

Scottish COVID -19 Inquiry

Witness Statement

Witness statement of Jim Thewliss, retired General Secretary for School
Leaders Scotland

Witness number: EDU0025

Statement taken on 20th August 2024

INTRODUCTION

1. My name is Jim Thewliss. I am 70 years of age. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.
2. I am currently retired, but during the pandemic I was the General Secretary of School Leaders Scotland (SLS).
3. I was headteacher at Harris Academy in Dundee between 1997 and 2015. I thereafter became the General Secretary of SLS, which was a post I remained in until August 2023.
4. I am giving this statement on behalf of SLS. In this statement, I refer to matters that have been relayed to me by Graham Hutton, who is the current General Secretary of SLS. Graham has held this post since August 2023. In respect of Graham's professional background, he was principal teacher of modern languages at Grove Academy, Broughty Ferry between 1994 and 2006; in 2008 he became the headteacher at Dumbarton Academy; between 2011 and his retirement in 2023, he was headteacher at his former school, Grove Academy.

OPERATION OF SLS PRE-PANDEMIC

Pre-pandemic overview

Description of SLS

5. SLS represents leaders in secondary schools across Scotland. The current membership consists of around 1169 members, including headteachers, deputy headteachers, principal teachers, faculty heads, and business managers. Members also include college lecturers and secondary leaders who have been seconded to local authorities or Education Scotland.
6. When SLS was first formed, the members were all headteachers. It then expanded to include deputies, business managers, and faculty heads. Membership is open to anyone with a leadership role in Scottish schools. The membership of SLS increased substantially during the pandemic and school closure periods from 950 to almost 1,200 members.
7. SLS runs with the backing of the executive presidential team and the SLS Council. SLS has a national officer, formally called a field officer, who is a full time official. This post is needed due to the increase in membership. The national officer deals with issues raised by members, such as grievances, disciplinary matters, pensions, policy, and the administration of policy.
8. SLS has an administrative and finance officer who does all the behind-the-scenes work and has worked for SLS since 1988. SLS also has a professional learning coordinator who works one, soon to be two, days a week.
9. The presidential team consists of a president, who is elected annually. Most of the time the president is the vice president from the previous year. The presidential team consists of two vice presidents, two past

presidents and an immediate past president. There are five people in that team.

10. SLS also have an executive which represents the core team plus the presidential team and representatives of each of the leadership areas i.e., heads, deposes, local authority heads and business managers. Alongside the executive, SLS has a minute taker and a treasurer.
11. Finally, SLS has a Council, which is the main body of the association. The Council has representatives from each of the 32 Scottish local authorities. The number of Council members from each authority depends on the size of the membership in that authority. For instance, there are three members for Glasgow, as the membership there is quite large.
12. SLS has 67 members from the independent sector, with the independent sector also having representation on the Council. Pro rata, the independent sector has the highest number of Council members.
13. SLS provides members with professional guidance, advice, and support. SLS delivers a bespoke and accredited programme of Personal Learning and Development for members. SLS also represents the views and concerns of members to their employers, the SG and its agencies.

Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Closure of secondary and special needs schools

14. Schools were not as prepared as they could have been. The closures happened very quickly, and both SLS and its members were not prepared for the immediate closure of schools.
15. Schools have always had two aspects within their communities. One aspect is social care, and the other is learning. The learning aspect was picked up more quickly and the social care aspect was the greatest

pressure and stress on school leaders, schools and on SLS as an organisation.

16. SLS had a role in supporting members who tried to maintain the effective functioning of their school as a learning institution. Members also had to accept, develop, and create social care structures that were not in place and could not have been expected of a secondary school at any point pre-pandemic. This involved devising strategies to maintain a level of contact which was far beyond the normal expectation of home/school liaison during a period when physical contact and interaction was challenging/impossible. This left our members exposed, in stressful and often impossible situations in relation how they tried to balance supporting young people, maintaining an educational structure, and keeping the school open. All these pressures eased over time, but in the first two to three weeks it was challenging, draining, and distressing. This impacted on our members' own personal health and wellbeing, but also impacted the duty of care they had in relation to staff, young people, parents, and the local community.

