

Deputy Louise Doublet – Vice-chair Children, Education and Home Affairs Scrutiny Panel
By email

19th January 2022

Dear Deputy Doublet,

Covid-19 Response: Impact on Children and Young People

Thank you for your letter asking for me to provide a written submission to assist with your review on the Government of Jersey's Covid response, for which I had a part in whilst serving as Minister for Children and Housing until November 2020. I am pleased to provide you with these answers, and would be more than happy to assist you further if you have any other areas you would like me to address.

1. Can you please outline what were the main challenges facing your portfolio as a result of the pandemic?

The overriding challenge was in keeping children and young people safe from the threat of the virus itself (which at that time we still knew little about), whilst balancing that with all of their other health and wellbeing needs. Determining what constituted 'proportionate action' was extremely difficult. Many of the actions which were taken by the government to bring Jersey into lockdown were inevitably going to have consequences on other fundamental aspects of children's lives, which we had to either do whatever we could to mitigate or spontaneously find alternative solutions for.

The most visible of these challenges was the closure of Jersey's schools, and the difficulties that then posed on delivering an education to all our children. But less visible was the impact on safeguarding that we feared may occur as children suddenly lost contact with many of the professionals they encountered on an almost daily basis before. Trying to make sure that children were not being left in situations where their vulnerability was exacerbated was something that was very difficult to do, especially given the circumstances we were working in, which had been completely unexpected and were frequently changing.

2. What would you say were the positive actions taken to support children and young people at the outset of the pandemic and going through until your respective stepping down?

The establishment of the Children and Families Hub early on in the pandemic was a success which I am particularly proud of. Beforehand we had known that the 'front door' to the Children's Service and other services that children and their families may use was not as welcoming as it should have been and was more often used in a reactive way after issues had developed, rather than a proactive way to prevent issues arising in the first place.

We had always planned to establish this hub as part of the measures we were taking to focus on "Early Help" and transform the Children's Service in the hearts and minds of the public into one which children and their families felt comfortable with unilaterally approaching for help and support. But the pandemic made this development even more necessary, as many people would be feeling lost and alone during lockdown and could need somewhere to turn to. By acting quickly to bring the establishment of this service forward, we were able to make sure we had something which was much more appropriate and responsive for the situation we were facing. This will have made a difference in being able to identify more children and families who needed help or intervention of some sort and direct the right services to them. Our "Be Our Eyes And Ears" media campaign complemented this,

and drew upon the strong community spirit which was developing during lockdown, to urge the public to play their part in ensuring children who were at risk were identified.

3. What key issues arose during your terms of office in respect of the pandemic that you feel were not addressed suitably?

It caused me a great deal of difficulty and regret when the regulations for care settings (P.26/2020) were brought forward, which included the same provisions for children's residential homes that were being applied in other care settings, which were seen by those who represent and advocate for children in our care as being inappropriate. These related to allowing people who were otherwise under-qualified for particular caring roles to take on those roles if the virus had seen regular staff laid low and unable to work. This had arisen, in my view, purely because there were extreme time constraints on developing these regulations, and so an easier option had been chosen for expediency, rather than take longer to separate children out of it.

The prospect of having people who were not as highly qualified as we wanted or who had their criminal record checks relaxed, working with children and young people in care was (understandably) viewed by many as being totally inappropriate, and not prioritising those children in the way that we said we were committed to.

We worked hard to try to address the concerns which were put to us and make it clear that we never had any intention to use these regulations and that they had only been proposed as a genuine worst-case-scenario if the virus had gone out of control and incapacitated our care workers. But the fact that it made it on to the statute books did not sit comfortably with some, who may have had their faith in us knocked because of it. I understand that perspective, and I deeply regret that it became an issue.

4. How were you involved in key developments arising from STAC advice during your respective terms of office?

As Minister for Children and Housing, I was not part of the core group of ministers (the 'Competent Authorities Ministers') involved in many of the key decisions about lockdowns and restrictions. So, I was never directly consulted on the key developments (i.e. when/ would we go into lockdown?), but during Council of Ministers meetings I was able to put across my perspective on this, and what considerations I thought needed to be included. I was also in almost daily contact with Senator Vallois, who was more involved with CAM as Education Minister, and in whom I had full confidence would raise any concerns that I would also have.

5. What involvement did you have in developing policy responses in respect of your specific remits in response to the pandemic?

There was of course a team effort to co-ordinate our responses. Senator Vallois, the senior officers in CYPES and myself were meeting almost daily to direct the actions which needed to be taken in response to the pandemic. It is fair to say that there were officers who took the initiative to come to us to propose policy responses which they wished to obtain permission to pursue. This was welcome though, and we had to place trust in those who were closer to the frontline of delivering services than we were.

