



SCOTTISH

**CHILDREN'S REPORTER**

ADMINISTRATION

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**BY EMAIL TO:**

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**Scottish Government Covid19 Inquiry Team**

Dear Covid19 Public Inquiry in Scotland,

**The Scottish Children's Reporter Administration (SCRA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the remit of the public inquiry into Covid19.**

**SCRA employs Children's Reporters, who work within the Children's Hearing.**

**The Children's Hearing is the distinct statutory way in which Scotland responds to concerns about a child's circumstances (whether about the care or treatment of the child by adults or the behaviour of the child). Such concerns are assessed by professionals and are then considered by Children's Reporters and if required by panel members in a Children's Hearing, who make a decision about whether there needs to be compulsory professional involvement with the child and family. This compulsory involvement takes the form of a Compulsory Supervision Order.**

**In the Children's Hearing:**

- the rights of children and families are respected
- the needs of children or young people are addressed through a single holistic and integrated approach which considers all the circumstances of the child and the child's welfare
- the welfare of the child remains at the centre of all decision making and the child's best interests are paramount throughout
- the child's engagement and participation is crucial to good decision making

**The role and purpose of SCRA is:**

1. Receiving referrals for children/young people who may be at risk.
2. Ensuring that other public agencies carry out enquiries and assessments into children's circumstances so we can make informed decisions about children referred to us.

3. Making decisions on whether to refer a child to a Children's Hearing if they need compulsory measures of supervision.
4. Drafting the grounds for the Hearing.
5. Arranging for Hearings to take place when we decide that compulsory measures of supervision are warranted and where there is sufficient evidence to prove the grounds.
6. Ensuring fair process takes place within the Hearing, including the rights of those in attendance being met.
7. Having a key role in establishing grounds of referral in court, where these are contested, and in defending decisions of Children's Hearings which are subject to appeal.

**Our Vision:** Children will be listened to, protected and supported to realise a positive future where they are safe, valued and respected.

**Our Mission:** We protect and support Scotland's children by making high quality decisions, upholding their rights and working collaboratively as compassionate, inclusive corporate parents to enable the most positive and personalised experience of their Children's Hearing.

**Our Values:** Our values are the shared motivations, beliefs and behaviours that underpin all that we do.

**Supportive** We work with kindness to support children and families, our Partners and each other.

**Child Centred** Children are at the heart of everything we do.

**Respectful** Everyone is respected and treated fairly, inclusively and lawfully.

**Accountable** We are responsible for our decisions, our ethics and our learning.

The work of SCRA and the Children's Hearing was seriously and significantly affected by the pandemic itself – in the impact of Covid19 on members of our staff who became unwell or had to self-isolate or care for other family members; on panel members in the same situation; on children and families in the same situation and on our professional partners in social work, health, education, police, Scottish Courts and the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service who were in the same situation. There were therefore multiple and cumulative challenges to the very core of the work of every component part of the children's hearing system from day one of the lockdown pandemic response.

SCRA's work was seriously and significantly affected by the restriction of movement and the stay at home orders. Children's Hearings are meetings that are carefully curated and organised; take place in carefully designed spaces with the direct involvement of key people around each child. We worked closely with our partners to develop a swift technical solution which allowed us to continue to make sure that Children's Hearings could continue to make decisions in the best interest of children – but in developing that solution we quickly realised the limitations and implications of the approach. Fairness, proportionality, accessibility and participation are crucial to any Children's Hearing and the emergent digital divide - in terms of access to devices, to data, to basic operating knowledge meant that these crucial elements of the Hearing were compromised.

From these two examples alone we would ask that the inquiry considers the impact of Covid19 on the public sector workforce - on individuals as well as on the wider workforce across children's services in Scotland. These impacts are likely to have longevity and the inquiry should be mindful of this. We would also ask that the inquiry considers the specific impact of Covid19 on children and their families, and the ways in which the socio-economic and adverse experiences faced by disadvantaged Scottish families have been exacerbated by both the pandemic and the public health/governmental response to it. We are struck by the British Academy's 'Covid Decade'<sup>1</sup> and by the irony that this will potentially span the 10 year reform agenda set out by The Promise findings of the Independent Care Review in February 2020.