Changing use and role of schools in supporting families and communities

17. The role of schools in supporting families and communities did not change completely during the pandemic. Children were still in school, albeit online, except of course vulnerable children and the children of emergency workers who were able to come in into the hubs.
18. During the pandemic, SLS was dealing with this from a different perspective and on a national level. In the early stages of the pandemic, SLS's main concern, shared with that of the public, was that people were dying with COVID-19 and trying to re-open schools from a social care aspect, given that teachers knew vulnerable young people were at risk but were either not known to or being supported by social services.

I was involved in discussions aimed at mitigating the risk from and spread of infection, but also in relation to trying to get schools to open again.

19. SLS issued guidance to its members, who were dealing with members of staff who were genuinely concerned and frightened. Some of them were unable to physically attend their workplace due to underlying health problems and they were very concerned. SLS was also worried about young people and tried to organise a structure whereby schools could be open to deliver a basic level of social care. So, for example nurses could be in hospitals and doctors could work with the emergency services, as their children would have a place to be.
20. SLS had to balance the overall national concern about health and wellbeing, in respect of both young people and SLS members. The death rate was enormous at the time, and in the early stages I was working to get people who were potentially vulnerable back into schools. In the early stages there was not enough personal protective equipment (PPE) available. Some SLS members work in special needs schools where intimate personal care is part of the expectations placed on staff. The responsibility for providing this care sits with local authorities.
21. A lot of young people who were coming into school required personal care at a high level where transmission of disease was going to be greatest. It was not known at that time what levels of transmission there would be from or between young people, so there were a lot of unknowns. SLS was really making it up as it went along because we found out things on a day-to-day basis. Due to that, I issued information to all members as soon as regulations or information changed. For SLS, there was underlying stress, a lack of understanding and lack of knowledge and the organisation was trying to do something with the best of intentions.

22. It took time to get to a point where SLS had enough background knowledge to understand what the regulations meant and what was safe to do. We were also able to estimate where restrictions might be lifted soon. Conversations at a national level between the Scottish Government (SG), politicians, civil servants, COSLA and parents' groups became more sophisticated the further we got into the pandemic. Non-teachers became more aware of how schools worked, and we had the benefit of an evidence base and previous trends upon which to decide on next steps.

Online teaching, digital literacy, access to ICT & learning resources, to include digital poverty & connectivity issues

23. In terms of communication between teachers and learners, online teaching meant that this was not as immediate or as free flowing as it would be in a classroom setting. There was a delay in young people emailing their teachers for help and support and then having to wait until teachers got back to them. A lot of young people found this frustrating.
24. One of the things the pandemic did across society was to test the systems already in place. Some systems were found to be robust, while others were not. It would be fair to say that this testing found education systems to be less than robust. For example, at the start of the pandemic SLS looked at digital learning and understood that there was a large part of the country in which broadband was unavailable, which meant it would be very difficult for young people to access learning. SLS knew that in terms of the hardware available out there, not all young people had access to it or the means to buy it, and that the software that was available was not brilliant.
25. SLS has always known that digital poverty was a major problem for certain sections of the population, and suspected that Education Scotland, the national body tasked with providing digital learning was

not up to scratch. Education Scotland was founded with the aim of being flexible, expansive, and having a base of materials available to take this forward in a meaningful way for the majority of young people. When schools closed, Education Scotland was unable to deliver on these aims, with the quality of the online learning resource and the level of online support for teachers and young people being poor to non-existent. It took very long time for it to come up to standard, if it ever did. E-sgoil filled a significant part of that gap.

