

Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry

Organisational Statement

Witness statement of Mike Corbett on behalf of The National Association
of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT)
Scotland

Witness Number: EDU0106

Statement taken on 02 August 2024

INTRODUCTION

1. My name is Mike Corbett. I am 58 years of age. I work in Edinburgh in our Scotland office in the city centre. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.
2. I am currently the National Official for NASUWT in Scotland. I have held that role since October 2021. During the pandemic I was working as a Teacher of English for East Dunbartonshire Council.
3. I was a Secondary teacher for 26 years, including during the initial period of the pandemic, and alongside this had held a number of elected roles on the lay side of NASUWT, up to and including UK Junior Vice-President. From October 2021, I have been the National Official for NASUWT responsible for all work of the Union in Scotland. I am degree-educated and have several post-graduate qualifications equivalent to SCQF Level 11.
4. I am giving this statement in my capacity as National Official in Scotland for NASUWT and on behalf of NASUWT Scotland.

Overview of the history, legal status and aims of NASUWT

Scotland

5. NASUWT is the teachers' union and the voice of the teaching profession. NASUWT has a proud history of fighting to secure meaningful improvements to teachers' working lives. Time and time again, the NASUWT has stood up, often against the prevailing views of the time, to challenge attacks on teachers' pay, workload, pupil indiscipline, and contractual rights.
6. NASUWT was born in 1919 due to demands for a living wage and decent working conditions and was formed by ordinary teachers prepared to do extraordinary things. NASUWT is made up of teachers that said enough is enough and were prepared to disrupt the status quo and break new ground.
7. NASUWT is built on a democratic structure; run by teachers and headteachers to represent teachers and headteachers in pragmatic trade unionism, focused on exerting pressure and influence wherever it can to secure the best outcomes for its members.
8. The main decision-making body of the NASUWT consists of five National Officers that are elected by NASUWT members to serve a four-year cycle and the National Executive Committee that represents their District of the United Kingdom. The legal status of the NASUWT is regulated under the Trade Union and Labour Relations (Consolidation) Act 1992 and, as such, is registered with the Certification Officer. The Scottish arm of NASUWT has no separate legal status and is governed by the same internal rules as the rest of the union.

9. The day-to-day running of the NASUWT is the responsibility of the General Secretary Team.
10. NASUWT is affiliated with both the TUC and the STUC.
11. There are battles which the union has had to fight again over the years and rights which have to be continually defended. The NASUWT is only able to do this thanks to the support and solidarity of members' who understand that standing up for their rights is inextricably linked to the right of children and young people to high-quality education delivered by professionals who have the conditions they need to do their best for the pupils they teach. Teachers know that as a member of the NASUWT, they have one consistent, powerful voice advocating on their behalf with employers, governments, and administrations.
12. Our aim is to improve and protect the status, morale and working conditions of the teaching profession so that teachers and headteachers can provide the best education and support to children and young people. NASUWT is committed to ensuring that teachers and headteachers are recognised and rewarded as highly skilled professionals, with working conditions that enable them to focus on their core role of leading teaching and learning.
13. NASUWT is proud to be led by teachers for teachers. Its democratic structures ensure that its decisions are rooted in the concerns of its members.
14. NASUWT's members are teachers and headteachers working in schools, early years settings, and the further and higher education sectors.

Description of NASUWT Scotland's membership

15. NASUWT Scotland is the second-largest teacher trade union in Scotland, with a membership of around 7,000, which includes workers across early learning and childcare (ELC), primary, secondary, additional support needs (ASN), and further and higher education sectors. The vast majority of members are in the primary, secondary, and ASN sectors.

An overview of the key issues and impacts experienced by NASUWT Scotland and its members as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in Scotland and the response by the Scottish Government.

