

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COMHCHOISTE UM LEANAÍ, COMHIONANNAS, MÍCHUMAS, LÁN- PHÁIRTÍOCHT AGUS ÓIGE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN, EQUALITY, DISABILITY, INTEGRA- TION AND YOUTH

Dé Máirt, 22 Meitheamh 2021

Tuesday, 22 June 2021

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 3.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 3.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

Teachtaí Dála / Deputies	Seanadóirí / Senators
Patrick Costello,	Mary Seery Kearney.
Alan Dillon,	
Jennifer Murnane O'Connor,	
Mark Ward,	
Jennifer Whitmore.*	

* In éagmais / In the absence of Deputy Holly Cairns.

Teachta / Deputy Kathleen Funchion sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: If any members or witnesses are experiencing any sound or technical issue, will he or she please let us know through the chat function. We have received apologies from Deputy Sean Sherlock and Senator Lynn Ruane. Deputy Jennifer Whitmore is substituting at this meeting for Deputy Holly Cairns.

I remind members who are participating remotely to keep their device on mute until invited to speak. When speaking, I ask members, where possible, to have their camera switched on and to be mindful that we are in public session.

I remind members of the constitutional requirement that members must be physically present within the confines of the place which Parliament has chosen to sit, namely, Leinster House or the Convention Centre Dublin, in order to participate in public meetings. I will not permit a member to participate where he or she is not adhering to this constitutional requirement. Therefore, any member who attempts to participate from outside the precincts will be refused.

Children’s Experiences during COVID-19 Restrictions and Lockdowns: Engagement

Chairman: Today, our engagement is with children from Brightening Air and The Ark on their experiences during Covid-19 restrictions and lockdowns. Joining us are three children who are representatives of Brightening Air and The Ark. The Ark children’s council is made up of children in fifth and sixth class from a number of schools across Dublin and the surrounding areas. The Brightening Air festival ran in June to reach out to children asking them to share their experiences of lockdown in a number of ways. On 11, 12 and 13 June, free live-streamed performances of a new show, “What Did I Miss?”, aired to the public. An engagement programme with schools was organised and encouraged children to share how lockdown was for them. These programmes have resulted in the three children before us today being selected to come and share their experiences and those of other children.

We are really delighted, pleased and very excited to welcome you here today. It is great for us as a committee to be able to talk directly to you. I offer a very sincere welcome to LilyRose Wogan-Martin, Conor James and Olga Buckina. How are you all today? Are you feeling excited about this session? Yes. That is excellent. We are really looking forward to it.

The children are joining us virtually through MS Teams. They are joined by Ms Aideen Howard, director of The Ark. Ms Howard is also very welcome. The purpose of our meeting is to have conversation on sacrifices that were made during the lockdowns put in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic. All of the children of Ireland, and around the world, had to adapt very quickly. There was home schooling. Some of us were not fans of that. There was separation from school friends, teachers, family members, including grandparents, and relatives. Children had to endure listening to very serious announcements by the leaders of our country on the lockdown restrictions and why they were necessary.

We recognise that children in Ireland missed out on many important celebrations and gatherings such as birthday parties, play dates with friends, sleepovers with friends and family and other special family celebrations. Some children had to come to terms with the upset of having first holy communion and confirmation celebrations cancelled or postponed, in some cases, at very short notice. Some children may have lost a loved one during lockdown, either because of

Covid or for other medical reasons.

We acknowledge the sacrifices endured by children with specific needs who lost access to important medical appointments, respite and day care services during the pandemic. We also recognise the effect this pandemic has had on the mental health of our children.

The committee members and I are very much aware of all the sacrifices the children of Ireland have had to make during this pandemic. We thank the children presenting today, and all other children, for the sacrifices they have made during the pandemic. More importantly, we thank them for helping to protect and save the lives of sick and elderly people by adhering to lockdown restrictions. Children have made a significant contribution in trying to fight and beat this virus.

In years to come, when you are reading the history books or talking to your own children or grandchildren about the pandemic, you can take credit by telling them you played a big part in tackling the pandemic by making huge sacrifices and, in doing so, you did your country proud.

Before I ask our guests to speak, I must talk to them about some of the rules that we must follow during our meeting. As we all know, there are rules we all must follow in life, and even the committee members and I must adhere to certain rules. One of the rules at the start of the meeting is that I have to read out a statement, and I will explain what this means. If you say something during this meeting that you should not say, I will need to let you know that you should not say it. We would have to stop you speaking then and explain to you if there is a problem. However, I can see from you all here today and from reading your opening statements that you are all going to be fine and there is nothing to worry about in that regard.

I will now read out the statement that I must read at the start of all meetings. As all of the witnesses are appearing before the committee virtually, I need to point out that there is uncertainty if parliamentary privilege will apply to their evidence outside of the parliamentary precincts of Leinster House. If a witness is directed by me to cease giving evidence in relation to a particular matter, it is imperative that he or she complies with any such direction.

I ask everyone to keep their device on mute until they are asked to speak. I will call first on Ms Howard to say a few words, and then we will call on LilyRose, followed by Conor and then Olga.

Ms Aideen Howard: I thank the Chairman and members of the committee. I thank the committee for the invitation to The Ark's children's council to appear before it. I am the director of The Ark, the children's cultural centre. I am here today in The Ark building in Temple Bar with the three speakers, from whom the committee will hear shortly. We are in a large space and at a distance. It is really lovely that we can be together. The children have prepared their presentations remotely and on Zoom. This is a very nice and welcome opportunity that we can present them to the committee together, albeit at a distance and remotely.

The three members of our children's council are LilyRose Wogan-Martin, Conor James and Olga Buckina. Today is about hearing from them directly and giving their voices and opinions due weight in the matters that affect them, such as the recent experience of the pandemic. My role this afternoon is to simply introduce the children and, if appropriate or necessary, to mediate afterwards any questions if that is helpful.