- 26. Some schools and local authorities were better able to develop their digital technology. There was no national roll out of access to digital learning.
- 27. It became apparent that teachers were not skilled enough to be able to interact with children digitally and in a way that was as detailed and comprehensive as was required in the early stages of the pandemic.

Remote learning - consistency of delivery & availability of training to members & other school staff to deliver this

- 28. I think the teaching profession learned as quickly as it could. It took a bit of time, as the support structure was not there. Some teachers' trade unions were good in terms of exerting pressure on the SG and Education Scotland to have resources/support provided. The unions also stepped in to provide support and guidance to members.
- 29. It is assumed by SG that young people are all digitally literate, but this is not entirely true. There is a high risk of being unable to get hold of young people due to them either not having devices, having poor connectivity or just not being able to use their device. Staff phoned pupils' homes to find out who was experiencing these issues, and this issue was also raised at the SG COVID-19 Education Recovery Group (CERG).

Continuing delivery of free school meal entitlement

30. During the early stages of the pandemic, all the professional teaching associations in Scotland made representations to the SG about young people who were entitled to free school meals not getting their entitlement. It was one of those things that could not be changed quickly. The process simply did not exist, as it never had to. The SG understood this and responded quickly.

Delivery of care & education in schools & childcare hubs, including implementation of COVID-19 restrictions

31. As the General Secretary of SLS throughout the pandemic, it is important to mention that the stress and pressure put on secondary school leaders, particularly headteachers, to make the hubs work, was at times intolerable. SLS had members who were either physically in the school five days a week, sometimes more, and who were on call seven days a week over the entire period of lockdown. It was above and beyond in terms of how the expectation on school leaders influenced their life and their lifestyle. It is important to say that some school leaders sunk underneath that pressure.

32. Graham Hutton, current SLS General Secretary has provided further information in his witness statement on how hub schools operated.

Delivery of care & education to children and young people with additional support needs (ASN) in hubs

33. I do not believe that children with ASN were catered for within the hubs. I do not believe that this lack of provision was anyone's fault, but it was instead driven by the circumstances. Given the dynamics of the situation, which required a high-level response, it took time and understanding of the dangers posed by the virus until SG was able to

respond more appropriately to the specific needs of individual young people.

34. With a greater understanding and knowledge of both the COVID-19 virus and of what was needed in respect of the delivery of education during a pandemic, improvements were made between the first and second lockdowns. The resources were better; staff were more resilient; the systems set up within schools were more able to cope and we were more confident; and people were more confident of SLS in relation to what was happening. It was a natural evolution of what was happening in terms of learning how to live with COVID-19.

Workload and stress levels

35. As General Secretary of a professional association that was asking members to go far beyond the normal demands of professionalism, members of SLS must get some public recognition of the work they did to make sure that schools operated; young people were protected; and their learning and social wellbeing was enhanced by what was done.
36. During the pandemic I was sending emails to members almost daily, bringing them up to date with things and being well ahead of the local authorities in many cases. I was sending pages and pages of stuff out daily and tried to direct members to different parts. The expectation of what was coming meant that members seldom objected to receiving this advice, albeit I received the occasional request for clarity.
37. It is worth mentioning that on a national level, the relationship between professional associations within teaching in Scotland has sometimes been tense and fraught. When I use the term 'professional associations', I am referring to all the teaching unions in Scotland, including SLS, AHDS, EIS, SSTA and NASUWT. The level of understanding and cooperation that developed between the professional associations in the education industry during the pandemic

was exemplary. If something came to any of these organisations from discussions with SG that was an issue for schools, the unions understood that the amount of time available for discussion on it was not great and that aspects related to leadership should be passed to SLS and those related to classroom practice or the ways in which teachers were interacting with young people belonged to unions such as EIS. The professional organisations operated on that basis with the understanding of both SG and the professional associations that things had been dealt with at a higher level, so that at school level there was not as much friction as potentially might have existed.

