OPUS₂

Scottish Covid-19 Inquiry

Day 56

November 5, 2024

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1 Tuesday, 5 November 2024 those at the hearing on the day. We may choose to (10.00 am) protect third party information for reasons of 3 (Delay in proceedings) 3 confidentiality by redacting statements or stopping the 4 (10.10 am) 4 hearing if third parties are named. Opening Remarks by THE CHAIR 5 5 Finally, may I remind you that the Inquiry THE CHAIR: I'm very sorry for that little hiccup, whatever 6 6 proceedings are broadcast live on the Inquiry's YouTube caused it. channel and recorded to be watched later. Video cameras 8 Good morning, and welcome to this session of the 8 are located at the rear and sides of the hearing room 9 Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry's substantive evidential and face those speaking. You should be aware that 10 10 members of the public attending our hearings may be hearings. Again, can I just repeat that apology. 11 I should say that we tested everything not 10 minutes 11 captured occasionally on wide angle or room overview 12 ago, and it seemed to be working fine so I have no idea 12 camera shots. I'll now hand back to Ms van der 13 13 what caused that hiccup, but as Ms van der Westhuizen Westhuizen KC who will provide more details on how we said, we should be able to catch up time. 14 intend to conduct these hearings. 14 15 So this part of the substantive evidential hearings 15 Ms van der Westhuizen. 16 will focus on the impacts of the pandemic on education 16 Opening Statement by MS VAN DER WESTHUIZEN 17 and certification . Before we begin, I would like to 17 MS VAN DER WESTHUIZEN: Thank you, my Lord. 18 18 thank all those who have shared information with us, My Lord, I appear today with my learned juniors Mary 19 19 whether that has been by means of a witness statement, a Ellen Stewart, Advocate, and Chris Stephen, Advocate, 20 20 Rule 8 statement, a Rule 8 response, attending a round who will be assisting me in presenting evidence at these 21 table meeting, providing documentation or by engaging 21 impact hearings. 22 with Let's Be Heard, the Inquiry's public participation 22 We also are joined this morning by representatives 23 23 of some of the core participants who have been granted 24 24 I want to reassure you all that the Inquiry team leave to appear at these hearings. As I mentioned 25 will consider all of the information in addition to that 25 at the preliminary hearing, a total of 19 organisations and groups are currently designated as core participants which we will hear during the course of these oral 1 1 2 hearings. All this documentation and information is 2 in relation to the Inquiry's terms of reference (k), 3 helping to inform the Inquiry's investigations. 3 which covers the delivery of education and 4 4 including into the decisions taken by Scotland's certification . leaders, which we will turn to at a later date. Of those, 14 have been granted leave to appear at I'm particularly grateful to the more than 10,000 these hearings and just as a reminder, they are the City 7 people who have engaged with the Inquiry through of Edinburgh Council, College of Paramedics, Convention 8 Let's Be Heard. They have provided us with a wealth of 8 of Scottish Local Authorities, Long Covid Kids Scotland, 9 information and kept at the forefront of our minds the 9 PAMIS, Public Health Scotland, the Royal College of 10 10 real impacts on individuals, both of the pandemic itself Nursing, Scottish Covid Bereaved, Scottish Hazards, 11 and of Scotland's response to it . Let's Be Heard will 11 Scottish Qualifications Authority, Scottish Trades Union 12 continue to gather experiences until 29 November of this 12 Congress, the Care Inspectorate, Scottish Women's Rights 13 13 year, and I would encourage anyone who has not yet Organisation and the Scottish Ministers. 14 participated to check the Let's Be Heard website for 14 Today is the start of the Inquiry's public impact 15 details about how to do this. 15 hearings for one of its four main investigative 16 We have shared witness statements and documentary 16 portfolios, namely portfolio 4, which covers its terms 17 bundles with core participants, who have an interest in 17 of reference 2(k), which, as I have already said, my 18 education and certification and who have been granted 18 Lord, covers the delivery of education and 19 leave to appear. These will be published on the 19 certification 20 Inquiry's website, where we will also publish 20 The hearings will run for approximately two and 21 transcripts of our hearings. 21 a half weeks and will conclude on 20 November 2024. 22 22 Any directions or orders, including restriction We will be sitting for three days this week from Tuesday

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to Thursday, for four days next week from Tuesday to

Friday, and for two and a half days the following week

from Monday to Wednesday.

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orders, that I have made, or will make in the future,

I make any specific restriction orders, I will notify

will also be published on the Inquiry website. If

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hearings, I will be repeating some of what I covered at the preliminary hearing, simply as a reminder for the rationale for the approach being taken. In doing so, my Lord, I propose first to make a few observations about the background to the Inquiry and its approach to impact evidence generally.

Secondly, to address a number of matters relevant to the investigation and gathering of impact evidence,

In setting the scene for what's to follow at the

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Secondly, to address a number of matters relevant to the investigation and gathering of impact evidence, relating specifically to the delivery of education and certification. These will include providing an outline of the scope of portfolio 4, a reminder of the engagement undertaken and impact evidence already gathered by the portfolio 4 legal team, and an overview and update of the continuing work of the Inquiry's listening project Let's Be Heard.

Thirdly, I propose to outline the approach that will be taken to the presentation of evidence at these impact hearings and in particular provide an overview of the organisations from whom we will be hearing.

Turning first, my Lord, to the Inquiry's background and general approach. I will again refer to relevant parts of the Inquiry's terms of reference, and also outline the Inquiry's general approach to impact hearings, in order to provide context for the approach

that is being taken to the presentation of impact evidence at these hearings.

In relation to the terms of reference, the aim of the Inquiry is set out in paragraph 1, and is to establish the facts of and to learn lessons from the strategic response to the COVID—19 pandemic in Scotland. Its scope is set out in paragraph 2 and that is to investigate the strategic elements of the handling of the pandemic relating to 12 areas, one of which is the delivery of education and certification.

With the exception of pandemic planning, the Inquiry's investigations are required to cover the period between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2022. However, it is recognised that some of the impacts of the decisions to lock down and apply other restrictions continue to be felt today, and we will be hearing about some of those during the course of these hearings.

Paragraph 5 of the Inquiry's terms of reference requires it to demonstrate how a human rights based approach has contributed to its findings and recommendations. Where your Lordship deems it appropriate and necessary, paragraph 7 requires the Inquiry to consider the impacts of the strategic elements of the handling of the pandemic on the exercise of Convention rights and any disparities in the

strategic elements of the handling of the pandemic, including unequal impacts on people, and again, my Lord, we'll be hearing about disproportionate impacts during the course of these hearings.

In terms of the general approach to impact hearings, the Inquiry has adopted a thematic approach and is considering evidence about the impacts of the strategic response to the ${\rm COVID-19}$ pandemic in Scotland under a number of themes. Impact hearings relating to health and social care ran from October 2023 to June 2024, during which time your Lordship heard oral evidence from numerous individuals and organisations.

Starting its investigations by focusing on the impacts of the COVID—19 pandemic and the strategic response is consistent with the commitment to the Inquiry taking a person—centred human rights based approach. It also enables the Inquiry to have a better understanding of the nature and extent of those impacts and where and by whom they were most intensely felt, to allow the ongoing investigations into implementation and decision—making to be focused appropriately.

As regards impacts relating to the delivery of education and certification, the portfolio team has engaged largely with organisations, although there has also been, my Lord, direct engagement with individuals.

In the time available during the upcoming hearings, we will be hearing oral evidence from organisations rather than from individuals, for whom the main vehicle for sharing personal experiences is the Inquiry's public participation project, Let's Be Heard.

This includes children and young people.

The Inquiry very much recognises the importance of engaging directly with children and young people, but considers that it would be inappropriate for them to be put under the pressure of appearing at a hearing.

Instead, they have been engaging directly with the Inquiry through Let's Be Heard, and this has been facilitated by various specialist organisations with which the Inquiry has been working.

In addition, there has been direct engagement with the portfolio 4 legal team, including through a round table discussion with children and young people that was facilitated by the Children & Young People's Commissioner of Scotland and A Place In Childhood, and also through outreach at youth work centres which led to a number of witness statements being taken.

My Lord, as I explained at the preliminary hearing one of the main reasons for adopting this approach is because the impacts related to the delivery of education and certification are ones that were felt particularly

the 25 and certification are

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communities rather than specific groups.

Organisations are more likely to have a greater breadth and information about and insight into the extent to which those impacts were experienced, to be able to reflect the collective views of their members and to provide a more comprehensive overview of the relevant impacts and issues experienced.

My Lord, I will now turn to address the three

widely across society and affected whole sectors and

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My Lord, I will now turn to address the three matters relevant to the investigation and gathering of impact evidence, which include the scope of portfolio 4, the engagement undertaken and impact evidence gathered by the portfolio team to date, and an overview and update of the continuing work of the Inquiry's listening project Let's Be Heard, specifically relevant to the delivery of education and certification.

In terms of its scope, portfolio 4 covers paragraph 2(k) of the Inquiry's terms of reference, which requires the Inquiry to investigate the strategic handling of the pandemic relating specifically to the delivery of education and certification .

In this regard, my Lord, the Inquiry has commissioned a number of academic reports from the University of Edinburgh's Moray House School of Education and Sport, which provides reviews of

literature $\$ and research relevant to impacts relating to the delivery of education and certification .

These are published on the Inquiry's website and include firstly a report dated February 2022 that considers the impact of the pandemic on the delivery of education and certification for learners at various stages of education in Scotland, and covers schools, colleges, universities and youth work.

A subsequent report dated July 2023 that updates the findings of the earlier 2022 report.

There's also a report dated July 2023 that builds on the findings of the 2022 report and focuses specifically on three areas, namely, one, the impact of children and young people's learning and academic progress in general; two, the known benefits and disadvantages of remote or online learning during the pandemic; and three, the issue of digital poverty and inequality and the effect on access and outcomes.

There's also a report dated July 2023 that considers the impact of school closures and changes to support packages on children and young people with additional support needs.

Finally, my Lord, there's a report dated December 2023 that reviews the evidence available on the impacts of the pandemic and the response to it on

the education of children under five in Scotland.

As I said, my Lord, these reports are available on the Inquiry's website. Importantly, they provide useful background information and context for the understanding of some of the impact evidence that we'll be hearing over the next few weeks, and they've helped to inform the scope of what is being investigated in relation to the delivery of education and certification.

In particular, my Lord, they have informed the six key investigative streams within which education and certification is being investigated by the Inquiry.

These cover early learning and childcare; primary and secondary education; additional support for learning; further and higher education; apprenticeships; and youth work.

In relation to the portfolio 4 engagement and evidence, as your Lordship pointed out at the preliminary hearing, oral evidence from witnesses during public hearings is only one way in which the Inquiry can gather evidence. In terms of impact evidence relating to education and certification, the Inquiry's portfolio 4 team has taken 134 statements and has received 73 responses to requests under Rule 8 of the Inquiries (Scotland) Rules 2007.

It has also held 26 round table discussions with

various organisations and individuals, including several with children and young people, and has prepared reports of those meetings summarising the key issues and impacts as discussed. Some of those will be referred to during the course of these hearings.

These statements, Rule 8 responses and reports have been reviewed and will form the basis of a narrative record of the impact evidence relating to the delivery of education and certification, which will also include evidence heard at the hearings. It will highlight the key impacts and issues that have been identified and is due to be published during the course of 2025.

My Lord, the portfolio team is grateful for all of those who have generously given their time to assist the Inquiry with its investigations to date.

As regards Let's Be Heard, as I emphasised at the preliminary hearing, although we will be hearing evidence from organisations rather than from individuals at these impact hearings, the Inquiry is nevertheless very interested in hearing about personal experiences of those impacts. Let's Be Heard was set up in order to give everyone affected by the strategic response to the COVID—19 pandemic in Scotland the chance to share their experiences directly with the Inquiry. Let's Be Heard has the capacity to gather and collate individual

response to it on 25 has the capacity to gath

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accounts of personal experiences on a scale that the Inquiry could not reasonably be able to do through traditional means, such as oral evidence, witness statements and Rule 8 responses.

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During its national engagement period, which ran from May to December 2023, Let's Be Heard gathered experiences from more than 5,400 people from every local authority in Scotland, who were able to share their experiences with the Inquiry in a variety of ways. This included a bespoke children and young people's response form to which Let's Be Heard received 382 responses.

Let's Be Heard published a preliminary report on the early findings in November 2023. During the course of 2024, Let's Be Heard has continued to analyse people's experiences and has adopted a more targeted approach through its focused engagement period, during which it has been working with organisations to hear from more specific groups around particular themes, through a range of activities such as surveys, focus groups and workshops. One of those groups with whom Let's Be Heard has been engaging is children and young people.

Let's Be Heard continues to be the primary route through which individuals can engage with the Inquiry about their personal experiences. Its members are part of the wider Inquiry team and have been working closely

with the portfolio 4 legal team in relation to engagement with organisations and individuals regarding the impacts relevant to the delivery of education and certification. As I mentioned at the preliminary hearing, my Lord, as part of its focused engagement, on 2 December 2024, Let's Be Heard launched three surveys that are directly relevant to the delivery of education and certification, which were prepared with input from the portfolio 4 legal team.

The children and young people's survey for 8 years and above is designed to understand better what the pandemic was like for younger people in Scotland between January 2020 and December 2022 and includes ten questions, including a number relating specifically to education.

To date $1{,}180$ completed responses have been received to that survey.

The other two surveys are designed to hear more from education and early learning professionals involved in delivering and supporting education and childcare services in Scotland between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2022. One of those is the early learning and childcare survey, which is aimed at early learning practitioners, managers, support staff and childminders. To date, 448 completed surveys have been received. The

other is the school survey, teacher, school management and education support staff, which is aimed at teachers and school staff who are directly involved in children and young people's learning, and in response to which 2,984 completed surveys have been received.

As your Lordship mentioned, the three surveys are due to close on Friday, 29 November 2024 so I would again encourage any early learning and school education staff who would like to share their experiences with the Inquiry, and as many children and young people as possible who have not yet done so to take part.

It has been important for the Inquiry through Let's Be Heard to engage with a range of young people facing different sets of circumstances in order to understand better the unequal impacts felt across different societal groups within this young cohort. In total, my Lord, Let's Be Heard has heard directly from over 2,000 children and young people in Scotland from age five years to 24 years and has also engaged with a small number of children under five and their families.

It has gathered experiences from those attending mainstream primary and secondary schools, those attending Gaelic—medium schools, children and young people attending dedicated additional support need

schools, young and unpaid carers, young people in residential care and their carers, those who attended hub settings, black and minority ethnic children and young people, those in island communities, young mothers, civically engaged children and young people such as those engaged with the Scottish Youth Parliament, young people impacted or at risk of homelessness and young people living or attending schools in areas affected by multiple deprivation indicators.

Their experiences have been gathered through a combination of methods, including response forms received during Let's Be Heard's national and focused engagement phase, in—person information sharing stands at university campuses, and contact with 14 student unions, collaborations with the Scottish Youth Parliament, and workshops and experience—gathering sessions with children and young people.

Let's Be Heard has also heard indirectly about the experiences of children and young people through its engagement with 3,600 education early years and childcare professionals, parents, carers and guardians, and that has also been through a combination of workshops, discussion groups and online surveys; and they have spoken about the impacts of the pandemic on

een received. The 25 they have spoken about t

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Let's Be Heard, my Lord, will be publishing in due course a series of reports based on key findings which will support the Inquiry's ongoing investigations and inform its reports and recommendations. My Lord, I will now outline the approach being taken to the presentation of evidence at these impact hearings, and will provide an overview of the organisations from whom we will be hearing. 1.0 In terms of the presentation of evidence itself. between us. Ms Stewart, Mr Stephen and I will be leading a variety of witnesses who have been selected with a view to ensuring that these hearings cover evidence on a range of key impacts and issues. There will be a combination of single witnesses and panel sessions of between two and five witnesses. The various hearing slots are scheduled to last between 45 minutes and two hours. As things have worked out, in order to accommodate breaks for the stenographer, there will be a 15-minute break between each witness slot. If we finish a particular witness a bit earlier, that break might be slightly longer. Witnesses will be lead on the basis of witness statements, Rule 8 responses and/or round table reports

children and young people they support.

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which have already been disclosed to core participants . $17 \label{eq:17}$

Witness statements will be published on the Inquiry's website on the morning on the day on which a witness is due to give evidence, and any other documents referred to at the hearing will be published later that day.

In the relatively short time available, witnesses will not be able to speak to everything covered in their witness statements or Rule 8 responses, so their oral evidence will focus on issues of particular relevance to each witness or those they represent with a view to avoiding repetition.

My Lord, the hearings will highlight and provide an overview of some of the key issues and impacts experienced by children and young people, parents, carers, adult learners, workers and organisations involved in the delivery of education and certification as a consequence of decisions to lock down and impose other restrictions across all sectors covered by the six investigative streams that I have mentioned earlier.

The majority of the impact evidence held by the Inquiry in relation to education and certification in the form of witness statements, Rule 8 responses and round table reports that cannot be covered at the hearings will be reflected in the narrative report that I mentioned earlier that is due to be published next year.

In terms, my Lord, of the order of witnesses and the evidence we propose to lead, we will be leading witnesses who will speak to issues and impacts relevant to various ages and stages in line with the six investigative streams. So we'll be starting with early learning and childcare, followed by primary and secondary education, then additional support needs, further and higher education, apprenticeships and youth work in that order.

However, in order to accommodate witness availability, we will need to interpose a panel of former National Union of Students presidents between the early learning and childcare and the primary and secondary education witnesses, rather than call them with the further and higher education witnesses.

We will be hearing from a number of primary and secondary education and further and higher education worker union representatives together, and that will be over a two—day period after hearing from the other witnesses for further and higher education.

In terms of the evidence itself, my Lord, this will cover some of the main issues and impacts that have been raised in relation to each and across all of the six investigative streams. These include, for example, impacts on the development of preschool children under

the age of five; experiences of remote teaching and learning and remote youth work; issues related to digital inclusion; access to hub schools and settings operating over national lockdowns; impacts on learning, development and attainment of learners of all ages and stages; referrals and access to services; challenges related to guidance and its implementation; impacts on physical and mental health and well—being; impacts on personal and social development and behaviour; disproportionate impacts and exacerbation of existing inequalities; impacts on transitions such as between different ages, education stages or into employment; and financial impacts.

In terms of witnesses themselves, my Lord, in relation to early learning and childcare we'll be calling four witnesses. The first will be from Play Scotland, which is an organisation that promotes and develops play in Scotland. Its work is underpinned by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its aim is to make children's right to play a reality.

We'll also be hearing from Early Years Scotland, which is a specialist Scottish charity supporting children from prebirth to the age of 5. It was formerly known as Scottish Preschool Play Association. It is

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independent early years settings.

Further in relation to early learning and childcare,
my Lord, we will be hearing evidence from a panel of
Early Years Scotland members who are —— who work in the
sector as practitioners. Finally in relation to early
learning and childcare, we will be hearing from the
Scottish Childminding Association, which is a charity

and membership organisation supporting childminders in

both a membership and service delivery organisation, and

has over 800 members from private, voluntary and

11 Scotland and approximately 82% of childminders in 12 Scotland are members.

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My Lord, I would emphasise that we have obtained Rule 8 responses and witness statements from a number of other organisations involved in relation to early learning and childcare, which again, as I mentioned, will be factored in, but those are ones that highlight some of the key issues that have been expressed across the board.

In relation to primary and secondary education, we'll be calling witnesses from School Leaders Scotland, which is a trade union for those involved in leadership roles in Scotland's schools. The current membership is over 1,000 headteachers, deputy headteachers, principal teachers, faculty heads and business managers. We'll

also be hearing from e—Sgoil, which is Scotland's national digital education provider, which offers e—learning to pupils across the country and also provides online study classes.

We'll further be hearing from Connect, which is a Scottish charity and membership organisation that was previously known as the Scottish Parent and Teacher Council. Its purpose is to advance parental and family engagement in their children's education, and it does this through promoting home and school partnerships.

Finally in relation to primary and secondary education, we will be hearing from A Place In Childhood, which is a Scottish community interest company whose aim is to improve the lives and situations of children and young people through advocating for them and helping them advocate for themselves. It aims to assist children and young people in making the changes they want to see in communities.

My Lord, I will come on to address the unions. There are a few additional witnesses relevant to primary and secondary education, but I will cover them in relation to the unions. As regards witnesses relevant to additional support for learning, we will be calling a panel made up of Linking Education and Disability Scotland or LEAD Scotland, which is

a national charity that supports disabled parents and carers to overcome barriers in accessing education.

They'll be joined by the Association for Real Change, or ARC Scotland, which is a charity that advances knowledge, practice and policy in health and social care for the benefit of people with learning disabilities or other support needs.

Further, in relation to additional supports for learning, we'll be hearing from Carers Trust Scotland, which is a charity that works to transform the lives of unpaid carers and which partners with a network of local care organisations to ensure that unpaid carers in Scotland have access to support, advice and resources to enable them to live fulfilled lives. We'll also be hearing from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapy, which is the professional body for speech and language therapists in the UK, speech and language therapy being — the aim of which is to better the lives of people with communication and swallowing needs.

We'll in addition be hearing from the Scottish Sensory Centre, which is based at Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh. It organises and delivers professional learning events and courses for teachers, professionals and parents involved in the lives of children who are deaf, have visual impairment,

or a combination of both.

Finally in relation to additional support needs, we will be hearing from PAMIS, or Promoting a More Inclusive Society. This is a charity and the only organisation in Scotland solely supporting children, young people and adults with profound learning and multiple disabilities and their families to lead healthy, valued and inclusive lives.

As regards further and higher education, my Lord, we will be holding panel sessions with, firstly, four of Scotland's colleges. Those are Ayrshire College, Glasgow Clyde College, University of Highlands and Islands Hebrides, and South Lanarkshire College.

We will be holding a panel with three universities, University of Glasgow, Glasgow School of Art and Aberdeen University.