I will first give some background on the process that led to today's presentations. As the Chairman mentioned, as part of the Brightening Air festival we premiered and live-streamed

a new show about children’s experiences of the pandemic recently and about the milestones they have missed out on. In addition, we shared a national call-out, asking children to give us their personal stories in their own words. The children’s council received 318 responses from children aged between five and 13 years, from Kilkenny, Dublin, Cork, Kerry, Louth, Donegal, Offaly, Galway, Kildare, Limerick, Westmeath and Wicklow. The response was from well beyond Dublin, where we are based.

The council, represented by the three members the committee can see today, then read all of the submissions, discussed them during four Zoom sessions, and then set about collating the experiences in order to inform their speeches today. What the members will hear today has been written by the three speakers directly, informed by their own lived experiences but also representing the views of other children. That is very important to them and to us because the practice of using their position to give voice to other children and to seldom heard children is key to their work and our reason for being. They and we are extremely proud that they are the first children of their age to present to the committee. I thank the committee for allowing this to happen today and for hearing the voices of children directly. I hand over now to the three children, the first of whom is LilyRose.

Ms LilyRose Wogan-Martin: I am 12 years old and I go to St. Vincent de Paul girls school in Dublin. We are part of the children’s council, and we help The Ark with decision-making and give our opinions on everything it does. I have been on The Ark’s children’s council since 2019. We are a group of children in fifth class, sixth class and first year from Dublin and its surrounding areas. We did a national call-out to children asking what the pandemic was like for them and some of these references will be in our speeches. I will give the committee an insight into how the pandemic affected me and other school kids in Ireland, including the impact 15 months ago and now.

During the first lockdown, we were all encouraged for our mental welfare to go walking with our families, but the fact that older people shunned us and in many cases tried to walk in the middle of the road rather than pass us, left a bitter taste in my mouth and made me want to stay in rather than go out. This week an Irish newspaper had a report about research on children being vectors at the start of lockdown. I found it amazing that it took 15 months to discuss this and I was even more amazed that it was not prioritised sooner. I was lucky that my mother and father were always with me, but I was sick of sitting in the car while my mother did all the shopping. On Mother’s Day, my brother and I made a banner for my granny and waved and danced outside her window. Little did I know that would be the last time I would see her, as we were not allowed to visit her in the hospital before she passed away. I am sure many children are in the same situation as me, but that does not make it any easier.

As part of our national call-out we heard from many children about their school life experience of the pandemic. Grace, aged 13, from Louth, wrote “I miss progress.” Although we learned how to use Google Classroom, we missed all the social elements of school and learning. We did not progress socially and did not get to reach our own goals. Dave, in fifth class, missed “normal life”. Normal life for most kids is going to school, even if we give out about it. Boredom does not happen so much in school. We used to spend time discussing after-school activities, but we did not even have that at first. Ava, in fifth class, said “Now we are back in school, I feel better” – I think that sums up the feelings of many kids. Even if school feels different, with hand sanitizers everywhere, being only in pods, walking in one direction and seeing Covid-19 posters everywhere, please remember that, with the help of our school and teachers, who were also scared, we did what we had to.

Things have changed a lot now. Sometimes my teacher will ask what we did over the weekend, and, before Covid-19, I would usually have said something that sounds amazing now, like swimming in the sea in Wexford, going to sporting events or some activity. Now, I talk about simpler things, like the coconut-scented soap in the supermarket or that we had chicken for dinner.

Much essential care for kids with specific needs was missed or reduced and this has caused an ongoing problem to them and their families, resulting in anxiety going into secondary school and with no real additional help from anyone. In our call-out, Felix, aged 6 from Dublin, talked about how masks sometimes make communication more difficult for autistic children. Basic needs like physiotherapy, assessments etc. were cancelled, delayed or reduced. This caused issues to get worse daily. Zoom was not always an option for many people due to lack of devices in some cases, lack of knowledge about using the software, glitches in the middle of sessions and some children just felt uncomfortable on it.

My brother has no date yet for his communion and he did not have a graduation from his school last year. My confirmation is now due in November. Will everyone attend when we will all be in different secondary schools? There was no wake for my granny who died in May 2020 and we only had ten people at the funeral. For the funeral of my aunt, who died in November, we only had 25 people in the church. Primary school graduation will be a blend of pre-recording and online activity. Everyone had a birthday in lockdown, but it is children who want to celebrate their birthdays the most. With not many shops open, people did not even have many options for gifts.

What will happen next? I am looking forward to getting vaccinated. Most of all, though, I am looking forward to all my family being able to travel home so we can all be together and, especially, to not feeling scared anymore. All children, even the very young, who did not understand, deserve appreciation and respect for all the fear thrown at us and we would appreciate not being forgotten now by the same adults.

Chairman: I thank LilyRose. That was excellently put. Conor is next.

Mr. Conor James: I am 11 years old. I live in Dublin, having returned from Toronto in 2016. I have been on The Ark's children's council since 2019. I thank the committee for asking me to speak here today.

The pandemic was a challenge for everyone. My mum and dad are doctors, and my mum still works with Covid-19 patients. We all know the pandemic was hard for health workers, but it was hard for their families too. The hospitals were very busy, overcrowded and stressful. I could not hug my parents when they came home from work. Luckily, they both got their vaccine four months ago. Since then, I have been looking forward to getting back to normal life.

