

## Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry

### Witness Statement

Statement taken at 1000 hours on Thursday, 15 February 2024. Witness Number HSC0182 refers.

Witness represented by **Name Redacted** Thompson's Solicitors, 285 Bath Street, Glasgow, G2 4HQ who was present at the meeting.

Statement: **Eileen Rose CAWLEY:**

### Consent

1. My name is **Eileen Rose Cawley**. I am 57 years of age, and my date of birth is **Personal Data** I can be contacted via my work address at STUC, Margaret Irwin Centre, 8 Landressy Street, Bridgeton, Glasgow, G40 1BP.
2. I am currently employed part-time as an Administrator/Development Officer for the Scottish Pensioners Forum (SPF) and have been in this position for 14 years.
3. I am willing to provide a statement, have my information contained within reports and to have my statement published.
4. I am prepared to give evidence at any hearing if required, and I am aware that I can withdraw consent at any time.
5. I have agreed to the recording of my statement today. I have signed the Inquiry consent form showing my agreement to all of this.
6. I would like to tell the Inquiry about my experience of the pandemic and how it impacted me in my role as the Administrator/Development Officer for the SPF. I am employed through the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC).

## **Personal Background**

7. I previously did voluntary work in the third sector and have a degree in Social Sciences, having worked in accountancy before this. It piqued my interest in third sector work and equality and human rights. I started working for the STUC in 2009.

## **Overview of the Scottish Pensioners' Forum (SPF)**

8. The SPF is a nonprofit making organisation and is managed by an Executive Committee, most of whose members are elected by their members each year at their Annual Conference. The STUC also appoints representatives to serve on the Executive Committee. Primarily a campaigning organisation, the Forum was set up in 1992, as an umbrella organisation for groups and individuals working and campaigning for a better deal for older people. The Forum was created by the STUC Pensions' Committee as a "national" body to allow pensioners to speak out on behalf of pensioners and was set up after discussion with older people's organisations at the time such as Help the Aged, Age Concern and the Scottish Old Age Pensions' Association. The SPF retains close links with the STUC, who host the SPF offices at their headquarters in Glasgow, and also employ the Forum's Administrator/Development Worker.
9. I am the only paid member of staff. In addition, there is an Executive Committee (all volunteers), with provision for 28 members (there are currently 19 in place) and provision for six others to be co-opted.
10. We have three categories of membership: Individual Members, Other Individual Members, and Affiliated Organisations/Local Forums.
11. The SPF is the only older people's organisation in Scotland who directly represents the rights and needs of retired trade union members and works closely with retired trade union branches to ensure that their views are heard. The Forum currently has over 350 individual members and 160 affiliated organisations, who in turn represent hundreds of thousands of older people throughout Scotland.
12. In 2018, in response to the ever-increasing state pension age rises, the Executive Committee of the SPF took the decision to not only to campaign

on pensioners' issues but also to undertake research and campaigns on older workers aged 55+.

13. Prior to the pandemic, the Scottish Pensioners' Forum had previous experience of surveying older workers: in 2018, the organisation carried out a series of outreach meetings, and a survey, looking at workplace bullying in older workers and its findings were included in the Scottish Government's A Fairer Scotland for Older People: A Framework for Action.
14. It is with this in mind, that the SPF felt experienced enough to undertake a survey, and several deep dive exercises, during lockdown to highlight the many issues facing older workers and their experiences of Covid 19 in the workplace.
15. A further example of our work is when we campaigned on fuel poverty last year (August 2023). Within one week of starting our campaign, we had set up a demonstration, had the media and radio involved and received a lot of press coverage. As a result of this, we now sit on the Office of Gas and Electricity Markets' (Energy Regulator) vulnerable stakeholder register group.
16. The support we provide for our members is provided in a variety of ways. We have an annual conference, outreach meetings of between four and five per year, we attend events with our information stalls, send out four newsletters per year (sent via post), our own website and social media accounts. We also receive emails and enquiries through our website.
17. The SPF is funded by a grant from the Scottish Government through Inspiring Scotland (Equality and Human Rights Fund), as well as donations and membership fees.
18. We engage with other public bodies if there are issues which affect us.

### **SPF – Pre-Pandemic**

19. We are not a service provider as such, we are a campaigning organisation. Prior to the pandemic we were out doing what we do, which is pro-actively campaigning in public.