We will also be having a panel session with three former presidents of the National Union of Students who were in post throughout the period covered by the Inquiry's terms of reference. My Lord, National Union of Students Scotland is a department within the legal organisation of the National Union of Students of the United Kingdom. It's a membership—based organisation made up of students and associations, and representing post 16—year—old students who are in

1 further and higher education as well as in institutions in Scotland. 2 apprenticeships. 2 In relation to apprentices, my Lord, we will be 3 In relation to workers involved in early learning 3 hearing from -- evidence about impacts on apprentices $\,$ 4 and childcare, primary and secondary education and 4 during the college and panel session, but later in the further and higher education, we'll be hearing from hearings, we'll also be hearing from Skills Development a range of unions. Scotland, which is the national skills agency for 7 Firstly, we will be hearing from UNITE Scotland, 7 Scotland, which offered grants and ran programmes to 8 which represents 152,000 working people in Scotland, 8 support apprentices who had been furloughed or had 9 across a range of industries including local government. 9 suspended their apprenticeships due to restriction 1.0 1.0 Their membership within the education sector includes measures 11 11 support and professional services staff, technicians. We also will hear from Glasgow Caledonian 12 cleaners and all staff working within facilities . 12 University, which offers graduate apprenticeship 13 13 We'll be hearing from UNISON Scotland, which is training. We will be hearing from HELM Training, which 14 Scotland's biggest public service trade union, 14 is a charity and grassroots organisation that for over 15 representing workers delivering public and related 15 40 years has been supporting young people aged 15 to 25 services across Scotland. It has approximately 162,000 16 16 in Dundee and Tayside to gain education and employment. 17 17 members working across all of Scotland's public services We will be hearing from the Scottish Apprenticeship 18 and education sectors, including cleaners working in 18 Advisory Board, which is an independent industry-led 19 academic buildings and residences, IT and security 19 body that was established to ensure that industry play 20 staff, and a range of other professional roles 2.0 a leading role in developing apprenticeships in 21 supporting teaching and learning. 21 Scotland, and it aims to ensure that apprenticeships are 22 2.2 We'll also be hearing, my Lord, from the national demand-led, fit for purpose and future orientated. 23 union of -- and my Lord, I apologise, I've forgotten the 23 Finally, my Lord, in relation to youth work we'll be full name. It's NASUWT. I understand in the title is 2.4 hearing from three witnesses, firstly -- well, three 25 25 the women's teaching union. It's a teaching union witness sessions. We'll be hearing from Youth Link 27 1 affiliated with both the TUC and STUC. Its members are 1 Scotland, which is Scotland's national agency for youth 2 teachers and headteachers working in early years 2 work. It's a membership organisation with membership settings, schools and further and higher education 3 including voluntary and statutory youth work 4 4 organisations and intermediaries, including every local 5 We'll also be hearing from the Educational Institute 5 authority. 6 6 of Scotland, which is the country's largest teaching We'll be hearing a witness from St Paul's Youth trade union, which has over 65,000 members, mainly Forum, which is a youth centre based in Glasgow. Its 8 8 teachers, college and university lecturers and aim is to help young people aged 0 to 25 by improving their life conditions, and it works with over 750 people associated professionals, such as chartered librarians. 10 10 educational psychologists and academic related staff. in Provanmill. Its goal is to deal with many of the 11 11 We will also be hearing from the Secondary Teachers issues that children and young people face by providing 12 Association, which is the only specialist union for 12 programmes that focus on exercise, eating, education and 13 13 secondary teachers. It has approximately 6,000 members empowerment. 14 with around 150 to 200 in advisory roles in local 14 Our final witness slot, my Lord, will be a panel of 15 authorities, and approximately 700 working in 15

independent schools. Finally in relation to unions, my Lord, we'll be hearing from the University and College Union Scotland, which is a federation of Scotland-based branches and local associations of the UK-wide University and College Union. It has around 1,000 members -- 9,000 members during the pandemic and it is the largest trade union in the higher education sector in Scotland, and it covers academic staff, academic support staff and professional support staff in universities and higher education

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Youth Link Scotland members who are youth work practitioners engaged in the delivery of youth work across Scotland. My Lord, I have one minute left, I seem to have made up the eight minutes that we lost, so I won't go into detail. I was going to touch on three procedural matters, but I won't go over time. I will just flag them for the benefit of the core participants .

It was simply to remind them that although there's no specific restriction order in relation to any of the witnesses being called, there is a general restriction

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order that continues to apply. As I have already 2 mentioned, the witness statements for each witness will be put up on the website on the day the witness is 4 giving evidence, with any documents referred to during the course of the hearings being put up later that day. so those are not to be published by core participants until the Inquiry has published those formally. 8 I'd remind the core participants about the Rule 9 9 procedure and the guidance your Lordship has provided 1.0 in relation to that, which again is on the Inquiry's 11 website. Finally . I'd remind everyone that 12 your Lordship has issued a direction in relation to 13 closing statements for this set of hearings, in terms of 14 which core participants with leave to appear, may, if 15 they so wish, submit a written closing statement to the Inquiry by no later than 12 noon on 29 January 2025 and 16 17 that's to be no longer than 2.500 words, and in that 18 regard they should have regard to the terms of the 19 appendix to that direction. 20 My Lord, I've made it. That is all I have to say at 21 this stage, unless your Lordship has anything further. 22 THE CHAIR: No, thank you very much indeed. You've done 23 very well, given that you lost about five or ten minutes 2.4 due to the technical hitch at the beginning. 25 So we'll take a break now, ladies and gentlemen, and 29

1 we'll come back at 11 o'clock. Again we're going to hear from Ms van der Westhuizen, this time leading a witness. So 11 o'clock. Thank you very much. 4 (10.46 am) 5 (A short break) 6 (11.00 am) THE CHAIR: Good morning, Ms van der Westhuizen. If you're 8 ready, can we have your first witness, please? 9 LADY MARGUERITE HUNTER BLAIR (called) 10 Questions by MS VAN DER WESTHUIZEN MS VAN DER WESTHUIZEN: Thank you, my Lord. 11

12 The first witness we have is Lady Marguerite

13 Hunter Blair from Play Scotland. 14

Please could you give your full names?

15 A. Marguerite Catherine Hunter Blair.

Q. And you've provided a witness statement to the Inquiry.

17 A. I have.

18 Q. Just for your Lordship's benefit, that is

19 SCI-WT0279-000001 20

Lady Hunter Blair, you are the current

21 chief executive of Play Scotland; is that correct?

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23 Q. You've held that role since 2006?

24 A. I have

Q. Immediately prior to that, you were the chief executive

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of Playboard Northern Ireland for four years?

2 A. Yes

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3 Q. Could I ask you to please provide just a brief 4 description of Play Scotland, including its core aims, objectives, in promoting children's rights to play in 6 Scotland?

A. So Play Scotland was formed in 1998, almost 26 years 7 8 ago, to make the child's right to play a reality in 9 Scotland, and it had four main themes that it was 1.0 focusing on at that stage. It was a champion of 11 children's play, and we campaigned for policy change, 12 and we developed a range of resources and toolkits for 13 a wide range of parents and practitioners and 14 professionals to support children's play experiences and opportunities 15

16 We commissioned and promote research on the benefits 17 of children's play and how it relates to their 18 development and optimal health and well-being. We're 19 very interested in workforce development, the 2.0 professional work play -- various professions who 21 actually work with children and young people, and 2.2 actually professionals who don't work with children and 23 young people, but whose strategic decision-making 2.4 impacts on children's play opportunities.

25 Q. I meant to add at the beginning that you've been called

specifically as effectively a scene-setting witness for early learning and childcare, which we recognise is fundamentally a play-based pedagogy. So we'll be hearing all about play from you.

What is the size and composition of Play Scotland's membership, please?

A. The membership of Play Scotland, we have about just over 7 8 3.000 members at the moment that we send out regular newsletters to. That's drawn from a wide range of 10 backgrounds, people and organisations, politicians, both 11 in Scotland and beyond Scotland.

12 We have a significant Facebook, I think 30,000 13 following on there, so a huge social media reach, and 14 our website, I suppose, is the biggest resource. 15 We have, I think, on average, 800 page downloads every 16 single day of the year, and we do a play well podcast 17 series, and I think the average there is about 200 18 listens per month. Sometimes it's up, sometimes it's 19 down. So we have lots of different ways that we try to 20 reach out and engage with people who are interested in play, whether they're parents, practitioners. professionals, students or people interested in setting

22 23 up similar organisations in other countries.

24 Q. You've already touched on -- in paragraph 11 of your 25 statement, you set out a number of ways in which

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Play Scotland realises its aims. One of those is by 2 promoting research on the benefits of play and the essential contribution of play to improve children's 4 outcomes. Could you please expand a bit upon that? What role does Play Scotland undertake in promoting research on the benefits of play and its contribution to improving children's outcomes? 8 A. The key thing about research is that we can't formulate 9 a proper argument without it. It's quite one thing to 1.0 be a parent and maybe think intuitively that you 11 actually know about play and the benefits, but in order 12 to change policy and compete for resources, we have to 13 know what we're talking about. So it's not taken 14 lightly . 15 One of the things that we've done in Play Scotland 16 over the years is we've commissioned our own research. 17 but we've also been very keen to bring together 18 literature reviews, so that we see a wide range of 19 opinions. We brought together a literature review in 20 2012, called the power of play. We've just completed 21 another one, which underpins the revision of the play 22 strategy, which is a literature review about what 23 children's voices say about play.

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I think it's so important, and we need to pay

attention to what's happening, so I'm just thinking,

I'll pick one out of thin air, the 2017 millennium cohort is being followed, and they're able to say that I think that by the time children were aged 7, they were spending half their day sitting down. What's that to do with play? That's got everything to do with play. It's got everything to do with what people might think school ready means as well. So it's things like that, we need to have a big picture about what's happening out there in the research world, and we need to discern what it means to children's play opportunities.

11 Q. Thank you.

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12 A. Sorry, I've just remembered the correct name of that. 13 It was the millennium Gateshead study, and it's about to 14 report again. I think.

15 Q. I am going to go on to ask you to explain the key ways in which play is essential for development, but before I 17 do so, you mentioned the play strategy. Could you 18 please elaborate a little about what that is, and what 19 Play Scotland's involvement is in that?

A. Yes. In 2007 Play Scotland set up a play commission and the findings were launched in the Scottish Parliament in 2008, and one of the things that we were calling for on behalf of the sector and children and young people was the strategic approach to play in Scotland. In 2013, we were successful in realising that ambition. Scotland

has a play strategy at the moment. It has four key 2 domains: play at home; play in early learning childcare 3 and schools; play in the community; and positive actions 4 for play.

> The main aim of the play strategy is that every child experiences life -enhancing everyday play opportunities. That play strategy has now been under review subsequent to -- pre-COVID and to COVID and it is with our minister at the moment. We're hoping that the refresh of that will be launched either at the end of this year or early in the New Year.

12 Q. Thank you. Then following on from the explanation there 13 of the engagement in relation to research, can I ask you 14 to go on and explain the key ways in which play is 15 essential for the healthy development and well-being of

16 preschool children, both immediately and in the long run 17 and why it's essential to maintain that?

18 A. So play, as I often say, is a very serious business. 19 It's lovely and quite delightful to see children play, 20 but there's a very serious business going on.

21 Q. If I could ask you to pause just briefly , Lady 22 Hunter Blair. I think we might have lost his Lordship. 23

(Pause). 2.4 THE CHAIR: Lady Hunter Blair was just going on to talk

25 a little bit about play strategy, which was the question

1 put to her then. She froze, I'm afraid.

MS VAN DER WESTHUIZEN: Sorry, I didn't notice, my Lord, so you might have missed a little bit of the answer. It is in the transcript.

5 THE CHAIR: I did miss a little bit. If you could ask it 6 again, I'd be grateful.

7 MS VAN DER WESTHUIZEN: If you wouldn't mind, Lady Hunter 8

9 A. So Play Scotland had called for a play strategy back in 10 2008, and in 2013 Scotland's play strategy vision and

11 action plan was launched. It covers four key domains.

12 It is founded in the child's right to play; it's

13 informed by General Comment 17 on Article 31. The four

14 domains are play at home; play in early learning

15 childcare and school; play in the community; and

16 positive actions for play. And the main ambition

17 is that every child, and that's not 80% or 96%, that's

18 100% of children in Scotland, get to experience

19 life -enhancing play opportunities every day.

20 MS VAN DER WESTHUIZEN: Lady Hunter Blair, I then moved on

21 to ask you to please explain the key ways in which -

22 based on the evidence base that you described and your

23 engagement and involvement in research, just explain

24 from what you know, the key ways in which play is

25 essential for the healthy development and well—being of

preschool children both immediately and in the long term
and why it's essential to maintain.

A. Okay, thank you. Sorry, I might just go back to my previous question. I think you might have missed me saying, my Lord, that the play strategy has been refreshed and we're hoping that it will —— it's with our minister at the moment and we're hoping that it will be launched at the end of this year, or the beginning of next year, and it's completely founded and based on children's voices.

So why is play important? There's a very simple acronym that we use, just to focus people, when I get asked a question like that, so I'll give the simple answer and then I'll unpick it a wee bit if that's okay. But we think about SPICE when we think about why play is important for children and young people's development. SPICE, the acronym stands for social, their social interactions; their physical development, their physical literacy; their intellectual, as in cognitive brain development; creativity and curiosity is C; and E for emotional development.

So all these things crucially happen during children's play opportunities and play experiences, and they then support children to develop resilience,

25 self-regulation, managing themselves, managing all the

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different emotions that can be quite overwhelming, their social skills, taking turns, sharing, things that are very difficult even when you're an adult. And a lot of this early learning — all this foundation for learning happens through play and all the different types of play that children engage in.

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8 A. I might add to that if that's okay.

Q. Yes, please.

A. The early educators, and I'm thinking Malaguzzi, the Reggio Emilia approach, Freebold, Montessori, a lot of people have heard of some of these early educators and they were very keen to point out the importance of play, and not just play but the environment, and the fact that there's general agreement that there's three educators of children and one is the adult, the adults around them, other children, and the environment.

So obviously, during COVID, children lost two of these great pillars of their learning when they lost access to the environment and other children.

Q. Thank you very much. You mention specifically in
 paragraph 27, the importance of play in their daily
 lives and healthy development has become increasingly
 accepted in recent years. You refer to the ever—growing
 body of evidence. You mention the most important

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sensitive period of their brain development is defined

by the United Nations as being zero to eight years.

I think we'll probably be coming on to hear more about that from other witnesses as well but do you have any

that from other witnesses as well, but do you have any additional comments to make in relation to that?

6 A. I think it's interesting, I'm not wanting to go down
7 a rabbit hole here, but there is a big campaign in
8 Scotland to raise the age of children going to school.
9 In other countries in the world, we see that children go
10 to school a bit later, and there's a real focus on this
11 play—based learning, for want of a better expression,
12 the pedagogy at play in these early years where children

the pedagogy at play in these early years where children learn through play.

13 learn through play14 When we look

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When we look at the Reggio Emilia approach, what they talk about is children are born competent. They're competent beings. When you look at the natural posture a child has until the age of eight, the physical literacy that comes very naturally with them, so this early years stage is so important because children are naturally curious. The whole purpose of play—based learning at this early stage is about fostering that curiosity and trying to encourage it and provide opportunities to expand that knowledge. That's in the environment, but it is in the world around them, and it 's how they make sense of the world around them and

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1 how they fit into that world, so it's incredibly 2 important.

The brain is developing at a rapid, you know, rate of knots. It never stops developing, the brain. But at that stage, as my father once said about his grandchildren, you can almost feel the brain working, you can almost hear it ticking, and even just being on a nature walk and stopping when the child looks right down to find an invisible bug to our eye, and watches it for such a long time, you know, and so many make—believe things that they do and provocations that stimulate language. Obviously language is really important in children's development. It stimulates the imagination. It stimulates creativity. These are essential for their own personal development. It is also very important for us in terms of what employment opportunities these children will have, and the life chances that they will experience.

Q. You explain in paragraph 26 or you describe, I think,
 that there are five fundamental types of human play.
 You say:

"These are commonly referred to as: physical play; play with objects; symbolic play; pretence or socio—dramatic play; and games with rules. Each supports a range of cognitive and emotional

important 25 supports a range of co

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developments, and a good balance of play experience is regarded as a healthy diet for children."

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I'll come on when we're discussing impacts to ask you to draw on those to explain the impacts with reference to the loss of play or the absence of play or deficiencies of play at the time, but if I can ask you to explain a bit more about -- in paragraph 17 you refer to a play types toolkit that Play Scotland developed. What is that and how is that used?

A. So the play types toolkit draws on someone called Bob Hughes' taxonomy of play types. He identified 16 different types of play. The different versions of play that you've just outlined derive from Professor David Whitebread, sadly no longer with us, and Bob Hughes the same. It was quite interesting when the two gentlemen met at a conference in Scotland where they compared their notes as to how they had derived the different types of play, and they agreed that actually they were both in agreement with what had happened and how they had described them.

So the purpose of Play Scotland getting involved in this was to -- I think sometimes when you talk about children, we talk about a monolith, but of course there's communities of children we're really thinking about, and the same about play. We don't just think of

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play $\,--\,$ some people do just talk about: oh, they're out to play, or the kids need to play. We actually saw this during lockdown, you know, when some local authorities I noticed in England in press releases, not anything against England by the way, that would say: the playground has to shut for X reason, I know it's good for children to run off, let off steam. That just so doesn't get why play is so important for children and young people. So the play types toolkit was pulled together with teachers in mind, but a wider audience as well for communities.

What we're saying is it's really important that children get opportunities to experience the broadest range of play opportunities, not just outdoor play. whatever that might be, or indoor play, but to try and go through the different types of play and the impact that has on their development.

We mapped it against something called GIRFEC, Getting it Right for Every Child, and the Shanarri well-being indicators. Really at the heart of all of it is what the Scottish Government is very keen on is the best start for every child, and we were mapping all these different play types and experiences and opportunities, and what they might look like in the school day and how you might be able to provide that.

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We mapped that then against the curriculum for excellence. So that made it easier for teachers who have a lot to get through in terms of delivering curriculum for excellence, to see how these different types of play fitted in to what they had to get through in the school day, and how play contributed to their delivery of the curriculum. It is the biggest download we still have. Every six months I do a report to government, I go through the analytics that people pull together, and there's easily 2,500 downloads of this document on a six-monthly basis, not just in Scotland but around the world.

Q. Thank you. The Inquiry has commissioned a number of academic reports, and one of them is on the impact of the pandemic on the delivery of education to children under 5, and that paper referred to the fact that young children's learning is fundamentally play based, and shaped by the environment, relationships, physical movements and spaces for sensorial stimulations as you've described as well. That report also noted that the closure of early learning and childcare settings during the pandemic impacted especially on the ways in which children in the early years learn by restricting their access to high quality play environments and opportunities.

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Just bearing in mind the seven types of play and the play toolkit, could I ask you what types of play spaces and settings in Scotland offer the best opportunities for high quality play?

5 A. In Scotland, over the past few decades, we've seen 6 a huge improvement in the offer for children's play in early learning and early years, and with childminders 8 and nursery provision. I think there's a much greater understanding of the importance of outdoor play. So 10 while a lot of provision now has outdoor play, which is 11 really important because I think it's one in three families in Scotland live in flats, and some of those families may well have access to private gardens, but a lot of them don't, it's really important to get this opportunity to play outdoors.

> I just checked with colleagues yesterday. I think there's 48 registered outdoor play providers now in Scotland, where it's a completely outdoor play offer. So we've come a long way. So outdoor play is something that's really important. It's so important that children get brought together in settings when they're young. Playing with each other is very important. That social interaction is huge. Playing slightly outside of your age range as well is good. It helps to bring children on. It maybe gives them confidence. As you

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know, we don't go on to work in our age range, so it's very important that we understand how to socialise and get on with other people.

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But what's really important is when you see children coming into an early years provision, and they'll all come in at different stages of development, but there can be up to five months, perhaps more, difference in development, and that can be in language development, it can be in independent mobility, it could be in going to toilet training.

So there can be a gap immediately on entry to these places, and the fact that there is so much rich stimulation across — whether it's to do with fine motor skills, whether it's to do with gross motor skills, whether it's sensory stimulation, physical literacy, so many different ways to stimulate the curiosity and encourage the child to learn through their own learning and their own play. It's very hard to get that in any household, never mind households who maybe haven't got access to resources that they can spend on play. So it's really important that this wide range is offered.

Obviously we have a very skilled workforce at play as well, and parents aren't that skilled workforce, you know, instinctively parents can do their best, maybe grandparents do a bit better because they have more

time. But actually it's a very skilled workforce that we have, and they're very good at encouraging children to learn for themselves by themselves and to cooperate and collaborate with each other. And I think that's something that they do need a lot of stimulation to achieve, and I would suggest that it's very difficult in any home environment to have that, but it's particularly important for children from more vulnerable backgrounds, and those that General Comment 17 tells us that we need to pay particular attention to.

- Q. Just in relation to those settings, you mentioned specifically outdoor, some of what you touched on there obviously not only outdoor, but would you be able to comment on formal and informal types of settings as well, because we obviously in Scotland have Bookbugs, we have various sensory organisations with sensory play. Are you able to elaborate and just link it back to the types of play that were mentioned and what —
- A. Yes. A lot of play can be make—believe, it can be pretend. We saw a lot during COVID children and I saw this in Northern Ireland when I was working there in areas of conflict, where children play out what's going on around them to try and make sense of it. So when Professor Helen Dodd and others had called for parents to tell them about how children's play had

varied during COVID, you would see children covering up their dollies or their teddy bears' mouths with sellotape to replicate the masks. You heard of games where if there was coloured balls, the red ball would be the COVID virus, and it was to try and splat it. You know, so children are playing to make sense of the environment around them.

They realise more than —— adults always realise that what's going on, and they play out what's happening and even things like they understood some of the rules that were being applied. They would invite ten teddies to their birthday party, and then say: sorry, two of you can't come because only six allowed now; if you don't take this medicine, you will die. Children are very matter of fact and black and white. It can actually be quite alarming for parents to see sometimes, but they do play out and they do understand.

So in the early years settings, you will have dressing up, lots of different dressing up opportunities, yes, you'll have sensory stimulation, you'll have lots of opportunities to go outside in all weathers. There will be different —— you know, the weather gear to go outside. There will be that experience of nature and the elements in nature, which are very important, and children need to learn to be

cautious about high winds, about strong rain, about the cold, so there are lots of these experiences that go on in the nursery setting, and a wealth of opportunities of things to play with.

And there could be wooden toys, there might be plastic toys, and just such a range, and obviously there will be the standard pots and pans and wooden spoons, the go—to that every child loves to play with. A lot of these things, like playground equipment, are played for for the purposes for which they're designed, for a short space of time, but anyone watching children play realise that doesn't happen for very long, and then they very quickly modify what's there to fit in with the games that they want to create and the rules that they want to make about how they're going to play.

- Q. You've already touched on children who might benefit.
 Are there any particular groups of children in addition
 to the ones you've mentioned who might benefit from
 this?
- A. I think there is. We have a lot of children in different communities in Scotland. I'm thinking of asylum seekers' children, I'm thinking of disabled children, I'm thinking migrants, ethnic minority children. A lot of families, particularly during COVID it was very obvious didn't have the support networks

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that we assume are in place. And also because some families nowadays don't stay -- a lot of families don't stay in the same communities for the rest of their life . So these support networks are very important. I know from being a parent myself, and my daughter being a parent, that very quickly the parents of your children's friends at nursery and school become your friendship group as well.

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So these things are really important, and I know other colleagues in projects, I'm thinking of Licketyspit, which is a drama-led organisation, were able to reach out to these communities that aren't well connected in the community to start off with, and were able to offer them a lot of drama play opportunities

For a lot of communities that they were working with, they would have said: they had no other connection to the outside world, they didn't understand a lot of what was going on; so that was an opportunity then to ask the drama play teachers really what was going on, what was happening and what this meant for them.