Impacts on particular cohorts of workers including support staff; staff teaching practical subjects; staff with caring responsibilities; and staff with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 (e.g., differential impacts based on sex, race, disability, or age)

38. There was a recognition at an early stage in national discussions between the SG and COSLA that staff with protected characteristics, underlying health problems and so on, had to be acknowledged and dealt with in a sympathetic way, both at a national and school level. There was significant clarity within the system about that at an early stage and I did not have any members coming to me raising issues about this.

Specific impacts on headteachers and other school leaders

39. COVID-19 tested systems. Education Scotland was not particularly responsive or foresighted. The learning resources available from Education Scotland, in terms of materials made available to young people and teachers on their website, were not nearly where they should have been. There was always some suspicion and concern within that system and suddenly it was tested and found to be lacking. The inspection system, which prides itself on providing support, was suddenly revealed to be a system which was challenged and there was

very little support provided by Education Scotland. Systems picked up slowly with the offering from e-Sgoil. At the time e-Sgoil's existence was not widely known within the system and it was given a wider profile to compensate for the lack of online support for pupils.

40. Education Scotland's work encompasses His Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIE). Inspections stopped during the pandemic and thereafter HMIE started to evaluate what had happened post-pandemic. They did not feed much of their evaluation back into the system because by that time things had moved on. Overall, Education Scotland did not contribute much in relation to supporting schools and teachers as institutions and individuals interacting with young people. Education Scotland's response was always lacking but it failed when it came under stress from the pandemic.
41. I recall one day in the later stages of the pandemic when I was on call with Jayne McManus of the HMIE arm of Education Scotland and she asked what they should be doing. HMIE was seeking to re-engage and ingather information on how schools were dealing with the situation at that time. I made the point that if they called any headteacher in Scotland, they would say they were looking for teachers, because there were so many teachers absent from school. Education Scotland was saying they wanted to engage with schools to find out how things were and how they were coping, and I made this point to give HMIE the opportunity to become part of the solution rather than adding to the problem. I said that if they wanted to engage with schools, they should go and meet with headteachers for a couple of hours. I did mention, however, that I believed this would be counterproductive, as headteachers at the time were extremely busy. I cannot confirm if any meetings happened. I suggested that since Education Scotland had a lot of registered teachers on their workforce, these teachers could make themselves available. I also offered to find them schools which they could go to. This suggestion was made on a Teams call. These teachers

could cover classes, observe, and get a flavour of what was happening in schools because they would be embedded in the school. Education Scotland was not prepared to engage in that way.

42. There was the potential for things to be done better, quicker, and more effectively in supporting the system than they were. However, there was reticence rather than proactivity from Education Scotland, including both the curriculum arm and the HMI arm.
43. E-Sgoil fed the system at a point in time about a month after schools had closed in March 2020 in a way which engaged with the system and enabled it to support young people. It was by no means perfect and never could be, but it was a system in a scheme which is capable of upscaling and did that in a way in which was made more accessible and immediately available. After my first meeting with e-Sgoil when they introduced themselves and their work, I was thinking to myself 'Why are we not doing this now?'

Impacts on particular cohorts of pupils including those with protected characteristics and those undertaking practical subjects & placement-based learning

44. I want to mention the time it took the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) to realise, understand, and adapt its systems to the challenges, particularly in relation to practical subjects and their assessment. In fairness to SQA, they eventually got there, but they were repeatedly warned to move things quickly because young people were not learning in the way they were accustomed to learning. I believe that if they were going to assess young people, they had to amend the structure in place for learning to ensure the assessment system aligns with the restrictions on learning. For a while, there was a mismatch there, with assessments being limited in scope to exclude what the lockdown response had prevented from being taught. At one point there was a sudden realisation that this was the case, and they did shift, but it

would have helped reduce stress levels within schools and on young people if this had been done earlier, when we started to highlight to them what the challenges were going to be.

