



Covid-19 Public Inquiry

30th September 2021

About Children in Scotland

Giving all children in Scotland an equal chance to flourish is at the heart of everything we do.

By bringing together a network of people working with and for children, alongside children and young people themselves, we offer a broad, balanced and independent voice. We create solutions, provide support and develop positive change across all areas affecting children in Scotland.

We do this by listening, gathering evidence, and applying and sharing our learning, while always working to uphold children's rights. Our range of knowledge and expertise means we can provide trusted support on issues as diverse as the people we work with and the varied lives of children and families in Scotland.

Children in Scotland is pleased to contribute to the call for submissions on the establishment of the COVID-19 Public Inquiry. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic we have continued to work with children and young people on a range of topics. All of this work has engaged with the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people to some extent. We have also delivered the Education Recovery Youth Panel in partnership with Young Scot and the COVID-19 Recovery project. Both have provided key insights into children and young people's experiences during the pandemic and their priorities as we recover from it.

Our response will focus in particular on the experience of children and young people. It is based on the direct experience of those involved in our project work and what we have heard from our members.

It is important to highlight at the beginning of our submission that we appreciate the complexity of decision-making across the period of the pandemic. We hope our submission can direct the inquiry to some of the key issues that arose from this and can be used to support better preparedness and resilience in the future.

As a membership organisation, Children in Scotland provides a key link to the children and young people's sector and we would be happy to discuss with the

inquiry how we can facilitate and support your engagement across our membership.

- **what do you think the inquiry should cover?**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a massive impact on the lives of children, young people and families. This has been seen across many different areas of their lives, and for all ages of children and young people, from babies through to young adults. It is therefore essential that the inquiry hears directly from children and young people of all ages (including younger children), and those who support them and work most closely with them. Hearing directly from children and young people will improve the quality of evidence gathered by the inquiry. It will also ensure that children's rights to be heard are realised.

We know the impact of the pandemic has been seen across many aspects of children and young people's lives and the services that they interact with. A key concern across the period of the pandemic for the children and young people we work with has been in relation to education. Children and young people have discussed inconsistencies in provision of education both when working remotely during the initial periods of the pandemic and also when returning to in-person schooling. The work of the Education Recovery Youth Panel¹ is a key source of the views of children and young people on the issue. You can access their March report [here](#)². Their final report is due to be published in the coming months and we would be happy to share this with the inquiry when it is available.

Through Enquire, Reach, Resolve and our Inclusion Ambassadors project, we are acutely aware of the impact of the pandemic on the learning opportunities for children and young people with additional support needs. Our work has highlighted a lack of support to engage with online learning and lack of support upon the return to school due to issues such as staff shortages. The recent Inclusion Ambassadors report, published in August 2021, provides a key starting point for understanding these issues and for developing the inquiry³. We would also encourage the inquiry to engage with Enquire, the Scottish Advice Service for Additional Support for Learning for detailed quantitative evidence on the enquiries they have received. This provides evidence of where the pandemic has affected education for families where a child has an additional support need.

We have also supported children and young people to share their views on exams and assessments through a range of opportunities. It is clear from our experience that the decision-making process and final decisions on delivery and exams and assessments must be explored in further detail. While efforts were made to engage with children and young people, it is unclear how their views were fed into the design of alternative methods of assessment. In both 2020 and 2021 the models agreed by the SQA created stress, uncertainty and confusion for young people sitting exams. In 2021, this model was agreed in clear opposition to what children and young people had said would work for them in the circumstances. It also appears to have been focussed as much on supporting data collection as it was on

¹ <https://youngscot.net/education-recovery-youth-panel>

² https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cee5bd0687a1500015b5a9f/t/60b8b6db1d83850f7a742e10/1622718176064/YS+Education+Recover+Report_V2.pdf

³ https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IA_Report2021_Final-pdf.pdf

supporting positive outcomes for young people. The decision-making process must be scrutinised in detail to explore why decisions were taken.

Our work with Changing our World, our children and young people's advisory group, has also identified how they feel the exams and assessments system can be adapted to meet the needs of children and young people. You can access the videos members of the group produced in the lead up to the 2021 Scottish Parliamentary election [here](#).

We would also encourage the inquiry to explore how decisions were made about the focus on the return to in-person learning as schools reopened. Many children and young people told us about the missed opportunities to socialise while restrictions were in place. The Deputy First Minister placed a welcome emphasis on the importance of focussing on wellbeing when schools reopened. However, based on our engagement, many children and young people indicated that they returned to schooling with a heavy focus on 'formal learning'. We would encourage the inquiry to explore how decisions about the focus of school-based learning took place and why the focus on wellbeing appears to have decreased in priority, despite the emphasis placed on it by children, young people and those who work with them.