So I feel that the play sector played an inordinately important role at this stage to help connect communities, but I'm also thinking speech developments for boys can sometimes be more delayed, I'm

not saying only for boys, play -- girls' play, I think a report came out only in October there suggesting that by the time girls are two, they play out less often than

So a lot of these things -- yes, the research catches up with some of the things that we feel we know intuitively, but these opportunities that children get to play in formal settings are very important, and they get informal play opportunities in these settings, and then in the after-school experience, there's what we call the informal unregulated sector where some of the staff there might have not formal early years qualifications , they will have play work qualifications and they might have specific skills like circus skills. drama, as I've mentioned.

So it won't just be the more curriculum-based qualification that you might see in early years.

Q. Thank you. I think I'll come back to Play Scotland's role during the pandemic because you've already touched on the review of the Play Scotland -- Play Scotland's review of the Scotland play strategy, and you touch on in your witness statement a number of projects delivered by Play Scotland, in particular the Get Into Summer programme, so if we have time, I'll move on to discuss some of the impacts and then come back to touch on that

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But there are two that I just wanted to ask you about before we look at impacts. You mentioned in paragraphs 47 to 48 the playful schools project and the involvement of loose parts play to promote mental health and well-being and also the feedback that you had on that project. Would you mind elaborating a little bit about -- was that part of the other initiatives or was that a stand-alone?

10 A. This was a stand-alone project that we secured the Scottish Government's well-being fund to deliver. We worked with delivery partners, ScrapAntics, in Dundee. That's interesting because they're a scrap store, they've got lots of skills , they're not formally qualified in early years, for example, or play work, but a very dynamic organisation. We worked with them and they went into various -- at that stage it was hubs that were being provided for essential workers, and children had to go to these hubs.

> What was happening was really born out of ignorance that we all had at the start, was a lot of children went along and they sat indoors and they weren't even given anything to play with because that could be dangerous: how would you clean it. if you touched it somebody else might touch it. So a lot of us really didn't understand

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what was going on and what was possible and wasn't possible. So the default was: nothing was possible.

So we set up the loose parts project in Dundee, and because ScrapAntics have this massive scrap store, they just brought along lots of loose parts, and they developed a pilot project and children were brought outside to play, and helped to build various play structures and take part in various activities . And the one quote that I think will stay with me for the rest of my life was -- that came out of the evaluation of this is one child said: play gives you a sense of freedom when you have none.

To my mind in all my career, I'd never heard a child talk about their freedom at all or their loss of it. I don't think it was something that had ever -- maybe any consultations we'd done with them and others had done, they'd never mentioned that. And it was just such a heart-wrenching comment to make, and the amazing imagination and things that were done. Obviously with loose parts play, a lot of it is scrap, so some of it can be scrapped, it doesn't need to be reused, but there were lots of different models created and lots of fantastic learning that came out of that, that allowed loose parts play to be enjoyed, not just in Scotland but around the world after that.

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Q. You mentioned that there was an evaluation report, and 100% of survey participants said that children who attended the sessions felt better in terms of better sleep, appetite and well—being, and were encouraged to 4 get out more and benefited from the opportunity to play outside; and over 90% of respondents said loose parts 7 play helps children to learn and negotiate with others. 8 Do you do evaluations of all the projects you do? 9 A. We do, we do. We build it in at the start to most of 10 them. A lot of our projects are based on public 11 funding. Occasionally we draw down funding from other 12 organisations, but you can't take public funding lightly 13 in my view. I've always thought about it sometimes when 14 I'm championing children's play: okay, I'm competing for 15 money here, I'm probably up against hip replacements, 16 knee replacements, you know, essential things that make 17 quality of life difference to people in the community. 18 So I'm not saying that I compete with money in that same 19 cohort. But you're always thinking what —— and I think 20 that's why the research and evidence base is so 21 important. We evaluate everything we do, and some 22 things are fantastic and some things we know very early 23 on are just not working, and that gives you a chance to start to modify. 25 I think the biggest disappointment I have, and this

this — a lot of transitions in school between early years into primary school, and then from primary school into big school as I call it, these are really important and children — if you're not in the school system, you probably don't realise, but children don't just finish on day X and go into the big school on day Y or go to the next school. There's a lot of preparation done by the professionals around the children and by the families, and there is various things that they go through. So they are going through a transition process, even if they don't realise it themselves, and that reduces the anxiety and helps them settle in in the new environment.

We were very aware that a lot of early years

So this project was really about -- to support

We were very aware that a lot of early years children hadn't gone through that transition and ended up in P1, and then they hadn't even had a proper P1, and they were suddenly in P2, and that was very difficult, and it was very difficult also for the professionals around them, so we were really keen and we came up with these cards that looked at different aspects of children's development and well—being, and different play — and we had a resource bag that went with it, and we had a teddy with a wee red heart. We had some meditation that children could do and they could lie

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isn't just confined to projects that we did during
COVID, is when you put a lot of money into a pilot and
an evaluation, and you know it works, the fact it
doesn't then get scaled up across the country can be
very disappointing. But for example, in Dundee we had
a fantastic project there, which was really focusing on
the transition from early years into P1.

- Q. I was just about to ask you. We will be hearing a fair bit about the importance of transition, so I was going to ask you to elaborate on that. That was the play well project, is that correct?
- 12 A. It was. That was Dundee City Council and ourselves working there and --
- Q. If I could ask you sorry, if you could elaborate
 a little bit about the importance of transitions and the
 rationale for having this project.
 - A. Yes. I'm just going to go back to the point I wanted to make because I might forget it when I go on to this. This particular project was carried out across nine primary schools in Dundee, and it was so successful and independently evaluated by a PhD student they had working with them, that they then rolled it out to all the primary schools in Dundee. So I just —— it's sad sometimes when that cannot be scaled up and rolled out further.

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down and put the red heart -- this is -- one of the teachers came up with this idea, over the beating heart of the child to help them to calm down when they felt overwhelmed by emotions.

The whole purpose of this was to try and engage parents and families with children's learning at home, and when teachers were then doing online learning with children in the home, they knew that they had these toys around them, these provocations around them, that they could play with, and it just was such a good experience.

I think it really helped parents — parents were feeling very overwhelmed, and a lot of people were learning how to work from home that had never worked from home. They were probably struggling with internet connections, the stress of joining a meeting and being kicked out of it. There was so much going on. It is so easy to forget how stressful it was, particularly if you lived in a rural area like myself.

These things were very challenging, and then so —— and children are at home maybe with their parents, thinking: oh, this is lovely, we're all together; but, no, parents are trying to work. So everything was very difficult, and then there was obviously, you know, an expectation that parents would get involved in children's education, and for some parents, I'm sure

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they loved that and were really good at it. For others it just didn't come naturally, but they recognised the benefit of this for children.

And alongside other packs and things that we'd

managed to get out to children at school and into families and into homes, I think this really helped make a difference and make a difference to everybody. We were obviously very interested in the impact on the child, but I think it had a very positive impact on the families and the professions working with the families.

Q. Thank you. In terms of before looking at the impacts that you list, there was one other aspect of your work during the pandemic that I'd like to ask you about. You refer to your work in engaging with the Scottish Government through a working group on guidance for the unregulated childcare sector. Are these what

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Q. So would you please give a few examples of what they
 might include, and then elaborate on what that
 engagement involved and what concerns you had?

are otherwise known as informal settings?

A. So formal provision is regulated, so if you have
 a formal out of school setting and preschool setting,
 then you're required to register that setting, and the
 workers are required to register with what we call the

SSSC, which is the Scottish Social Services Council. That is what we call the regulated sector.

Then unfortunately, we have something called the unregulated sector, which is not the wild west that it might suggest, but it tends to be the informal play provision where we tend to have people, and they're with a wide range of backgrounds and skills, and we talked about ScrapAntics there. We've talked about people that have drama, circus skills, play workers.

Because a lot of the play work offer is less than a certain time in the day, then it doesn't have the same requirement to register. But these providers do abide by the regulations — they are not required to regulate but they do abide by some of the ratios and the health and safety requirements for buildings, the health and safety requirements if you take children outside. So it's a bit unfortunate, the name, we've just never come up with a better name.

But it was really important —— so some of their —— there wasn't guidance specifically written for them because they didn't fall under the formal terms and structures. These settings were the ones that were possibly providing the most important play opportunities for children in terms of outdoor play, and I hesitate to say most important, but a range of play opportunities.

So it was really important that they could understand, and that's where the loose parts piloting came in as to: what is it you can do; what does the hygiene look like in these settings now; what does loose parts play look like; what are the loose parts that we're recommending maybe that you bring in and use; what are the ones we're maybe not recommending that you use at this point in time?

So it was a range of, you know, recommendations, and the sector, to be fair, was crying out for it. When it sounds like unregulated, you probably think: oh, they don't want regulated; that's not the case. People wanted to know what was working, what could they do, what they couldn't — nobody wanted to do the wrong thing, but everybody wanted to do the best by children, and people working with children and young people could see the distress, the anxiety and the impact that not being allowed to play was having on children, and it was impacting then their school work, it was impacting on family relations at home. So this was something that people wanted to get right, and it was really important that Play Scotland then got involved and helped to write these regulations for the sector.

Q. You mentioned one in paragraph 60 — you highlighted that children's well—being, including mental health,

would be negatively affected. You said play opportunities being limited by views on risk and not balanced by an understanding of the essential benefits of play.

Is that where you stepped in to assist with the regulations?

A. Yes. One of the things that was very helpful during COVID. I think for a lot of organisations, was the networks that were already plugged into. So Play Scotland was plugged into children in Scotland's strategic policy forum. Play Scotland is also plugged into the play safety forum, the UK play safety forum and the UK children's play policy forum, and the boards that we've had, over the years, the governance boards for Play Scotland, has had a lot of researchers and academics on those boards. That creates its own network that you have.

So we were liaising with all our networks and with all our researchers, and the play safety forum, Professor David Ball, who is professor of risk management at Middlesex University, with others had written a paper — a number of papers for the play safety forum. And we were really concerned that — we talk about risk benefit or benefit risk, where you kind of assess what are the benefits of allowing children to

opportunities. 25 of assess what are the be

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play in playgrounds, for example, against what are the risks that are happening to them.

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So these papers were being published. Professor Helen Dodd and others had published a paper that talked about the impact of social isolation on children and young people, and their conclusion that I found very interesting was that it wasn't the severity of the social isolation that was the big issue, it was the duration.

So we were feeding this research and evidence back up through the networks we had and through the government networks that we had to get to the people who were making these strategic decisions, and we were concerned that -- particularly the families that we talked about, and I said one in three families living in flats, a lot of families, particularly in poorer areas, didn't have access either to a garden or a quality green space, and we felt that that should have been -- a read across priority that people maybe in flats would have direct access to that.

But the other thing I think that motivated a lot of our energy at one stage, particularly got me very worked up and exercised, was the media relentlessly going on about how important it was to re-open the pubs. And my view was that there wasn't a right to go to the pub but

there was a child's right to play, and by not exercising that right for children and young people, it was having a significant impact on them.

So we made our case and we managed to put forward the evidence that we had at the time. It was well received in government and one of our officials, I felt very astutely came back, and said: this is very interesting, are there other papers out there we should know about, is there one space for all these to sit where everybody was doing different bits of research? And of course there wasn't. It was just about trying to identify where this evidence was, bring it together and then try and get it to the right people who were making the decisions.

And in Scotland we were very pleased that we were the first of the nations to re-open our playgrounds, and that children under 12 didn't have the restrictions placed on them that previously they'd had, they were allowed to play freely , and there was a recognition in statements by the First Minister that children's play was important.

So we felt we had stepped up to the mark and done our job, rather than wringing our hands and complaining which is very easy to do, but I think it proved to us how important these networks were in terms of bringing

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together evidence, research and making sure that it gets 2 to the people that were making strategic decisions that 3 impact on children's opportunities for play.

4 Q. Thank you. The other thing that we will be hearing more about during the Inquiry is about — a concern about a lack of children's voices being heard, and you mentioned specifically that you in this context were 7 8 concerned by the lack -- Play Scotland was concerned by 9 the lack of children's voices and visibility in the 1.0 crisis. Would you care to elaborate a little on that, 11 please?

12 A. Yes. I think when we were evaluating — the loose parts play one was a good example that I gave. Children were so articulate and understanding, you know, and I think it was difficult enough for some of the adults to get their head round what was going on. But actually, children were very astute, they were very -- obviously they observe, they pay attention. And no one was really asking them about how they -- what effect it was having 2.0 on them, and what they might have thought the solutions 21 were because children are very solution focused.

> In my experience of consulting with them, they're never asking for anything that adults don't want. They like clean environments, they don't like dog poo, they don't like glass in the playground, you know, they're

1 not -- they like light, they like the place tidied up, 2 they like more green planting.

So it's really important that children's voices, because obviously Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child says that children should be engaged with and their voices taken into consideration appropriate to their stage and range of development and understanding.

So we had carried out a review of the play strategy in a COVID context, and the government asked us actually, and I think might have given a small piece of money to listen to what children had to say about the recommendations that adults were coming forward with. That was fascinating, and we produced a report, and I know that that was widely circulated in government, and some of the comments that children were making were heartbreaking, you know, and they were actually what a lot of us were feeling but possibly weren't able to articulate, but they missed fun, friends, family and freedom.

It was really quite heartbreaking. They really missed the social clubs that they went to, they missed going out to play football or hang about, as they liked to do before. This produced a huge stress and anxiety in them. There was a lot of gratitude from

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2 keeping us safe. It really was very rewarding and 3 heartwarming to hear how they were observing what was 4 going on and what they thought about it. But they really wanted their schools re-opened and they really wanted their clubs re-opened, and they really wanted to be able to go and visit their friends again, and they 7 8 really missed their family. 9 I think that was fantastic, but it also made us 1.0 realise that for children —— didn't have big families or 11 wider connected families, that it was really important 12 that we tried to get the social networks re-opened for 13 them, and where possible provide them, and if that was 14 by outside, then we had to provide them outside. 15 ${\sf Q}.$ Thank you for that. I think we'll try and have a look 16 at some of the impacts that you discuss in your 17 statement. Just before we do that, I understand that 18 Play Scotland didn't undertake any specific surveys 19 in relation to impacts or understanding the impacts on 20 children. How did you ascertain what these impacts

children: thank you for what you're doing, thank you for

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A. Yes.

A. A range of opportunities that we have to engage with the

Q. — of those or something else completely?

were? Was this through engagement with your members,

through feedback on your projects? A combination --

sector. So we convened something called the Play Council in Scotland, which is of the play sector. We had convened meetings of the Play Council. Things got a bit easier to convene meetings online anyway. We had a Play Council strategy group and we were consulting with them on the review of the play strategy, we were consulting with them on a manifesto that we were putting together for the upcoming elections at that time. I think that might have been 2021.

A lot of the projects that we had run out, of Get Into Summer, we rolled out with a wide range of stakeholders, including Early Years Scotland with their stay and play project in Glasgow and Dumfries. Staff that I now have in Play Scotland worked directly in the sector at that time. So it didn't take long for us all to understand what the impacts were and what -- so what the impacts were on children and young people and on their families. It was really important that we try to bring that together and we had pulled together a manifesto for play from the ten key national children's organisations in Scotland, and it was really important when we looked at making recommendations to government in the review of the play strategy going forward that it was things that made a difference to children and young people's lives, so it wasn't just

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about infrastructure or things like that. Children wanted to have a say in things going forward.

I think they said so many times: we want more play and better play. And I think when some of them had started to look around, and a lot of the parents started to look around what the play offer was in their area, some people might have been quietly impressed. I think a lot of people weren't, and they started to realise that this was not fit for purpose and that children's play had to improve, and that they had to have more say in how that was done.

This was sitting alongside a piece of legislation that had happened in 2019, where Play Scotland had led a campaign to have play sufficiency and children's participation duties in the Planning Act, and there was consultation going on around that and something called national planning framework 4, which is a bit of a mouthful, but we had to unpick that and explain it to the children's sector, and then ask children to have a view on it.

So there was a lot of consulting going on with children and young people at that stage, and I think it came from a very informed position. I think it was over 1,000 children and young people responded to some of these consultations, which were record highs, because

1 they had seen what happened when their play was taken away, and they had lots of very good ideas of what they thought should happen going forward and if it ever should happen again. So I think we captured a lot of that learning and we discerned a lot of the impact then 7

Q. Thank you. You cover a number of impacts and I'm not sure we'll have time to cover them all. You cover the impact on play generally, social and emotional development, language and communication, impacts on personal skills, motor skills and disproportionately impacted children. I'd just like to touch on a few of those. If I can perhaps ask you just to elaborate a bit on the impact on the -- or the specific impact that the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions had on children's ability to play and engage in social interactions within early learning and childcare settings. You discuss that starting at paragraph 69, and you talk about, in your statement, children shifting toward more solitary play, delaying their progression. You talk about restrictions to small isolated bubbles within hubs later, when they return to settings.

So if I could ask you to elaborate a bit on that impact on the ability to play, please, in a general sense

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1 A. Yes. I think this happened during COVID and I think it
2 was hard to break down after COVID. I think the whole
3 direction of travel in nurseries had changed.
4 Obviously, there was a preoccupation, necessarily so,
5 with hygiene and cleanliness and what could be played
6 with and what couldn't be played with, and bubbles and
7 how many should be in a bubble and who could be in a
8 bubble, and that had led to children playing in more
9 solitary groups.
10 I think there's a very high level of anxiety among
11 children and young people and I think there was a clear

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I think there's a very high level of anxiety among children and young people and I think there was a clear indication, slightly related to this, that language development was slow as well. So when children can't communicate, it's very difficult, and when they're playing in quite managed situations, that's quite difficult as well because children usually run about and do lots of different things. The people that they're playing with changes very quickly. If you think about it, you know, they may be playing with two or three people doing something, the attention span goes or they see something brighter and bigger or the door opens and they're out.

So there's a lot of that that goes on at nursery and that's a level that they're at. Suddenly, they're in a very confined, constrained, managed environment and that

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was at odds with what some of them had been used to. For some children that's what they came into and got very used to and found very hard to undo.

I think a lot of staff who, quite rightly, took, you know, the health and safety and the sanitising and everything very seriously, still had a big preoccupation with cleanliness even afterwards and not getting dirty. So these are things that children need to do without even thinking about it: getting dirty, getting wet, playing with something and passing it on to somebody else and all the things that children do with play. So I think there was lots of different things happened and I think it did have an impact, particularly on children who knew something different, and then for the children who came in and this is what they knew, it was very hard to undo that after the event was over.

Q. Thank you. You mentioned language and communication and you've got something on that at paragraph 65. You note that staff observed significant delays in the development of children's language and communication skills due to reduced opportunities for socialisation and interaction. Are you able to elaborate a bit on

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24 A. Just to say that even before COVID, I think a lot of us 25 knew anecdotally that there was concerns about -- there

was a lot of things happening pre—COVID. You know, in Scotland we had children who —— Professor John McKendrick had carried out a study for us in 2017 for the Four Nations for Play Day, called "A Transformation of Play" and he had noticed this move away in the last 30 years from outdoor play, informal play, that children were moving indoors, more sedentary, what he called opportunities for risk competence were diminishing, children in Scotland becoming increasingly overweight.

We knew a lot about language development. Language development was very poor. You would have seen a lot of signs outside schools saying, "Greet your child with a smile, not a mobile". So there was lots of discussion and thought going into -- and research going into why children's language development was being delayed. Was it they weren't being spoken to directly? Was it because there was more screen time by the adult as well as the child? So a lot of things -- we were thinking about a lot of things at that stage. So then moving forward into the COVID environment then this language delay became even more pronounced, speech and language delay, and increased anxiety, which we'd already seen, mental health concerns. I think we were thinking back in 2017, 2018, 2019, I think maybe 10% of children and young people were being identified with mental health

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1 issues at that stage.
2 During COVID w

During COVID we could start to see this all increasing, so those in the sector talking, different forums, meeting up occasionally, and so anecdotally and experientally people were saying, "This is actually getting worse". And I think Public Health Scotland has just brought out a report in October there, suggesting that this differential is increasing and that COVID has played —— so it was there before, COVID has played a role, but it still seems to be increasing. So I think it's something to be very concerned about.

- 12 Q. Thank you. Related to that, or partially related to 1.3 that, you talk in paragraph 66 about the impact on 14 personal skills and you note that staff observed that 15 the pandemic restrictions affected the development of 16 essential personal skills and hygiene practices in 17 preschool children, which are typically acquired through 18 playful learning. Could you please elaborate a bit on 19 how these skills are usually acquired and how this was 20 affected?
- A. I think a lot of skills and behaviours that are taught
 through different ways you know, I'm thinking through
 nursery rhymes, through repetition, through singing,
 through copying what other people are doing, through
 slightly competitive behaviours, you know, getting stars

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for doing this, getting rewards, and collaboration and cooperation, and children do emulate and copy what other children are doing.

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So if you've got a slightly older cohort, they're really good at brushing their teeth and we're wanting the young ones to pay attention and it's really important to do that. So a lot of things were done in a very playful way to pick up these skills . I'm thinking of fine motor skills, where children play with Play-Doh -- I know I've talked on that earlier on -- and other things, and messy play, and just textures and everything, lots of things that children get to experience, and the skilled practitioners introduce at different times and reinforce. A lot of these things either stopped altogether or didn't happen very much and so a lot of these learned behaviours, which actually are essential going forward, haven't been established and have been very quick -- a bit like I was saying, for the children that maybe knew some of that before they might be able to pick it up quite easily. But for children who didn't know that before, sometimes it's quite hard because this growth period that we talk about in the brain between nought and eight is massive.

By the time they get to school -- and remember some children come out of early learning straight into P2,

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they didn't go into P1, through the door and into the next door. They didn't get a lot of this and the teachers had enough to be worrying about in some ways, I would suggest, in terms of trying to teach cohorts that hadn't come through the normal transition phases who'd missed out on key elements of their blocks of learning and their play opportunities more than anything

It was very challenging then. So some of these things can't then be done. I'm not saying they're not expected to happen in the school day, but I don't know how a teacher would fit that in as well. So in a way, you know, being school ready traditionally would have been being able to sit down, tie your shoelaces, it probably would have meant going to the toilet and brushing your teeth and other things as well, but a lot of these practices, as it says here, couldn't happen as much as they did have, so that embedded learning didn't happen.

Q. You touched on there motor skills, and in paragraphs 67 to 68 you explain that limitations on outdoor space and playtime significantly impacted on children's growth and fine motor skills development. Could you please provide a little bit more detail on the ways in which their physical development was affected and why? And I think

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you've mentioned Play-Doh already, but if you could 2 elaborate a little bit on the play types that would 3 develop motor skills.

A. Yes, and I think just to add to what you're saving there. I think even when schools went back, quite often children weren't allowed out to play. So it wasn't just that this happened in early years, it continued on into the school environment. Some of the things we talk about are rough and tumble play, local motor play, children hanging out of trees, standing on one leg, working out their balance, deliberately letting themselves fall over. Do you know, if we didn't let children fall over, they would never learn to walk.

