

Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry Witness Statement

Statement of Judith Turbyne – Witness Number HSC0220

Statement taken at 1400 hours on Friday, 16th February 2024.

There were no legal representatives present at the meeting.

Introduction

1. My name is Judith Ann Turbyne c/o Children in Scotland, Thorn House, Edinburgh, EH2 2PR.
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 CEO of Children in Scotland and have been in the post for 2.5 years. Prior to becoming CEO, I worked as head of engagement for the Scottish Charity Regulator and before that I worked in International Development.

Overview of the organisation

5. Children in Scotland recently celebrated its 30th anniversary. The organisation was set up due to the realisation that there were lots of organisations working with and for children and young people and that there would be a strength in forming a membership organisation that would both support the membership and work closely with the wider sector. The membership includes both statutory and non-statutory bodies. A key aim of the organisation is to have a positive influence on policy and practice.
6. Over time the organisation has evolved. For instance, one addition has been the running of our own services. It was set up as a more traditional membership organisation but due to the nature of the organisation, its positioning and the skills we have developed over time, we now run services which are very much part of our DNA and are key to our overall policy work.
7. In terms of what we do, we have six strategic area which are:
 - a. Making sure that children and young people's views will be listened to, taken seriously and acted upon.
 - b. Delivering quality services that support children, young people, parents, carers and professionals.
 - c. Maintaining and building on a strong and effective network with a vibrant membership at its core.
 - d. Leading and developing the children's sector workforce.
 - e. Influencing policymakers to deliver on our Manifesto priorities.
 - f. Being an environmentally and financially sustainable organisation.

8. One of the principal things that we do is to ensure that children and young people's voices and views are not only heard, but taken seriously. This is essential in realising the ambition of the UNCRC. It is essential to our work, but also to the policy making and shaping that affects children and young people across Scotland. Within this area of work, we do different things, but a key area of focus is supporting good practice in policy and engagement work with children and young people.
9. We have a learning and events programme which supports the development of the children's sector workforce. This is both crucial in terms of benefits for members, but also in supporting the wider sector.
10. Our services are primarily centred around additional support for learning. They offer advice, information and mediation on additional support for learning for children and young people, parents, carers and practitioners.
11. Our membership is at the heart of who we are as an organisation. At the moment we have around 450 members who come from all kinds of backgrounds and we support that membership in numerous ways. One of the reasons for having a membership organisation is to allow our members to learn from each other and allow them to use their voice to support the shaping of good policy and practice. One of the ways we do this is through having a strategic forum which we chair and is made up of elected and non-elected representatives. This works really well because we have a range of sizes, shapes and types of organisations and we link up organisations with a great range of experiences. We facilitate the Forum to develop a more cohesive voice in area of importance to the children's sector.
12. We also have our Voices Forum which focuses on key themes of interest and benefit for our members. This allows peer learning and helps shape our approach to policy.
13. As an organisation, we have a key role in supporting the development of good policy and practice. On a day-to-day basis, this work involves many things including responding to consultations, representing the organisation and the Forum at various Committees and on working groups and ensuring good and accessible public communications about these policy positions. Our policy positions are captured in our organisational manifesto.
14. In terms of engaging with and learning from children and young people, we have a number of different routes. Central to our efforts are the Inclusion Ambassadors and our Young People's Advisory Group which is called Changing our World. These groups are made up of volunteers and they are intrinsic to the development of the overall strategy of Children in Scotland, as well as inputting into specific pieces of work such as specific government consultations.
15. Our engagement with children and young people has positively developed over time. It is also something that is becoming more intrinsic to the work of other organisations and has particularly accelerated with UNCRC incorporation.
16. Something we are very conscious of as an organisation is to not replicate information that has been collected before. To tackle this, we have an 'evidence bank' where we store research and information that has been gathered and this prevents us from reinventing and doing things over and over again. In doing this we can also identify what information we already hold and find gaps to go and ask new questions.