Closure of early years settings, primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities

16. At the outset of the pandemic, with the Scottish Government's decision to close schools to the majority of pupils in March 2020, members were suddenly in a unique situation, with little guidance from the Scottish Government on their employment or health and safety. As a result, NASUWT formed a rapid response team to ensure that targeted advice and support was delivered to individual members at risk and began its chain of all-member communications offering help in navigating what teachers should and should not be expected to do. This rapid response team model was a dedicated team of 10 NASUWT staff from across the UK to work on COVID-19-related matters, meeting daily to review cases and develop consistent and accurate advice for members. In addition, policy officials from across the UK met weekly to review developments in respect of the response of governments and administrations across all UK nations and to share effective practice.

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

17. NASUWT Scotland supported members with the uncertainty of working from home, in the absence of any useful guidance from national bodies, such as Education Scotland, ensuring that those with caring responsibilities such as those with children or elderly relatives who were dependent on them, had a workload that reflected their circumstances. NASUWT dealt with many over-zealous line managers who seemed to have lost sight of this. Principally, many teachers had caring responsibilities at home, for their own children or sick or elderly relatives, yet some managers expected those teachers to be available and working as if it were a normal working day – for example, insisting that they offer live lessons to pupils – irrespective of their family circumstances. Hub Schools/Nurseries were established as soon as the need for wider school closure was recognised but teachers were not typically recognised as Key Workers with access to this facility (unless they were part of the small band of teachers who were actually in school delivering lessons in those Hubs).

18. NASUWT also provided clear guidance and support to ensure that unsafe home working practices were not imposed on teachers, particularly around the issue of remote learning and teaching, including live streaming. There were sometimes unrealistic expectations of teachers in respect of what they could achieve in the time available. NASUWT reminded members of their contractual rights on working time, their right to take breaks, etc. There also seemed to be a failure on the part of some managers to understand the new working conditions which teachers found themselves in e.g. familiarising themselves with five or six different platforms on which pupils could submit work and then assessing it and giving feedback,

again perhaps in five or six different formats, all of which took much longer than the same tasks would normally take in school.

19. There were many issues around remote learning, including excessive workload for teachers and fewer opportunities for welfare checks and to ensure that they were safe and working in a healthy environment. With live streaming, the key concerns related to GDPR, and the possibility of teachers being recorded without their consent or their own or their pupils' data being misused, for example, teachers or pupils not only being recorded but their captured image then being manipulated and re-used without their consent. There was little evidence of schools/employers considering this and offering appropriate advice and guidance.

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

20. From March-August 2020, some teachers reported for work at hub schools and taught vulnerable children and those of key workers. NASUWT pushed for thorough risk assessments and control measures to be put in place to minimise risk to the members providing this essential service, enabling NHS staff to provide the life-saving services that our communities needed. Through NASUWT Scotland's negotiation at the Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT) in March 2020, we secured agreement that only teachers that volunteered to do so worked in Hubs.

Impacts on specific cohorts of members

21. Probation teachers are teachers in their first year of teaching (though there are exceptions where they are completing the flexible route to full registration). A teacher must pass their probationary

year in order to gain full registration with the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS), which allows them to continue working as a teacher in Scotland. The assessment of a teacher working through their probation is undertaken by the employer, hence a huge amount of support and guidance is needed, and the required number of lesson observations needs to be satisfied. Probation teachers were severely affected, especially through the incredibly challenging academic year of August 2020 - June 2021 with its lockdown and, unlike the previous year, no special allowance for this was recognised by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS). Essentially, those on the Teacher Induction Scheme (TIS) in 2019/20, given the introduction of the first lockdown in March 2020, were able to complete their induction and gain the full standard for registration with GTCS, without fulfilling all the normal criteria (e.g. nine formally observed lessons during the year). Those on the TIS in 2020/21 were not offered the same flexibilities, despite having also endured a lockdown from January to March 2021), which resulted in them losing out on months of experience of lesson preparation and delivery; assessment and reporting; professional development opportunities; and more and made the year very difficult for probationers. NASUWT Scotland addressed this by running dedicated 'Probationer Teacher Seminars' and taking up issues on their behalf.