So children need to be able to balance, throw themselves about, they manage their own body, and this happens in the environment where they're running about using soft play, and you'll see children playing a game and deliberately letting themselves fall or throw themselves on the ground. So all these things happen in a very playful environment.

I mentioned earlier, children have a very natural posture, they've got very good physical literacy, but it's really important that they get a chance to develop that, upper body strength, big muscle groups. I was just thinking even this year at the Paris Olympics

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there's not an elite athlete who gets there that didn't start just by there playing, you know, in the street, playing in the nursery, playing in the home.

So all these fine-honed skills in terms of physical literacy, hand/eye coordination, ball skills, everything starts in these ways of children playing and just engaging with the world around them. And that's why this exposure to the outdoor environment was really is really important and it didn't happen as much as it

I think where it could -- and I think now that we have these outdoor provisions in Scotland, it's fantastic to see. So we have really good practice and I think a lot of learning has happened. I know this might not happen the same way round, but I think it's really important that we hang on to the evidence and the evaluations that we have and we build on that going forward, not just in a pandemic but just for children's health development generally.

20 Q. Thank you. Just on impacts, you also note in your statement in a couple of places the disproportionate impact of the restrictions on children from marginalised and disadvantaged groups was a key concern. You mention that Public Health Scotland in their COVID-19early years resilience and impact survey showed that

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infection control measures, including those to restrict outdoor play opportunities, disproportionately affected children from marginalised and disadvantaged groups.

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You've already touched on this to certain extent. but how and why did factors such as poverty, lack of digital access and limited access to outdoor space contribute to those disparities?

8 A. It contributes enormously. Just to pick one area in 9 Scotland, if you think of Govanhill, in one square mile 10 I think there's over 57 languages spoken. It's home to 11 two Roma communities living side by side, migrant 12 families, asylum-seeking families, ethnic minority groups, a wide range of -- it's the communities that 13 14 reflect all of us in Scotland. Very intense living 15 in that area, very high levels of poverty and deprivation. So it's really hard to talk about 16 17 disadvantaged communities as a monolith. There's no 18 such thing. We really need to unpick the communities 19 that build Scotland and the composition of what Scotland 20 is and we've all these communities, and when we think of 21 the communities that are most disproportionately 22 affected, this is them.

> If you then look at General Comment 17 where they say we need to pay particular attention to disabled children, to play for girls and other groups, then we

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realise that these groups, who maybe had less play opportunities to begin with, were obviously going to be even more adversely impacted going through a crisis like

So it was really important that loads of us in the sector try to do what we could, whether that was providing play online or outdoor play opportunities. For some of the people, that was trying to get tablets to them, you know, electronic devices, because that was their connection to the world and that was how they made sense of what was going on round about them.

There was such deep social isolation for families, never mind children and young people, and I think sometimes that's what we forget. You know, it was the families and the communities were so massively impacted and the fact that people could be so isolated and maybe in an overcrowded flat in Govanhill -- so much more different from maybe an experience somebody else might have with a private garden or in a less well-off area but with access to quality green spaces on their doorstep. So there was just such a wide variety.

There was also a great -- there was a very poor attitude in the public realm to children being out playing and communities being out playing. I hope he doesn't mind, but l' $\hspace{-0.1cm}$ I use the example of my current

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chair of Play Scotland, who took his daughter with her skateboard to an empty car park, a great place for the skateboard, and got chased. There was nobody in the car park, it was empty, so why not let children in there to play. You know, a great play space.

So I think there was a lack of smart thinking about where children could go and play, and it's spaces that we should have brought into use straightaway. I'm thinking of cul-de-sacs, I'm thinking of pavements. There were pop-up cycling lanes everywhere, millions were spent on pop-up cycling lanes. I'm not complaining about that, I'm complaining that millions didn't get spent on pop-up play where they needed to be. And I think if there was some learning, I would like to see that as some learning. There was great response from the government in the Summer of Play, don't get me wrong, and it was fantastic to see that, a great response, but there's others whose lobbying skills I think we need to learn from.

20 Q. You mentioned there the Summer of Play, that was something we had to skip over earlier to get on to impacts, so perhaps we can just go back and have a quick discussion about that. Firstly, just the review of Scotland's play strategy. That was one of the things you undertook during the pandemic. What was the

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1 reasoning behind Play Scotland conducting a review of 2 that strategy at the time?

A. So the play strategy had been launched in 2013 and the 4 Scottish Government had worked with us and given us some 5 funding to review the play strategy in 2019. We were 6 getting ready to launch that version of it in 2020. The government had a new fund they were going to announce 8 and Play Scotland had been working on a new five-year strategy for ourselves. Then came the pandemic in March 10 and that was all put on hold.

11 Some of the recommendations that we were wanting to 12 make from the review of the play strategy and actually 13 some of the learning of what had -- what was really 14 important in that review was we had been looking at what 15 had really worked and what had improved in the previous 16 six years, seven years. So we turned to that to see 17 what was working, what could we build on, and then 18 we were asked to conduct a review under the COVID -- we 19 decided to conduct a review then under a COVID-19 lens 20 to build on that learning and then the government asked 21 us to take our findings to children and young people to 22 see what they thought about that.

23 Q. And that was the consultation you mentioned earlier? 24 A. That was the consultation where children clearly told us

25 that they clearly missed their freedom, their fun, their

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2 gratitude for what we did, they were really asking to be able to be allowed to go out and play again. 4 Q. Then we're almost at the end of our time, but I will ask you briefly just to provide -- you touch on it in your statement -- but just a brief overview of the projects 6 7 and initiatives that Play Scotland developed and 8 delivered as part of the Scottish Government's Get Into 9 Summer programme and what it was aiming to achieve and 1.0 then I'll ask you after that what some of the key 11 learnings or successes from those projects were that you 12 think could be applied more broadly to support 13 children's play in the future. 14 A. Okay, so the Get Into Summer project, what we tried to 15 do was create new things, pilot new things, use it as an opportunity for innovation, and we spread it across all 16 17

families and their friends. And while they were full of

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the domains of the play strategy. So we had some projects where we support families and we had the Play 19 Well Outdoors packs and we worked with Save the Children 20 and the Beano and others on those and rolled them out 21 with families and into schools as well. I think we had 22 80.000 distributed through schools and 40.000 23 distributed through other partners. Home Start and 2.4 others. So that was families. Then we looked at early

learning and childcare and we worked with

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Early Years Scotland on stay and play in Glasgow, and that had a food offer as well.

We had an inter-generational story telling project with early years and out of schools, working with old people, senior citizens in homes, and that was story telling to try and reduce the isolation of older people in the community as much as -- and increase their health and well-being as much as children and young people's. That was a great success.

Then we had our loose parts play in schools, I can't just remember them all now off by heart, and then we had play in the community. So we did have pop-up play and we had publications came out of that as to what pop-up play might look like in our streets and communities and what had worked and what hadn't worked. A lot of that was piloted up in Dundee and Aberdeen. So we tried to cover the whole of Scotland. We had things going on --I think we had pop-up plays going on in Shetland as well, so we tried to look at Borders, Highlands and Islands, all of Scotland, and then the full age range as

22 Q. Just in terms of the lessons learned from that and 23 taking them forward, were there any positive lessons. 24 the key learnings and successes that you think could be 25 applied in future?

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A. I think we learned a lot of about what works, I think we learned a lot about how important inter-generational approaches to play are, and I think we did a lot of 4 piloting, a lot of evaluating. I think a lot of those things could have been scaled up, still should be scaled up across Scotland, and I think what was really important for us was the importance of partnership. 8 I think we worked with between 42 and 60 partners 9 directly to deliver a lot of these things.

I think it's recognising and looking round to see who has the skills -- we can't all be good at everything -- but know what's out there. So the partnerships and networks, the circles of influence, became incredibly important, and I suspect, going forward, are going to be more important, and that we all have a role to play, and particular professionals who -play possibly has nothing to do with their day job, their strategic decision-making can have a huge impact on children's experiences and opportunities for play and it's really important that we are able to reach out and touch them.

I think a lot of things that worked could have been rolled out and benefited children across Scotland. I know a lot of what we did benefited children around the world, which was good. And some people didn't wait

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1 for local authorities to introduce things, community 2 groups did it for themselves. So we were also -3 I think we won an award for one of the projects with the 4 International Play Association as well and we were 5 allowed to present around the world on that project.

So a lot of good was able to be done, we couldn't have done it alone and we certainly couldn't have done it without the voice of children and young people telling us what it was they wanted and without the researchers and the evidence keeping us right about what the impact was, what they could see happening on the ground, what needed to change and how we needed to change it, and we were fortunate that the government was receptive to that and that they recognised the value of play, particularly for under 12s, and allowed the restrictions on that to be lifted very early on.

17 Q. Thank you. Then before we leave, just based on your 18 experience of the pandemic, are there any -- you've 19 touched on a few already in your evidence -- but any 20 other key lessons that you or Play Scotland think should 21 be applied to ensure children's play is prioritised in 22 the recovery efforts and in any future crisis response?

23 A. Yes. I think, hopefully, there's a greater learning 24 that children's play isn't just about running around to 25 let steam off, that there's an incredible impact on

their emotional well-being, their mental health, their MS LORNA KETTLES (called) 2 physical literacy and abilities to do things, their 2 Questions by MS STEWART social skills , and in a way that we do understand that 3 MS STEWART: Thank you. Good afternoon, Ms Kettles. Can you please confirm your full name for the Inquiry? 4 social isolation -- isolation isn't good for a lot of us 4 because we're a very social animal, it's really A. Yes, it's Lorna Anne Kettles. important to understand this early phase of children's Q. You have provided a witness statement to the Inquiry? development, the nought to eight is incredibly 8 important, and we really do need to pay particular 8 Q. And for your Lordship's benefit, that is at reference 9 attention to that and the play opportunities that they 9 number WT0642. 1.0 1.0 can have Now, Ms Kettles, you're the policy and engagement 11 11 manager at EYS. That is a role you have held Then we need to look at the 8 to 12 year-olds. 12 That's a huge part of their life where they're about to 12 since November 2022? 13 transition then, after that, into secondary schools. 13 A. Yes, that's right. 14 And I didn't talk about the transitioning into secondary 14 Q. During the pandemic you were with the same organisation 15 schools, but Falkirk Council and Learning Through 15 as a policy officer? A. Yes, that's right. 16 Landscapes had worked with us. Every secondary school 16 17 in Falkirk, except one, including the additional support 17 Q. How long did you hold that role for? 18 needs school, worked with us because there was a 18 A. I started in August 2019, so about three years. recognition there that the P7 children then moved into 19 19 Q. In terms of your role with EYS during the pandemic, can 20 S1 and into S2 and that actually children's play should 20 you tell us a bit about what that involved? 21 extend into secondary school, it can't just stop in P7, 21 A. Yes. So I have done policy for a number of years. It 22 2.2 follows a very similar pattern. Normally, I would be and so greater recognition of that in Scotland. 23 So a lot of that learning has now been brought 23 sort of doing consultation responses and calls to 2.4 forward into the new play strategy that I talked about 2.4 evidence and things, but obviously during the pandemic, 25 25 earlier. This is only a draft, so don't quote me on it, that changed quite significantly because of the policy 85 87 1 landscape and because of the fact that policy was sort 1 but at the moment the primary drivers in the new play strategy look like parents, practitioners and place. 2 of held -- on hold for that time. And we're really pleased about that because those are 3 So most of my role was concerned around supporting the three key areas where we can make a big difference 4 our members and our children and families through making 5 to children's opportunities and where we've actually 5 sure that the information that was being provided by the 6 gained a lot of learning and insight over the pandemic 6 Scottish government, by the UK government, by anyone and through a lot of the projects that were piloted. everyone, was accessible, that they could understand it MS VAN DER WESTHUIZEN: Lady Hunter Blair, thank you very 8 8 and that we could kind of support them to deal with any much. I have no further questions for you. Unless questions or anything that might have arisen from that. 10 10 your Lordship does, that's the end. There was also a couple of opportunities as the 11 11 THE CHAIR: No, I've got no questions and again I extend my pandemic went on to provide evidence to various kind of 12 thanks as well, Lady Hunter Blair. We're very grateful. 12 calls for evidence, committees within the Parliament and 13 13 We will now break for lunch and we will come back at things like that, so I dealt with the preparation of 14 1.30. 14 that, and I also — my role is half policy, half 15 (12.13 pm) 15 engagement now and the engagement side of things really 16 (The Short Adjournment) 16 came out during the pandemic where, because of my 17 17 background, I was kind of able to provide support to 18 MS STEWART: Good afternoon, Lord Brailsford. 18 families in terms of applications for sort of benefits, 19 19 THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, Ms Stewart. Now, you have a housing, college and university jobs, that sort of 20 20 witness for us. please? thing. So out in sessions in communities, working daily 21 MS STEWART: I do, my Lord. Giving evidence this afternoon 21 with children and families as well. 22 is Ms Kettles, who is the policy and engagement manager 22 Q. That's really helpful. You've answered my next 23 23 at Early Years Scotland or EYS. auestion, your current role. In terms of your role

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during the pandemic, you mentioned information coming

from the government. Is that the guidance --

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Ms Stewart

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. When you're ready,

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A. Predominantly, yes.

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- Q. The restrictions. Thank you. You're here to give
 evidence on behalf of EYS. I wonder if you can tell us
 a bit about that organisation in terms of its purpose,
 its aims. its membership.
- A. Absolutely. Pleasure. We are the leading national 6 organisation for pre-birth to five-year-olds in 8 Scotland. We are based in Glasgow but we are 9 nationwide. There are four strands to the work that we 1.0 do. So there is direct provision of services where we 11 work within communities and prisons in Scotland, working 12 directly with children and families predominantly in 13 areas of socio-economic disadvantage, with our trademark 14 Stay Play and Learn sessions, where children and 15 families are encouraged to learn together, in an 16 environment that's known to them.

We also have our membership which is another significant part of the work that EYS does. We have —— we represent at present about a third of the early learning childcare sector in Scotland, and we provide guidance, we provide policies, we support members to do inspections. We act as a conduit between the membership and policy and decision—makers.

There's also professional learning so we look at supporting the sector to be able to continue the

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professional learning journeys, providing professional learning opportunities.

Then my part of the organisation predominantly, which is policy and advocacy, which is kind of tying that all up into a neat little bow, back to policy and decision—makers.

Q. That's really helpful. Thank you. Before we go on, I just want to remind you to slow down a wee bit. We have stenographers taking a note of the proceedings today.

You have set out helpfully and you have done in paragraph 12 of your statement, the four workstreams of EYS, and in the evidence today I want to focus on two of those, principally the work you do directly with children and families, and then a small part of what I ask you will be about the membership and support for the settings .

18 A. Okay.

19 Q. In terms of working directly with young children and families then, you have set out at paragraph 34, and
1 think you should have your statement in front of you,
22 although you don't need to refer to it, but it is there for you if you want, you have spoken about engagement with parents and carers. Why is it that families are so important, or engagement with families is so important

to early years delivery?

A. Well, parents/carers, the family environment is a very important learning environment for children, and as we all know, parenting doesn't come with a manual. You don't get an instruction booklet when you take your baby home from the hospital. There are families out there who benefit greatly from additional support and a bit of information and guidance as to how to support their child's learning and development. It's not just about learning. That's a very niche thing about early learning and childcare. It is learning and caring, and the two are completely inextricably linked. But it is very important, and as an organisation, we have a very strong family—based ethos.

Now, that's not to say that nursery — the nursery traditional environment or a childminder isn't great for children because it is, but we have to recognise that there are families for whom the traditional drop and go model doesn't work. So they should have the ability to be supported in their child's early learning and childcare, so that's really where we come in and the first 1,000 days of a child's life is so important that it's really remiss not to provide parents with the level of support that they need.

25 Q. That's one thing I wanted to ask you about. We heard

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a little from a witness earlier this morning representing Play Scotland about the importance of play.

3 A. Yes.

Q. I wonder if you want to add anything there. You
 mentioned the first 1,000 days and the importance of
 that.

7 A. Yes. Play is so important. You'll have heard that this 8 morning. I don't need to wax lyrical about that again. Babies develop from the off, and they're developing 10 every single day. So it's really, really important, and 11 a lot of people maybe think that there's no point in 12 playing with a baby because they don't understand, they 13 can't talk, they can't communicate. But everything 14 that is done in an interaction with a child is helping 15 to support their development.

So it's really, really important that those who are primary caregivers, parents and children and primary educators, have the tools to be able to do that, because it is that first 1,000 days, from the moment that baby is born, they are ready to take on knowledge and information to be able to develop, so it's really, really important that they have the opportunity to learn through play from that early stage and beyond.

Q. That leads me on to asking about the informal learning
 settings that you speak about in your statement. You

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mentioned Stay Play and Learn, a short while ago, and 1 2 your statement makes mention of Bookbug. Can you tell 3 us a little bit about the delivery of these informal settings? 4 5 A. Yes. So an informal setting is generally a child's first kind of interaction with early learning and 7 childcare, most commonly in the likes of parent and 8 toddler groups, play groups, our sort of community-based 9 sessions, the likes of your Bookbug, within your local 1.0 libraries and other activities , baby sensory, baby 11 massage and that kind of thing. It's really important 12 that children have the opportunity to socialise in very 13 broad terms with other children, because they learn from 14 other babies as well, and also that parents have that 15 kind of level of peer support. That's where Early Years Scotland -- I would say we really thrive 16 17 in the work that we do within communities, because we 18 build -- our practitioners build really strong 19 relationships with the families, but also allow the 20 families to build that for themselves, so it is really 21 about empowering, and those informal settings, you know, 22 sometimes a lot of the times as well, those sorts of 23 things can be quite expensive, so the likes of Bookbug which is available in the library or the Early Years 25 Scotland sessions which you don't pay for, provide that

are made to feel nice and calm and supported prior to going in to visit their loved one, because obviously it can be quite a daunting experience.

But the work that we do within the other prisons, for example, here in Edinburgh, we do it in HMP Barlinnie, we mentioned Stirling, we also have Greenock and we're about to start in HMP Perth as well. That's working very much directly with the imprisoned parent to continue that level of bond with their child. So we run what we call the fathers' programme and the mothers' programme in Stirling, which is a 12—week —— not parenting programme, because that sounds very prescriptive, but it's a programme to support parents. They learn baby massage on the baby massage dolls. They learn about child development. They learn about play, the importance of play, and then are given the opportunity to put those into practice during a family

So it's really about making sure that families who are affected by imprisonment still have that attachment if they want it at that very early stage, because obviously children grow really, really quickly. So it's really important for those who are in prison. It also gives them that bit of support, and we don't — we work with some parents who maybe don't even have access to

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- really important first sort of exposure to other children, to other parents and carers, and to the notion of early learning and childcare itself.
- Q. Thank you. One aspect of EYS's work I want to focus onwith you is the work that's done in prison settings.
- 6 A. Okay.

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- 7 Q. You mention at paragraph 18, I think it is, about the family visitor centre at Low Moss. You also set out 9 a bit later on about a service level agreement with 10 Stirling and with other prisons. Does that fall under 11 the banner of informal learning, or is that formal?
 - A. No, it's not formal. What I mean by formal is anything that is Care Inspectorate registered and is inspected by the Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland, so that is a nursery, childminder, that sort of thing. But what we provide within the prisons, and I must say we are immensely proud of the work that we do within prisons in Scotland, it genuinely is life—changing, and you mentioned the visitors centre, very briefly, we run the visitors centre at Low Moss. All families who are visiting a loved one who is in prison there will have access to a family engagement practitioner and a family support worker prior to going to a visit. It's a really trauma—informed space where all children, because it's

not just early years in that setting, are welcomed and

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 $1 \hspace{1.5cm} \hbox{their children, but still it allows them to understand} \\$

how their child is developing and that sort of thing, so it's really about empowering that parent while they're in the situation that they're in to keep that bond and

to understand how their child is developing.

6 Q. That's really helpful to us, thank you. In connection

- Q. That's really helpful to us, thank you. In connection with the closure of ELC settings, you mention a bit about your membership. Does that cover childminders, nurseries?
- 10 A. Yes. Early learning and childcare is an exceptionally 11 complicated landscape. I will admit to that and I'm 12 still working my way through it nearly six years on, but 13 our membership covers the sort of regulated formal 14 nurseries, child minders, but nurseries, there's lots of 15 different aspects there. You've got your local 16 authority nurseries, and then private voluntary and 17 independent, or as we call PVI nurseries. Our 18 membership is predominantly made up of PVI settings. 19 We have some childminders, but obviously there is an 20 organisation specifically for childminders, but we do 21 work very closely with SCMA.

We also have unregulated members, so your parent and toddler groups, your play groups, that kind of thing, and students who are perhaps studying early learning and childcare, or just those who have an interest in the

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nurseries we represent.

In terms of looking at the impacts of closure of the ELC settings, I want again to focus on the prison—based settings that you spoke about there and you explained about a trauma—informed environment. Can you explain a little to us about the impact of the cessation of

these in-person sessions?

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topic, can become members of Early Years Scotland, but,

yeah, predominantly it's your nurseries and mostly PVI

10 A. Absolutely. It really did have an impact. So as I've 11 alluded to previously, children grow quite quickly, so 12 visiting is a really important way of keeping children 13 and their imprisoned parent engaged. When those 14 stopped, it had an impact both on the child and on the 15 parent. Obviously we have a close relationship with the parents that we work with who are imprisoned, and just 16 17 found it obviously very difficult not to be able to see 18 their children, concerned about the fact that there was 19 something going on in the outside world which they were 20 a little bit sheltered from, albeit that the virus did 21 come into prisons, but they were sort of sheltered from 22 the impact. So they were really, really focused on the 23 fact that they were unable to see their families which made it very difficult, and obviously, children, a huge

impact. You know -- a child will always know who

someone is if they're kept in their life, but if you don't see someone for a while, it can be very jarring.

There was virtual visits, which were a really great initiative and they continue on to this day, where imprisoned parents have access to a set—up much like this, and they can see into their family home, and it's monitored at both ends and they can interact with their family there, but that's very difficult. Have you ever tried to keep a young child in front of a screen for more than two minutes? It's impossible, regardless of the fact that it's a parent on the screen. It's really hard for them to keep engaged.

So we did quite a lot of work, created our virtual visit boxes and supported the parents to read stories to their children and puppets and there were thematics, so to try and keep that engagement going, but it was very difficult.

What was actually really interesting was in prison, parents said it was really hard to see the home environment because they were away from it, by virtue of the fact of where they are. It's not something they would see. So they're watching life carry on as normal in their own home, so they found that very, very difficult as well. So it really did have quite a significant impact and it meant that when things

opened back up again and when parents were allowed to see their children again, it was quite difficult because the kids had perhaps forgotten what it was like to be in that environment. It's quite a daunting environment if you've not been in it before.