Impacts on ability of members to work in partnership with other organisations, e.g. schools, businesses, third sector;

45. It is worth mentioning that social work and schools have different protocols in the way in which they work. In better circumstances, they work together, perhaps not always perfectly, but when coming under pressure, the lack of coordination of the protocols made it impossible to work in partnership at times. Schools were in the position of having to provide education and continuity of education. This could not be done in the traditional in classroom face to face way, as this would be putting young people at risk of harm.
46. School leaders had more than enough on their plate trying to ensure schools were working without having to try to unravel the difficulties that existed between protocols to get that aspect of it to work. To be fair, the social work department had more than enough problems to be dealing with themselves to be able to devote any amount of time to do that. In terms of where it came in the priority list, it was pretty much down there.
47. Partnership working was a stressed situation before the pandemic, related to the lack of resource there. The pandemic made partnership working unworkable at times and it has not recovered since.

Human rights, mental health & wellbeing

48. The teaching profession is now finding out what the long-term impacts of COVID-19 and lockdown have been. Part of this long-term impact relates to how it has impacted the education system and how this system relates to, and interacts with, society. Not only are the long-

term impacts affecting individuals, but it is also impacting on the way in which the system works, as the normality within the system now is a different normality than in 2019.

49. Scotland now has a cohort of young people who have not experienced normal schooling e.g., early years; primary, secondary, further, and higher education, and all the various transition points. All children and young people whose education and social development was interrupted were definitely impacted. The behaviour they are exhibiting within the system is now starting to affect the system itself and this is a much longer-term, insidious harm that will continue if the level of resource going into the system is not enough to sustain what would have been normal. SG has not yet made any serious attempt to investigate and understand how the school system is evolving and the new challenges and pressures on schools since the pandemic.

PPE, including access to, and implementing the use of PPE

50. At the outset of the pandemic, the PPE was not adequate or supplied as quickly as it could have been. A significant number of young people with health and personal care needs who could have been supported within school were not due to it being unsafe to do so at the outset. The missed learning of these young people was difficult to catch up on.
51. After some time and within the level of priority PPE got in the national system, schools were eventually well provided for. The way the professional associations worked together on this in the early stages was critical in the way this improved quickly within education.

Vaccine prioritisation

52. SLS and AHDS made the case at CERG and one of the CERG sub-groups quite strongly that had teachers been vaccinated as a matter of priority and much sooner, then the way schools could have operated would have

been significantly better than it was. SLS and AHDS saw no reason why vaccinating teachers in Scotland had not been done given how vaccination centres were set up. The way in which schools could have operated would be significantly enhanced by doing so.

Transitions/new admissions/destinations

53. Rather than talking about transitions, the whole notion of progression and learning should be considered. This was undoubtedly disrupted by lockdown and the way in which schools accommodated moving back out of lockdown into an approaching normality. The disruption was to all young people and the system needs to recover from this. Young people know there are gaps in their learning and feel short-changed.

Changes to SQA exam diets & alternative certification model (ACM)

54. SLS was involved in the changes to the curriculum that were made by SQA. SQA set up a strategic overview group which was tasked with making strategic decisions in relation to examinations and qualifications, of which I was a member. The SQA will be able to confirm the full membership of this group. SLS was aware of curricular amendments that were being made and there was a certain logic behind most of these changes.
55. In fairness to SQA, it is both true and untrue to say it they stripped parts out to the core. I will take maths as an example – if the maths curriculum contained three units of work, with only one unit of that work being examined, maths departments would teach all three units and schools would only know later in the session which unit would be assessed. The idea behind it was that young people would be able to access all the learning and gain full knowledge of the three units despite being tested for only one. Considering how much school children had missed during the pandemic, SQA decided to only have two units. This was a compromise between comprehensive learning and a course that

took young people towards an examination and obtaining a qualification. The choice was made to strip out the alternatives, to provide certainty to learning that could be covered within the time available to award the qualification.