17. Another strand of our information gathering is through on the ground projects with children and young people. Recently, for instance, we have been involved in supporting young people in talking about a suicide prevention. Our role is to support these young people to come together safely to talk about their thoughts, feelings and views which are then fed into the policy process.
18. We often tender for or are commissioned to do work involving children and young people. For instance, we worked with Young Scot and Scottish Government to support the Education Recovery Youth Panel from October 2020 – June 2021 and this work helped inform the SG COVID-19 Education Recovery Group.
19. We co facilitate the Scottish Parliament's Cross-Party Group on Children and Young People with YouthLink.
20. We have also administered a number of funds which support organisations. One example is the Access to Childcare fund which was an exploratory project looking at how best to develop and offer flexible childcare options.
21. At the heart of all our work, we should be actively listening to children and young people, working with them in ways to bring out information and use that to inform our policy and practice.
22. Within the organisation we have currently have 45 members of staff. In addition, we also use the services of a number of associates. For instance, our Resolve & My Rights, My Say core teams are small, and rely on associate workers to help deliver the work. The children and young people working on our advisory groups or taking part in specific projects are volunteers, as are our directors.

Enquire

23. Enquire is the Scottish advice service for additional support for learning. The service provides easy to understand advice and information about additional support for learning legislation and guidance for families and professionals. It also runs 'Reach' which is directly for children and young people. The team runs a helpline which gets hundreds of inquiries from parents and carers (the majority) but also from professionals and children and young people. To give an example of numbers, in financial year 2022 – 2023, the team responded to 1,602 queries. The team also runs a comprehensive online resource bank.
24. There is also an Enquire website for parents, carers, families and professions and the Reach website for children and young people. Just to get an idea of number, in financial year 2022 – 2023 there were 286,364 views of the Enquire website.
25. A lot of people who use the Enquire service generally come to us when they are having a bit of a difficult time. As a result, the service is a very supportive helpline where individuals can safely talk about their situation, and we then support them to move forward on their journey. 100% of feedback is "Excellent".
26. The service has been running for 25 years and the core work is fully funded by the Scottish Government.
27. As a service, Enquire feeds into the overall policy work of Children in Scotland, ensuring that we have an extremely strong evidence base for our work on additional

support for learning. The service plays a key role in supporting the delivery of the national Additional Support for Learning review action plan.

28. Enquire is generally a self-referral service. However, as it is well known to other services there is sometimes an informal referral process in place.
29. Enquire are also partners in the My Rights, My Say Service where they provide awareness raising activity and actively signpost families to the service.

Resolve

30. Resolve is the largest independent mediation provider to the education community in Scotland. It offers a way of bringing together parents/carers with education team to try and resolve disputes. It is a mediation service which tries to bring the two sides together into some kind of agreement with respect to how to support the child or young person best in their educational journey.
31. This service is mostly self-referral by the parent/carer directly to the local authority and then to us, or by the parent/carer directly to Resolve.

My Rights My Say

32. This is a direct support service which provides advice and information and advocacy support for children to prepare for and understand the consequences of their own and their parents use of rights, legal representation for Tribunal references and a service which independently seeks children's views to inform decision making. We run the Children's views part of that service which works directly with children to gather their views in adult led formal education processes and offers independent support to practitioners to upskill them in gathering children's views.
33. In Scotland, all children have the right to have their views considered when decision are being made about the support they get with their learning. Children with additional support needs aged 12 – 15 have rights to be more involved in the decisions that affect them. The service aims to support these children to use these rights. The support is independent, confidential and easy to use.
34. The service is separate from the school, the local authority and the child's family and allows children's views to be heard in adult lead, formal education processes.
35. Many of the referrals for this service come from the Additional Support needs tribunal, although some come from local authority education professionals and parents.

Age

36. The organisation works with children and young people from birth to 26. We often collaborate with other organisations who are experts in dealing with particular age groups.
37. This is a little different from some other organisations who might tend to focus on a more discrete age group. For our organisation, the decision was made that if we

embrace the whole age range of children and young people then we are supporting them through the transition of child to young person and so on. This transitional time is very important for children and young people with additional support needs.