Also, the parents had to wear masks, so it was difficult for the child to interact fully with their parent because they were wearing a mask so they couldn't see their face, they couldn't communicate in the way that they had been over the screen. So it just made it really, really quite difficult and it really did have an impact on the little ones, and it took a long while. You know, we have built up really good relationships between the families all together, and it really did take a good bit of work to be able to kind of try and pull that back together again.

- 2. You have mentioned about restrictions other than what we call lockdown. That's something I want to come to a bit later on. Sticking first of all with the cessation of these in—person visits and the ELC settings within prisons, you talked about a trauma—informed approach being possible because of the environment. Was it possible to recreate that on screen?
- 24 A. Very difficult . Very, very difficult . The whole point 25 of a trauma—informed environment that we create in the

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sessions, in our settings that we hold there is that it's calm and there's soft lighting, there's fidget toys for the children to play with. The colours are selected very specifically.

So if it's virtually, then it's a home to something else environment, so it makes it very difficult to keep that kind of trauma—informed —— I mean, you know, we can provide the tools to the parents, both the imprisoned parents and the families at home, but, yes, it really was very difficult to keep that going, and again, that's something we worked really hard with the parents to create, so they knew the visits weren't going to be stressful or anything like that for their children, so, yes, really difficult to keep that going.

Q. I'm being reminded again to ask you to slow down a little bit. It's difficult but if you can try to slow down. We want to make sure we capture all that you're saying.

You mentioned a bit about working within restrictions and obviously ELC settings and other education settings were open as hubs during the pandemic. Can you explain a little to us about how ELC settings in the main operated as hubs? Were they aligned with primaries, or were they alone as they would otherwise be?

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- A. Yes. So we didn't have a huge amount to do with the hub settings. Predominantly because we were trying to support our members, there was a lot of financial 4 concerns, there was the concerns of the development of children. So in terms of what we know was that -- they were central, they were facilitated by the local 7 authority. Often it would be a case that a hub setting 8 would encompass early learning and childcare and 9 primary, sometimes secondary school, depending on the 1.0 environment. They were predominantly staffed by local 11 authority staff, but that's really all that I can kind 12 of give you about that, as I say, because we really 13 didn't have much to do with it. 14 Q. You mentioned about the local authorities operating the 15 hubs. Was that -- were they operating them in terms of 16 eligibility as well? A. Yes, so there was criteria, it was key workers. So
- eligibility as well?

 A. Yes, so there was criteria, it was key workers. So initially it was very much sort of healthcare workers, you know, front line services, and then that got widened more to include early learning and childcare workforce, people working in shops, those providing essential services. So there was a criteria. So families would
- apply to -- for their child to be at a hub setting, and then it would be decided through the criteria whether

25 they were eligible or not.

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- $1\,$ Q. Is the same true for the eligibility for vulnerability?
- A. For the eligible ...
- Q. Vulnerable children.
- 4 A. Yes. But that's very difficult because again it was
 5 a self—referral, an application, and the family is not
 6 going to want to admit in the main that that's the
 7 situation that they're in. So there were probably a lot
 8 of vulnerable children, not a word that we use in EYS,
 9 vulnerable children who were eligible but did not take
 10 up spaces for a variety of reasons.
- 11 Q. Was it possible, you mentioned there self—referral, was 12 it possible for the settings who knew the children and 13 the families to make that referral for them?
- 14 A. Yes. I think so. Probably. Again, I couldn't say
 15 definitively yes or no, but the onus did seem to be —
 16 because not all settings were open. So it is very

difficult, and the settings were, you know, trying to keep their families going and making sure they were

- 19 okay. So I couldn't definitively say whether that was 20 the case or not.
- Q. That's really helpful. Thank you. One more question on hubs before we move on. You mentioned at paragraph 89 that childminders who you say are a small proportion of your membership, they didn't operate as hubs.

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The Inquiry understands that they did stay open during

the pandemic, so that's perhaps something different, and they did offer childcare to the children of key workers

and some vulnerable children. Is that your

4 understanding also?

5 A. Yes. I think in the use of the word hub there, it's 6 more about a central location, is probably what was 7 meant by that.

 $8\,$ $\,$ Q. That's helpful. That's perhaps something you mentioned

9 a -10 A. Yes, without a doubt, SCMA will have much more
11 information on that. They only work with childminders,

12 so they will be able to give you significantly more —

Q. For your Lordship's benefit, SCMA is the Scottish
 Childminding Association, an organisation from which
 we will hear in evidence.

16 I want to speak to you now. Ms Kettles, about 17 re—opening and operating with restrictions. At 18 paragraph 115, you make reference to Getting it Right for Every Child, or GIRFEC as it's commonly referred to, 19 2.0 and that, for your Lordship's benefit, is the 21 Scottish Government's policy commitment and their 2.2 framework to promote, support and safeguard the 23 well-being of children and young people.

In mentioning that framework, Ms Kettles, you expressed at paragraph 115 that there were challenges in

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 $1 \qquad \quad \text{realising \ children's \ rights \ due to the \ restrictions} \ .$

I wonder if you can expand on that for us.

A. Of course. So GIRFEC is based on UNCRC, which is the
 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
 And that sets out very clearly and very definitively

And that sets out very clearly and very definitively rights of children which should be realised, and GIREEC's always been modelled on that We're very

GIRFEC's always been modelled on that. We're very proud of that in Scotland and rightfully so.

It was very difficult for young children to be able to have their rights realised, predominantly because of the pressures, I think I would say, on the staff within settings, so guidance was long, there were big meaty documents. Early learning and childcare is an exceptionally guidance—led sector as it is. There's a lot we have to take into consideration. There was a lot more we had to take into consideration with the re—opening guidance.

So something really basic like the right to play, so yes, children were back in a setting, so in theory they were able to play. However, those rights weren't being fully realised, because they weren't allowed to sing, and they were only allowed to be with certain groups of children. That's very difficult. That was so, so challenging for settings. So hard to keep children away from other children in a bubble or a group or whatever.

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stay open during 25 from other children in a b

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So there's like rights of association, which they technically weren't getting. Little things like the GIRFEC and the Shanarri indicators that go with that. Safe is something around about that. Children weren't allowed to take their comforters, their little bears or their little blankets or whatever to nursery, because obviously concerns around cross—contamination, but again, that's just taking that something away from a child that forms part of that GIRFEC framework.

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Now, don't get me wrong, settings worked their absolute hardest to realise children's rights as much as they could, by trying to provide a normal environment for them after everything that they'd been through from being in lockdown to coming back to nursery or maybe coming into nursery for the first time.

So, yes, we were just really concerned as an organisation that although they were still back in with their peers, so they were still associating and they were still playing, that they weren't being able to do that to the fullest degree because of the pressures faced by the staff who were looking after them.

- 22 Q. You mentioned there the guidance -- the pressures in connection with the guidance.
- 24 A. Yes. So infection prevention and control, which is
 something that we've already been always been very

strict on in ELC was further manifested. Things like parent and carer drop—off. So a parent could no longer go into their child's setting and have a chat with their key worker: oh, she's had a bad night or he's had a bad night or they've slept well or whatever. It was a drop—off at the door and then off they went, and then a pick—up at the door again.

So you're losing that little bit of kind of interaction that you have with the person that's looking after your child. You're also not seeing the environment your child is learning in and developing in, which for a parent is difficult, because you want to see what they're doing and their art on the walls, and, you know, just the space that they're in, especially if it's a new environment, if it's a child who's not been in a setting before, who's — this is their first time. There were restrictions on blended placements. So when the expansion of early learning and childcare came about, the 1140 as I'll call it, because that's what we call it, blended placements was a really big focus because we wanted families to have the choice of where their children went.

So they might take a day with a childminder and a couple of days with a nursery or, you know, they could use their funding however they saw fit as a family, and

it kind of really solidified that element of choice. But blended placements were discouraged during the pandemic, again, which we can understand, worried about cross—contamination, but kind of flew in the face of something that we'd been working towards as a sector, to support a family in the round who were then told: no, actually, you can't do that. So they were having to make a choice: you can send your child to this setting or this setting, we'd rather that you didn't do both. That's the local authority that obviously grants the funding, so they were kind of having (inaudible) on that.

Children couldn't play with things that they would normally play with. Sand, water, making Play—Doh, anything —— children like being messy and they like getting their hands into things, whether it's gloop or whether it's Play—Doh, you know, and we couldn't do that obviously, and again, for obvious reasons, because we were worried about the spread of the virus. But it's just things like that that children were missing out a little bit on, eating together, you know, you stick to your own packed lunch. It was really restrictive, and it's a time for children where everything is a learning opportunity for a child in an early learning and childcare setting.

So staff are having to re—think how they provide those learning opportunities in a way that's not going to adversely impact a child, because they're always thinking about the next steps and going to school and that child growing up. It's about how that first 1,000 days, the first five years of a child's life were —being able to carry out in a way that would keep them learning the things they should be learning, and allowing them to take risks, and we noticed that

So guidance would —— outdoors was great, but there was a while where kids couldn't go to the park, so they'd come back to nursery, and there'd be a slide and they'd be frightened to go down it, or they didn't know how to go down it, because those kind of opportunities had been taken away, so there was a lot less risky play, which is really, really important again for a child's learning and development.

19 Q. I want to come on to speak to you in a short while about
20 the various impacts, some of them that you've touched on
21 there. Before I move on to that, sticking with the
22 restrictions just now, and you mentioned a bit about
23 this in connection with the prisons, you see at
24 paragraph 126 that there has been an increase in ASN as
25 a result of mask wearing.

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1 A. Yes

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Q. Can you explain what ASNs in particular has increasedand how it is you know that?

A. Absolutely. So the additional support need that we're really focusing on in that response is speech and language. All children were — all children, but there was — Early Years Scotland has been working with the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists. They kind of reached out to us and said: we're a bit concerned because we're getting more referrals and is this something that you've seen? And we said: well, yes, we've noticed that. So from working with that organisation, it became quite clear that there were quite significant gaps in children's speech and language therapy, and as with most things, that was more evident in children from disadvantaged socio—economic backgrounds.

Children will learn from looking. So sound forming is something that a very young child will respond to, but they have to be able to see how someone is making a sound for them to learn how to do it. It's a mimicking thing almost. And you can't tell, if someone's wearing a mask, if you're changing a baby's nappy, for example, which happens in nurseries every day, if you can't look at that baby, they can't tell

what kind of experience they're having, they can't tell if the person doing it is smiling at them, or if the baby's lying down and going to sleep, there's no —— half the face is obscured so that means that half of the ability of a very young child to learn is obscured.

So, yes, we were really, really concerned about that and the kind of impact that that would have going forward and the number of young children who are now at primary school, let's face it, with speech and language developmental delays because of that, because of not being able to see faces, and also because of not being able to babble with their peers. That is quite a big impact as well, but certainly the masks, we were really, really — fought to have that taken out of the guidance, so that the key worker, the person within that setting who was looking after the child could fully look at and focus on the child, to support their learning and development.

Q. The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapy is an organisation we'll be hearing from next week, so we can pick up on that with them. But for the time being, you've mentioned more about what you have said at paragraph 140. You refer in particular to a Times Educational Supplement article which was written in conjunction with the Royal College of Speech and

Language Therapy, and in particular that focuses on the
 mask—wearing issue, so that's something we can raise
 with that witness.

I want to spend a bit of time now with you talking through the impacts, some of which you have mentioned there. You set these out at paragraph 128 and following, and you set out a number of areas which were impacted by lockdown and by other restrictions. For example, you speak about impacts on motor skills, social, emotional and linguistic development, sleep, play, personal skills and so on. Can I first of all ask you how you are aware of these impacts? Was it through a survey, perhaps, or through your engagement with members?

A. Yes. So Public Health Scotland did an Early Years Resilience and Impact Survey which we sort of collaborated on, we shared with our members, we were involved in the kind of dissemination of to find out how restrictions had impacted on children, and it found that 2.0 that had happened quite negatively but also, yes, very much so. From our direct service provision in 2.2 communities, we could see the impacts and the concerns that members were coming to us with, about much of what you had outlined there. 2.4

So it was a kind of very much a landscape of the ELC

sector from that survey by Public Health Scotland to our own work and our own kind of — we'd done a couple of member surveys as well during the time about the impact on children and just kind of anecdotally from our practitioners who were witnessing and observing the differences in children who had been away and came back following restrictions.

8 Q. That's helpful. I'm not sure we'll have time to go
9 through each of these impacts in today's hearing, but
10 I want to focus just now for a short time on the impact
11 on children's social and emotional development. You've
12 got that at paragraph 128.

I wonder if you can tell us a bit about how children's social development was impacted.

A. Yes. In a number of ways, to be honest. First of all, if we think about the socialisation in general in that they just really weren't able to. So that's very, very broad and very basic. But if you kind of — you know, young children are often looked after by another family member, a grandparent, an aunt, an uncle, who — whilst parents or carers are at work themselves. So they stop being able to see those family members. That's difficult, because it's a change in routine, so a child wonders where the person's gone, and then again when that person is reintroduced back into their life, it's

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difficult , it takes them a while to catch up on interacting with them, because whether it was the initial nine weeks of very, very restrictive lockdowns, it's a long time in the life of anyone under three.

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So that was really impacted. Obviously, very sadly, some children had family members pass during the time, so they went from maybe spending time with this grandparent or whoever, and then they just were not there any more. That was very difficult. So we had to kind of look at how children would deal with bereavement and grief because that was something that was — it wasn't new but it was very different , you know, circumstances

I think probably most fundamentally was the interaction with their peers. Children don't necessarily play with each other. They'll play beside each other, depending on age and stage. They will get to that stage where they are playing together, but in the main, they're kind of just aware of another child, and then they're aware of another child playing beside them, and that's how they learn to do things like share, because, you know, there's two children and one set of blocks, so they've got to share the blocks. That opportunity didn't present itself so that became quite difficult.

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They didn't -- you know, there was babies who had never seen another baby, which is just, when you think about it, is really crazy but they didn't. They never -- you know, other than themselves, maybe in a mirror or on FaceTime, they'd never seen another baby. So that very natural interaction that happens at a parent and toddler group or a Stay Play and Learn session where they're kind of on the floor together. aware of that other little person or those other little people, that was taken away as well. So they didn't have that same level of social development. And things like maybe parents going to -- as happens a lot of time with parents that come to our groups, they'll then go out all together for a coffee or they'll go for a play date. So relationships that would organically be formed in those circumstances weren't able to be formed because they weren't having any interaction with each other. Q. In terms of their emotional development, how was it that

- 18 Q. In terms of their emotional development, how was it that 19 was impacted?
 - was impacted?

 A. So I think in terms of emotionally, again, regulation, emotional regulation was a big one because again, children learn by looking at and observing others. So because they weren't always faced with opportunities in which they would have to regulate their emotions, they didn't. So they didn't learn to do it. A lot of the

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time, a lot of our families, parents were working from home and it was super, super, challenging, especially if you had a child under three, which I had myself at the time, a child of that age, who needed your attention but you also had to work.

So there's that really horrible rub between: I'm just going to give in to you so you don't get upset. So they didn't have the same opportunities to be told: no, you can't do this; or you're upset because of this, but let's work through it; or you're happy because of this. You know, those kind of joyful moments in terms of emotions that come out, in terms of, you know, like flowers blooming and all those kind of things. They didn't have the opportunity for that because they were really, really quite stuck in.

That then has an impact on a child's mental health. Early Years Scotland, I think about two years ago, we were commissioned by the government as part of the mental health joint delivery board to do a piece of work around young children's mental health, well—being and happiness. We worked with early years practitioners, we worked with families of children in early years settings, and also who had just left and also with ——the workforce, I said that.

One of the things we found were that children -- it

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was cuddles, so if a child is upset, they want a cuddle. So we weren't allowed to — their parents could cuddle them, but that was all. So it's things like that which were very natural reactions to a child, if they were having emotional distress or whatever, that weren't able to be demonstrated in the same way. So that was again something else that had to be caught up on at the time.

- 8 Q. You mentioned a little bit before about parental
 9 engagement and parental contact at drop—off, and you
 10 mention at paragraph 163 that there was an impact on the
 11 loss of that parental engagement. Can you explain
 12 a little bit to us about the importance of that
 13 engagement?
- 14 A. Yes, absolutely. So as a parent, you hand your child 15 over, if you're putting your child into a nursery or 16 a childminder, whatever setting it might be, and you 17 hand your child over, entrusting the most precious thing 18 that you have in your life . The person who is receiving 19 that child, whether it is a childminder or a key worker 20 or whoever works in the setting, knows your child, but 21 needs to know how your child's been. Children aren't 22 necessarily in a setting five days a week. They might 23 only be in for a couple of days. Also, there was a 24 global pandemic. There was a lot going on in homes that 25 we didn't -- that might not have been -- children might

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2 So not to be able — to leave your child at a door 3 and just wave without saying: can I have two minutes 4 with you because actually she's really not been

not have been exposed to previously.

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with you because actually she's really not been sleeping, and I'm really worried, and I would like your expert advice as a practitioner as to how I can support this. They didn't have that opportunity.

And, yes, you could email or you could phone up, but there's something about that human interaction of just being able to talk, and I think we see it generally with the kind of rise in meetings online and that sort of thing, that you can never fully tell how a person is if you're looking at them through a screen or talking to them. Whereas if you just have that couple of minutes at the start of the day, or, you know, imagine a parent going to pick their child up and their child being handed over and there's a note that said: he took his first steps today. Not: come in, this is where he did it, he walked —— you know, just those really basic things.

That was really sad, but also I think it's really important to be aware of how important a relationship between parents and carers and early years setting is. Early years practitioners, or whatever they're called, because they've got a couple of different names, have

got really trusted relationships, and families build up really trusted relationships with them, and staff, certainly our staff within Early Years Scotland, we have family engagement practitioners, we have had disclosures of domestic abuse. We have had families come in and saying: this has happened and we don't know what to do and we don't know where to turn.

So that crisis level was also being missed somewhat, because you're not going to phone somebody up or email them and say: by the way, I think I'm experiencing domestic abuse. But the relationships that get built up within ELC settings, a worker can look at a mum and a dad and go: something not right with you, what's wrong; have that conversation and then support them from there. So that was something that was really lost as well.

- Q. Thank you. There's just one other aspect of these impacts you raise that I want to bring out just now, and that's the impact on transitions. I'm thinking of transition to early learning settings, and I'm thinking now of formal settings and transitions. You mentioned blended learning between the settings, and then on to primary school. Can you tell us a bit about how that was impacted?
- A. Yes, absolutely. So to be perfectly honest, transitions
 aren't always handled best. Possibly I'm talking more

moving to school. It's different when a child is starting a setting, they're given the opportunity to settle and then that kind of thing. So what would normally happen is a parent or carer would —— right, this is where my child is going, so they would go to the nursery or the childminder or wherever it was, for an hour with their child. They would either sit in the room with their child, or they would sit in another room but the child would be there. There would be a phase —— you know, that would be phased. So the parent felt comfortable to leave their child in a setting while they went to work, and they knew the child would be safe and happy and whatever.

Didn't have that. So it was literally, you're dropping your child off at a door and hoping that they're okay, not knowing. So obviously, parental mental health was kind of through the roof at that point, because people were so worried about whether their children were getting on okay, whether they weren't getting on okay. Just —— you get a feel for something. It's like anything. You only get a feel for something if you go into it. So, you know, parents often will go into a nursery or whatever and go: actually, I don't think this is for me; for whatever reason. So they didn't have that option.

School transitions were really hard. School transitions are hard anyway. You expect these little tiny people who have got all this freedom and are able to do, you know, whatever they want within a nursery setting to then go to this building which they may never have been to in their life before, and go in there and sit and do as they're told and —— you know. It's a very different environment. I mean, some schools really do take a play—based learning approach and that's great. But they don't all .

So it's a huge thing anyway, and when you've got a setting, like I said previously, PVI settings, the kind of private voluntary independent, where people are fee paying mostly, and families come from everywhere, so it's not as if that kind of traditional model of 25 years ago where all the children would go to the nursery that was attached to the school, and they would all go to the school from there.

So it's quite difficult to manage anyway. If you add a situation into that where visitors can't come in, so what's quite common is that if there's a couple of children in a setting going to a school, a teacher from that school would come in. Couldn't do that or could, but, you know, there was -- had to do this, that and the next thing, and it depended on which part of the

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pandemic we were in. So that was really stilted . 2 So then again it's -- you've got your child 3 through -- I mean, I use the word trauma to describe 4 COVID. and I think it is relevant. Because everybody went through -- it was a trauma for everyone in one way or another. So you have these little people, these resilient little people who despite everything, are 8 getting on, and they've got all their challenges but 9 they've got through that kind of nursery -- they've not 1.0 been able to have a graduation, and I know a lot of 11 people laugh at graduation, but they shouldn't because 12 it's a really important transition. It's showing a 13 child that they are now at a stage where they are, you 14 know, moving up to school, that kind of thing. 15 So that was taken away. It's just -- it's --16 it's -- there was perhaps short-sightedness on how 17 it would impact on the child by not allowing that to 18 happen, versus the policy that had to be adhered to. 19 Q. Did that impact information sharing between settings, 20 between ELC and primary, for example? 21 A. Not formally, because the nursery would send a learning 22 journal or information to the school and vice versa, but 23 it was more again about that face—to—face contact, or 2.4 the child being able to visit the school that they were 25 going to go to, more than once. Because there would

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early learning experience and have that preparedness within themselves.

3 Q. Thank you. Staying just now with disproportionate 4 impacts, you mention in your statement at paragraph 117 5 about intersecting inequalities, and you talk about parents who are hard to reach. Can you tell me what sort of circumstances may make a parent hard to reach and the impact of that? 8

9 A. Yes. So, hard to reach families, again, a phrase that 1.0 we don't tend to use because it's quite stigmatising. I prefer to call them easy to ignore from a policy perspective. We are talking about perhaps families who are new to Scotland, for whom English isn't a first language. You're talking about really any family who is suffering socio-economic disadvantage. Families with imprisoned parents. Families who are perhaps experiencing domestic abuse. There's certain parts of 18 the country where we have big sort of gypsy traveller communities, who traditionally don't engage.

> But from our perspective, very much Early Years Scotland, we work with families who are would be considered often hard to reach, and literally without us going to their doors to drop off play packs or food packs, they wouldn't have had any engagement because they don't know -- they're not engaging with

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1 maybe be one invitation where they could go one time and that was it. but I think in terms of information sharing, that was probably okay because most of that is done kind of digitally.

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5 Q. Again, thinking about disproportionate impacts, did the 6 absence of these transitions impact some cohorts of children more than others? 8

A. Yes, absolutely. I think the children who are now -goodness, it just seems like such a long time ago. But the children who are now sort of primary 2, primary 3, no, actually, I'd say a bit older than that, who didn't have those leaving nursery traditions , and who weren't seeing their families and who weren't allowed to go to the park, and you know, that —— the ones who went to school right in the thick of it at the very start, so the 2020 starters, for them it was normal, but now that things are back to normal and the school day looks -you know, everyone's falling back to the way things were, that's different for those children. Also bearing in mind that the ones coming after them have got those speech and language concerns and the delays.