56. It is easy to say with hindsight, that young people were at a disadvantage as they lost some of their learning. However, when the decision was made, it was not known what was going to happen. I understand that the decision was made in the best interests of young people in terms of obtaining qualifications at that exam diet. The main reason it was done was to reduce the burden of assessment on young people. The aim was to ensure that the course syllabus was covered from an understanding point of view, but at the same time trying to reduce the time spent on assessment.
57. Having been involved in this decision and being aware of the genuine angst that existed within SQA at that time, the decision was made with the best will in the world given the information available at the time, which was gathered by speaking to other people, mainly representatives from other professional associations. Graham Hutton, the current SLS General Secretary sat on the relevant working group and consulted with other members of the SLS Presidential Team, all of whom were serving heads in state schools. I was in a group with other professional associations where we made a joint decision that this was the best way. None of us knew what was going to happen and it was a very fluid situation.
58. The SQA made use of the word 'co-created', which they used to mean that decisions on issues such as exam cancellations and the ACM were made in consultation with the professional associations. The cooperation between SQA and the professional associations increased throughout the pandemic. The strategic overview group led to the creation of a

communications group and several other short life groups. So, if anyone is to blame, the co-creators are also guilty.

Communication with SQA

59. SQA was at a disadvantage from the start of the pandemic because what it does is dependent upon continuity of learning in an institution leading towards, for most people, a diet of exams at the end.
60. Pre-pandemic, communication by SQA within the system in which it operated was good. Within that system and structure, SQA communicated in the context of telling people what was going to happen, what would happen next, and what they could expect. There was a shared understanding and a shared expectation on the part of SQA, school leaders, teachers, pupils, and parents.
61. When the pandemic began, because young people were not in schools and exams were not going to happen, SQA carried out the same level of communication by telling people what was going to happen. What the SQA failed to do was to communicate and provide, on a regular and ongoing basis, reassurance that what they said was happening was actually happening. In that vacuum of communication, people made things up. The press made things up. People who were prepared to make mischief made things up. Some politicians made things up. SQA constantly found itself being wrong-footed in relation to the communications they put out because they did not confirm and reaffirm that things were under control. It took them a long time to grasp the fact that communication is not just something that you do regularly in the context of the next stage of an event and that it is something that needs to be done when there is huge uncertainty out there.
62. A lot of the problems SQA faced during the pandemic were due to poor communication. The ultimate downfall was at the end of the first exam diet, when they did not communicate effectively exactly what was

happening and how qualifications were going to be awarded. This was a harsh lesson for SQA to learn. As SQA moved into the second year of the pandemic and onto the next set of qualifications, they did things entirely differently. This included early engagement with the professional associations and local authorities and ongoing communication.

63. As General Secretary of SLS, every Friday morning during the second year of the pandemic, there was a strategic meeting in relation to what was happening that finished with a reminder to SQA to communicate what was happening. SQA will be able to confirm who attended these meetings. Following these meetings the working group worked on whatever the strategic group had told them to implement.

Re-opening of schools, including implementation of COVID-19 restrictions such as physical distancing and recruitment of additional staff to assist with implementing these measures

64. At a national level, in terms of the way SG was issuing guidance going out to schools, the implementation of that guidance was different. Part of this was circumstantial and part was related to the way the guidance was drafted and the learning gained about the way to communicate things out into the system. The circumstantial part was that in the first lockdown, the information SLS were feeding into the system and the discussions we were having related to health and wellbeing; not catching COVID-19; and how the hubs would work. It was a different kind of communication because it was a skeleton system to protect a certain group of people and keep learning going. The second type of communication was to get the system back up and running again. Everyone perhaps had a naive belief that the system could get back to what was seen as normality before. There appears to be an unwillingness or reticence to open up discussion on this matter.