38. Collaboration is at the heart of what we do, and this wide range often means that we will collaborate with other organisations who specialise in working with a particular age range, for instance babies and very small children.

Impacts of COVID

Pre-pandemic funding

39. As an organisation, we have a number of revenue streams. We have grant funding, including a core grant for Scottish government.
40. The core of the Enquire service is funded from Scottish government.
41. The Resolve programme is funding through contracts with local authorities.
42. The MRMS is a national service run by a partnership and funded by Scottish Government.
43. We have specific funding for project and programme work which comes in in various ways for example, through commissions and through tenders. Membership and learning and events generate unrestricted income for the organisation, both of these have been seriously impacted by the pandemic.
44. We get a relatively small proportion of our funding in through donations, although the type of organisation that we are (membership with a focus on policy), means that this is not currently a significant income stream for us.
45. We also develop relationships with corporate partners which can bring in a level of income.

Impact on funding from the pandemic

46. During the pandemic there were a number of funding streams which opened up, as a result of being in a pandemic. For instance, the 'Adapt and Thrive' funding programme which was quite interesting for us as an organisation because it was quite flexible funding, and this is something that it is often hard to access. We also accessed SG's Wellbeing Fund early on in the pandemic to support a series of webinars on Children and Young people and the pandemic.
47. However, the pandemic did also impact the organisation negatively in regard to funding. To run our organisation we need to sustain a strong core as we need to have exemplary HR systems, IT systems, safeguarding systems and so on. It is always difficult to cover this core. We do it through some direct grant funding, ensuring full cost recovery in our commissioned and tendered work, and by trying to generate unrestricted income through membership, learning and events and donations. There were some key impacts of the pandemic on the funding streams affecting our ability to cover core costs.

48. Prior to the pandemic, our learning and events work brought in a significant amount of money that was used to support our core costs. Overnight, this income stream was slashed. We needed to carry on doing learning support to the sector as that is a key strategic objective, but we could no longer generate anywhere near the level of income. We were very pleased with the way we were quickly able to offer good quality, online events. However, income levels were hit significantly and haven't recovered. The impact of the pandemic has been compounded by the cost-of-living crisis.
49. Our membership is also a source of unrestricted income. With both the pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis, what we have seen is that many organisations have been struggling financially, and often one of the first things to go is membership of other organisations. We have managed to maintain a good level of membership, but our income has dipped in this area.
50. A key challenge for us, is that we have a number of ongoing funding streams which have remained static in monetary terms of level of funding. With the cost-of-living crisis, this means that the value of these income streams supports has radically decreased. This would include both our Enquire funding, as well as our Scottish Government core grant. This has led to us having to recently make redundancies.

Other impacts of COVID on the organisation

51. The pandemic caused our organisation to completely pivot on the way we carried out our day-to-day work. An example of this is with our participation and engagement work where, pre-pandemic, all of that work was done face-to-face.
52. It was effective to work face-to-face because everyone was sitting in one room and you could be sure to create a safe space. However, because of the pandemic, all of that needed to change. To tackle this, our organisation, decided to take some time to speak and work with our children and young person's advisory group, Changing Our World, to help develop a new approach to our participation and engagement work. We built on this knowledge and adapted our approach.
53. Now, post pandemic, we can use a hybrid approach because we are comfortable with the online part of that. However, at the time it was a very steep learning curve which took a lot of creativity to deal with. A particularly important issue was how to ensure child protection and wider safeguarding in online meetings.
54. While we did move a lot of our services online, this raised its own issues. While it was positive insofar as service continuity, we had to deal with problems that we hadn't had to deal with in face-to-face situations such as being able to read a person's emotions within the room or being able to diffuse a situation that could arise out of someone perhaps not having a good day. These sorts of interactions were much more difficult to manage online.
55. In regard to our mediation service, a lot of the people using that service are living relatively difficult lives and, with our mediation service being moved online, it meant that these people were still at home in the space where they were struggling with those difficulties and, in some cases, this just meant it was even more difficult for them to be calm and enter into the mediation.