Although there are many negatives about Covid-19, there are also some positives, especially about how communities changed. There was a big effort to keep people outdoors, which I really enjoyed, and there was a big effort to help keep small businesses running, which helped the lives of many people and small communities, like where my grandparents live in Westmeath. People really supported each other during the pandemic. For example, because our childminder had to leave due to Covid-19 and because school was cancelled, it was hard for my parents who still had to go to work every day. Other parents in our community and my aunt offered to help. I hope this community support continues long after the pandemic.

My favourite sport is basketball. During the pandemic, our training was cancelled because basketball is an indoor sport. We do not have a big garden, so I could not practice my drills. Four basketball courts near me in Dublin took down their hoops to prevent people coming to play. The only public court near me was constantly overcrowded. Basketball players had no access to their favourite sport for nine months. My sister missed her swimming and gymnastics. Many children who answered our call-out spoke about the sports they missed. One six-year old from Dublin said he wants to go to soft play, taekwondo and play dates. Students at St. Michael's national school in Limerick missed sports, dance classes and hockey. Not everyone has access to a large, safe outdoor space. Sports are important for communities. They help people to stay fit and in a good mood and are good for mental health overall. If we have another lockdown, it will be important for the Government to improve facilities for all sports to encourage everybody to stay active and to be as inclusive as possible. We should support access to sports for everyone, even if there is not another lockdown.

It was a shame that The Ark's children's cultural centre could not stay open during the pandemic. I was having lots of fun on the children's council. I was enjoying meeting lots of new people who were interested in different things, and I was watching some plays, concerts and exhibitions and giving feedback on them. We had to go online, and it is very hard for the arts to operate this way. I really missed the orchestra. I made new friends there. Other children across Ireland felt the same. Marta, aged 9, spoke about missing her violin and music lessons. You can meet different types of people when you are involved in music or the arts, people who often are not at school. It is important to have different types of interests in your life and I am looking forward to starting back with the orchestra again. I hope the Government will support centres like The Ark, the National Concert Hall, NCH, and other institutions involved in arts and culture. Arts and culture are very important because they help boost creativity and confidence. It is a way to express your feelings. It also is a way to get your head clear for a while. I love nothing more than playing my cello for my grandparents, whether over Zoom or in person.

I was thinking about why art and culture is important for everyone. Sometimes people think art does not affect them, but everything in our lives has art within it and people take it for granted. Art, music and culture are there for us at the best and worst times. When we are very sad, like at a funeral, we recite poems that explain how we feel - we sang "Danny Boy" for my great granny's funeral - and when we are happy and joyful, like at a wedding, we also use music and dancing and art. Arts and culture are there at the most important times of our lives and I hope we appreciate the arts and artists even more after the pandemic.

Chairman: I thank Conor. We will move on now to Olga.

Ms Olga Buckina: I am 13 years old. I love cycling with Orwell Wheelers, scouts with the Dundrum 20th troop, The Ark's children's cultural centre and my family, not necessarily in that order. Those are the things that kept me going during the pandemic. I am going to tell the committee about children's mental health, how we missed normality and structure, the simple things and how we see the future, post pandemic.

For some children, being at home so much meant their mental health went way down. Yet, for others, it went way up. It depended. Some children felt so alone at home that they had to rely on several hours of FaceTime with their friends just to keep themselves sane. Other children would have felt really lonely in school, even though they were surrounded by other kids. For them, being able to stay at home during the pandemic was freeing. Loneliness probably affected all children to varying degrees. Those who found it hard to be with their families or hated being at home needed to do anything they could to get out of their homes. Some were

just stuck, imprisoned. Lots of people said to children that they should not worry. They tried to stop us worrying about getting the virus. Yet, most of us were not worried about ourselves but about other people who would get the virus or be affected by it. We are not small-minded, narcissistic individuals and it is okay for us to be worried, but the Government needs to take care of us and help those people badly affected by the virus.

Every child missed out on something. In fact, there are lists of things children missed out on. These are some examples from our public call out: going shopping; going out without a mask; confirmations; school tours; seeing our friends; being able to see faces; sports days; funerals of someone special; weddings; going on holidays; walking down Grafton Street on Christmas Eve; going to restaurants; and hugs. Some children lost progress in little things and others lost progress in big things. All of us lost progress in something. For one person it was music lessons, for another fractions, but for another child it was progress in learning to walk using a specialised mobility device. For me, I missed the Errigal International Youth Tour, the one international cycling race we get to do every year, and I missed it twice. Some children lost someone close or had a relative who was sick or otherwise harmed by the pandemic. They will never get them back.

Lots of children missed sports, games, races and competitions. We missed out on the teamwork element, the adrenaline and the sheer fun. We certainly missed the chats, the taste of victory or smell of defeat, or even just a friendly match on a Sunday morning. We missed comforting each other at the starting line and finding out everyone was just as nervous as us. We missed going all out and doing our best, seeing the cheering spectators, and talking to friends about strategies on how to win or ranting about losing and how it was not actually your fault. We missed normality and the structure of everyday life; things as simple as helping with the weekly shopping in Lidl, taking the Luas, or waking up at 7 a.m. and getting dressed to go to choir practice before school. We never really got dressed completely during the lockdowns. Sometimes we went to bed too late and slept on in the morning. Days, weeks and months all blurred into one. Going to the Ark to meet with friends and stopping to sit inside for a quick taco before getting the Luas home - that is a perfect day.

What is next? Can we simply pick up where we left off? With fractions it is possible but with things like hypermobility lessons it is harder. Children will have differing reactions. Some will take all opportunities possible. Some will do things they never thought of pre-pandemic. Some will be inspired. Others will be permanently anxious and nervous. Some will have big holes left in their lives and some will never recover. I cannot wait for the future and for the day we can talk about the pandemic as an ancient story, a saga long past, when we have put it behind us. My hope is that I will be one of the ones who learned to make the most of life. I want to tell my grandkids that I survived the pandemic and that is why their 88-year-old grandma goes skydiving.