22. Supply teachers were also badly affected during the pandemic. NASUWT fully recognised that an inevitable consequence of measures imposed to curtail the spread of COVID-19 was that large numbers of supply teachers would be unable to work; had work cancelled; or were only able to obtain drastically reduced employment opportunities. These concerns were addressed to the deputy first minister (DFM) directly, as well as through the national bargaining structure, the SNCT, resulting in a supply teacher job

retention scheme being put in place,¹ including arrangements to compensate those who were not engaged in a contract when the first lockdown began on 23 March 2020.

23. Guidance/pastoral staff had particular challenges, especially during both lockdowns, when they were faced with impossible pressures to try and identify where pupils may not be engaging with online/distance learning; explore the reasons for this; and offer appropriate support. These challenges were exacerbated by the limited availability of staff in other parts of local government and other organisations, such as social workers, educational psychologists, and careers advisers, who normally provide support to guidance/pastoral teachers. Social workers and educational psychologists often join meetings with guidance/pastoral staff to offer support for children with acute challenges. Careers advisers, support guidance/pastoral staff throughout the year but particularly when pupils are making course choices. The reason there was limited availability of these workers was largely because, since they were not classed as Key Workers with access to Hubs, many of them were looking after children or undertaking other caring responsibilities and unable to commit as much to their day-to-day work (including conducting meetings with external partners such as Guidance/Pastoral Teachers).
24. Perhaps the most worrying feature of the pandemic and Scottish Government's response to it was the treatment of minority groups. Black and minority ethnic teachers and those with disabilities reported feeling unheard and isolated by Scottish Government from the outset and through the worst of the pandemic. While NASUWT

¹ Guidance from Scottish Negotiating Committee for Teachers (SNCT) re Supply teachers job retention payment, dated 03/04/2020 ([SCI-NASUWT-000017](#)); Letter from John Swinney to NASUWT regarding support for supply teachers, dated 22/02/2021([SCI-NASUWT-000006](#))

Scotland did its best to support and reassure these members, a focus group of BAME members assembled in November 2023 to contribute to the Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry's 'Let's Be Heard' listening project. This group expressed ongoing bitterness and distrust of Scottish Government for its failure to recognise and address the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on minority groups. NASUWT's consultation response to the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee on the Impact of COVID-19 on Equalities and Human Rights (1 January 2021) gives full details of this and has been provided to the Inquiry.²

NASUWT's communication with the Scottish Government & the various Scottish Government education groups that met during the COVID-19 pandemic

25. Scottish Government echoed the Westminster Government's decisions during the early part of the pandemic, including on what seemed like an unnecessary delay in applying a lockdown. Scottish Government found its own voice as the pandemic progressed, for example, taking a distinct approach from Westminster regarding the arrangements for mask-wearing in schools by staff and pupils.
26. There appeared to be a more collegiate process undertaken by the Scottish Government from early in the pandemic, especially around its contact with trade unions. Nevertheless, NASUWT has particular issues with how communications with Scottish Government were arranged. Only the following teacher trade unions were invited to join Scottish Government's COVID-19 Education Recovery Group (CERG): EIS (Educational Institute of Scotland); SLS (School

² NASUWT's consultation response to the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee on the Impact of COVID-19 on Equalities and Human Rights 01/01/2021 ([SCI-NASUWT-000031](#))

Leaders Scotland); and AHDS (Association of Headteachers and Deputies in Scotland). NASUWT Scotland and the SSTA (Scottish Secondary Teachers Association) which, between them, represent over 10,000 teachers were both excluded from this forum.

27. NASUWT Scotland was invited to participate in a Workforce Issues Group (WIG), established in April 2020 (alongside a wider group of partners than those that attended the CERG, including Scottish Government officials, local government representatives, and all the trade unions that had any involvement in schools). WIG met daily for the first two months and then twice weekly for much of the pandemic. This was more of an update and discussion group, with little in the way of formal agendas and no minutes taken, while key decision-making responsibility lay with CERG. CERG meetings began at the end of April 2020 and took place twice weekly initially, then weekly up until October 2020.