56. The restrictions also caused problems regarding confidentiality. For example, it could be quite difficult to deliver the 'my rights, my say' work because confidentiality is so important in these situations and, when delivering services online, it is impossible to know exactly who is in the room at the time.
57. As well as learning to adapt to deliver our services during the pandemic, we, as an organisation also had to learn how to work together when being geographically dispersed and working from home. This proved to be a massive learning curve. We had to consider how to keep our staff connected and continue to work cross organisationally. The nature of our work is that our value is really in the richness of the work across the organisation and the ability to work and learn together. The pandemic put a strain on this. Before the pandemic, we had a large office with training rooms and shared spaces. We now have a hybrid approach, with a smaller office space which can be used flexibly. We have not made the decision to make people come back to the office on certain days but instead we ask that they come in for certain events. It is working relatively well but we are still actively monitoring and learning and there does need to be investment in ensuring a continuity of connection.
58. Working in a hybrid model does cause some amount of concern simply due to our staff potentially feeling isolated and, although we are yet to form a firm conclusion on it, a particular concern is for our younger workforce coming into the organisation who have not had the opportunity to collaboratively work with their colleagues in one central shared space.
59. Another example of this difficulty is with our board of directors (trustees). All of our board members are volunteers, often having significant personal or professional workloads outside Children in Scotland. It was more difficult for them during the pandemic, having to make significant decisions with a lack of contact and person to person collaboration. This tended to add to stress level and as a result, we have seen a little more churn than normal in terms of the board.
60. As an organisation we have done okay in dealing with this but there is a sense of tiredness that seeps in which we have to be able to recognise and find ways of supporting both our board and our staff as we fully move into the post pandemic world.
61. Our strategic capacity was impacted by the pandemic. Such a lot of time was spent having to deal with the ongoing crisis and the change management needed, which sometimes made it difficult to have the necessary time to be able to work at a more strategic level.

Training and Recruitment during COVID

62. We did furlough some staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was also some turnover of staff during the pandemic and we did lose some staff. Some of our staff had worked for the organisation for many years and the pandemic caused them to re-evaluate their choices and so we found that some members of staff retired earlier than they would have had the pandemic not happened or they made decisions regarding career changes. Naturally, this did have a cost to the organisation and dealing with that turnover was a challenge.
63. All of our training provided by our organisation during the pandemic had to be delivered online.

64. We also changed the way recruited for the organisation. During the pandemic we had to carry out all of our recruitment and interviews online but as we have come out of the pandemic we have moved back to face-to-face recruitment. We have recently been reflecting on this and realised that the feel that we got for candidates is generally better face-to-face. Interviewing online created a burden for the organisation as it required more time to be dedicated to it and, on some occasions, could require a second interview where this would probably not have been needed had the interview been face-to-face.

Office based staff

65. Prior to the pandemic, we were not systematically set up for home working and we quickly had to find a way of doing this.
66. We had to quickly pivot to using online systems for cross-organisational working and for external working. This included, for example, using new systems such as Microsoft Teams to carry out their day-to-day jobs.
67. Due to the nature of our organisation and the staff we employ, lots of our staff are quite dynamic and creative and so they actually adapted very quickly to new ways of working.

Online delivery of events

68. We did adapt quickly and delivered events online. However, this was another learning curve for our organisation; having to learn totally new ways of delivering training and development opportunities. This was done relatively fast and post pandemic we are using a hybrid approach to this area of work.

Geographical reach

69. As an organisation we work with people all over Scotland. One of the interesting impacts of the pandemic was that the online offer allowed easier access for some in terms of training and development opportunities. It also meant that for some of the services, for Resolve for instance, there were time savings in terms of not having to travel for all sessions and so on. However, on the other side of that, as mentioned above, there is something lost through doing that kind of work online.