It will be interesting to see what the world does as a whole. Lots of new technologies will probably emerge. We will perhaps find new solutions to possible diseases and create new, innovative economic safety nets. Maybe the Government can ask us children about what we think before making decisions for and about us. Listen to us. We have learned how fragile the world is. All of a sudden and with little warning, the whole world was literally shut down. Will we ever take the world for granted again? We had better not.

Chairman: Thank you, Olga. I thank all the witnesses. They put their points across excellently and I agree with so much of what they have said. There will be some questions now. Deputy Murnane O'Connor had to leave so we will move on to Deputy Dillon.

Deputy Alan Dillon: I thank the witnesses. The contributions from Conor, Olga and LilyRose were all brilliant and I thank them for joining us today and giving us an insight into the challenges they faced during the pandemic. I also acknowledge the wonderful work by Ms Howard and her colleagues in the Ark children’s cultural centre and thank her for being here today as well. Covid has certainly had a huge impact on the progression of many children. Over the next few weeks and months we need to redouble our efforts to ensure we re-energise and motivate our young people to participate in extracurricular activities, be that sport, art, culture, drama, music or dance. They have lost out on a huge amount of time in many of those areas. From listening to the contributions today it is clear that they are more than eager and excited to get back playing with their friends and hopefully the summer will give them further opportunities to do that.

Mental and physical health was mentioned in all three contributions. That is hugely significant and we cannot discount how our young people have shown that resilience and responded in a way that has been enlightening for many adults. I am looking for an understanding of what the witnesses found to be most beneficial when taking care of their mental or physical health. What types of activities did they do, week in, week out, to ensure their minds were off the pandemic and more focused on learning, sport and the use of technology?

Ms Olga Buckina: For me, one thing that helped was cycling. I was lucky to have an indoor training thing I could put my bike on and we did online races together. It was great because I could talk to my friends online and tell them about the race and then I could focus on the race itself and do my best in it and then we could all talk about it afterwards. Being lucky enough to have a phone was also a good thing during lockdown because I could talk to all my friends no matter where they were. I spent quite a lot of time on FaceTime with my friends so that was a good thing.

Ms LilyRose Wogan-Martin: I am a very artsy person. I love to draw a lot and for me it was helpful to draw because I find it fun to just place down a blue marker or a red marker and get ready to draw whatever I feel like. I would go on FaceTime with my friends every week or twice a week. I did not want to do too much FaceTime or get too attached because I knew I had to do schoolwork. You had to have an even balance to be okay during lockdown because it was such an unusual experience.

Mr. Conor James: My favourite sport is basketball. We have a basket in the back garden so I would just get my ball and shoot a couple of baskets. It is quite relaxing because sometimes I would score and sometimes I would miss and then I could reflect on the misses and try to score again. It takes your mind off everything.

Deputy Alan Dillon: That is great. I have one follow-up question. Where did the witnesses get their information about the good public health guidelines, such as how to wash their hands, good cough etiquette and sanitisation? Has that taught them something going forward about the importance of good public health guidelines?

Mr. Conor James: In my school we got the information off *gov.ie*. That was the main one we got it off and where the signs and everything are from. Before, when I thought of washing my hands, I asked: “Why would I do that? It is not like the flu is going to affect me.” I then realised that this is basically the flu, and that it has killed like 20 million people or some other crazy number, so I probably should wash my hands.

Ms Aideen Howard: Olga and LilyRose, do you have anything to contribute on that ques-

tion?

Ms Olga Buckina: I got lots of information from my dad. He is 66 and he is big into sanitising things. He showed me the science behind it. That made me think, “I should be washing my hands like this and this is why.”

Ms LilyRose Wogan-Martin: At the start, I got information from other people. Many kids in my class thought that this was a new disease that could kill people. They said random things to scare people. Then I started getting information from the news and the Internet to know how to wash my hands. Moving forward, I think it is going to be crazy. I remember how I used to walk home from my local shop with a pack of crisps with my bare hands and no hand sanitiser. Now, I always have hand sanitiser and a mask. I think everyone will be much more sanitary.

Deputy Alan Dillon: Those were three excellent answers. My final question is for Ms Howard and relates to the challenges and issues The Ark probably faced when engaging with more children through online and remote channels. What worked and what did not? Does she see opportunities for the Government to provide support to organisations like The Ark?

Ms Aideen Howard: I thank the Deputy. Like all other arts organisations, we had the experience of moving online very rapidly last March and April. Although we never wished to be in a situation like that, we found that we were able to numerically reach more children and reach geographically further than we had ever done before. We now have a national reach, which is very welcome. Our principle is that children have a right to art and culture and if that is the case, then it is our job to deliver it as widely as possible. Technology has enabled that for us.

We did, however, experience what we now know as the digital divide. There were children who were able to participate in our programmes because they had access to technology, broadband and so on and others who did not. We have been conscious about this in continuing our hybrid programming for the future. We will think about very carefully going forward.

Second, as an arts organisation, I believe we were well positioned. We have great relationships with schools. While in the past, art and culture may have been seen as a luxury item to be fitted into teachers’ very busy and packed curriculum, we discovered that we are now an essential item. We were gratefully received by teachers who were engaged in remote teaching, with 30 children in different locations, and also when moved back into the classrooms and were able to deliver summer provision in July. This was a provision for children in particular circumstances. We were then able to use the technology we had developed to Zoom in to whiteboards in schools. There is much scope for children and for the State’s systematic delivery of the children’s right to art and culture. We now know that there are a lot of enablers in terms of technology. However, we all wish to be able to be in the same space at the same time in future. We are committed to doing both, as of the autumn.

Chairman: We are moving on to Senator Mary Seery Kearney. Will the Senator please confirm her location?