So it's impacting on the schools as well, because they've had to deal with children who for all intents and purposes because of their age were school ready, but who didn't get the opportunity to properly finish their

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other services. Often, when a family who would be hard to reach — will be brought into a community because there will be a community centre, and there will perhaps be an English as a second language class or a wee exercise class or a baby group. But if that is all taken away because you're not allowed to mix and interact with others, then that keeps families away.

We have services where most of our families for whom English is a second language and the benefit that they get from attending is -- you know, you can see it on a daily basis, and their interaction with the community and their use of community spaces. If you take that away, then it becomes even more difficult for them to engage and be engaged, and the real concern is there that their children, there's things that aren't getting picked up on with their children, in terms of health, in terms of perhaps additional support needs, but also the isolation faced by parents who would be considered hard to reach, and how difficult, you know, and a lot of the time those kind of families are living in flats or temporary accommodation. They don't have a garden, they don't have that outdoor space, sometimes they don't even have another room to go into.

So taking away something which will allow them to explore a peer network and their local community, and

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2 and themselves be able to integrate, was taken away and 3 that really did have an impact. 4 Q. I want to ask you now a little bit about the impacts on the workforce working within ELC, and you dedicate a section of your statement to this at paragraph 203 and 7 following. At 208, in particular, you speak about the 8 impact on the development and training of the staff. 9 Can you tell us a bit about the impact that lack of 1.0 training has had on the profession? 11 A. Yes, so what's very interesting, which to be honest 12 I don't think we fully appreciated until we were coming 13 out of the pandemic a little bit, because we were so 14 busy doing what we were doing, but in order to obtain an 15 early learning and childcare qualification, you have to do practical work. You have to have a placement, 16 17 you have to go out to an early learning and childcare 18 setting, and you have to interact with children and 19 families. It's part of the assessment process and all 20 that kind of thing. 21 That didn't happen because of the pandemic. So what 22 we're seeing is there are a lot of staff who are in 23

get more involved and have their children integrated,

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tried to lead a singsong with children or made Play-Doh 125

theory qualified and who are theoretically brilliant at their jobs, but who have never sat down in a group and

with them or spoken to a family about challenging behaviours or anything like that. So that's something that -- and our sector and our workforce -- our sector is a mess. That's another story for another day generally. But we're really struggling to recruit and retain staff in early learning and childcare at the moment

So where we do have staff, we don't want them to go. we want to be able to support them, to train them and to develop them. But those kind of barriers are there. that, you know, perhaps they've not had the practical experience. That's maybe easing off a little bit now that things are back to normal, but at the time that was quite difficult, because you can teach theory, but you can't always teach interaction, so that was something.

Just the kind of -- I mean, early learning and childcare sector is massively undervalued. We're undervalued in terms of -- societal terms and in financial terms. And it's not a particularly attractive job prospect for a lot of people. It's not seen as very professional. We're seen as people who make macaroni pictures and change nappies. So, so much more than that but the low pay and low skilled kind of myth, stigma. round about early learning childcare means that it's not very attractive . So it's hard enough to attract people

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into the sector, never mind trying -- and keep the ones that we have there, because, you know, settings were closing because of COVID, so people were losing their jobs, and the expansion of early learning and childcare put a lot of pressure on a lot of settings, so more staff went and they've left the sector completely.

7 So training and development is a really, really 8 important part of any role, but certainly early learning 9 and childcare because things come up all the time, 1.0 especially now where we are seeing more children with 11 additional support needs, and we don't have the same 12 levels of support particularly in the PVI sector, 13 they're not -- there's not a lot of them in local 14 authority nurseries either, but those kind of support 15 members and support staff who we don't have any longer, 16 and again, a lot of that is because of the undervaluing 17 of the workforce.

> So it's very difficult to then access training because there's not enough staff, so the people that would maybe be on the training can't go to do the training because they've got to be on the floor. You have nursery managers who are behind on paperwork and things, because they're keeping in ratio by being on the floor. So if they can't get time to do their Care Inspectorate returns of a week, how are they going

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1 to get time to do any kind of course or any kind of 2 development and training?

So that's a big issue because any workforce should be consistently learning, because there's always something new, but it's becoming more and more difficult within our sector because of a lot of external pressures that are on, which were not created by the pandemic, but 8 which were very, very much exacerbated by it.

- Q. Sticking with the workforce for the time being, you 10 mentioned there that the ELC workforce, in terms of 11 formal and informal, is predominantly female. How was 12 it that that led to them being disproportionately 1.3 impacted, as you set out at 215?
- 14 A. So we know that early learning and childcare is 15 a massively female-dominated sector. It's again another 16 disproportionate impact -- sorry, could you put that 17 down a wee bit? Yes. So we're talking about a female 18 workforce. We're always told that we need to get more 19 men into childcare, which would be wonderful, but don't 20 raise the wages of the women because we want more men 21 in, just raise the wages of the women that do the job 22 anyway, and that's part of the problem. It's low paid, 23 it's low skilled. So we are not valued and nobody -- no 2.4 early learning childcare worker got the £500 social care 25 payment that was announced by the First Minister back

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in, I can't remember whether it was November 2021, maybe, but social care staff got that payment, early learning and childcare staff didn't get that payment.

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The disparities in our sector as it is, regardless of the fact that it's predominantly female, mean that the PVI sector are subject to lower pay, they are much less likely to be trade unionised, and their terms and conditions aren't generally as good as those within local authorities . So what you have is staff who are working in PVI at the moment who see the same role in local authority for a significantly larger wage, so they'll move to local authority. So there's no staff

So PVI will bring in younger women because they're cheap, because they need people, because it's a really important part of the sector, and what it means is that it's just — sorry. I get myself so upset thinking about this because it's so unjust. It's all women, they don't get paid very well, they don't get valued very well, so actually does it matter if they're working in a nursery, or does it matter if they're working in Aldi. Because actually, if they go and work in a supermarket, they're going to get paid the same, but they're not going to have the same hassle, so we'll leave the

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So what that leaves is a massive gulf in terms of expertise. You know, there's women who have worked in our sector for years who following the pandemic have gone: I can't do this anymore. So you're losing expertise, you're losing knowledge, and ultimately, that's impacting on the children because $--\,$

- 7 Q. What was it about the pandemic that made them make that decision? Was it purely financial?
- A. No, it was just -- I think a lot of it was the 10 undervaluing, was that nobody clapped on a Thursday night for early learning childcare workers. We're 11 12 always seen as a bit of a Cinderella service generally. 13 We do all -- we're in the background burrowing away, but 14 we don't always get the recognition. I think it was 15 a culmination of things. The pandemic was really 16 difficult; again with the disparities between local 17 authority and PVI, local authority settings don't have 18 to worry about paying their rent or paying their 19 electricity bills or that kind of thing, because that's 20 covered by the local authority.

So PVI sector are having to deal with the -- all of those things and are receiving less of a funded rate per child than the local authorities are, so they've got less money. Yes, they are private businesses, but they are working under the same guidance and documents.

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Everyone works under the same guidance and documents in the early learning and childcare sector. So there's really strict things that they have to adhere to, but as they have less and less money, they either have to charge their parents more, which nobody wants to have to do, or they have to really look at their staff's wages, and everything's predominated on being paid the real living wage. So those who provide early learning and childcare, eligible early learning and childcare must be paid at least a living wage. So what that is doing is creating a race to the bottom because it's saving that that's all that they're worth and they go: do you know what, I could get more money working somewhere else, so that's what I'm going to go and do. So I think it was

16 O. Business and welfare is one of the themes that 17 the Inquiry is looking at, so in terms of the private 18 settings you have mentioned there, that's something that 19 we can pick up on.

just kind of a culmination of things.

I want just in the last sort of 10 or 15 minutes to speak to you about your support for your members, and you've outlined today and you do so at paragraph 73, about the interpreting and re-presenting of government guidance and that was an important part of your role. You mention at 73 there that there was confusion about

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1 the published guidance. Can you explain a bit for us about the nature of that confusion?

A. Yes. So every time -- there were about 12 iterations of 4 the re-opening guidance for early learning and childcare 5 settings, and there were two separate sets of guidance 6 so there was -- for formal settings, regulated settings, and then for informal. But both sets, every time a new 8 set of guidance came out, it looked the same, there wasn't enough definition as to where the changes had 10 been. There was no quick way of a second going: can 11 I still do this or do I still need to do that; because 12 it all kind of fed through each other.

> So they were having to really essentially read another 52-page document a couple of weeks later. Sometimes it was really only minor changes, so I think talking about the confusion, it wasn't necessarily confused about what they had to do because of the guidance. There was frustration because of what had to be done because of the guidance, and there was concern as to how it was all going to be able to be done, but the confusion would come when something new would come out, and it would just look the same. That's why Early Years Scotland decided to create a kind of easy read version for our members.

So what I did with that was sort of condense it, so 132

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rather than it being 52 pages, we would pull out the 2 relevant information and make it maybe half the size of that, and then highlight anything that was taken out or 4 added in. So all settings had to do was look for the bit of blue highlight, and they could see that it was either something new that they had to do, or something 7 that they no longer had to do. It just made it a bit 8 easier because we were so aware, they were getting 9 bombarded with information left, right and centre, you 1.0 know, trying to keep themselves going, so there was 11 a lot of stuff around kind of the furlough and all that 12 stuff, there was everything about child protection and 13 all that, and then there was this more guidance of how 14 to re-open their settings. So, yes, we just wanted to 15 make it as easy as possible to make people aware that 16 this was what was changed, or put back to what you were 17 used to, so they weren't having to read big lengthy 18 documents basically. 19 Q. Thank you. The other aspect of membership and support 20 I want to speak to you about is regulation and 21 inspection. You've mentioned already that the settings 22 required to be registered with the Care Inspectorate. 23 You set out at paragraph 218 that following the nature -- the nature of the Care Inspectorate's

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- 1 inspections became in your view tougher.
- 2 A. Mm-hm.

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Q. I wonder if you can explain a bit to us about first of all how the inspections changed —-

inspections changed, and you set out that the

- 5 A. Of course. So inspections, the Care Inspectorate 6 resumed inspections fairly quickly compared to Education Scotland, in terms of their inspection of both 8 early learning and childcare and schools --
- Q. Did they cease completely in March 2020?
- 10 A. They ceased completely, uh-huh, so they stopped completely, obviously, purely because people couldn't go 11 12 in and out of settings. But when the guidance was 13 restricted somewhat, the Care Inspectorate would kind 14 of -- went back out a lot earlier. So what you had 15 was -- and this is all coming from members, this is all 16 coming from what members have told us. They were trying 17 to get back on their feet, trying to -- that's part of 18 where the confusion around the guidance comes from, 19 because members were really worried that if there was an 20 aspect of the guidance that they weren't adhering to. 21 because it was so big, so things could be missed, then 22 that would have an impact on their Care Inspectorate

grades. They'd be marked down. Obviously in order to

receive funded entitlement as a setting, you have to

meet the specific Care Inspectorate grade. So that's

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really important as well.

But it was just felt that the Care Inspectorate came back out quite quickly and were harsh, and every member that we spoke to about this, because we did go out and specifically ask, until about now, none of the people that we spoke to in the settings were getting higher grades. They were generally getting marked down.

So there was just this kind of really horrible uncertainty that everything was just kind of getting back on its feet, settings were trying to support their children and make sure that their best interests were catered for, and adhere to the guidance that was there and deal with staff absences as well, because obviously during that time, there were still the restrictions around whether you could go to your work or not, so, you know, settings were staff down, they were having to close rooms.

Can you imagine the level of stress if somebody from the Care Inspectorate walks in and goes: I'm here to inspect you; and you're down three members of staff because they've tested positive for COVID, and, you know, you're trying to keep your infection prevention and control on the go, and somebody's brought in a teddy and is the fact that someone's brought in a teddy going to give you a lower grade. It was just a really, really

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1 uncertain time

> I think it's not about being inspected per se. because any ELC setting will tell you that it's really important to have a level of scrutiny, you know, and nobody is denying that, and it is really important to have a level of scrutiny. But it's just the way it was done. It wasn't felt to be very supportive. It wasn't felt to be very: is there anything we can do to help you, given this massive thing that's happened. It was very much: right, well, your window was shut there so we're going to have to mark that down; or, you know, the room wasn't -- that room didn't have enough staff in it so you had to bring someone in from this other room. But actually that was because you had other staff off who were ill or whatever.

16 Q. You mentioned about grading. Is a grade given to each 17 setting at the point of inspection?

18 A. Yes, so members -- Care Inspectorate. It's quite 19 confusing. There's -- Care Inspectorate and 20 Education Scotland have two separate grading systems. 21 although they are moving to a shared inspection 22 framework. But at present, Care Inspectorate goes from 23 1 to 6, so -- obviously with 6 being the top end and 1 24 being the lower end. So there's aspects of each setting 25 that will be graded which will then create an overall

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children's kind of learning and care. There's criteria 3 to be followed. So each aspect will be graded to create 4 an overall grade. 5 Q. Which aspect of that grading was it that led to there being what you mentioned a short while ago, 7 a downgrading? 8 A. It just depended. It depended on the inspector, it 9 depended on -- probably a lot of the time it was staff 1.0 because, you know, staff weren't necessarily there 11 because they were off ill but it very much —— although 12 it's a framework, very much depends on the inspector as 13 to how they perceive something happening on the day, and 14 the other thing about a Care Inspectorate inspection is 15 it's one day, it sometimes goes into two, but 16 generally $\,--\,$ so it's a very, very tight snapshot of 17 what's happening on a day-to-day basis in a setting, so 18 if one thing goes wrong, as it invariably does 19 sometimes, you can guarantee that's the day that it 20 happens. So it just -- it really just depends on the 21 setting, the day and the inspector that was there. 22 Q. What could have been done to maintain the scrutiny you 23 say is so important, and to provide the support? 2.4 A. Just support, just coming at it from a — maybe not

grading. So it's environment and staff and, you know,

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resuming inspections quite as quickly, or giving

settings a bit of notice about it because Care Inspectorate will just pop up. There's no -- they don't -- you know. It used to be that they would give a pre-inspection questionnaire so that the setting would know there was an inspection coming up. That's not the case. Just a little bit of preparation to be able to say: we're coming out next week; and for the setting to say: well. actually, we've had to close our baby room because we've got three members of staff who have tested positive for COVID, so that's just to make you aware of that. So it's almost as if the settings weren't given the opportunity to explain themselves.

I'm not saying that if there was something that they shouldn't have been doing that that shouldn't have been picked up on in terms of the fundamental aspects of the Care Inspectorate framework; but just a bit more notice and a bit more support and a bit more awareness because that's something that, you know, obviously the inspectors have a job to do and again, like we say, scrutiny is important, but support is really important as well. So often it is just about the approach that you take. So I think members would have just -settings would have felt a lot better if they had a bit of awareness that it was coming up the tracks and the opportunity to sort of explain themselves a bit more,

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and you can challenge grades, but if you've just gone through a stressful inspection that happened when you didn't know it was going to happen, and everyone is really stressed out, sometimes it's easier to just go: right, we'll go again; and take it from there.

So it's just that kind of -- just the support and awareness just could have been a bit more sensitive, maybe might be the right word.

9 Q. I just have one more question for you. You set out in 1.0 the final paragraphs at 241, you say it is only now EYS 11 is really seeing the real impact of the pandemic. 12 I want to give you the chance just now to speak about 13 any key lessons you think should be applied to make sure 14 these impacts -- we've spoken about the impacts on the 15 settings, the children, the workforce, and there 16 you have spoken about impacts in connection with 17 regulation of that. Is there anything you think should 18 be applied to try and address these impacts and mitigate 19

20 A. Yes. I think certainly very basic things like --21 talking about speech and language, and I mentioned 2.2 previously that -- very unlikely to get speech and 23 language support in the early years as a par for the 2.4 course situation. So Early Years Scotland would 25 certainly suggest that an increase -- because we know

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1 some settings who are members of ours who have speech 2 and language therapy regularly, which makes a world of difference to the children. So that is really important 4 about recognising that that was a big impact on 5 everyone. So there needs to be a bit more provision for 6 7 There needs to be more provision in terms of 8

training and development for early years staff, about specific things. So additional support needs is a very broad term, but we are finding within the sector that more and more children are presenting with some form of additional support need, and unfortunately that's not necessarily something that's covered in depth as part of training for becoming an early years practitioner, or whatever you're calling it.

So just that kind of more appropriate training for that. More age-appropriate materials as well. This is something that we hear a lot, that there's a lot of really, really great resources out there to support young children's mental health, or to support children with additional support needs, but a lot of the time it's for five and up. Children who are zero to five are a very different demographic, so we need to make sure that -- I suppose it comes back to really just recognising the importance of the early years. But

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you know, it can go some way to mitigate. It's not going to solve everything, but it'll certainly go some way to mitigate.

I think as well in terms of transitions, I think we learned Early Years Scotland has always called for better and enhanced transitions between ELC settings and schools, and how difficult that was during COVID has

being aware that if you can get into those things early,

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really only kind of shown how important that is.

I mean, you know, we have advocated in the past for the likes of an early years worker in schools, not somebody from the school nursery, but a specific early years practitioner. So we do —— Early Years Scotland runs primary 1 Stay Play and Learn, where we'll go in to schools, they'll ask us to go in, we'll go in, and the children and their parents will come in and we'll hold Stay Play and Learn sessions. So it's about that kind of play—based learning.

It's recognising that it's very difficult to expect a young child to go from an environment where they've got freedom and they're allowed to do a lot more and then in six weeks set them down. I remember my son saying: I don't like the trousers because they dig in; because all he'd ever worn was tracksuit bottoms. So it's little things like that that you recognise that's

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obviously an issue for children. So it's about -- transitions is a really important one, and I think -- it's always been difficult but I think COVID really showed us that we could do that better, and I think the children now who went through that are okay and they're settled in school in the main.

But it's a learning that that could have been better anyway, because if that was better anyway, then it wouldn't have been as bad during the pandemic, if that makes sense. I just also think that, you know, touch wood it never happens again, but if we did have to go through something similar, where there was a raft of documents that had to be created, guidance documents, that they're just made simpler, that somebody like me shouldn't have to pick them apart and, you know, make them accessible and easy to read. That should be done already and, yeah, just so it helps the staff because fundamentally at the heart and the bottom and the middle of all this is the children, and it's about ensuring that they have that best start in life.

Scotland are really committed to it as a country, and we've got some really wonderful policies around it, but we just sometimes need to think a bit better, so making sure that staff have time to do what they need to do, so they can invest time in the children and that

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play is really important and recognised, and that it's really important to allow families to come together, particularly in socio-economic disadvantaged 4 backgrounds, come together and create those networks and meet those peers, so they can have that support going forward, to really just guarantee that kind of best 7 start for the little ones. 8 MS STEWART: Thank you very much, Ms Kettles. I don't have 9 any more questions for you. 1.0 My Lord, I have no further questions unless there's 11 anything that your Lordship wishes to add. 12 THE CHAIR: Thank you very much indeed. Thank you, 13 Ms Kettles. I'm very grateful for your evidence. We'll 14 now take a break until 3 o'clock. 15 (2.41 pm) 16 (A short break) 17 (3.00 pm) 18 THE CHAIR: Good afternoon, Ms van der Westhuizen. MS VAN DER WESTHUIZEN: Good afternoon, my Lord. We are 19 20 this afternoon going to hear evidence from a panel of

22 Mr Ross Keenan, who are all operators of private 23 voluntary independent nurseries and members of Early

Years Scotland, from whom we've just heard evidence.

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three witnesses, Ms Rhona Black, Ms Karen Flynn and

1 MS RHONA BLACK (called)
2 MS KAREN FLYNN (called)
3 MR ROSS KEENAN (called)
4 Questions by MS VAN DER WESTHUIZEN
5 THE CHAIR: Good afternoon to you all.

Ms van der Westhuizen, when you're ready.

MS VAN DER WESTHUIZEN: Thank you, my Lord.

Good afternoon, everyone. I'm going to ask you in a moment to introduce yourselves, but I am just going to confirm that you previously attended a round table with the Inquiry. Is that correct?

12 THE PANEL: Yes, we did.

Q. And a round table report was prepared of that meeting,
 and have you had sight of that round table report?
 THE PANEL: Yes, we have.

16 Q. Thank you.

My Lord, the number for that is SCI-WT0171-000001.

1'Il just ask that to be put up on the screen
because essentially what we are doing this afternoon,
my Lord, is we'll be running through the agenda items
that were run through at that round table, and just get
evidence in relation to each of those headings. If
I can ask for that to be scrolled to the end, so we can
have the agenda items up on the screen in front of
everyone.

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Before we start, could I please ask you all to 2 introduce yourselves by giving your full names, the name 3 of your setting and an indication of the size of your 4 setting or settings, and how many -- the number of settings and if I could start perhaps first with 6 Mr Keenan. 7 ROSS KEENAN: Hi, my name is Ross Keenan. I'm director of 8 Cosmic Coppers Childcare in Glasgow. 9 At the time pre-pandemic, we operated three 1.0 different services, two children's nurseries running off 11 of three locations and one after school care, totalling 12 around 250 children per day, we could take into our care 13 across all three settings. 14 Q. If I could ask Ms Flynn to come in, followed by 15 Ms Black KAREN FLYNN: My name is Karen Flynn. I'm the director/area 16 17 manager of Kirktonholme Childcare. We at present have 18 11 settings, but at the time of the pandemic had 10, and 19 we have also added two forest schools. At the moment, 20 we offer care for over 1,000 children and families. RHONA BLACK: My name is Rhona Black. I'm the head of the 21 22 nursery and kindergarten at the Glasgow Academy 23 Kelvinbridge site, which is one of three sites in 2.4 Glasgow, one in Milngavie, one in Newlands and one 25 in the West End, in Kelvinbridge. At Kelvinbridge we

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offer a place for 84 children daily.

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Q. Thank you. If I could ask for the agenda just to be shifted up a little bit so we can get to the first item, which is -- well, the first item for us today, which is item 4, discussion of the key issues and impacts experienced by ELC settings and their workforce. Thank you.

Just by way of how we will run things today, there are six items on this agenda and I propose to include a seventh one. On my calculations we should be able to make it through all of them. What I'm proposing to add to the end is a discussion on the financial impacts on your settings and your businesses. That's touched on in a couple of the bullet items. So if we can save that discussion until the end, and just have a stand-alone discussion on the financial impacts on your businesses.

My Lord, the items I will be covering are the closure of the settings, for those who did not operate closures -- who did not operate over closures and lockdowns.

The second item is operating critical childcare services or hub settings over closures and lockdowns.

The third item is operating with restriction measures throughout the pandemic period.

The fourth item is subject-specific impacts on the 146

2 The fifth item is subject-specific impacts on 3 preschool children, and I'm going to be proposing that 4 we include in that discussion impacts on the families as well, the parents and parenting, not just on the preschool children.

> The sixth item relates to disproportionate impacts on certain groups of preschool children.

> And then, as I said, I propose to include a final item on financial impacts on the businesses themselves.