PPE

70. Because of the way in which we pivoted our services, we did not need to use PPE.

Tribunal Services

71. The Additional Support Needs Tribunal did pause for a little while. However, it worked relatively quickly to pivot and to be able to do the work online. While it caused a little hiatus, our perception is that the change process was relatively quick and we were

equally as responsive to maintaining quality provision for children via our Children's Views offering as part of My Rights, My Say.

Engagement with children and young people specifically on the pandemic

72. Through the Cross-Party Group (CPG), which we deliver with YouthLink, we did some work which looked at children and young people's experiences of the pandemic. This included a 'Pandemic Impact Survey'.
73. We were funded by Young Start to look at Participation through the pandemic. This work looked at the key children to be listened to and also how this was being honoured during the pandemic. It looked at both positive examples as well as the natural challenges that people were experiencing at that time.
74. The Scottish Government commissioned us to do a consultation exercise looking at Scotland's Children's Strategic Recovery framework and how it could best support Scotland's children, young people, and families to navigate and recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.
75. We also prepared a 'Home and Belonging Evaluation' which was done alongside STAF with care experienced young people who were transitioning to their own homes. This was not directly about the impact of the pandemic and lockdown, but because of the timing we heard a lot about the impact of COVID and lockdowns both from practitioners and young people during the evaluation.
76. We talked to our children and young people's advisory group, Changing our World about our office spaces in a post-pandemic world.

Educational Impacts

77. During the period of school closures our evidence from those we work with and for was around a number of areas; a level of inconsistency and confusion about eligibility for hub places under the 'vulnerable child' definition, lack of access to hubs for families who felt this was needed for their children due to their needs or circumstances, variable and sometimes limited communication from schools or local authorities, a lack of individualised home learning appropriate to children's need. For many children there was a negative impact on children and their families because of the lack of support from school and the loss of routine.
78. The return to school brought other challenges. These included: children with additional support needs being offered limited time in school or delays in returning to school compared to peers; lack of reasonable adjustments and planning made for needs of individual disabled children in implementation of Covid-19 restrictions; limited timescales for transition planning and resulting impact on provision in place for children starting new schools and for those living school.
79. In addition the return to school resulted in children with additional support needs being proportionally further behind in their learning; high levels of anxiety for children and young people and their parents (particularly where a child or family member was at increased risk of serious illness from Covid); confusion around whether repeating a

year was an option; changing and increased needs as a result of the lockdown and changes and or reductions in support in school due to Covid-19 restrictions.

80. There was an overall impact of returning to school after the long absence.
81. There are also signs of longer-term impacts which including a continuing lowering of levels of support, delays in identifying needs and in timescales for coordinated support plans (this latter as a result of the effective suspension of duties within the ASL Act) and lack of planning for support and for transitions.
82. In addition, there is evidence that of an increase in numbers of children effectively in part-time education and ongoing levels of anxiety affecting school attendance.

Inclusion Ambassadors

83. The concept of the Inclusion Ambassadors was formed by Education Scotland in 2016. They were formed as a group of secondary school pupils from various settings who all had additional support needs and with the aim of the formation of the group was to try to ensure that the views of young people with additional supports needs are being heard in discussions about education policy.
84. Children in Scotland supported the group from the start, but formally started supporting it in November 2019.
85. It is a brilliant group which is involved in a range of activities to influence and improve the experiences for pupils with additional needs, including the creation of a number of practical resources.
86. The group is enabled to do this work through meetings facilitated by professionals working within the children's sector and by engaging directly with parliamentarians and other decision-makers.
87. The pandemic impacted the group in an interesting way because the pupils who make up the group come from vastly different settings who experienced the pandemic in different ways. As has been seen from pieces of research and testimonials, a lot of the experiences for children and young people with additional support needs throughout the pandemic were quite negative. This was particularly true, where individuals were in settings and situations where they were already having a difficult experience.
88. While there is much to reflect on in terms of the impact of the pandemic on this group, the group are also keen to try to encourage good practice through looking at where different settings are getting it right for children with additional support needs. With this in mind, the group created the 'Success Looks Different' Award which celebrates settings that are doing great things by celebrating different kinds of success, bringing a much more inclusive approach to the educational environment.
89. The Inclusion Ambassadors met over 20 times between March 2020 and December 2022. The membership of this group changes over this period, but there were approximately 20 members at any one time.