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I am in Leinster House. I thank the witnesses for their submissions and presentations. I was struck by their content, the description of loss and the personal experiences we heard about. Coming back to LilyRose, her statement that she is not a vector is a powerful one. With the evolving information, the news and so on, everything has changed. March of last year feels like a very long time ago. It is now perhaps easy to forget that in the beginning that was the message that was put out regarding children. Reflecting on it

today, it is striking to hear LilyRose put it so well. It was terribly offensive to children. It must have been a horrible experience. LilyRose's statement, therefore, is a strong one and a good reminder for us.

Conor stated that his parents are doctors and he could not hug them. There is a very personal sacrifice there. We are struck by how, behind closed doors and within families, people had to take very personal stances in protecting everyone from the virus. I am grateful that everyone, including Conor's family, made such good choices behind closed doors. However, I am struck by the loss and enduring sacrifice they had to make.

Olga was strong in her presentation on the experience of loneliness and in describing the loneliness of the experience of the virus. To me, her abiding message is that sense of the shock of the change, that we could go from one state of being where we presumed everything was going to be alright to the world suddenly changing overnight and having to abide by a whole set of rules that we did not know beforehand. Olga described that particularly well.

My questions are for all our guests. How would they like to see us as a nation recognise those losses and respect them? What would they like us to do to commemorate those we lost? Should we have a national holiday or a commemoration day? Given the specific creativity our guests have brought to this meeting and coming from The Ark and representing a children's council, have they explored that idea? What would their recommendations be on that? That should be a central plank in how we as a Government and an Oireachtas respond.

Mr. Conor James: This is more on the second question about what we should commemorate with. Maybe we could have a national holiday or maybe the people who have lost someone can take the day off and then commemorate their loved ones.

Ms Olga Buckina: The idea of having a national day is really interesting. It would be a cool thing to do to remember what everyone went through. It could also go on into the future. We could educate people on this event, because it is a big thing. We could tell everyone what we went through and remember it.

Ms LilyRose Wogan-Martin: I do not think we should have a national holiday. Maybe we could have a day in school where we learn about it. We all know that this pandemic will be in the schoolbooks anyway, but we could tell people what happened. I lost my granny during the pandemic and we still have not had a celebration of life. I think my auntie had one in England. It was hard because we were expecting to have one in August when it was my grandad's birthday, but we could not. It would be nice to learn about it in a few years time when we know more about it and we can study it in science, history or English class.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I am hearing two things. First, we all need to stand still and remember those we have lost and perhaps we should do that together in some way because we were not able to have funerals as we may have expected. Second, we need to make sure that our learnings from this and its commemoration happens in schools.

My other question is about rites of passage. This particularly applies to Olga. Pupils in sixth class are the oldest in a school and have the experience of being the elders in the school. Some schools have confirmation, a big school tour and all of those things. How should that be restored for children? How do our guests think that should be marked now that they are in secondary school? I apologise for assuming they are in secondary school. Do our guests think something needs to be made up? Do we need to create those rites of passage on which we adults

look back with fond memories? Our guests have not had that experience. How can we restore that?

Ms LilyRose Wogan-Martin: I have missed many school trips. I am in sixth class. I missed my confirmation in March and it is now due to happen in November which means it will be very cold, we will probably not be able to wear dresses and will have to wear jackets. That is not helpful. I feel like we should try to make up for it because I wanted to go on a few school trips. We do a junior pioneer project. We would usually use our money for all three classes to go on a big school trip. We did still go to the chipper and it was still really fun but it could have been something more. I feel like a lot of kids will not do things like that. There are others, including leaving certificate students, who are going through worse things and a tough time. We could do something about that.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: Has The Ark considered the losses, restoration and commemoration of these things?

Ms Aideen Howard: Indeed we have. We have been marking Universal Children's Day in recent years. It is in our thinking that we may find some way to acknowledge what children have gone through over the past 18 months. That length of time will have passed by the time Universal Children's Day comes around in November this year. It is a day when we celebrate children's rights across the broadest spectrum. We are considering whether we can find some appropriate way to acknowledge children's recent experiences of the pandemic as we are hopefully coming out of it and as we start to figure out how to rebuild and reflect on what are the things we want to take with us as learnings for children in the future. One of the mechanisms we use to guide our thinking, planning and action is a child participation process which we lead through the children's council but with children more broadly. We look to them to give us some indication and information about what is crucial and critical to them. Through the processes of consultation and participation, we hope we will be able to find some fitting way to acknowledge children's experiences in the future. We also aim to acknowledge that while they were children when the pandemic happened, the experience will travel with them into their future as young people and adults.

Senator Mary Seery Kearney: I was particularly struck by Olga's description. She said she has reached the age she is now before realising that life could change overnight and the world we live in can become very different. I wonder about the impact of experiencing that when a person is quite young, and how we restore and rebuild a confidence in being able to future plan when a person has had that big an experience. That is incredibly well articulated and very valuable.

The idea of Universal Children's Day is superb. I am spokesperson on children and there has been a tendency, at times, to be almost relativist about children's experience of the pandemic and diminish its impact by saying they are young and have their whole lives ahead of them. These are rites of passage that are being lost. We, who are older, take them for granted in our memory. There is a responsibility to ensure that we build back, rebuild and give the opportunities to observe those rites. I love LilyRose's idea that there should be lots of school trips. I do not say that in any way flippantly. I believe we need to do that. I thank our guests very much.

Chairman: We are moving on to Deputy Costello who I ask to confirm his location.

Deputy Patrick Costello: I am currently in Leinster House. My thanks to everyone for coming in, for sharing their world with us and for their comments. I was struck by the frustra-

tion and anger in LilyRose's comment that she is not a vector. Some of us in here were talking about how we need to be careful with our language around this. I would call out Deputy Whitmore for leading that and if I did it, it was only because I was copying her. Some of us in here were saying we need to be careful with our language and to avoid exactly the stuff LilyRose talked about.