28. NASUWT liaised with Scottish Government leaders, especially the DFM, who was also in the role of cabinet secretary for education and skills for much of the time, and employers, on a regular basis throughout the pandemic. NASUWT made formal contributions to a wide range of consultations and calls for views made by Scottish Government. This includes some fundamental responses, for example, to the COVID-19 Recovery Committee in the Scottish Parliament. NASUWT has made more recent submissions on a variety of topics which, though they may, on the surface, seem unrelated, do have within them comment related to COVID-19 or its legacy. This refers specifically to more recent consultation responses on broader topics, which have within them some direct reference to COVID-19 or its impact; for example, the consultation in October 2022 on the Disabled Children & Young People Bill. All of these are part of our evidence to the Inquiry, which lays out all significant

correspondence with Scottish Government and others, including key questions about some of the decision-making during the Covid-19 pandemic by politicians and national bodies, such as the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Education Scotland. Broadly-speaking, NASUWT would have preferred Scottish Government to have moved to making its own decisions, rather than echoing those of the Westminster Government, much earlier in the pandemic; this may have led to earlier adoption of key NASUWT 'asks' such as implementing the widespread use of face coverings in schools. Even after taking a more independent approach, though, and making decisions which were supported by NASUWT, there remained a reluctance, at times, on the part of Scottish Government, to act on NASUWT concerns (for example, around the easing of various mitigations in the first half of 2022). As far as classroom teachers are concerned, Education Scotland was posted missing during the early months of the pandemic, at exactly the time when Scotland's teachers were desperate for guidance and online resources. (Comments on SQA decision-making are contained in paragraphs 34 to 36).

29. Although they are outwith the Scottish COVID-19 Inquiry's investigative period, NASUWT made a submission to the Long Covid Inquiry in the Scottish Parliament in February 2023. We also contributed to a special Education Committee Roundtable in June 2023, facilitated by the Scottish Parliament's Education, Children and Young People Committee regarding violence and abuse in schools. Both these issues can be directly linked to the pandemic.

Human rights, mental health & wellbeing

30. As Scotland emerged from the pandemic, there seems to have been a rush to get back to 'normal' with little research on the longer-term impact of the pandemic on teachers and pupils. NASUWT surveys

highlight increased levels of teacher stress and anxiety, with an associated increase in teacher absence and retention challenges within the profession. For instance, an NASUWT Wellbeing Survey from 2022 ³(which ran from mid-December 2021 to early January 2022 – available on NASUWT website) suggested 90% of teachers had experienced more work-related stress in the previous 12 months, with 91% saying their job had adversely affected their mental health and 64% their physical health. Increased workload was cited as the main driver of this stress, linked to remote learning, pupil behaviour, pupil wellbeing and academic performance, alongside personal financial worries.

PPE

31. One of the most concerning issues raised by members in March 2020 until later in 2020 was the lack of availability of personal protective equipment (PPE) for those working in school hubs and, later, for those working closely with children with significant ASNs. These children required a range of interventions, including personal and intimate care, and invasive procedures such as percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy (PEG) feeding*, and staff that supported them regularly undertook healthcare duties; social care duties; and moving and handling, all of which meant they were in regular close contact with many of these children. (*PEG tubes are used to feed a person straight into their stomach if they have a problem feeding by mouth, cannot maintain their weight, or are unable to digest food. They can be used either to meet all their nutritional needs or to supplement the diet. A PEG is a surgical procedure where a small opening is made through the abdominal wall into the stomach. A PEG tube around 7mm wide is inserted through the opening to allow liquid feed, medicines, and water to be passed into the stomach.

³ NASUWT Wellbeing Survey from 2022 ([SCI-NASUWT-000029](#))

The PEG tube is held in place by a small plastic disc against the skin on the outside.)

32. Through lobbying Scottish Government, NASUWT ensured teachers had the right to wear face coverings in classrooms, when this was not the case elsewhere in the UK. Whilst this reassured some staff, it did not address the patchwork picture of wider PPE provision in the ASN/special school sector where, for example, some teachers were not provided with protective aprons, even when they were helping to change a child who had soiled themselves. Although Scottish Government advice was that staff should be provided with protective clothing, gloves and other protective equipment if they were asked to physically support, assist or restrain pupils, this was not routinely offered by many schools/employers to teaching staff in exactly these circumstances.