11 If I could perhaps start off the discussion by 12 getting an indication, and again, just for the 13 stenographer's benefit, I'll cue you in one by one. But 14 if we could perhaps start again with Mr Keenan, followed 15 by Ms Flynn and then Ms Black, and just get an 16 indication of which of your -- which of you closed down 17 over the lockdowns, and which of you remained open, or 18 whether there was a combination of the two.

ROSS KEENAN: Initially on the first lockdown, we looked to 19 remain open to offer care for what was classed then as key workers' children. After a short period of time, 2.2 probably a week, we decided through pressure that was being exerted by our parents and carers to close because of the options of selecting children that were eligible at the time. It became a bit of a minefield for us in

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1 terms of selecting people who were eligible and not. So 2 we chose to close down on the first lockdown after that. 3 and any subsequent lockdowns, we remained open to offer 4

5 Q. Thank you.

KAREN FLYNN: We made the decision to close all but two of 6 our settings. The two settings that remained open was 8 our south Avrshire setting, and that was because South Ayrshire Council had asked us to provide a hub, so we 10 actually provided a hub in Ayr, and our other setting 11 was the Wishaw general hospital setting. We felt 12 morally that we should keep it open. There was --13 North Lanarkshire Council did provide hubs in 14 north Lanarkshire for the children. However, we felt 15 that these children -- this is the setting they know, 16 this is the people they know, and really it's the best 17 place for those children to be there. However, it did 18 get fractious, as was just said there, about parents 19 then. There was a lot of unrest about what makes 20 someone eligible for those places. So it was difficult.

Q. Thank you very much. We'll come on to discuss that in more detail in due course. Ms Black.

23 RHONA BLACK: We closed our settings in Milngavie and in 2.4 Newlands, and at Kelvinbridge, I remained open as a hub 25 for those other two sites.

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Q. Thank you. Just in terms of those of you who closed, what were the impacts of ceasing to provide the usual services such as, for example, on relationships with the 4 families and children that you'd ordinarily remain open ROSS KEENAN: Significant, in terms of our ability to 6 7 communicate with families, it was severely impacted. 8 Our only -- or our chosen channel for communication was 9 Facebook at the time. That was our key means of 1.0 contacting, staying in contact with families and 11 suchlike, so you can imagine not a lot of people were on 12 Facebook, there was significant impact with that. 13 Again, with it being online, there's only so much you 14 can do via social media. You can't actually physically 15 check on the well—being of children. So there was significant impacts with that. 16 17 KAREN FLYNN: For us we saw huge impacts. Like what's just 18 been said, there wasn't a lot of digital back then. We 19 had Facebook, our staff were doing things on Facebook 20 for the children, meeting with the parents, but having 21 those connections was -- losing those connections was 22 really worrying because we had many, many children who 23 were very vulnerable, even just before the pandemic, and that just made it even harder, because we had lost all 25 contact with them.

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1 RHONA BLACK: During the first lockdown, we had sporadic
2 contact with the parents on Zoom calls and tried to
3 maintain connection with the children during that time.
4 But during the second lockdown, we were much better
5 prepared, and we had daily Zoom sessions with the
6 children, and tried to establish relationships with them
7 and maintain relationships with them on a virtual
8 medium.

Q. How important was it from their perspective to --

10 RHONA BLACK: I think for the children it was very important. I think the families appreciated the time 11 12 when we spoke to the children and worked with the 13 children, reading stories, having small lessons and 14 classes with them. I think for the families, it was 15 very important. The children loved seeing each other on 16 the screens, and for -- many of my children transitioned 17 to nursery and started their nursery days on a Zoom 18 call, but it meant when they came to join us in reality 19 in person, they did have some idea of who we were and 20 we weren't just strangers.

Q. In relation to families that you maybe weren't able tocontact, were there any particular concerns?

23 ROSS KEENAN: Generally speaking, we had widespread adoption of our chosen channel of Facebook, so there weren't

many, if any, families that we were disconnected with

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2 communicating with us and what their choices of 3 communication were, but generally speaking, we managed 4 to maintain communication with all of our families. albeit restricted to their choice in terms of how much they wanted to communicate with us. 7 KAREN FLYNN: There was numerous things that we did. We did 8 actually do Zooms as well, and the staff were doing 9 bedtime stories and things like that with the children, 1.0 but our staff took it upon themselves for those more 11 vulnerable children to be doing garden visits and 12 doorstop visits and just checking in on them, and this 13 was even when they were furloughed, they still checked 14 in, because we knew that we had good relationships with 15 our families, and so we knew what the challenges were, 16 and we knew that they would have been exacerbated with 17 home schooling preschool children. Also financial 18 issues as well, we were already struggling financially, 19 and knowing that their children were getting fed during 2.0 the day at nursery, where all that was going. So our 21 staff had taken it upon themselves to do wee bits and 2.2 pieces just to keep checking in. 23 RHONA BLACK: I think for anyone who works in childcare, 2.4 lack of visibility of children is always a concern that

totally. Some use Facebook more than others in terms of

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you have if you don't know if they're ill, so for

a sustained period of time, not to have connection and visibility of children will always be something that rang alarm bells potentially. I have to say, most of my parents and families engaged readily with the offerings that we had, and we had visibility of most of the children, and for those other ones, we sent messages or we phoned home, and we tried to keep up with them in terms of activities and things that we could send to them to engage with.

10 Q. Thank you. In the round table report there's mention of 11 pressure to stay open. There was substantial pressure 12 to remain open from parents and carers. I would ask you 13 each in turn to address what -- concern has been raised 14 about whether and to what extent staff might have been 15 under a similar pressure to come into work if you chose 16 to remain open over a particular point. So I just ask 17 you each in turn to indicate what policies you had for 18 staff attending if they were feeling ill, and to what 19 extent staff might have felt pressure to come into work 20 if they themselves were not feeling well.

ROSS KEENAN: Generally speaking, when the first lockdown came around and we reviewed our policy for who would be willing to come into work, we actually asked our workforce if there were any within the workforce who were subject or were classed as being vulnerable.

e disconnected with 25 were subject or were classed as

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Those were immediately excluded from expectation of 1 2 working because of their own situation. We then spoke 3 to our team in terms of those willing to basically carry 4 on working, those who were wary of it and we tried as much as possible to take that into account when we were trying to offer the care for the children. Again, 7 moving on, care numbers we were taking in through the 8 door were significantly reduced so that became easier 9 in the short term, but as numbers gradually increased, 1.0 it became a bit more difficult. But generally speaking, 11 we were able to fulfil everybody's needs and look after 12 their concerns with regards to their own health and 13 14 KAREN FLYNN: We were very similar. There were also staff 15 who they might not have been vulnerable but they had family members who were vulnerable. We had a few whose 16 17 grandparents had moved in to be part of their bubble. 18 All those things. So we took all that into account. 19 But again, just what's been said, the numbers were 20 significantly lower, so we could -- it did allow for 21 that flexibility 22 RHONA BLACK: Again, the same. We talked to staff about who 23 was willing to come in, who was able to come in, perhaps 2.4 they didn't have childcare for their own children 25 necessarily readily, so it was about making sure that

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they felt comfortable about the amount of time and pressure that would be exerted upon them in fulfilling a rota. So I reduced their hours to make sure that they had adequate time to be with their own families and also to help out as much as they felt able to.

6 $\ensuremath{\mathsf{Q}}.$ Thank you very much. I think if we could move on then to the next bullet item, which is operating as critical 8 childcare services in the hub settings over closures and lockdowns. This has a number of sub-topics including 10 eligibility criteria, uptake of spaces, changes in 11 responsibilities, development and training, mental 12 health and well-being, registration requirements and 13 financial impact, which again, the financial impact 14 aspect we'll discuss at the end. If I can start with 15 Ms Flynn this time, and just ask you specifically 16 in relation to the operation of critical childcare 17 services and all of you in turn then, what were the 18 eligibility criteria and how were those enforced? 19

KAREN FLYNN: Well, we were given — things get a bit fuzzy — a list of criteria of what makes you a key worker but that could be misconstrued, that could be — like, we had parents taking jobs as delivering Just Eat once a week just so they got the criteria to bring their child in. We knew they still had their day job, but if you did two hours a week delivering burgers, then they

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got the free childcare. So there was all of that.

We had a skeleton staff, and also trying to keep our staff safe as well, because we had a responsibility to our team as well, and it then sometimes became a wee bit challenging that actually we were the ones at the front line having to take sometimes really difficult decisions, but sometimes there were parents who were really quite volatile about being a key worker.

9 Q. So in relation to that, were you having to decide 10 vourselves who did or did not qualify?

11 KAREN FLYNN: Yes.

12 Q. Any input or involvement from the local authority?

13 KAREN FLYNN: No, we were on our own with it.

14 Q. If I could ask then Ms Black and then Mr Keenan for your 15 input on this?

16 RHONA BLACK: So the criteria was actually dealt with by our 17 management team in the school, and they dealt with a lot 18 of enquiries from parents who wanted to know whether 19 they were eligible or not, and some of the criteria, the 2.0 way it was worded, perhaps led to a bit of dubiety of 21 eligibility or not, and often parents reflecting on 2.2 other people's jobs and professions, and whether they 23 felt that was a suitable eligible category or not. It 2.4 created a bit of dubiety, I think, amongst parents.

They wanted the best for their children . They didn't 155

want to be having their children at home while they were trying to work, and they were in a quandary themselves:

how am I going to look after my child adequately and suitably when I'm trying to do a job? So there was a lot of personal angst, I think, brought by about it.

ROSS KEENAN: I think connecting to what Karen and Rhona said as well, the financial impact on a lot of our parents was such that it brought a huge amount of pressure on them. That pressure was subsequently redirected towards the other childcare settings. We sat and decided who was basically in and who wasn't in, to the extent of —— I had people on the phone to me shouting and screaming down the phone that their wife as eligible, when in fact we knew she wasn't, and it was making relationships very, very difficult at that point as well, because they felt the pressure and likewise they were putting us under an awful lot of pressure.

I think the key thing for us making decisions was the sourcing of information on who was eligible at any given time. At one point it was left up to us to basically go on and trawl the Internet to get viable lists of who was eligible, who wasn't eligible. Those lists differed in Scotland from England on a lot of occasions, and sometimes the only information you could

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to apply that. I think the frustration on our part 4 a lot of times was whether we were actually right or not in taking a standpoint on that, and that was very, very difficult at the time. 7 Q. Just in terms of children being allocated to hub 8 settings , were any -- of your settings, were any 9 children allocated to your hub settings that were not 1.0 children who you -- settings were not children who'd 11 normally attend? If I can start maybe in reverse order. 12 Mr Keenan? ROSS KEENAN: All of our children were children registered 13 14 with us. There was no other children coming in to us 15 from other settings at all. Q. Thank you. Ms Flynn? 16 KAREN FLYNN: In our hub setting in Ayrshire, we had 17 18 children we didn't know. Most of the children we didn't 19 know. Some of them being school age as well. So that 20 was a whole different -- we had to resource, we had to 21 do all of these things for them, because it was

get was from information that was eligible in England,

so you took the best information you could get and tried

RHONA BLACK: I just had children who came from our school

a preschool setting, but we had children who were school

age up to the age of P7 with us.

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1 Q. Perhaps I could turn back to you, Ms Flynn, and ask you, were there any specific -- we'll obviously come on to discuss impacts on children, but in relation to the children who were allocated to your hub setting that 5 were maybe not ones that you were familiar with, were there any particular issues for them or for yourselves? 7 KAREN FLYNN: The not knowing -- like their whole world had 8 been turned upside down and then they were asked —— they were taken out of their own out-of-school care and 10 brought to us. They didn't know us, they didn't know anybody, like -- and they came from all different 11 12 schools as well, so it wasn't as though it was just -to know that wee hub from that school. There might have 13 14 been five or six schools that they came from. 15 So there was huge impacts. Yes, they were old 16

enough to build relationships and all of those things, but when you actually -- your world is upside down as it is, you're not going to school, now you're not going to your out—of—school care and you're going to this place where you don't know and you don't know anyone, and you've got a workforce that only knows early years, and has just had to adapt.

Q. Before I move on to everyone else, in terms of -- vou mentioned there the increased workload, what was that like and what steps did you have to take to accommodate

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operating as a hub for children who weren't ones that 2 ordinarily attended?

KAREN FLYNN: It was more the fact of thinking outside the 3 4 box to what would meet the needs of the children because when you're used to just having those preschool children, you know what meet their needs, but all of 7 a sudden you have all these school-age children. It 8 wasn't just: what can I do with them to keep them

9 occupied and keep them happy; but it was: what resources 1.0 are we going to use, where are we going to get --11 everywhere is closed. You know, but actually what --

give my staff their due, it was them that was: I've got 13 this in the house and I've got that in the house, and 14 we'll bring all this. And we kind of all just pulled

15 together for the workforce to get them resources that 16 would help.

17 Q. Just before moving on from this topic, just in terms of 18 staff mental health and well-being, what if any impacts 19 were there on that as a consequence of having to operate 2.0 as -- choosing to operate as hub settings? Perhaps 21 I can start with Ms Black and then move back up the 2.2

23 RHONA BLACK: I think for my staff who worked in the hub 2.4 together, it made us a very tight team. It certainly 25 bonded us together in trying to make the best experience

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1 for the children, both the ones we had in the hub and 2 also remotely. So we worked really hard to make that the best possible experience in both environments. And 4 I think it made us a very strong team. It was 5 a positive thing for us as staff.

6 KAREN FLYNN: I would mirror that. It was very positive, 7 because you were relying on each other more than you 8 ever did before. I think the only negative came is when they were split into bubbles. But when they were all 10 able to work together, then it was really good.

11 ROSS KEENAN: I would echo what my colleagues have said 12 there. The connection between the staff teams grew 13 stronger. They connected even in the first lockdown 14 where they weren't actually physically in, they 15 connected over social media and spent a lot of time with 16 their work colleagues as well as their family groups. 17 Generally speaking, we were very cognisant of the mental 18 health areas that we made sure the staff team were okay, 19 were coping okay. If they had any specific concerns, 20 we were trying to address them as much as possible. 21 Generally speaking, our staff coped admirably well with 22 it. We didn't have any real dramas, if you like, as a result of it. They stuck together very well.

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24 Q. Thank you. If we could perhaps then move on just to 25 discuss operating with restriction measures throughout

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the pandemic period. This incorporates things such as 2 keeping up-to-date with guidance, wearing a face mask, enhanced cleaning and hygiene, restrictions on play 4 practices, toy rotations, restrictions on parental engagement and restrictions on the use of blended places. 7 If I could start specifically in relation to keeping 8 up-to-date with guidance as a stand-alone topic and 9 perhaps start with you, Ms Flynn and then Mr Keenan and 1.0 then Ms Black, and then we can come back round and 11 discuss any of the others that were issues for you. 12 KAREN FLYNN: With regards to guidance, that was hugely 13 challenging because it changed so quickly, so often, it 14 just seemed like every Thursday night, there was another 15 change to the guidance. But at the beginning when the 16 guidance came out, it was just -- pieces were just added 17 to it but you didn't know what the addition was. So 18 every week you were going through screeds and screeds of 19 paperwork, trying to work out what was there last week 20 that's $-\!-$ or what wasn't there last week that's there 21 this week. 22 Eventually, I'm sure eventually it ended up getting 23 highlighted in blue any changes, but even the stress of sitting, going through, that was one of my main jobs was 25 sitting churning through this every week, because you're

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thinking: I've got the responsibility of all these staff, all these children and all these families on my shoulders, and if we do it wrong, then it comes back to us. I would say that was probably one of the worst parts of it.

Sorry, I'm getting a bit ...

Q. Mr Keenan, perhaps we can move on to you.

ROSS KEENAN: I think again, keeping up with the guidance was a huge demand on our time. Fortunately, we're a family business. My wife dealt with that in terms of that, and then it brought up discussion. Hugely, hugely challenging. The fact that we were expected to move on to these things almost immediately, there was a huge amount of pressure. I think that was borne through our willingness to be compliant, but again, there was an unknown -- there was grey areas there in terms of some of the things you were doing, were they compliant, what would be the punishment, if you like, for not being compliant. That was huge. There was an awful lot of it we felt was changing without our knowing as well, and at times being unsustainable. That was a huge pressure on us. huge.

23 Q. Thank you. Ms Black.

24 RHONA BLACK: I think there was a lot of guidance

2.5 undoubtedly, and I think in early years, and when you're

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dealing with little vulnerable children, you want to get things right immediately, you want to know that something is important and you follow through. So there 4 was a lot of pressure and a lot of new information coming out, and it was a lot to keep on top of.

6 Q. Then related to guidance, just to ask when settings were 7 opened beyond critical care, what were some of the 8 restrictions and measures imposed that were either good 9 or bad or particularly problematic for you, and if I can 1.0 perhaps start with Mr Keenan this time 11

ROSS KEENAN: The biggest initial one that came in was the implementation of bubbles where we had to isolate the children and staff to be able to manage the bubbles, not only isolate the children and staff but find spaces within the nurseries that were able to be segregated as such to keep the children and staff in their own separate bubbles.

Picking who went into each bubble was a huge issue, because from that, you use your knowledge of the children, who they're familiar with, when they attend nursery. Off the back of that, there was significant pressure from parents to assign children to specific groups where the parents thought the children would be best suited. So you were looking at social groups outwith nursery, as opposed to social groups within

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1 nursery. Huge pressure with that.

The actual physical segregation of the nurseries was a huge issue, and a very, very costly issue for us all in terms of being able to cope with that. That was probably the biggest challenge. Uncertainty in terms of what you were able to do to create a bubble, who was eligible to go into a bubble. Certainly for myself, I know that the number of children within a bubble was hugely problematic to us. and we were restricted to that at the start as well, which hugely took down your ability to operate at capacity or within numbers that you were used to, so that was a huge, huge issue for us.

Q. Thank you. Ms Flynn, you mentioned bubbles already. Please feel free to expand on that and/or to mention any of the other -

16 KAREN FLYNN: The bubbles were hugely challenging, 17 absolutely hugely challenging, because it was like has 18 already been said, we had parents who -- we were 19 splitting the children into their friendship groups of 20 those children that they played with on a day-to-day basis in nursery. However, parents didn't see that 22 because they saw who they played with at the park in 23 their social groups, and that caused so much unrest, but 24 also the staff then had to get split up in the breaks.

25 They had to use separate toilets. They had to -- so

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stuck together like a wee tight-knit community, they were all separated. had -- they didn't have their friends to sit at a break with and at some points were sitting on breaks on their own. So they were working all day, eight hours a day, with just one group of children and just them, and then they couldn't even sit in their break and have a conversation, and that to me is when the mental health issue hit big and hit the staff, and they really began to crumble in that Q. Thank you. We'll perhaps touch on mental health issues

where we had all that camaraderie before where the staff

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13 14 in a moment. Ms Black, if you could come in.

RHONA BLACK: The problems with bubbles were such that we were only allowed to have 32 children in one of our rooms, but actually at that time my register was 48 children, so 16 children had to be located somewhere else or not come to nursery.

So it was never a question that we would say to 16 children , you can't come in. So we found -- initially we started in the garden with 16 children in the garden in probably one of the coldest winters. After a while. that became unsustainable because it was just so cold. The school found us an alternative space indoors, and we

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created a nurture room for the children and we had a space for them there. It became —— it was a lovely space and we resourced it for that.

But 16 children in a garden doing all sorts of dancing and singing, trying to keep warm. The Twelve Days of Christmas song acted out was a highlight, I would say, but not perhaps the best because two members of staff had to be outdoors whilst the other staff team were indoors working in bubbles.

Q. Thank you. Just before we move away and looking at issues in relation to the workforce and staffing, we've heard a little bit today about transitions and issues with —— or the importance of transitions. Could I perhaps start with you. Ms Black, and then move down the line again, just to ask if there were any particular concerns or issues in relation to transitions during the time when you were operating with restrictions.

RHONA BLACK: So for the new intake that were coming to me, I came in during the summer holiday and actually toured children and their parents around the nursery in an empty space with no children, toys all tidied away and with mothers who perhaps hadn't left their children with anyone at all before that. They were having to entrust

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23 24 their child to -- well, (a) me who they had met but also 2.5 other staff who they weren't going to meet during that

induction visit, so the transition became a very trusted experience. Parents had to put an enormous amount of trust in us, leaving their most precious thing at a gateway or a doorway with people who they really hadn't made a connection with as an adult, and we were expected then to take their most precious thing and develop a relationship with them going forward and know that we were doing the right thing for everybody working together.

So transitions were, I think, probably one of the hardest things for the children. When they did come in. they established relationships with the staff very quickly, because they hadn't been around a lot of other adults, and all of a sudden, there were all these new play resources and new people to play with. So the settling session became a shorter period, I would say, for children but transitions were particularly challenging.

19 Q. Thank you. Ms Flynn?

20 KAREN FLYNN: Yes, I mirror that too. We have -- we've got 21 a different $\,--\,$ we've got Scotland's youngest children. 22 So we've got, I mean, I think about 400 babies in our 23 care. So that was massive, that was really, really 2.4 difficult. because we very much -- the way in which at 25

Kirktonholme we do our transitions is it can take up to 167

six months. We encourage parents when they're on maternity and paternity leave to come and do stay and plays for as long as they want. It can go months on end until they're ready to go to work, and then that's when we do the settling.

So all of that was obviously gone, just like Rhona says about taking babies off parents at doors. We did evening visits. We would never -- like Rhona, never have anybody hand their baby in to a nursery, and you've actually never been over the door. So we did do evening visits. We also did stay and plays in the garden. So yes, it never went on, because it was winter months, it never went on as long as we would generally have done it, but we did do it, we encouraged the parents to just come and play, do you know, with us to try and get it that wee bit better. But for children that was a huge

ROSS KEENAN: Transitions in terms of new children coming on board or coming into the nursery wasn't particularly a challenge for us, because we didn't -- we were struggling to provide our existing register with the care required. So we didn't actually bring on a lot of new children as such. We were so restricted in our numbers in terms of putting them into bubbles that we couldn't. The additional transition from that as well

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is from age group to age group as it moves up through the nursery. By and large we tried to maintain the children in their age groups, even though maybe encroached over the recognised age group by a couple of months to just try and keep them within their own bubble that they were familiar with as much as possible. We tried to restrict that as much as possible as well.

Any new transitions towards the end of the pandemic were dealt with via Zoom calls and afternoon or evening visits, so that they could come in and meet the managers on site, and again, it was about the managers on site dealing with parents, becoming a face that they knew, but in terms of the actual staff members that would look after the child, we tended to keep that to a minimum. It would just purely be senior managers speaking to parents who are going to bring in new kids towards the end of the pandemic, certainly not when there was bubbles in operation, because we just didn't have the space. I still had children sitting at home that were on our register that couldn't come to nursery, so bringing in any new children just wasn't an option for us.