I have two questions. One picks up on Conor's comment about the community supports that came in and were good. We have heard from our guests what annoyed them and what was frustrating. What worked? What were the community supports that worked, as Conor said? What were the things that people did that were actually helpful in the face of the pandemic? What were the positive things among all the negative changes? Is there something our guests found was so good that they would like to see it continue as we move away from the pandemic?

My other question is around our guests' experience of the children's council. It sounds like a positive initiative. I have been a scout leader in the past and perhaps I was a leader to some of Olga's leaders. That is how old I am. Scouting talks a lot about youth participation. Where else would our guests like to see a children's council? How can schools do it better? How can we in the Oireachtas do it better?

I have a similar question for Ms Howard. I ask her to share her learning and experience of the children's council. Who is receptive to it and who is not? Is there anything we can do to help spread that learning? Those are my questions.

Chairman: Ms Howard might divvy out those questions.

Ms Aideen Howard: Conor would certainly like to answer the first question about community supports and what worked well.

Mr. Conor James: I found that many people in my community were trying to help and everything. I think that what worked well was that there are many different childminders in an area. Perhaps they could be spread out or something. There is an area I know of where there are not a huge amount of childminders. I have had five childminders from my area. That might work well. In my neighbourhood of Dublin 4, everyone is friends with everyone and that really works.

Ms Aideen Howard: Thank you, Conor. Do LilyRose or Olga want to contribute anything about community initiatives, things that worked well and that might be brought into future practice?

Ms LilyRose Wogan-Martin: I am very lucky that I live in Marino, an area where there are a lot of places to walk. It keeps you interested. There are lots of places to shop if you need anything. What worked really well in my community was that on one of the first days we were at home, one of the people who lives a few doors down, brought a pack of chalk for my brother. They sanitised it and put it into a plastic bag. That kept him outside on the driveway for hours. He was around seven or eight at the time. Younger kids were very hard to maintain during the lockdown because they were wanting to do many things. My brother did not really understand.

Communities are really important: a few times my neighbours would need something, and we would sanitise it and give it to them. There are so many community things that worked. Some things that did not work were probably where people who lived in apartments or far away from many places did not really have anywhere to go. They probably felt really lonely and had nowhere to really go. It was like we were all isolating but they were just isolated and alone.

They did not really know what to do.

Ms Aideen Howard: Olga, would you like to contribute to that or to the question about the children's council?

Ms Olga Buckina: I might say a bit on the second question if that is okay. It would be really interesting for the Government if you could maybe have a group of kids of diverse ages where you could listen to their ideas or run your ideas past them before making big decisions. That would be a good thing to do.

Ms Aideen Howard: On Deputy Costello's question about children's councils and mainstreaming child participation practice, the good news is that the State has been winning gold stars internationally for its leadership in child participation in strategy. Ireland was the first country in Europe in 2015 to have a child participation in decision-making strategy nationally. In setting up the children's council here we were inspired by that, and inspired by the good practice that already existed and was being led by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, as it was known at the time. It seems to me that the challenge more nationally is to reach into everyday settings and into everyday decision making so that children's voices are heard consistently throughout all sorts of decision making, whether that is in the school system, in after-school settings, or other settings. Our experience has been very positive, but we are also a very small organisation where we can create our own types of practices and protocols. We have embedded child participation into our strategy and into our strategic delivery. We try at every opportunity to share our practice with those who are interested and we have had great support from our chief funder, which is the Arts Council, in actually assisting us in sharing that practice and disseminating it as widely as possible. We have also had support from the Department of Children in that regard.

Our big ambition would be to mainstream the practice beyond the children's council and out into every aspect of everything we do, be it policy making, board reporting and governance, or artistic programming. There is a lot of traction around this area at the moment, and there is a lot of popular support for it. I would encourage any organisation that may be dealing with the committee to consider it. It is very clearly part of our responsibility as duty bearers to fulfil and protect these children's rights, to be heard in the first instance and in my case to deliver their right to art and culture at the same time.

Deputy Patrick Costello: I thank Ms Howard for all of that. Hopefully today is an example too of that participation and the benefit of giving a platform to people of that age. I thank Ms Howard for her time.

Chairman: I thank Deputy Costello. We are moving on now, will Deputy Mark Ward please confirm his location?

Deputy Mark Ward: I am in Leinster House. This is my fourth online meeting today, so far, and coming in here to listen to the testimony of these guys is like a breath of fresh air for me. I thank Ms Howard for facilitating the meeting. I also thank LilyRose, Conor and Olga for their absolutely brilliant testimonies, and for giving a really good insight on how Covid has impacted children, and especially children of their age group. I am the father of three children. One child is in primary school, one is in secondary school and one is at third level education. I have seen, right across the spectrum, how Covid has affected children disproportionately. The children today have outlined really brilliantly how their routines were affected, how not having sports, arts, and choir, when they were needed, really affected them, along with missing family

and not being able to see family members. I must say to LilyRose that her granny would be really proud of her today and the way she spoke. I thank her for sharing that with us.

All of the guests referred to mental health. I am Sinn Féin's spokesperson on mental health and I have met with groups from all ages across the spectrum from our older generations to teenagers, but I had not yet met a group the ages of our guests. I had just not had the opportunity to do so.

It is okay to be worried right now. It is a perfectly normal feeling to feel worried right now, and especially during a pandemic and during these restrictions. Hopefully, we would only ever have to experience this once in our lifetime and we will not have to go through it again.