Vaccine prioritisation

33. NASUWT launched a 'Vaccinate2Educate' campaign at the beginning of January 2021, calling for all teachers and education staff to be prioritised for the COVID-19 vaccine. This was done to save lives and help get children back to school. As a result, and following NASUWT Scotland's direct intervention with Scottish Government on behalf of ASN practitioners, in January 2021 Scottish Government ministers decided that staff working very closely with children and young people with the most complex ASNs, were to be offered COVID-19 vaccinations as a priority. Regrettably, vaccination prioritisation was not broadened to include other teachers.

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

34. By necessity, the planned final examination diet for 2020 National Qualifications was cancelled and alternative arrangements put in

place by SQA, relying largely on teacher estimates. While this worked reasonably well, at least until the announcement of results, it caused significant workload for teachers, including the individual ranking of students. This was unnecessary. Students were not ranked when they got their results pre-pandemic; on their certificate they got, for example, a Grade A, which indicated they got between 70 and 100%; many of their peers would get the same Grade A, they were not individually ranked. While it is true that individual students could then enquire what their exact percentage was, very few did. To insist on this individual ranking exercise for every pupil presented for a National Qualification (NQ) while in the unique circumstances of a global pandemic was perverse.

35. Better communication and engagement by SQA with NASUWT Scotland and its members may have helped to address this and avoid the later issues around the announcement of results, where many pupils, especially those from deprived backgrounds, initially had their final awards downgraded by SQA, sparking a furore which led to a public apology from the DFM and a reversal of this decision.

36. The academic year 2021/2022 saw the use of the ACM for the awarding of NQs. Once again, NASUWT Scotland was denied entry to a key group, this time the National Qualifications Working Group, which developed and agreed the ACM. NASUWT Scotland members highlighted many issues around the ACM, principally its timeframe, the quality assurance 'juggernaut' that it unleashed and a lack of clarity and poor communication around some aspects of it. Essentially, there was no trust in teacher judgements. While no teacher minds their assessments being cross-marked by a knowledgeable peer, some schools and local authorities insisted on systems of 'quality assurance', which had candidates' work and grades being checked and cross-marked five times or more,

including by local authority employees, who were not even teachers. This led to a significant increase in the workload of teachers, who were having to re-mark/re-assess work and/or amend associated records/spreadsheets far more than they normally would, at a time when they were under enormous time-pressure to get these exercises completed swiftly. All of this is explored more fully in NASUWT Scotland's submission to the Education, Children & Young People Committee on 22 September 2021, which has been provided to the Inquiry.

Re-opening of early years settings, schools, colleges, and universities

37. When the first minister instructed that all schools were to fully reopen in the week beginning 11th August 2020, NASUWT provided support and guidance to its local association secretaries and workplace representatives. This was done to ensure that comprehensive school risk assessments were carried out with NASUWT involvement in order to try and make schools safe to open and the associated risks minimised. NASUWT also supported a large number of individual vulnerable, Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME), and pregnant members through our 'rapid response team' model, utilising resources from across the union to support members in Scotland, which was the first nation to fully reopen schools after the summer holidays in 2020.
38. Prior to the reopening, NASUWT wrote to all members to ensure that anyone vulnerable, pregnant, or shielding had checklists and model letters to send their employers, with a process for escalation to rapid response team members where safety concerns were not addressed. NASUWT ensured none of these groups of teachers entered the workplace until an individual risk assessment was in place. Where necessary, this involved utilising Section 44 of the Employment

Relations Act 1996 on an individual basis. This gives employees a right to 'retreat to a place of safety'; in practice, to remove themselves from the workplace if they believe it to be unsafe and places them at risk of serious and imminent danger. Members were alerted to their ability to use this though, in practice, in Scotland, we are not aware of any members who had to do any more than threaten to do so. These members in particular, but also teachers more widely, experienced significant stress and anxiety about the safety of their workplaces: they had concerns around many things, such as, the inability to socially distance properly, whether there was an appropriate amount of cleaning undertaken within school buildings/classrooms, the availability of sufficient cleaning/sanitising materials in classrooms (such as hand sanitiser and desk sprays), the lack of COVID-19 testing and the lack of PPE equipment (especially for those working with children with ASN). There was a strong sense that schools were under-prepared for wider reopening and communication with staff regarding the arrangements for that was weak in many cases. NASUWT had numerous enquiries from members who had received little or no information about cleaning, pupil movement, social distancing, and ventilation.