6. What is your assessment on whether the Government put children first during the initial stages of the pandemic until you left your respective posts?

"Putting Children First" was a philosophy and approach which we developed at the start of this term of office as part of our work to respond to the recommendations of the Independent Jersey Care Inquiry, to ensure that the failings of the past could never happen again. The most important part of

it is the cultural shift we tried to promote, where everyone involved in public service would understand their responsibilities as corporate parents and try to meet the best interests of children in all they do.

I can confidently say that whilst so many have taken to this agenda in exactly the spirit we intended, there are some in government (both political and in the civil service) who are either apathetic or even hostile to this agenda. The pandemic probably provided them with a convenient excuse to cast aside this agenda, but it was a problem even before the pandemic. It is a shame that the pandemic struck before we had completed the work on incorporating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child into Jersey law, as that would have imbedded a way of working in government which would have remained legally compulsory during the pandemic.

But even though there are things which people could point to as examples of children not being put first in the pandemic response, or areas where the general development of the “Putting Children First” philosophy seemed to go backwards, I am still of the view that the vast majority of those in public service who stepped up to the mark during that stage of the pandemic were absolutely committed to putting children first. On their part, any shortcomings which may be identified would more likely be honest mistakes due to the extreme pressure many of them were under, rather than negligence. Of those who I spent the most time with during this part of the pandemic (the Director General of CYPES, the senior Directors, our communications officer and my Private Secretary) none of them ever gave me any cause for concern that they did not have the best interests of children at the forefront of their minds at all times.

A difficulty which arose for me during lockdown was that I lost touch with those working at the frontline of our public services. Because of enforced working from home rules and many premises being shut to visitors, I was not able to go round offices, schools and children’s residential homes to meet with staff and young people as I had before the pandemic, and so I regret that I was not able to directly engage in conversations with those we entrust to work with and for our children across the public service. And, more importantly, it meant I did not have as many opportunities to speak directly to children and young people.

- 7. Do you think the Government should develop a comprehensive post-COVID-19 strategy for children and young people, and, if so, what should be the key considerations for such a strategy?**
- 8. What would you say are the key areas for improvement that should be taken forward to support children and young people as we come out of the pandemic?**
- 9. How do you think the Government of Jersey could heal societal divisions between young and old that appear to have widened due to the pandemic?**

I would like to answer the above questions as one.

Whilst there is much political speculation on whether the government has lived up to its commitments on “Putting Children First” there can surely be no credible contention against the fact that their pledge to “Reduce Income Inequality and Improve the Standard of Living” lies abandoned and in tatters.

Both before and during the pandemic, the government and States Assembly has failed to take any meaningful action to ensure that the trend of growing inequality and rising poverty is reversed. When proposals have come from States Members, the full weight of the Council of Ministers has been used to oppose those proposals. When serving as a government minister, I repeatedly complained at our lack of progress on this key commitment and on the lack of political commitment from some ministers to endorsing proposals that were designed to reduce income inequality. The evidence from around

the world that more equal societies are more prosperous is clear, and the impact that poverty and inequality has on children is also clear.

If children go to school hungry, their education will suffer. If children live in homes which are insecure and unsanitary, their health will suffer. If children cannot spend time with their family because they are busy working their 2nd and 3rd jobs to afford the bills, their social development will suffer.

A comprehensive post-Covid-19 strategy must focus not just on undoing the damage caused by Covid but also on resolving many of the ills we faced in our society before the pandemic too. Our trend of growing inequality is unsustainable and must be reversed. This should not be done at the expense of other more specific recovery strategies (such as focusing on educational catch up), but to complement them so children can be provided with an environment which enables them to thrive, no matter what their socio-economic background is.

10. What are the key messages that you would like to put out to children and young people about the pandemic and the road to recovery from it?

Even though many children and young people will have faced hardship and trauma because of the effects of the pandemic, I hope that many of them will have been inspired by it to dream of a better world after all of this.

The pandemic exposed many of the things which were wrong with our society before anyone had ever heard of Covid-19. But our response showed that many of the things we were told were impossible beforehand were actually possible all along. We managed to provide free primary healthcare, access to a home for everyone and financial support to prevent unemployment, because we had to, and politics managed to enable this, rather than prevent it like it had always done before. If we could do all that to respond to the Covid crisis, why can't we do it to respond to the other crises we face?

If we can secure such an incredible mobilisation of efforts to respond to a pandemic, there is no reason we could not do the same to resolve the housing crisis or the climate crisis. These are issues which matter deeply to the young people I speak to. I hope that children and young people will use their voices loudly after this pandemic to demand this action and make it impossible for them to be ignored.

Older generations owe it to our children that we leave for them a world to inherit which is better than the one we inherited ourselves. If Jersey can commit to doing that, we would be truly putting children first.

If I can be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,



Senator Sam Mézec