65. The communication that was issued by SG at the start of the pandemic was predicated on the notion that schools were going to start up again as opposed to the fact that schools were going to be for the large part, closed. As time went on, SG communication became focused on what could be done, bearing in mind the circumstances of particular schools, and starting to look at having some year groups in school in certain circumstances if schools could meet certain conditions. This opened the system up and gave schools the opportunity to start making decisions that were best suited to their own circumstances. There was pressure on schools because 'school A' was doing one thing and 'school B' was doing things slightly differently, so parents who lived half a mile apart from one another were starting to ask why there were differences. This was a different type of communication, which recognised that school estates are different across the country. School headteachers were, at that point, being given the opportunity to exercise their professional judgement, having a set of parameters within national guidance in relation to what is safe in the context of bringing young people back into school.
66. The initial SG guidance based on medical advice was 'shut it down'. The next set of guidance was based on medical advice saying that steps could be followed to re-open schools. The system learned a way of communicating which understood what the restrictions were, but also that the school estate was such that individual schools could start to make their own decisions.

Changes in pupil behaviour & needs since schools re-opened, including issues with attainment & attendance

67. The notion that COVID-19 is done, and we are done with it, is not correct. The impact of the pandemic remains in schools. Graham Hutton, the current SLS General Secretary has provided further information about this in his witness statement.

Funding challenges and retention of staff

68. If you make a school operate in a different way, it would be highly unusual for this to be carried out without more cost than the previous operation. At a practical level, PPE had to be funded. Schools were not asked to fund PPE themselves but over a period of two years implementing systems and structures all required more money and staff. This funding needed to come from somewhere, whether from central or local government. In the end, Scotland now has a system in which there is less money available. COVID-19 extracted a chunk of money from the system and schools are now paying for other cutbacks too.
69. In relation to staff retention, in those areas where local authorities were able to recruit staff, some have retained them, and others have not. Again, it comes back to the amount of money available within the system to do that.

Communication with the Scottish Government

70. I could not speak more highly of the level of communication with SLS. SG engaged at every level in relation to everything that was happening.
71. I find it very difficult to remember a phone call or email from a member where they asked what was happening. SLS was informed and consulted by the SG throughout the pandemic.
72. I attended the SG COVID-19 groups on behalf of SLS. At the highest level, I was involved in CERG. Outwith CERG, there were nine SG education working groups on which SLS was represented. I attended weekly strategic meetings with SQA. I also met with COSLA weekly throughout the pandemic. There were one or two subgroups COSLA initiated that were short-lived, looking at particular issues and on which SLS had representatives. I cannot recall the names of these subgroups

or who the SLS representatives were on these subgroups, but they were short-lived, and issue specific.

Lessons to be learned

73. At CERG, there was a set format for meetings, with the epidemiologists speaking first. They told those in attendance what had happened, what was happening, and what would happen. The epidemiologists were on the ball all the time and were always pretty accurate. What they did say was that they had been telling us for a long time that something like COVID-19 was going to happen. The greatest lesson to be learned is preparation. If we are not learning that things like this can happen, then we have not learned at all.
74. The second lesson relates not only to the SG but also to all the groups I was on. Constant, accurate, and regular communication is crucial because if SG and other public bodies do not grab, and maintain hold of, the agenda, other people will do so. It took a great deal more work than it should have to fend off the nonsense and mischief-making that was going on due to various public bodies not communicating with the public accurately, continuously, and comprehensibly. Communication with the public during the pandemic was a learning process, with some bodies learning quickly, others taking longer and some never learning at all.
75. It is critical to understand that the traditional model of teaching cannot be sustained. The world now expects teachers and teaching institutions to operate in a much more responsive and flexible way to deliver learning to the community.
76. In these circumstances, collegiality is all. The more collegiate you are, the better you can deal with a situation because the system becomes empowered through collegiality. People gain confidence and develop trust if confidence and trust are shared.

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that this statement will form part of the evidence before the Inquiry and may be published on the Inquiry's website.

By typing my name and the date below, I accept that this is my signature duly given.

Signed: (James Thewliss)

Date: (20 August 2024)