday party in the home for her. It was really nice.
41. It took us a whole day to decorate. We had lights and balloons on the ceiling, we had a chocolate fountain, we had a karaoke and everything was pink and gold for a real party feel for the house – it was a real surprise to her and far too big a milestone to not be celebrated.
42. I think the normality of the situation is really important to get that across. It's supposed to be a home, it's a home for these young people. It's not just a facility that they're put in, it's their lives.
43. I think this demonstrates that we were there for the young people. It was just living like a family and again, they really expressed their appreciation of this.

### ***Children's Hearings System***

44. Interaction with the Children's Hearing System during COVID was not great I would say. I think that although I can understand the reasons - it was really difficult for young people to join and participate in hearings online. Even after lockdown online hearings continued. I believe that should have been a young person's choice but they weren't given one. I think we only had about two hearings during the period and I don't think they were particularly great because they were online.
45. I think hearings are far better face-to-face. Young people don't particularly like to have meetings in their home and in their safe space. I don't think that was very productive for them given that they couldn't go anywhere else. That wasn't particularly good experience for some of our young people.

### ***Collaboration with other third-party organisations***

46. Our young people had access to Who Cares? Scotland. I think their approach was actually pretty good. They made a point to come to the house and drop stuff off at the door and things like that - care packages, cakes etc. They did a lot of online baking at the time and you could follow it live online. They were also videoing the sessions and sending out the recipes for the young people. They tried to keep their interaction and participation with the young people going which was really positive.
47. Some of our young people were also supported by Action for children. At the time we had a young person who was involved in an intensive support service and intensive support wasn't really happening because it was needs to be face-to-face. An intensive support service means a worker would take the young person out and spends some time with them a couple of times a week. This wasn't happening at anywhere near the same frequency and there were attempts to do face-to-face meetings in the gardens. I don't think this works because it's the young person's home, there's other young people around. A professional coming to their home is visible to everywhere else there and there is an obvious privacy issue with this.
48. The Care Inspectorate would usually inspect our facility but we didn't have any inspections during COVID although we did had regular communication at the time. We had a regular catch up and we submitted local data to them as well. We received our PCRs and lots of lateral flows from the Inspectorate.

### ***Impact on young people***

49. Initially the young people just didn't understand what was going on. They didn't know or understand how serious the situation with Covid was. There was a young person staying with us who had a lot of anxiety about Covid because of their mum's health condition. They were really concerned about catching Covid.
50. I think our approach was really positive for the young people and they expressed that. When we as a staff group moved into the house we responded as a family – doing things like baking, having DVD nights. We had fitbit challenges and we generally tried to keep everyone busy all the time to make things as normal as possible.
51. When we first started working this way, a young person who was particularly struggling with it all relaxed immediately. I also remember one of the young people saying to me 'this feels like we're in foster care rather than in residential care'.
52. The young people we looked after were absolutely amazing during the whole pandemic period. After lockdown and even after the young people had moved on, relationships have continued to be strong. I had one young person who was with us during this time, who doesn't have any family said that I was like his mum and that I treated him like a son. The nurture that we provided by moving into the house allowed us to really focus on the young people. We didn't really have a choice to be diverted to meetings or have to go out and do shopping. We didn't have the additional kind of pressures of life because we were just in it together.

### ***Education***

53. Education was pretty limited. A couple of our young people had been in college and did online learning but this didn't work for them. Home learning generally didn't work and their engagement was really poor. They would often just mute themselves and watch TV.
54. What we tried to do in terms of learning was to try and do activities within the house and focus more on general education. Things like playing Scrabble, reading books, watching history programmes, painting and crafts etc, but the engagement in actual academic stuff was really poor.

55. The young people helped with food preparation and things like that. They would even help with the online food orders that we did. They would bake with us, helped cook dinners – we were showing them how to cook food. That that was all really positive in terms of life education skills.

### **Contact**

56. We had mixed communications regarding contact and I remember it being really difficult at the time. Initially I remember some young people had received a generic letter stating that there would be no contact which was really hard. There was a discussion at the time about whether children living in residential accommodation could just go home and live there during lockdown. I am sure this was asked by social work. To me this was a crazy idea. It wouldn't have necessarily have effected my group of young people but it sat really uneasily with me that a blanket decision was even being considered. There are good reasons as to why young people are in residential care and often it is the safest place for them. I also feel that if young people can ever safely live at home with family then they should be rather than being in care.

57. I completely agree that we needed to try and support contact with families but I also recognised that we couldn't put additional pressure on them or the young person by forcing a move back to their parents. For some young people who maintain a lot of family contact it may well have worked for the lockdown but I suspect that this would have been for very much a minority of young people in care.

58. We were very lucky because of where our residential home is. I know that other residential homes are not located in similar settings. We have large grounds and we had created spaces in our garden where gazebos were set up. We managed to create safe spaces for socially distanced contact from the beginning.

59. Prior to COVID, arrangements for contact would depend on the individual plan for the child. For most of our young people there were few restrictions around contact. They could have overnights at their families if agreed by the social worker. Contact was very much assessed with the lead professional and the key worker and was very specific to the child/young person.