We also know from our engagement across the sector that the pandemic has impacted on young people's rights to access support. There have been significant delays in Children's Hearings. We also know there have been issues in accessing services such as social work or mental health support. We also know specific groups have been particularly affected, such as those with experience of care. The inquiry must make efforts to engage across all the issues faced by children and young people to explore why gaps in support appeared and what could have been done differently.

The inquiry should also make efforts to explore how news and updates about the pandemic and the related restrictions were communicated to children and young people. We know from across our work that many felt the restrictions were not communicated in a way that was accessible to them. We know that for many, this meant they felt like they had been excluded or ignored.

The Scottish Government should be praised for taking steps, such as the First Minister and the National Clinical Director engaging directly with young people through various channels. However, we know that these routes are not accessed by all children and young people, especially those of a younger age. We also know that many would have appreciated more practical advice. We would encourage the inquiry to explore the communications plans that were in place to provide recommendations on how information on complex, changing topics can be communicated in clear and accessible ways.

As we have discussed previously in relation to exams and assessments there was a feeling among children and young people that they did not have opportunities to participate in decision-making. The inquiry should also explore how decisions were taken on 'opening up' as we moved into the latest phase of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and also on the vaccination roll-out. We are unclear about how children and young people were able to engage with these decisions or share their views.

It would also be worth exploring digital engagement with specific children and young people. There have been some clear positives from in this area that we can learn from, with many organisations adapting their practice to maintain engagement with young people. However, we also know there were issues with digital access in schools and that there were barriers to many people engaging with digital resources due to financial constraints, access issues or digital literacy.

- **what do you think the inquiry should not cover?**

While we appreciate the need for the inquiry to work quickly and to provide feedback on its findings, we would encourage it to take a wide-ranging, intersectional approach to gathering evidence. We know the pandemic has impacted on everyone and different groups have had vastly different experiences of it. It is important that the inquiry provides opportunities for people to share their views and vital that it has a full understanding of the impact on these different groups.

A full, in-depth inquiry that takes full account of the diversity of ways the pandemic impacted on individual lives is essential for ensuring that we take on the appropriate learning from the pandemic.

- **is there any type of evidence that you think is essential for the inquiry to obtain?**

We have already highlighted that we have worked on a number of projects that provide key evidence on the experiences of children and young people. This includes the 2021 Inclusion Ambassadors report and the March 2021 Interim report from the Education Recovery Youth Panel⁴⁵. The inquiry should also engage with the findings from the final Education Recovery Youth Panel report and the report on the work of the COVID Recovery Panel when they are published. We would also point the Inquiry in the direction of reports such as Covid in Colour, Lockdown Lowdown and the work of the Children's Parliament, including the Corona Times and the How Are You Doing survey⁶⁷⁸.

It is vital that a wide-ranging approach is taken to gathering evidence that takes account the breadth of experiences of the pandemic. We have highlighted several key sources above; however, it would not be possible to list every source from across the sector here. We would encourage the inquiry to use the Scottish Government's own children, young people and families evidence summary to identify other evidence⁹.

As the membership organisation for the children's sector, we would also be happy to facilitate discussions with sector during the inquiry should this be of benefit. This

⁴ https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/IA_Report2021_Final-pdf.pdf

⁵ https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5cee5bd0687a1500015b5a9f/t/60b8b6db1d83850f7a742e10/1622718176064/YS+Education+Recover+Report_V2.pdf

⁶ https://uploads-ssl.webflow.com/608820001af29516836aa575/60c3515747c786c1303ac028_COVID%2BIN%2BCOLOUR%2BFINAL%2BUPL OAD%2BVERSION.pdf

⁷ <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/4486/lockdown-lowdown-final-report.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.childreparliament.org.uk/our-work/children-and-coronavirus/>

⁹ <https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-19-children-young-people-families-december-2020-evidence-summary/>

could take place through our members' Voices Forum and also through the Children's Sector Strategic and Policy Forum. We regularly support engagement between the Scottish Government and the sector through both these routes and we know they are valued by all parties.

- **what should happen to ensure the inquiry is completed as quickly as reasonable thoroughness permits?**

As we have detailed above, we do not believe the inquiry should rush its work. It is important to commit the time to engage meaningfully with children, young people and the organisations that work with them.

Meaningfully engaging with children and young people takes time. To support this, we would encourage the inquiry to work with organisations that have existing relationships with children and young people. Doing so will ensure you can gather information in a safe, respectful manner and build on work that organisations have already been doing.