39. From August to December 2020, NASUWT supported members through the rigorous implementation of the Scottish Government guidance. NASUWT intervened on a large number of occasions to ensure that symptomatic pupils were not in school despite pressures from families and some school leaders. Unfortunately, a pattern was set where the health and safety of teachers (and, indeed, many pupils) was compromised by overwhelming pressure to have schools open, no matter what. There were inadequate arrangements and protections in place: teachers had one of the highest infection rates of any occupation; and higher numbers of teachers suffer from Long COVID than most other occupation groups as outlined in an article

from the British Medical Journal.⁴ I have also provided the Inquiry with a copy of the NASUWT MSP Briefing on Long Covid from May 2022,⁵ and our submission to the Covid Recovery Committee's Long Covid Inquiry in February 2023.⁶

40. NASUWT supported members in ensuring that professional cleaning was in place and that members were not expected to clean pupil workspaces and desks. NASUWT also ensured schools provided cleaning resources for teachers' and pupils' use in personal work areas and that these were Control of Substances Hazardous to Health (COSHH) compliant.
41. Where schools were pushing for in-person parent/carer consultation meetings, NASUWT successfully had these postponed until March 2021, with clear local agreements supporting local Working Time Agreements. The issue was not about the timing but that they were planned at all – these were essentially mass in-person gatherings which would have been infection vectors. Working Time Agreements are agreed each year in every school across the country on things such as when parent/carer consultation meetings will be scheduled and conducted, when pupil reports will be written, etc. Changes in approach to these and other activities will have been part of the discussions conducted by Working Time Agreement groups in most schools.
42. From January to March 2021, during the second lockdown, NASUWT supported members in similar ways to those during the first lockdown and, in particular, provided advice around the increased use of remote learning, via the publication of our own guidance and

⁴ Article from the British Medical Journal, 28 September 2023 ([SCI-NASUWT-000027](#))

⁵ NASUWT MSP Briefing on Long Covid, May 2022 ([SCI-NASUWT-000010](#))

⁶ Submission to the COVID-19 Recovery Committee's Long Covid Inquiry, February 2023 ([SCI-NASUWT-000004](#))

some from Education Scotland. Members were, nevertheless, put under extreme pressure to navigate multiple software systems and packages along with a myriad of ways to assess pupils' work, which led to sometimes unmanageable workload pressures. Alongside this, teachers were concerned about the impact on pupil learning, with large numbers of learners failing to engage with online tasks, whether this was through a lack of access to technology, insufficient training/familiarity with the online tools being used or a flat-out refusal to get involved.

43. NASUWT supported the most vulnerable members through the second wider reopening of schools before Easter 2021, to ensure individualised risk assessments were in place for the staggered return of pupils (beginning with P1-3 on 15 March 2021 and progressing with more senior pupils thereafter, with all pupils being back in school in some form before Easter 2021). Whilst all members co-operated with the staggered return, many commented that it was educationally disruptive and that they would rather have continued online learning with whole cohorts of pupils rather than in-person learning with rotating small groups.

44. As schools tried to cope with the 'new normal' of a return from lockdown for a second time, from April 2021 and into the new academic year of 2021/22 NASUWT Scotland continued to support members in many of the same ways as before. This included meeting with politicians, Scottish Government officials and, increasingly, Public Health Scotland officials via WIG. Through WIG, NASUWT was able to challenge the Scottish Government's position in a number of areas, including on the sometimes premature withdrawal of mitigations in schools; the impact of the pandemic on teachers' (and pupils') workloads, with the associated impact on mental health and wellbeing; along with the need to take more

effective action to address the needs of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils and students. NASUWT also continued to challenge the Scottish Government to mobilise effective equality impact assessments, considering the potentially increased impact of the virus on BAME teachers. Evidence at the time suggested that these members were disproportionately more likely to be impacted by COVID-19 infections and deaths, as outlined under the 'Equalities Advice' section on NASUWT's website titled 'Covid-19 – Minimising Racial Disparity'.⁷ More recently, though, there have been suggestions that multi-generational households may have been more of a factor in this than ethnicity.