I look forward to getting to the stage where Covid is an ancient story, as one of the guests said earlier. I got a good message of hope from the presentations. I also got a good message of not taking things for granted, like we used to. I train underage GAA club teams and we are back training now. Sometimes, if the weather was not great or when I was tired from work I would have gone out thinking "I have to train these guys again". Now I am skipping out the door just to get out to do the stuff I really love, and to engage with young people.

I have one specific question on mental health and then one other question. What would the representatives like to see provided in an age-appropriate way for them to be able to go and explore their feelings and emotions, based on what they have told us of their experience of Covid?

Ms Aideen Howard: Olga, would you like to kick off?

Ms Olga Buckina: I am not 100% sure on that question yet. Perhaps someone else could take it.

Ms Aideen Howard: Thank you. Would LilyRose or Conor have any suggestions in that regard? We will start with Conor.

Mr. Conor James: I find that sometimes you have lots of different things but one is that some kids' mental health might not be tip top, they might have anxiety, anger or depression. Maybe a couple more normal counselling sessions and special child counselling would help. I know there are a few normal ones, but I do not know of much child counselling stuff. Maybe that could be done. Sometimes there are just as many children as adults who suffer from anxiety and from anger. After this pandemic, who knows how many people will suffer from anxiety? Loads and loads of people would suffer from anxiety after their relatives die or go to hospital and cannot come home, for example. More counselling would be good.

Ms Aideen Howard: Would LilyRose like to contribute to that? No. That is okay.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank Conor for that. I really appreciate that response. I will move onto my last question. Olga said that maybe politicians could ask children before making big decisions about children. I will ask the question and we will see how the answer comes back. What do our guests think that we as politicians could have done better during the pandemic and that would have helped them?

Ms Aideen Howard: Does anybody have a hand up to answer that big question? Would Olga like to start?

Ms Olga Buckina: One thing that might help is, and I do not want to blame anybody because they do a good job, they should not put us in one category, as in saying that children are

vectors, children are spreading the virus, all children have to go back school or all children miss GAA and stuff like that. Everyone of us is unique and we all have our own problems. We need to be seen as more of a diverse group.

Deputy Mark Ward: Excellent.

Ms LilyRose Wogan-Martin: There is not much to say. When we watch RTÉ news or anything to do with politicians, people tend to be very negative because there is not much that is positive about a pandemic. I guess that could really scare people. At the start when nobody knew what was happening it was quite scary. All we were hearing was that children were spreading the virus or that it could get worse every day. I feel that people would have been affected. It is quite hard to say because news has to be delivered, but sometimes it got very negative. It is good to deliver news but sometimes when sitting down to watch RTÉ News, and my parents do that every day at six o'clock, it was mostly the same negative things. It would be good if we had a bit of the positive, such as reporting on a community that is doing good things for children this week.

Deputy Mark Ward: I thank our guests. I really appreciate those answers.

Chairman: Thank you, Deputy. Deputy Whitmore, can you confirm your location?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am in the convention centre.

Chairman: Thank you.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: I am very impressed with the contributions today. It is hard to come to a meeting such as this, but the things our guests were speaking about are things that I wish we had them discussing with us a year ago. The issues they are talking about and the way they are talking about them are exactly how we should have dealt with not just children's issues but a lot of the stuff to do with the pandemic in the first place. In all the committee meetings I have attended I have never heard people talking in such an inclusive way. When asked what they would like to see, their first instinct is to talk about other people. That is incredible. Well done. It is a testament to themselves, their families and The Ark group.

I have a couple of questions. During the pandemic everybody was trying to get outside a lot more, but we do not do outside space very well in Ireland. We do not put enough emphasis on it. I have four children and the playgrounds are sometimes old and not very big. There also may not be skate parks and things like that. What type of outdoor spaces do our guests think we need? Perhaps they think they have good spaces, but what would they like to see in outdoor spaces? That is my first question. Can we deal with the first question? I have another question about online stuff as well.

Chairman: That is no problem.

Ms Aideen Howard: Conor is very keen to talk about outdoor space and then Olga can.

Mr. Conor James: I think outdoor space is used quite well. The Blackrock Park is quite near me and that is where I go sometimes and there is a good bike trail. That is all really good and it is well used. There are two different playgrounds. There is one for all age ranges and then there is an older one. We can still use the older one but it is not as good. Maybe that space could be used for something else. I know there are lots of parks that have two or three playgrounds in them with a lot of different things, but maybe we could use that space for something that is

over near the playground and then make an overall bigger playground so everybody could play there. Sometimes adults think that a 12-year-old would never do something that is meant for a seven-year-old, but sometimes children do. Sometimes there are fun little slides, you want to play with your sister or sometimes you want to play by yourself and want to try something out or go on the small thing. There is either the big kids' yard or one for the small kids. Maybe if all of it was included, kids might have a bit more fun and it might be a slight bit better.

Ms Olga Buckina: It would be a good thing to add more spaces. It does not necessarily have to be a playground, but just a space where people can go to do something outside. Take the example of people who lived in the city centre and who were only allowed to travel 2 km. There was nowhere people could go to do physical activity or anything outside. It is really important even to get just a field, a basketball court or somewhere you could go to and use, so you are not stuck in the house all day.

Ms LilyRose Wogan-Martin: At the start of lockdown we were not allowed to go to any playgrounds because we were not allowed to touch many surfaces. Our playground is in Fairview. There are other playgrounds around, but that is the biggest and best one. It has not got old but a lot of equipment has been taken away because people are not being the best with it. People were throwing pizza boxes and things like that on the ground. We should have more playgrounds for everyone. There are people who are trying to ruin playgrounds. Maybe it is just local problems but there are a lot of playgrounds that end up with graffiti within a few years. I think it is because people might feel left out. Maybe we should have a playground with many things because a couple of things in playgrounds end up getting taken out because they are deemed unsafe. Maybe if we could child-proof them we might be able to include everyone in playgrounds.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: When we are designing playgrounds the first people we should talk to are our guests, to be honest. Children know what they want to see in playgrounds and they know the best way to lay things out.