20. We do not deal with individual cases from members or others as we do not have the capacity. Should we receive information from someone with regards to a particular issue, we would speak to our networks in other areas across Scotland to establish if that matter is also affecting them. If it was, we would highlight this in our newsletter to ask if this matter was also impacting others. Then we would action further.
21. I was the only member of staff pre, during and post pandemic.
22. A typical week for me pre-pandemic when I worked 21 hours as opposed to the 25 hours I work now, involved checking emails (in the office), travelling across the country delivering our outreach events or attending meetings (all in person), responding to requests, managing social media and monitoring the media in general for issues affecting older people.
23. During the pandemic, my role changed massively. I have an underlying health condition and was restricted at home to shield. This meant I could not go out in public to do my job. Instead, I had to work from home with my laptop. I created eight extra newsletters in the first year of the pandemic to try and keep people's morale up and to make them aware of developments in the guidelines issued by the government.
24. Some of our members dropped off the radar during the pandemic as they were digitally excluded. Others would phone me (number diverted from work phone) just to chat. I think at that time, we were only using Zoom for Committee meetings but some people could not access this, so there were times I was calling them from multiple mobile phones so they could listen in to what was being discussed.

### **SPF – COVID-19**

25. As the pandemic and the lockdown started to emerge, the main challenges were that we could not meet in person. Microsoft Teams was not really used at this time but we were using Zoom. I would speak to the Chair daily to keep up to date with what was happening. We communicated with our individual members by telephone to ensure they were okay. We also engaged with the Scottish Government frequently especially the cross-party groups on older people age and ageing and funerals and bereavements.

26. A large part of my role was being proactive and being out in the communities promoting what we do in addition to attending many meetings in person. This all stopped with the lockdown and my role was undertaken working from home.
27. My workload changed with an increase in email enquiries, increased website queries as well as questions on social media. However, the biggest increase was in the number of telephone calls I received. I would estimate this increased by about 400%. Not just that, the calls were also coming in during the evenings and at weekends, so I was working unsociable hours to try to deal with these.
28. The kind of things people would call me to discuss, and it wasn't just our members, were things like their care packages being removed, or just being lonely and frightened they were dying as they had no-one else to talk to.
29. I did refer people to other organisations like Age Scotland if I thought they needed more professional help.
30. Personally, I was frightened for my family, especially my sister who works in health and social care. I wanted to ensure that I kept people informed as much as I could, especially those who were digitally excluded.
31. We did get additional funding during the pandemic from the Scottish Government's Older People's Strategic Action forum, but it was only a nominal amount of money for a laptop to allow us to send out more newsletters and postage. We also got additional funding in 2021 to increase my hours from 21 to 25.

## **Lockdown**

32. As lockdown was imposed, the immediate consequences for our members were the fact many were digitally excluded which caused stress and anxiety. We were contacting many of them by telephone as they had no other means of communicating. This was evidenced in a survey conducted by our organisation, which was published in November 2020 and can be made available to the Inquiry.

33. This survey was completed in conjunction with our partners at Scottish Hazards and was conducted in response to concerns raised by older workers. We felt it was important, and necessary, to learn from them directly on how they were feeling, having either worked normally throughout the pandemic, been placed on furlough, and as they prepared for their return to work after being furloughed.
34. 88% of responses came from trade union members (from private and public sectors). Members also responded from Health and Social Care Partnerships (HSCPs), private care homes, retail and other essential workers, bank/financial services, teachers/school transport etc but most responses were from key workers in the 55-65 age group. There were 550 responses over a four-week period, which was positive in comparison to other such surveys. The survey was sent out via trade union websites, social media and email. The STUC has an overall membership of approximately 540,000.
35. Regarding digital exclusion, another survey revealed that for those aged 65 or over, 36%% were either digitally excluded or avoiding using such. (Household Survey)
36. With regards to the impacts of lockdown on our members, there were so many. Access to GPs and receiving their medication was one.
37. Some pharmacies took it upon themselves to levy a charge for delivering medication, despite the Scottish Government promising this would not happen. They were charging £5 per distribution and some of our members were needing multiple deliveries per week. We proactively campaigned against this and sought to consult with the pharmacies. After negotiation, they eventually agreed to stop this practice.
38. Access to food was another issue. There was anxiety amongst some of our older people to attend shops due to the fear of overcrowding, thus exposing themselves to more risk. Some shops only allowed those over 70 years of age to attend at certain times (especially those who had shielding letters) but quite a lot of our members were not on the shielding list despite having underlying conditions.
39. Many of the supermarkets were also requiring people to place their orders online before collecting. As many of our members were digitally excluded, this was not an option for them. Then when they could get access, they were finding there was hardly any food left.