Q. Thank you. If we could perhaps now turn just to look at
 specific impacts on the workforce, such as
 qualifications, experience, recruitment and retention,

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integrated working with other services, vaccine prioritisation, access to PPE regulation, inspection and the expansion of funded hours. Perhaps we won't have time to go through all of those, but Ms Flynn, you mentioned mental health, so perhaps we could start with mental health, then discuss qualifications, experience, recruitment and retention if there are any particular issues with that, and regulation and inspection, and if there's time then, working with other services, perhaps I think is something that we could touch on as well. So perhaps if we can start with mental health with you, Ms Flynn.

KAREN FLYNN: It was at the point of the bubble, as I said previously, at that point we started to see the staff starting to struggle. Do you know, they just weren't — and it had been a long time as well and their personal life, they'd gone through so much as well, they'd been in work and out of work, and it definitely had that impact on them and they were then starting to become off sick more, do you know, and just struggling, just needing, do you know, that wee bit extra. So that's where we were with mental health. I mean, do you want me to go on and speak about qualifications or do you want to do mental health first?

Q. We'll finish mental health and then we'll come back

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 $\begin{array}{lll} 1 & & \text{around on that.} & \text{I think, Ms Black, maybe if you could} \\ 2 & & \text{go next.} \end{array}$

RHONA BLACK: I think for the staff who were working in the 3 4 hubs and things, it was easier for them to remain positive. They had the camaraderie of a team and perhaps the ones who were at home would find that slight disconnect from -- and it was really was up to managers 8 in those settings to keep the staff going in terms of 9 contacting in connection with them, and I know some of 1.0 my colleagues had weekly Zoom meetings and quiz nights 11 and different things with their staff and different sort of social events online to try and maintain that 13 connectivity and to remain in touch with them and to 14 check in on them as much as possible.

Q. Thank you. Mr Keenan?

ROSS KEENAN: Mental health during their time on shift 16 17 I think for our teams was a bit easier for us. certainly 18 in one setting because of the nature of our settings, 19 it is generally open-plan. The segregation still meant 2.0 that they could see the rest of their teammates within 21 the playrooms, so communication and suchlike, as they 2.2 would normally get it, while restricted to a degree, 23 wasn't totally removed. 2.4

Echoing what Karen had said, you would get staff members going in on a tea break and sitting in

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isolation . So naturally, a tea break is a time for them to have a chat and suchlike. That was obviously reduced. Generally speaking, I thought our staff team did an admirable job in terms of maintaining their mental health. There were certain aspects of — as you would get with any workforce — some being more vulnerable than others, and we tried to address that but, generally speaking, they did a reasonable job with it.

10 Q. Thank you. If we could then turn and probably start
11 with Ms Flynn again on qualifications, experience and
12 recruitment and retention, if there were any issues or
13 subsequent issues with that.

14 KAREN FLYNN: There was. There was huge issues, but the 15 pandemic came the same time as an expansion in early 16 learning and childcare, so it's kind of difficult to 17 separate both. But a definite impact was the 18 qualifications and experienced workforce because a lot of -- we've got a whole -- because of the expansion 19 20 we've got a whole new workforce now and they're all a very young workforce. So that workforce then were 22 doing a qualification through a pandemic or they maybe 23 never finished their formal education, like school 2.4 education, because of a pandemic. So they had missed 25 a huge chunk of their education, whether it be at school

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provider, because a lot of the college-qualifiedpractitioners didn't get an opportunity to be in nursery and have that practical experience. And then others were -- if it was like an SVQ qualification they did, which is very work-based, they had some online classes but they weren't to the calibre of what they should have got, just due to circumstances. So there's a huge -- we're still dealing with it now. There's a huge gap in knowledge and experience that

or whether it be at college or with the training

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11 we are having to now go back and plug. So we're having 12 to take qualified staff back and doing training that

13 they should have got at college or with their training 14

15 Q. Thank you. Ms Black, I don't know if you have anything 16 17

RHONA BLACK: We had some recruitment which took place during the lockdown and online interviews, which we weren't accustomed to doing with staff, and when they then came in to work in the room, it was a different experience, it wouldn't be our normal way of running things. We were operating a hub, so things were different, but the staff were able to mentor each other quite readily because we had smaller numbers of children

and we were able to explain things and for them to

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integrate was a different experience. But it was a better experience in terms of having access to things. but I think -- I know that an expansion happening at the same time has had huge demands on staffing and the availability of staff and well-qualified staff across the sector.

Q. Thank you. Mr Keenan?

ROSS KEENAN: The recruitment of staff -- generally speaking, we found the desire of our staff members to move on to other environments wasn't there, they wanted a bit of stability during COVID. Obviously, with the impact of furlough as well, if they did move sometimes they weren't eligible for furlough. That tended to slow up the process.

By and large, just to echo what my colleagues have said as well, the introduction of the expansion of funded hours was the biggest impact because what you'd had in terms of impact in the private sector was that local authorities had in effect harvested all the experienced staff from the private sector to cope with the expansion introduced to 1,140 hours. That left us, as Karen said, with an extremely young, inexperienced workforce. And again, Karen's mentioned it previously before, the level of experience left within the private sector severely impacted our ability to nurture and

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bring on and teach the new recruits coming into the

sector maybe from school and suchlike. So that has had

a significant impact and is still having a significant

impact on certainly the private sector because,

basically, there's been an exodus of experienced staff and a huge level of competent staff moving from private

7 to the local authority and that's been a huge impact on

8 us, really huge.

9 KAREN FLYNN: Can I just add, just to put it in context,

1.0 we've lost over 200% of our workforce, so we're about

11 150 practitioners and we've lost something —— to date 12 about 350 since the pandemic.

13 Q. And what impact has that had on children?

14 KAREN FLYNN: Massive, because these children -- this is

15 their people, this is their safety, it's those

16 relationships that have been built and it's just

a rotation continuously, the problem being just what

18 Ross has said about the new young workforce, it's not

19 their fault, but when you've got a full young workforce

2.0 there's no one to learn from because they're all at the

21 same level. But that's had a massive impact to the

2.2 children because it's like they don't know we get paid

23 to take care of them and love them and play with them.

they just think we're their aunties and uncles and all

25 of these things and then all of a sudden every week

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1 there's someone else. It's had a huge impact on the 2 families as well because they build that trust in people

and then all of a sudden those people are gone.

Q. Thank you. Perhaps we can touch on, briefly, regulation 5 and inspection and if there were any issues around that 6

for any of you. We can perhaps start with Ms Black and

move back down the line

8 RHONA BLACK: So we did not have any inspections at that

time. It wasn't -- we weren't due for inspections, so

10 it was following the last period of lockdown and of

11 restrictions we had an inspection from HMI, it was

12 a recovery inspection. Education Scotland came in, and 13

14 from Care Inspectorate, but nothing during the time of

15 the pandemic.

16 Q. Thank you. Ms Flynn.

17 KAREN FLYNN: We had a few out of 11 settings -- well, 10

then, following that, last year we had an inspection

18 settings at the time. It was a huge challenge. I would

19 say it's a huge challenge because we were firefighting. 20

That's all we did for two years, we fought fires. In fact, we're still fighting some today. But when you

22 don't have a digital system, when you're working in 23

bubbles, and bubbles go down because when a child has 24 COVID and an adult -- we felt as though we were in

25 nurseries every single night of the week, going through

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everybody's forms, phoning every parent, letting them know -- that was our day-to-day and then keeping everyone safe and those children happy. But then we were getting inspected throughout it.

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We got a key question 5 inspection about keeping children safe and healthy, and of course we've got to make sure children are safe and healthy. However, the inspection $\,\,--\,\,$ one inspection was in person, but at that point the Care Inspectorate weren't allowed in for more than 2 hours, so you had to send stuff to them. Another inspection $\,--\,$ we had one of our managers going about with a tablet round the whole nursery, being fired -questions fired at them.

Then others, it's just on the phone. It was all very different, but at a time —— well, the first part, the Care Inspectorate were phoning us weekly, checking in, "How are you doing? Do you need anything? What can we do to help?" But very quickly, that changed and we were then being inspected and I felt $\,--\,$ I still feel bitter to this day that that was put upon us at that time. We did have an HMI, an Education Scotland recovery visit, which was very positive, and Education Scotland sold it to us as, "We're here to listen and learn, we want to know -- before we can fully inspect, we want to know what you went through, what the

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impacts were", all of this.

But I felt that with Care Inspectorate, we got the opposite. It was making us feel guilty for not doing things maybe not 100% right, but we were juggling all these children, all these families and all these staff, and doing the best we possibly could at that time. And can I just say without masks, do you know, because we never wore masks, we never -- because these children needed to see us; they needed to see our facial expressions, they needed to see smiles, all of these things. So we and our staff put ourselves out there where everyone else was all masked up and gowned up. When speech and language came through the door, they put a hat on, everyone took their coat off, put a hat on, a blue apron, gloves, and then went in and were supposed to be doing speech and language with children. There was huge implications of all these things.

- 18 Q. Thank you. We'll probably touch on services now and if 19 I could just ask Mr Keenan to finish off on the 20 inspections issue.
- 21 ROSS KEENAN: I think, generally speaking, the relationship 22 with Care Inspectorate quickly moved. We didn't
- 23 initiate or have any initiated contact with 2.4 Care Inspectorate at the start of the outbreak. Our
- 25 contact with them came subsequently after when we had

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outbreaks within the sites. We had two inspections in both of our services, one via phone and one in person. Both of them resulted in some tweaks being made, which subsequently we found questionable, for example putting a brand new window in a stairway because of ventilation issues, which we've now found out the ventilation issues were questionable. We found it to be quite adversarial at points.

9 Going back to a point we'd previously made earlier 1.0 about the guidance being issued and our willingness to 11 be able to adhere to the guidance but also an inherent fear that you weren't being able to follow the guidance, 13 that would therefore be looked dimly upon by the 14 Care Inspectorate when you were inspected. There was 15 a level of real fear, if you like, certainly from 16 a provider's point of view that we were doing the right 17 thing when you'd so much information to wade through and 18 invariably things would be missed but not -- we were 19 doing everything with the best of intentions but 2.0 sometimes things slipped and there was just always the 21 fear there that you'd be punished for it as such.

22 Q. Thank you. Well, perhaps -- Ms Flynn touched on it and if I could start with you, Mr Keenan, and it feeds into the next subject, which is impacts on children. Before we leave the topic we're on now, if we could touch on

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1 working with other services and how that worked and if 2 there were any issues in relation to that.

ROSS KEENAN: I think we could all agree they practically stopped. I mean, to be totally -- we didn't have huge amounts of additional support needs within our establishments as it was, there were maybe less than 20, but the support that we had at the time pre-COVID almost 8 disappeared, almost disappeared. There was nothing to speak of in terms of any support for the kids.

> There was one child in particular who was transitioning to school, who, in our opinion, shouldn't have been going to school and actually should have been going to a supported learning establishment, whose support dropped off a cliff and there was nothing there for the family, and I think that was a real concern for

> But generally speaking, any support that we got, speech and language, that type of thing, just practically disappeared for us. Again, that in turn brought additional pressures to our staff teams because they were expected to kind of pick up the weight of it from there and they're just not trained for it; they'll do the best they can, but they're certainly not specialist trained in that aspect. So there were huge amounts of pressure on us from that aspect, but that was

1 certainly our experience, that it practically 2 disappeared. 3 Q. Thank you. Ms Flynn? $\mathsf{KAREN}\ \mathsf{FLYNN}\colon \ \mathsf{I}\ \mathsf{just}\ \mathsf{mirror}\ \mathsf{that}.\ \mathsf{There}\ \mathsf{was}\ \mathsf{very}\ \mathsf{little}.$ 4 It was -- speech and language for us had come back nearer the end, but it was, like he says, like all 7 gowned up as though they were going to perform surgery 8 and stood against a wall in a playroom. Now, there was 9 nothing for that child, there was no connection, there 1.0 was no -- like -- it's hard enough getting the children 11 to feel safe and feel supported and then all those 12 restrictions just added to that because we were doing 13 our utmost to make sure we were in a nurturing 14 environment but it wasn't -- like Ross said, the other 15 services kind of more or less disappeared until towards 16 the end 17 Q. Thank you. Ms Black? RHONA BLACK: We had very little workings with other

18 19 services at that time, but the few that we had, the 20 visits took place in the garden, the visiting staff were 21 happy to meet the children in the garden in an outdoor 22 setting.

23 Q. Thank you very much. If we could then turn and just get 2.4 some evidence from each of you on impacts on preschool

25 children such as, for example, social and emotional

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1 development, motor skills, language and communication, 2 play, independence and confidence, routine and structure, feeding, eating, relationships, sleeping, personal skills, separational anxiety, transitions to 5 primary school and any positive impacts. Perhaps if 6 I could start with you, Ms Black, and we can work back up the line. There's a lot in there, so please feel 8 free to pick out as many -9

RHONA BLACK: There's a lot. It's very obvious that the children have lost a lot of experience and understanding of -- and social interaction template, seeing their 11 parents interact with their friends, adult friends, seeing their parents interact with professional services, even going to shops with their children, visiting the doctor with their children, going to museums and cafés. Lots of the children hadn't been 17 anywhere other than within the four walls of their own 18 homes and, for them, learning to share a space, 19 a different space, resources, time, share people with 20 them, other little children, has been a huge learning 21 miss in terms of how much time, when they're not in 22 nursery, they need these things, they need these 23

> Children need to develop their own independence away from home, they need to develop connections and

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2 families need, that support and that network of 3 friendships and that network of trusting relationships 4 that they can build, not only with us as professionals. but also with other parents going through the same experiences and shared -- they didn't have things like 7 toddlers, mother and baby groups, even the health clinic 8 where they might have chatted to other mothers going 9 through similar situations . I think that this is where 1.0 the children haven't seen their parents reacting and

relationships with adults, and they need, and their

11 interacting the way that they normally would with other people and, with the best will in the world, four walls

13 and a screen with us talking to them hasn't made up that 14

15 Q. I meant to say in relation to impacts on children, 16 please feel free to add any impacts on parents and 17 parenting under that discussion as well.

18 RHONA BLACK: I think the confidence of -- often as a first 19 time mum with your first child, you know, you need that 20 connection with other people who are going through the 21 same experience, and somebody perhaps phoning you and 2.2 asking if you're all right isn't the same as somebody 23 sitting, looking at you and talking to you and sharing 2.4 that experience. And just being able to chat informally 25

with other people going through the same experiences so

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1 that you can share that and you don't feel you're being 2 questioned or judged, you can just be open and you can see other people's children and your children 4 interacting and recognise the differences and 5 similarities between their age and stage of development 6 and how they play and interact and move. 7

Q. Thank you. Ms Flynn.

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KAREN FLYNN: A lot of the same, a lot of -- from the parents' view, I absolutely can see that lack of connection with other young parents themselves. I think we see it a lot in so many social media platforms and you see young parents asking in other parent groups questions about children's health and taking advice from other parents.

To me that shows -- and it's always, "I've got a 4 year-old, I've got a 5 year-old", and you think, that's our lockdown children. "They're not speaking properly yet, should I be worried?" The other parents are giving advice back and saying, "No, don't worry, you're okay". And you're thinking, "Oh my goodness, speak to your health visitor", but they never had all of that. If they'd had all of that on the way up then they'd be reaching out to their health visitor or their GP or the nursery or the school and not on social media, so I think a massive impact to young families.

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With the children, yes, in development, especially speech and language development, there are huge impacts. That comes back to the masks, a lot of it comes back to masks, or being sat in front of a screen because their parents are maybe home schooling their older siblings or they're trying to work from home, what they're doing is just sitting them down, as soon as they put them in their pram they're handing them a phone, they're $--\,$ all of these things.

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We've got children with American accents because all they see is YouTube and American things on their screens. But the masks as well. That lack of seeing those facial expressions, seeing all of those movements in the mouth, all the things that bring about good speech and language development.

I would say that physically and emotionally, some children with emotional —— but physically we were very outdoors, we still are very outdoors, we've never went back in. So they've been climbing trees, they've been doing all these things, so they actually are very physically well.

Relationships can be hit and miss as well because it depends on what their experience has been. So there's some children that really still are quite emotional and haven't got that maturity in relationships where they

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should be. So there is definite impacts to them, but the biggest positive being that they were outdoors and that's the place to be.

Q. Thank you very much. Mr Keenan?

ROSS KEENAN: In terms of the children, we had a mixed bag, really. There was a lot of positives, certainly from the first lockdown where support from the nursery was totally removed and it was basically the family on their own. I think there was an awful lot of guilt from the parents' perspective because if mum and dad, or either/or, had to sit and work during the day then what do you do with a 3 year-old? There's not a lot you can

We experienced huge amounts of children coming in after the first lockdown who are incapable of playing, couldn't do it unless you gave them a phone or an iPad, they could do that, that was no problem. Their diet. Again, it was what was quick and easy for mum or dad because of their specific circumstances. There was certainly a huge amount of guilt amongst parents with regards to that.

We got real positives. They came in back from the first lockdown having been toilet trained and they were brilliant, they could go to the toilet because mum or dad had time to actually focus on this, and their

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relationships got a bit tighter as well. So we had a huge amount of success with that.

But just to echo Karen and Rhona, the speech and language element of it -- when there were specific issues with that, mum and dad maybe didn't know how to deal with it, there was specialist assistance required, they had no access to it, so there were specific things like that. I think we put some numbers on it and I think our needs for speech and language rose, I think, around 30% coming back from the first lockdown.

But generally speaking, just children's ability to play was a huge thing because they were so used to just playing themselves, and when they got in amongst a crowd again there were bits and bobs of anti-social behaviour and such because they just weren't used to it. But that quickly moved on, we tried to rectify that after the first lockdown and we didn't shut down again and we provided an environment for them to come in and get an escape from home, if you like.

20 Q. Just before moving away from children, were there any 21 disproportionate $\,--\,$ or any groups of children 2.2 particularly disproportionately affected? For example, 23 children experiencing poverty, care experienced children, children from minority ethic backgrounds. 25 children with additional support needs, children in

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1 one—parent families, and children in rural areas that 2 you were aware of from amongst those with your cohort? ROSS KEENAN: The biggest impact would have been additional support needs. ASN was the biggest impact. We have --

5 our settings are in very different demographics in terms 6 of the parents we have. We didn't experience anything

that was particular to either/or. Most -- the biggest impact was ASN, definitely, absolutely.

9 KAREN FLYNN: I would agree. Children with additional 10 support for learning needs have been really, do you 11 know, left.

12 RHONA BLACK: I think it's harder for us to access --13 there's a huge backlog now on the back of what's 14 happened and, you know, families don't know their health 15 visitor, that hasn't been someone who they've connected 16 with, so it can be a bit harder to access support needs 17

18 Q. Thank you. Then finally, obviously you're all business 19 owners or operating businesses. The financial impacts 20 as a consequence of the restrictions that were in place. 21 If I could perhaps start with you, Mr Keenan.

22 ROSS KEENAN: Where do you start? The one positive that 23 came out for us is the support we got initially if you 24 were in partnership with your local authority. For

25 a business owner, if we didn't receive the support from

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we are allocated partnership funding for every three to five children up to a level -- if we didn't receive that funding we wouldn't be operating now post-pandemic. By my reckoning, we could have survived probably three months into the full lockdown. We had financial reserves to survive three months. That was pre-furlough. When furlough was introduced -- I said it before, I'll say it again, quite happy to say it --I cried that night. It was terrible. From that perspective, we moved on. I think the thing that really got us was the expectation of local $\,--\,$ not local authorities but the government for us to open

the local authority that we got through partnerships, so

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up, operate within the restrictions that they had placed upon us without the financial assistance. I know, certainly in our settings, we had to spend tens of thousands to become compliant within the guidance that was issued in terms of putting up perspex walls, putting up traffic light systems, buying in outdoor classrooms. All of that was done at a significant financial expense to us in normal circumstances. We were faced with circumstances that -- our income was down 80%, sometimes up to 85/90%, and I think in a four-month period our income was down 85%

So that in itself was a huge financial impact. We

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got the funding from the local authority, which we'll be forever grateful for, but the expectation was huge on us to be able to do these things. And I'm sure there was private operators who were financially in a worse state than we were. Not everybody has got three months of reserve, they don't, some operate month to month. If that wasn't done, there wouldn't have been a private childcare sector for us to open back up with, it would have disappeared.

So that again is a slight positive. But I think there was probably more that could have been done to run in parallel with the expectations of the private sector. We need to provide this, but there was no concern as to how financially we were to be able to foot that bill to be able to do that, and that was a huge concern for us right through the pandemic in terms of being able to survive financially.

The bubbles being introduced where you had -we were registered for 115 or 89 children, you could take 30% of your register at one point, so that in itself was a huge impact on us, huge.

Q. Thank you.

23 KAREN FLYNN: Yes. I mirror what Ross has said. On top of 24 the -- talking about the bubbles, you didn't just have 2.5 your member of staff for the bubbles, you needed the

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staff then to give them breaks, so over and above you had to have more staff.

When I go back to my hospital site nursery that we decided to keep open, it cost us tens of thousands to keep open because, ves. as I said right at the beginning, it was the morally right thing to do, but it blocked us out of grants, it blocked us out of everything because we had opened it. So it did cost us. We don't regret doing it because we did it for the children and the families of that service but there have been huge implications. It actually had massive financial implications on services.

Q. Thank you.

14 RHONA BLACK: I'm very lucky because I operate under the 15 umbrella of the school, so we did receive monies for the 16 children attending the hubs from the council and we had 17 to fill in registers for that, and we also received 18 government -- local authority funding as well, which 19 came from the government, towards grants for re-opening 2.0 and to keep us in compliance with all the regulations.

21 Q. Thank you all.

22 ROSS KEENAN: Can I just add to that as well? Something 23 that's widely forgotten as well is that we were $-\$ at the outset of it, we actually asked parents that if 25 they could and they were able to, if they wanted to

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continue to pay our fees, then we would be -- in order for us to survive, they would do that. And there was a significant portion of our parents who were happy to actually keep paying the fees, because at that point, it was an unknown quantity how long we were going to be closed, how long is it going to last, we want to make sure the nursery is going to be there for us to re-open again.

These were all valid concerns of not only myself running the business, but parents who needed the service to run when they went back to work, and that's a very positive thing for us that there was a huge amount of parents actually said: no, no, we'll keep paying our fees. Our landlords turning round and saving to us: listen , don't worry about your rent because we know you're closed down but you've still got the cost to pay. Without that, and without their understanding, again would have been significant barriers to us surviving the pandemic. So in terms of that, people's goodwill in these situations certainly came to the fore.

Q. Thank you all very much. My Lord, I have no further questions for the panel unless your Lordship does.

23 THE CHAIR: No questions from me, but can I thank all the 24 three panel members for their very helpful contribution,

25 I'm very grateful.

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          That brings an end to today's proceedings. We
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       commence tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock. So until
 3
       tomorrow morning at 10 o'clock, good evening, everybody.
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       Good night.
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    (4.12 pm)
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             (The Inquiry adjourned until 10.00 am
 7
                on Wednesday, 6 November 2024)
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