Access to community services for young people

90. One of the main challenges for young people during the pandemic was the lack of structure and socialisation. This impacted on different children depending on their circumstances. Children and young people we worked with highlighted the challenges of not seeing family or friends. Many found it difficult seeing friends face to face but tried to stay connected through social media and messaging apps. A number of young people we connected with through our projects and research highlighted that many groups, sport or hobbies stopped during the pandemic, limiting opportunities for children and young people to try new activities and learn new skills.
91. Further information about challenges for children, young people and families in accessing community services can be found in the Pandemic Impact Survey 2022 which was conducted by the Cross-Party Group on Children and Young People. Barriers to services included staff capacity to delivery services, uncertainty among children, young people and families, digital exclusion and lack of funding for services to meet demand.

Mental health impacts on children and young people during the pandemic

92. The research we have been doing into the experiences of children and young people during the pandemic has highlighted an impact on mental health.
93. The impact has been shown in a number of ways ranging from individuals feeling just a bit anxious to those who were really in a negative headspace as a result of feeling so isolated and with more serious mental health problems.
94. For children and young people, their mental health can be very tied up with going to school or going to community groups because it gives them a different experience from simply being in their home environment. For that to suddenly be taken away from them can have a very negative impact on their mental health.
95. There are very different impacts depending on individual geographic or financial situations. For example, if a child or young person was living in poverty during the pandemic, they perhaps did not have access to technology and so this could contribute to them being much more withdrawn both from their studies but also from their peers. Another example is that one child could be living in a high-rise building during the pandemic whereas another child may live by the seaside and these factors can also have an impact on their mental health.
96. It is important to reflect on the fact that we do not yet know what the long-term impacts will be in terms of the mental health of children and young people and we should be prepared, as a nation, to support our young people going forward in regard to this.

Were the needs of children and young people adequately considered during the decision-making process of the Scottish Government?

97. The pandemic was a very challenging time for anyone who was in a decision-making position and it is worth reflecting on that. We have never been a position to have to deal with a pandemic of this sort and it was always going to be challenging. All the comments in this testimony are given against that backdrop, recognising that significant efforts were made to rise to the challenge. Nevertheless, it is my job here

to identify some of the challenges that we have seen from our position working with and for children and young people.

98. We know from our engagement across the sector and the participation projects that we delivered, that the pandemic had a significant impact on children's rights and their access to services and support mechanisms. It resulted in challenges for children in accessing their right to education, especially for those children with additional support needs.
99. There was a lack of meaningful engagement with children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic and we have heard this from a lot of children and young people as a problem, particularly in related to decisions about education.
100. As is frequently the case, the impacts were different for different children and young people across Scotland. Evidence shows that there were differences experienced by children and young people experiencing poverty, children with disabilities and additional support needs, care-experienced children and young people, and children and families from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds.

Lessons learned

101. Embedding the participation of children and young people at the start of any future crisis would be instrumental in shaping policy around key areas, for example education.
102. Where possible, and dependent on budgets, releasing flexible funding (or pivoting current funding) at the start of the pandemic to help organisations plan and put the appropriate changes in place would be very helpful.
103. There needs to be a more considerate response for children and young people with additional support needs. This should involve improved transition processes as this group of young people can be particularly sensitive to the pace of change that layers of multiple transitions can bring.
104. There was also a rapid rise in the utilisation of digital technology to supplement learner's education during the pandemic which has not been consistently offered since its conclusion. When considered alongside the difficulties in transitioning back to school, then use of digital technology could be used to support this more effectively.

Personal Data

Signed

Date 13 March 2024