40. Lots of people were bulk buying goods to ensure they had supplies. This was not really an option for older people as many stayed on their own. This impacted on the availability of certain items.
41. Some people were worried they were going to get their services removed from Health and Social Care. The Health and Social Care workers were expressing concerns about visiting some households due to the number of people staying within. This was probably more relevant in areas of social deprivation.
42. Older people were also fearful in general because they were aware of the numbers who were dying especially those in the care homes.
43. All the weekly clubs older people used to attend which were vital to prevent loneliness and being able to socialise with others were all closed at the start of lockdown which had a massive impact on people's mental wellbeing. A lot of them have still not re-opened. This has also had a long-term impact on our members post-pandemic due to the local authority cuts. For the ones that have reopened, there is a problem with community transport to take them there. Many of these older people are still fearful to leave their homes even now, and these are people who were fully active before the pandemic. The long-term impact is still affecting them.
44. Another concern related to Do Not Resuscitate (DNR) orders. Older people were aware DNRs were being put on some people's medical records if they were of a certain age.
45. The impact of the pandemic on older workers was significant. They were often at greater risk of developing serious illness if they contracted the virus as well as being less likely to adapt to COVID secure working practices.
46. If older workers contracted COVID, they were also more likely to be absent from work for longer periods of time, thereby isolating them from the normal daily social interaction their working environment provided for them. This could have resulted in higher incidences of social isolation and loneliness particularly when, due to geography and government restrictions, they had little interaction with others when they needed it the most.

47. Statistics showed that older workers aged 55 plus were also more likely to have the kind of underlying health conditions that made them particularly vulnerable to COVID, resulting in them being forced to shield in order to protect themselves.
48. Another impact was the number of funerals which were held online. As there are a large number of older people who are digitally excluded, they could not even access these online funerals to allow them to say their goodbyes or to grieve properly.
49. There was also a problem with landlines for phones when there was a digital rollout of broadband services in certain areas. We had to reassure our members to keep their landlines and not accept being transferred over as many did not need access to such.
50. Scam alerts on telephones was an issue as older people were being targeted. Again, this was something we highlighted so our members were aware.
51. Some members were not fully aware of the constant changes to the guidelines so we would keep them updated by means of our more frequent newsletters.
52. As an organisation, all our meetings were conducted online until the beginning of 2022. Our first conference was in June 2022. We did not see many people for over two years.
53. We did not operate an Urgent Assistance Fund during the pandemic.
54. The impact on our services was that demand increased during the pandemic especially those via the telephone, but we were very well supported by the STUC. From an employee perspective, I have to say I was very well supported by both the organisation and my peers.



## **SPF – Post-Pandemic**

55. The SPF has emerged from the pandemic stronger especially our reputation due to the work we did. The cost-of-living crisis however, brings similar issues for older people, namely the fuel and food price increases, which we have also challenged. A lot of the discounts the major supermarkets were offering for older people were only available online or required a QR code, which necessitated one to have a smart phone to enjoy the benefit. Again, many of our members do not have access to these so they could not benefit from the discounts on offer.
56. Many of the community services which were available before the pandemic have still not returned. Some services like libraries may have resumed but on a more limited nature. Community transport has been hugely impacted and this prevents our members from attending clubs which is their avenue to socialise and helps reduce the feeling of isolation. Older people may also have concessionary travel cards, but these are no good if there are no buses running in their areas.
57. The benefit of the pandemic for the SPF would be our enhanced reputation. Online meetings have made some aspects of my role better, albeit older people in general do enjoy attending meetings in person so they can socialise with others. I enjoy meeting in person which I don't think you can do as well online. I think my role, as someone who has to develop the organisation, needs to be sociable and out there in the community.
58. Our membership numbers have fallen, probably due to the number of people who have died since the pandemic.
59. Demand for our limited services has not gone back to pre-pandemic levels but are less than they were during the pandemic.

## **Lessons to be learned**

60. I think that pre-pandemic, there was recognition from the Scottish Government that older people were being left behind and were being digitally excluded. This is still something which needs addressed. We need an Older Persons Minister in the Parliament to fight our cause.

- 61. Older people need to be valued more in society. They do a lot of great work which goes unrecognised such as looking after their grandchildren or the work they do in the voluntary/community/church group sectors.

**Hopes for the Inquiry**

- 62. I hope that we learn the value of everyone, and it leads to a fairer and more equal society.
- 63. There has to be a proper mechanism for older people to engage.
- 64. GP services also need to be revisited for older people, especially regarding the issue around DNRs.

**Personal Data**

Signed .....

Date .....2<sup>nd</sup> April 2024.....