However, we would also encourage the inquiry to build on the evidence that is already out there. As we have highlighted above, there is a range of evidence already available on the experiences of children and young people. The work of the inquiry should complement and build on this, rather than seeking to start from scratch.

- **how should the inquiry report its progress?**

All reporting by the inquiry must be provided in accessible formats. This means there must be an active decision to move beyond just providing a long-written report and identify alternative methods of communicating the work of the inquiry and its findings. This could include infographics, videos and animations being used to highlight key information and to support the dissemination of it to children and young people.

There should be a fully developed communications plan that takes account of reaching children, young people and families and which has specific strands aimed at disseminating information to more seldom heard groups.

- **should there be interim reports? If so, what should the inquiry deal with in interim reports?**

We would support the inquiry providing interim reports where helpful, to support people to be informed about the progress of the inquiry and facilitate ongoing engagement with its work. As above, these documents must be provided in accessible formats. It is not for us to identify exactly when these reports should be made while the terms of the inquiry are still being set.

- **should the inquiry be required to make recommendations?**

Yes. The inquiry will provide a key source of learning on the impact of the pandemic in Scotland. Children in Scotland believes it is essential that it makes recommendations based on this learning. These will be essential for making progress in the delivery across all aspects of public services and in developing national resilience to future pandemics.

- **what should be done to ensure everyone learns from the inquiry?**

It is important that information is shared in an accessible manner that all can engage with. This includes all reporting across the lifespan of the inquiry. We have outlined several key routes for doing, detailed above.

There also must be full consideration given to how feedback is shared with those who participate within the inquiry. We know receiving feedback on how their views have been used is important to children and young people. We would encourage the inquiry to identify a process for feeding back to those who participate at the start of the process.

There also must be a clear plan of who will be responsible for taking forward the recommendations from the inquiry and for how this will be overseen following the inquiry. For the inquiry to have weight and for decision makers to learn from it, there must be opportunities for independent oversight.

- **how should the inquiry be designed so that it takes a person-centred, human rights-based approach to its work? For example, do you have views on inclusiveness and accessibility of venues and information?**

For the inquiry to take a person-centred, human rights-based approach it should aim to meet people where the 'are'. Too often children and young people are invited into adult spaces to share their views - this is a barrier to engaging for many. As we have already highlighted, we would encourage the inquiry to work with organisations that know children, young people, families and communities best. They will be able to facilitate engagement on the terms of the people they work with, and this will lead to meaningful engagement and information. As we have highlighted above, this will take time. It is vital that this is built into the timescales of the inquiry.

We would also encourage the inquiry to explore how it can take a children's rights-based approach to its reporting. This could build on the Children's Rights and Wellbeing Impact Assessment approach and explicitly make recommendations through a rights-based lens. Children in Scotland would be happy to discuss how to approach this work with the inquiry and facilitate work with partners across the sector who already approach their work in this way.

- **what help and support could be made available for those participating in the inquiry?**

As we have highlighted throughout this submission, it is vital that the inquiry works with partners so they can build on established relationships with children, young people and families. This will encourage people to take part and help them feel confident and able to do so. As we have highlighted, we believe that this will also improve the quality of the information collected.

It is also vital that those involved in the inquiry clearly communicate the aims and the processes to all those involved. You should provide accessible information sheets that outline all key information to allow people to make an informed decision about whether they wish to participate. As we have highlighted previously, it is also key to ensure the feedback loop is closed for participants so they can see the impact their participation has had.

- **do you have views on whether there should be a panel of members and/or assessors, in addition to the inquiry chair?**

We would encourage the inquiry to consider having a panel of members to support its work. Working with a range of people with lived experience and also organisations would support a human rights approach and be more inclusive of a range of expertise and experiences. It is important this takes an intersectional approach and ensures a range of views are included.

It is also important that any panel is given a meaningful role and those involved are given the support to participate. Children in Scotland would be happy to provide evidence from our experience of working with Changing our World on how to involve advisory groups and ensure their views are meaningfully heard.

We would also encourage the inquiry to consider our Guidelines for the Meaningful Participation and Engagement of Children and Young People¹⁰. These provide practical support in working with children and young people and the key steps for doing this in a supportive manner. We believe this will support you in developing any work with a panel of members.

- **do you have any other comments about the design of the COVID-19 Public Inquiry?**

It is vital that the inquiry aims to engender trust from the outset. This will require clear communication about the inquiry and its aims. It is also key that you set clear, realistic timetables and share plans.

If you have any further questions about our response, please contact Amy Woodhouse, Head of Policy, Projects and Participation, awoodhouse@childreninscotland.org.uk

¹⁰ <https://childreninscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CiS-Participation-2019.pdf>