45. NASUWT Scotland also regularly intervened in reports of COVID-19 breaches in schools, and supported members where Scottish Government guidance and protocol was not being properly followed, especially around the recommended distancing between pupils and the wearing of face masks.

46. Scientific research identified ventilation as a hugely important mitigation in reducing risks of virus transmission, so NASUWT Scotland pressured Scottish Government on this specific measure, which led to more robust recording of ventilation levels in schools through the use of CO2 monitors. The key period when this pressure was applied was November 2021, via Workforce Issues Group (WIG) meetings (unminuted), correspondence with Scottish Government officials,⁸ and with the Cabinet Secretary for Education & Skills,⁹ leading to the production of COSLA's Covid Good Practice Guide,¹⁰

⁷ Letter to cabinet secretary for education and skills re ventilation in schools ([SCI-NASUWT-000032](#))

⁸ Correspondence with Scottish Government officials 04/11/2021 [SCI-NASUWT-000012](#)

⁹ Correspondence with Cabinet Secretary for Education & Skills, 25 November 2021 ([SCI-NASUWT-000002](#)) and 10 December 2021 ([SCI-NASUWT-000001](#))

¹⁰ COSLA's Covid Good Practice Guide, Dec 2021 ([SCI-NASUWT-000005](#))

published in early December 2021. The key points of this were highlighted to NASUWT members in a Bulletin issued in January 2022.¹¹ I have provided copies of these to the Inquiry. NASUWT also produced its own bespoke ventilation guidance for members and, through rigorous and persistent campaigning, finally ensured that COSLA produced a practical ventilation guide which set out steps that workplaces should take when air quality exceeded 800ppm. Regrettably, this focus on air quality in schools and classrooms has regressed as Scotland has emerged from the pandemic, despite clear evidence that it is vital in terms of pupils' cognitive abilities. Research on this point is to be found in a pdf titled 'Air Filtration in Schools and Colleges' and stored under the 'Health and Safety Advice' section on NASUWT's website.¹² Indeed, recent Scottish Government guidance, which is being developed on infection control has dropped specific reference to CO2 levels and ventilation, despite NASUWT Scotland's pressure to retain this.

Long COVID

47. NASUWT also saw the need to intensify lobbying in other areas, such as the NASUWT campaign at a Scotland and UK level that Long COVID should automatically fall under the disability characteristic of the Equality Act 2010. This would mean those suffering from Long COVID being entitled to reasonable adjustments should they be placed at a disadvantage due to Long COVID. NASUWT also continued to press the case for no teacher to suffer a detriment due to Long COVID. In this connection, an SNCT circular was put in place on 30 September 2021,¹³ which provided paid special leave for 12 weeks for COVID-related absences. I have provided a copy of this to the Inquiry. This policy was supposed to expire on 1 March 2022

¹¹ Bulletin issued in January 2022 ([SCI-NASUWT-000003](#))

¹² Air Filtration in Schools and Colleges research ([SCI-NASUWT-000030](#))

¹³ Additions to SNCT handbook, Sept 2021 ([SCI-NASUWT-000015](#))

but was extended to 19 April 2022 but not renewed, despite the desire of the Teachers' side of the SNCT (i.e. all the teacher trade unions) for this to occur. SNCT 22/89¹⁴ was agreed to commence from 19 April 2022, although the teacher trade unions expressed concerns about the inferior nature of this provision. I have also provided a copy of this to the Inquiry.