60. During COVID we just arranged contact ourselves. We used our diary to plan who was coming and when they were coming and give all staff notice. The parents kept telephone contact which was really positive and then arranged when they could come out and what time it would be. The staff would go out and if we had a couple of gazebos we would put one up with a table and a couple chairs and we just put masks and hand gel out.

61. We had a thermometer as well and we asked everyone to check their temperature before they engaged in contact and to keep socially distanced contact.
62. One of the families resided in a more remote area, some distance from the home and that was more difficult. The family didn't come and visit and that was really hard for the young person and a profound negative impact on them.

### ***PPE***

63. We had no difficulties obtaining PPE because Barnardo's purchased a lot of PPE on behalf of the organisation, so we were supplied with it internally.

### ***Mental Health***

64. We had young people with difficulties around suicide and suicidal thoughts and ideas at the time. We had a really good support package with CAMHS, the local CAMHS care experience team before Covid and this continues to be the case.
65. We get monthly consultations from that team to help staff acquire the right skills to manage the situations they face with our young people's mental health and the risk that had increased due to COVID. The specialists that we speak to are well connected to our house were always available to us. We could call and ask for a session the next day and they would talk us through what we needed to do. This support was delivered online via Teams or via a telephone call and was of a really high quality.
66. We had a young person who did struggle with their mental health and had on a number of occasions needed to go up to A&E. What was difficult for us as we couldn't go in with them and support them in the normal way due to COVID restrictions.

### ***RISE Highland Service***

67. Our RISE Highland service is slightly different to our wider service and it was new when Covid hit. It was initially funded for three years by the McDonald Trust. There are three strands to its work; the direct work with young people, consultancy and training as well as raising awareness. There was just one project adviser who was based in the police headquarters. During Covid the worker I think worked 80% from home and I don't think they engaged in much direct work with young people. The work at that point was focussed around consultancy, education and training.

68. The services are actually changing slightly as we've managed to secure further funding for that service and we're expanding it to increase the direct workers. So in April we'll change to that - the Project Advisor will remain the same but we'll have workers doing the direct work.

### ***Impacts on Staff***

69. I personally felt really supported by the organisation. I think Barnardo's response was incredibly positive. It was very supportive to the team I managed. Wellbeing sessions were introduced and there was constant communication and visibility from senior managers. We knew that the Director Martin Crewe was really aware of what was happening on a local level which was really encouraging and he always offered support. I am aware that my colleagues in other organisations didn't always find the same.
70. The staff that did the lockdown shift pattern with us were happy to do that partly because of the support they were provided by Barnardo's and managers. That isn't to say it wasn't difficult. My own daughter was almost three at the time and I found it very hard to leave her. I would contact my husband a lot but I couldn't really speak to my daughter on facetime because it would upset her and it would upset me. My husband sent me videos but it was really hard.
71. You can't manage a service like ours from home, it's impossible. I think the only thing that impacted me personally was leaving my family, but that was a decision I made that wasn't put upon me at all, like everyone else who went into lockdown with the young people.
72. It was recognised by Barnardo's that staff were taking on extra responsibilities and we all got an additional allowance.
73. There was also an obvious impact on staff who couldn't work due to their health conditions. Much of our work is impossible to do from home. We did try and find work for them but there are only so many risk assessments and plans that could be drafted. We didn't furlough anyone.
74. I was aware of different staff needs as a manager and we did try and make sure that the staff who were at home didn't feel isolated. Some staff who didn't want to do lockdown helped with making and delivering food parcels. We got funding to do so from Barnardos. The young people often went in at night to help with tidying up and things. Again it was lucky because we had this garage facility that staff could access safely and we could socially distance. This scheme really helped with teaching



the young people to have empathy for others and for what they were going through.

75. There were no issues with recruitment or staff turnover during this time. We've been very lucky in terms of our retention of staff and we actually helped the local authority with some of their staffing issues and challenges as well. This entailed helping with specific tasks and so workers that weren't doing the lockdown did a bit more of the outreach work, albeit socially distanced.
76. By the end of the pandemic most of us actually ended up getting COVID, although nothing significant, nothing serious.

### ***Funding***

77. There was a lot of support given to the third sector during COVID. There were welfare funds etc and we used that to reach families and I think a lot of good work was undertaken. Unfortunately, that funding has now disappeared but the effects of COVID have not, there are still many families who are in financial difficulty.
78. We did have access to crisis funds through Barnardos once the COVID fund was stopped. With those funds we were able to respond differently providing food vouchers and parcels and energy for families.

### ***Recommendations***

79. We found that guidance wasn't young person friendly and that it was complicated even for professionals to understand. Young people found it even harder to understand and therefore follow. It would have helped to have resources to explain restrictions and rules to young people in appropriate terms.
80. Specific advice and guidance should be catered towards residential homes for children rather than defining all care homes together, with a more considerate response for different demographics such as looked after children and young people.

Signed C.Crossan Guruge

Carol-Ann Crossan Guruge

Date 25/03/2024