I have another question and it is related to something I have seen in my house. I have four children - one in junior infants, one in fourth class, one in sixth class and a second year student. I spent many years telling them to get offline. They were always online and I used to try to pull them off, saying they should not be spending so much time online. However, during the pandemic I completely flipped and told them they had to go online. They had to go online to talk to their friends and they had to do their schoolwork online. I was encouraging a lot of online use. Are our guests finding it hard to not be online as much as they were? Did they go online much more during the pandemic?

Ms LilyRose Wogan-Martin: Personally, I did not really like Zoom. Maybe it was just me, but it was such a big jump from learning algebra or something else in the classroom to suddenly doing everything on Zoom. I really did not like the Zoom classes. I would cut it off and just leave and do my homework. However, there are some aspects of Zoom that I did like. We had about an hour on Zoom so we had to fit every subject into a small bit. It was kind of nice only having a little bit of mathematics to be explained, but at the same time it was a lot harder to learn because I had my iPhone next to me and everything around me. It was so easy to just turn off Zoom and start playing Roblox or something. I think a lot of kids did that. It was a big jump. It was very hard at the start in March, just before St. Patrick's Day, to ease back into it, but after a while we got used to it again, or at least I did.

Mr. Conor James: For me, before that I used to be out for perhaps one, two or three hours

a day, and that is not including walking to school or being in school. I used to play quite a bit. In lockdown, I used to go online at between 9 a.m. and 10 a.m., or 9 a.m. to 9.30 a.m., if it was not as big of a day. After doing that and finishing my schoolwork, it would be lunch by the time I had done everything. Sometimes, I was online for a long time and it was really hard, but then other times, I was online for a shorter time. Afterwards, I did not get back to the structure of a normal day quite fast. Half the time I found that by 4 or 5 o'clock, when school was meant to be over, if I had some difficult homework or something to do like a project, I would try to finish it all in a day. If I was done by noon and I did not have anything to do, I would just sit around. Sometimes, I would play the iPad, watch TV or go outside. Then I had to go back to school where if I finished something, I just had to read. I could not zoom forward and finish all my work in a day. It was hard to come back to normality and the schedule.

Ms Olga Buckina: For me, before the lockdown, I might have sat at home and been on my phone mindlessly scrolling through something. I took the fact that we could go outside for granted. I would say to myself "I am too tired to go outside or do anything today" and I would just sit and use my phone. During the lockdown, when we switched to being on technology all the time, we got used to it after a while. Now, I am much more eager to drop the phone and do anything I can when I have the opportunity to go outside. When I can meet my friends and actually do stuff, I am more eager to do that now.

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: That is brilliant. I am delighted to hear that.

Chairman: Is that everything, Deputy Whitmore?

Deputy Jennifer Whitmore: Yes, it is. I thank Ms Howard for facilitating this meeting. It was very interesting listening to all the guests.

Chairman: I want to ask one or two things. I agree with what others have said about being impressed with our guests' contributions, including their speeches and follow-up answers. Their honesty is incredible. I agree with Deputy Whitmore, it is a pity that we could not have had this engagement sooner, but I think it is great that we are having it now.

I want to ask about when the witnesses got back into school or doing activities if they have resumed those. I know from the experiences of my children, nieces and nephews that people felt very nervous about going back to school. It was not just about the virus but about interacting with people again. People had got used to being on their own, being in their own room doing their schoolwork. It was difficult to come out of that and go back to "normal". How did the witnesses, or other kids that they know who are also in The Ark, feel about going back to school or doing activities? Was there a nervousness around that? Did they find there was help available, particularly when going back into school? If there was someone who was struggling and found school difficult, did they get the extra help they needed? Ms Howard can pass that question around.

Ms Aideen Howard: I know LilyRose is keen to answer that question.

Ms LilyRose Wogan-Martin: I was not really nervous going back with the virus. In September, when we went back, it was more nerve-racking because I did not know what the school had in line for Covid. In March, when we went back, I was a bit more relieved because I knew what my school was doing. At the same time, I was nervous because when we went back in September, I thought we would not go back into lockdown, but then we did. I was more nervous that I would forget how to do my fractions. On the first Monday when we went back, I

was in the dentist for half the morning. I did not know what school was going to be like and I could not feel half my mouth, which did not help.

Chairman: That is an excellent answer.

Ms Aideen Howard: Does Olga or Conor want to contribute? No.

Chairman: Do members have anything they want to add that they did not get the chance to say? Do Ms Howard or the other witnesses want to add anything at this point?

Ms Aideen Howard: I thank the committee on behalf of the Children's Council, because there are 30 members but only three of them are here today. I am thankful that this group has been able to pioneer new practices and share their views with members of the committee. I thank the committee for providing the opportunity and letting them do so.

Chairman: The gratitude is on our part. It has been an excellent engagement and I am delighted we had this meeting. I sincerely thank Conor, Olga and LilyRose, and to everyone who works with them. The children's committee takes on board the suggestions and everything they have said in their presentations. I look forward to future engagement with them and with children in general on matters that are important to them. They have done an excellent job in representing themselves, the Ark and children in general throughout the country. I thank them on behalf of myself and the members of the committee. Hopefully, when it is safe to do so, we will be able to meet in person and invite them into the Oireachtas. We would love to be able to do that.

Do I have agreement from committee members to publish the opening statements to the website? Is that agreed? Agreed.

The joint committee adjourned at 4.46 p.m. until 3.30 p.m. on Tuesday, 29 June 2021.