Changes in pupil behaviour & needs, including attainment & attendance issues

48. The academic performance of pupils (albeit judged by the sometimes questionable Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study, conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) shows a decline in scores between 2018 and 2022 in Scotland and elsewhere. Many teachers believe that the challenges for some pupils can be linked to problems they experienced earlier in the pandemic (for example, a lack of any transition work between primary and secondary school, especially during the first lockdown; or the inability of many pupils to undertake practical work in many secondary subjects during and after lockdown). Meantime, teachers across Scotland report increasing mental health issues amongst pupils and a significant rise in incidents of violence and abuse (confirmed by the Scottish Government's independently commissioned Behaviour in Scottish Schools Research published in November 2023). All of this points to a failure by Scottish Government and other national bodies to properly assess and address the longer-term impact of the pandemic on teachers and pupils.

¹⁴ COVID-19 Related Absences temporary changes, 13 April 2022 (SNCT 22/89) ([SCI-NASUWT-000016](#))

What lessons that can be learned from the Scottish Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic

49. NASUWT recognises fully the challenges and pressures any government would face in seeking to respond to the diverse range of demands that a global public health emergency creates for the education and wellbeing of children and young people. However, NASUWT is clear that knowledge gained since the height of the pandemic highlights a range of policy principles and priorities necessary to ensure that the Scottish education system fully recovers from the impact of the pandemic and remains resilient in future.

50. NASUWT would draw the Inquiry's attention to the following important considerations in this respect:
 - a. Scottish Government must recognise that the ability of the education system to remain focused on the needs of children and young people depends critically on the capacity of its workforce to focus on the provision of high-quality education, whatever the circumstances. For this reason, Scottish Government should ensure that teachers and school leaders are able to concentrate their efforts on teaching, leading, and learning. Scottish Government must intervene where necessary to ensure that provision across the education system is sustainable and manageable for the workforce. There were pre-existing workload issues for teachers, but the expectation of education recovery has brought these more sharply into focus, given the need for teachers to try and spend more time with pupils experiencing a variety of challenges (developmental, behavioural, etc.), which have been exacerbated by the pandemic;

- b. Any future requirement for the provision of high-quality remote and blended learning will require continued investment in support and training for teachers and school leaders and the provision of resources tailored to learning of this type. Investment in additional teacher capacity, including effective harnessing of the expertise of supply teachers must also be regarded as of critical importance to the longer-term national response to the pandemic and ensuring that children's educational needs continue to be addressed at a time when schools are facing significant resource challenges;
- c. The COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath continue to place significant resource pressures on the education system. Scottish Government must ensure that the consequences of the crisis are properly recognised, and that the system is able to meet the inevitable costs of addressing this. There are a variety of suggestions under the 'Advice' section on NASUWT's website, titled 'Education Recovery Policy Statement';
- d. The independent research commissioned by Scottish Government (Behaviour in Scottish School Research, November 2023) confirmed a post-pandemic worsening of behaviour in schools, which has not yet been effectively addressed;
- e. Scottish Government must continue to place the highest priority on ensuring that schools are safe places to learn and work. It must ensure that its expectations of schools are clear, guided by scientific evidence and, if necessary, are given practical effect through meaningful intervention in settings where they are not being met. Specifically, the focus on improved air quality in schools should not be lost or diluted;

- f. Scottish Government must ensure that, in any future national crisis, it seeks to involve and properly consult all teacher trade unions: the decision to exclude NASUWT from the CERG group, when we had experience of how Governments across the UK were dealing with the pandemic, was bizarre. Similarly, national agencies, such as SQA, need to be willing to consult with all teacher trade unions: the failure to include NASUWT on the National Qualifications Working Group, when we had direct experience of what other qualifications bodies in the UK were doing during the pandemic, was an error, in our view;
- g. More attention will need to be focused on supporting those learners and staff who face higher health and safety risks than the wider population, be that disabled or BAME teachers and pupils, or those who have clinical vulnerabilities;
- h. The best prospects for success for the education system rest on meaningful and effective engagement with the workforce and the organisations that represent them. Only in this way will the full confidence of those working in schools be secured and maintained.

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: Mike Corbett

Date: 2 August 2024