We would also like the inquiry to consider the 're-set' that has potentially been inadvertently provided by the pandemic. SCRA had to strip back our work through prioritising urgent situations where children and families were at risk and as a result we have recognised what is essential work for us – and also what may not be essential work. Public sector agencies like SCRA should be supported to learn lessons and promote redesign as a core part of this reset. We, like others, will learn lessons that potentially provide efficiency to the public purse. But there will be other areas which may require significant future investment to consolidate reform and improvement and the inquiry should take a holistic and realistic approach to this future investment to ensure sustainably better outcomes for children, families and communities who are most in need.

**In relation to the workforce we would ask that consideration is given to the following:**

- 1) the impact on young people at the start of their working life – to avoid long term economic and social exclusion
- 2) the impact on women as this has been disproportionate on so many different levels in the economic, social and domestic/familial spheres
- 3) the impact on carers as a result of reduction in access to services and support
- 4) the impact on older people nearing the end of their working life
- 5) the definition of key worker status and the supports available for key workers, particularly those in level 2 and 3 who struggled to access support and help to enable their key duties
- 6) the use of the furlough scheme in private business compared to the approach taken across the public sector
- 7) guidance in relation to business continuity which is about events beyond inclement weather. <sup>2</sup> National guidance which recognise and reflects the wider future impact of climate change, cyber security, internet access, access to key systems and power supply issues amongst others would be a useful reflection on this Covid experience

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<sup>1</sup> [COVID-decade-understanding-long-term-societal-impacts-COVID-19.pdf \(thebritishacademy.ac.uk\)](https://www.britishecademy.ac.uk/COVID-decade-understanding-long-term-societal-impacts-COVID-19.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> We are now more conscious of the potential of a further lockdown or pandemic outbreak; a terrorist attack or a cyber-attack and need to be proactively prepared.

- 8) effectively equipping the workforce to work both from home and from an office – increasing overall future adaptability.
- 9) productivity and expectations about the capacity of the workforce, including gold standard expectations of agile working approaches in the public sector
- 10) stress and cumulative stressors in the workforce and in society at large– including domestic abuse / alcohol use / addictions and including mental and physical wellbeing and reviewing the types of help that individuals will need now and in the future – including reshaping service and promoting opportunities for self-help.

Overall we would wish the inquiry to examine the need for significant and enduring support for public services which have played such a critical role in the pandemic response and which will continue to be central to our national recovery; and to examine an end to the year on year incremental reductions in some aspects of public provision and to provide a positive and compelling vision for how we build and strengthen further the public service response. In our view with a sharp and specific focus on children, families and communities most in need.

**In relation to children we ask that the following be considered:**

- 1) the focused and specific impact on all children
- 2) the focused and specific impact on disadvantaged children with adverse childhood experiences
- 3) the trauma of Covid19 for children and addressing the trauma nationally
- 4) how Covid19 has been communicated / explained to children and the impact of that
- 5) Covid19 vulnerability and disadvantage needs a specific focus linked to the nature of required supports including the impact of direct financial support
- 6) how do we build trusting relationships and a support structure for people that they want to engage with
- 7) the collective recognition of coping strategies and resilience which respects rights and addresses previous imbalances of power
- 8) how can we work differently with children across the public sector as a result of our collective experiences of Covid19.

SCRA recognises the four harms as the skeleton structure of the inquiry:

- direct health impacts of Covid19, including cases and deaths in care homes
- other health impacts
- societal impacts, including education
- economic impacts

We hope that the deeper dive into the areas outlined above will also be considered. We genuinely believe that the inquiry is an opportunity to see what worked and what we should continue to do – as well as for us to learn what didn't work and why.

We are of the view that we are in the Covid19 decade and we should not just be considering 'recovery' as a short term, episodic phenomena. Instead we should be considering how we can improve and develop, through a long term programme of work around statutory service provision for children and families in the context of our recent experiences during the pandemic and in support of delivery of the wider national vision for initiatives such as the Promise.

We hope that this is useful,

Yours

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Neil Hunter', written in a cursive style.

**Neil Hunter**

Principal Reporter / CEO Scottish Children's Reporter Administration