

## **Scottish Child Abuse Inquiry**

### **Witness Statement of Jonathan Anderson, Headmaster, Merchiston Castle School**


#### **Background**

1. My name is Jonathan Anderson and my date of birth is [REDACTED] 1975. I was born in Belfast. My contact details are known to the Inquiry.
2. I attended Queen's University of Belfast from 1993-1996 and read Geography. From 1996-1997 I studied for my Post Graduate Certificate in Education (Geography) at the University of Ulster at Coleraine.
3. In September 1997, I was appointed to my first teaching job at Christ's Hospital, a full boarding co-educational school in West Sussex. The School has a strong charitable ethos, providing a boarding education to many who otherwise would not be able to access such an education. I joined the Geography Department and taught the subject across the 11-18 age range. In 1998, I became Assistant Housemaster of Thornton A House at the school, and from 2003-2011 I served as Housemaster of Lamb B House. Throughout my time at Christ's Hospital, I was a resident member of staff, living in school accommodation adjoining the boarding houses in which I worked.
4. In 2011, I took on the role of Senior Deputy Head at Worksop College, a co-educational boarding and day school in Nottinghamshire. There I was resident onsite and closely involved in the boarding life of the school, line managing the Housemasters and Housemistresses, as well as overseeing the physical boarding environment.
5. In December 2017, I was appointed to the Headship of Merchiston Castle School, Edinburgh and took up post in August 2018. I was approached by a recruitment agency and encouraged to apply for the role. The process was a rigorous one, with two initial rounds of interview, a 'fact-finding' visit to the School to meet pupils, staff and governors, a reciprocal visit to Worksop to see me at work in my current role,

psychometric testing and a final panel interview. In addition to this, three references were also sought.

6. As a Housemaster, Deputy Head and now Head in boarding schools, I have been faced with a very wide spectrum of challenging but ultimately rewarding pastoral issues as well as having to tackle a wide range of difficult disciplinary concerns. I fully appreciate the fundamental importance of a safe and happy school; not just to pupils, but also to parents, staff and inspecting bodies. My experience in England, where regulation of independent schools is very different to that in Scotland, has offered me some very useful professional insight. In England inspection of independent schools is undertaken by the Independent Schools Inspectorate, with a set of National Minimum Boarding Standards overseen through that inspection framework.

#### **Response to hearing the evidence**

7.  I can confirm that have been in attendance via the WebEx link each and every day and I am grateful to Inquiry for allowing this. I am determined to give evidence in person on the 27<sup>th</sup> January 2022 as I fully recognise the importance of the Inquiry in learning lessons from the past to best equip Schools like Merchiston for the future.
8. I have been deeply moved by the testimony that I have heard and I can only reiterate my profound regret that former pupils of Merchiston experienced such a terrible and terrifying time; I am sorry that their time at the School was damaged and so damaging. Merchiston has always sought to engage with the Inquiry in the most positive and genuine of terms; to recognise where the School fell short, to learn lessons and to continue to improve our practice in the care of the young people we look after.

#### **What was inherited on arrival in post and what has been done since**

9. The conditions imposed upon the School 2015 resulted in clear priorities being identified for the school in respect of improvement:
  - a) Better safeguarding training for all within the Merchiston community
  - b) More robust Child Protection Procedures

**c) Better Personal and Social and Health Education**

10. I inherited a good structure, where there clearly had been a great deal of work done on the Child Protection and Compliance aspects of the Schools policies and procedures. There was, and still is, a huge store placed in Child Protection and Wellbeing, with the lessons of previous years still serving as a salutary reminder to all staff. When I arrived, it was clear that the experiences throughout the period of closest scrutiny meant that there was a keen focus was placed on ensuring that best practice was followed in regard to Child Protection and Safeguarding and that this was reflected in the School's policy documentation. The series of inspections from 2014 through to 2016, alongside the report compiled by WithScotland clearly precipitated a huge amount of work in reshaping the approach to Child Protection across the organisation. As a result, I feel that Merchiston became and continues to be, an organisation that reflects on its practice and one that seeks to improve where it can.

**Pupil voice, pupil wellbeing, pupil safeguarding, our pastoral responsibilities**

11. Merchiston has clear and robust policies and guidance around Child Wellbeing and Protection. These are kept under regular review, and are signed off annually by the Board of Governors. The review process includes feedback gathered from pupil surveys and from groups such as the Parents' Forum. Our policies reflect best practice in the sector and any changes in legislation such as the new Child Protection guidance that was introduced last year. It is very clear that the School's focused approach has embedded a strong culture of sharing and communication between staff. Concerns raised are shared documented and carefully followed up. The key aspect of the guidance in place is that there are clear processes in place with reference to the actions that should be taken particularly by colleagues in relation to any safeguarding concern. The use of staged intervention models has allowed for greater clarity and understanding of how certain aspects of school life are managed; this is true for staff, boys and their parents.
12. Staged intervention models exist for Anti Bullying, Behaviour Management and Wellbeing. These offer colleagues, young people and their parents a clear guide as to how we as a School will respond to concerns in these areas. Actions are recorded on the Schools MIS (Management Information System). This system is continually refined to ensure interrogation of records can be done easily and those colleagues who need to see any shared information can do so in a straightforward manner.

13. Merchiston does not tolerate bullying behaviour of any kind, but we accept that as a community which reflects life in wider society, such behaviour can and does occur. Bullying incidents are recorded and followed up and then reviewed in the short and longer term; if no further negative behaviour reemerges, they are considered 'closed'. Throughout the restorative process, parents of all parties involved are kept informed. Restorative approaches enable those who have been harmed to convey the impact of the harm to those responsible, and for those responsible to acknowledge this impact and take steps to put it right. Pupils are encouraged not to be bystanders but to support those experiencing bullying and those who are bullying by speaking up and encouraging intervention.
14. A wide range of pupil forums exist to capture pupil voice ranging from food to academic lessons. Termly surveys are conducted to measure pupil wellbeing and the results of these surveys are used to inform best practice of Housemasters and other staff. Each house has a pupil council where issues can be raised and addressed, and there are a number of School-wide forums where pupils from across the School can meet to discuss any matters arising from the pupil body. The intention is to encourage the boys to take an active part in promoting the best possible environment Merchiston can offer.
15. We hold the bronze award for Rights Respecting Schools and are working towards gaining silver and gold. This has required the School to commit to promoting the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child through learning more about the Convention and its impact on children and young people. A pupil-led steering group drives our progress through the programme and external accreditors visit to assess success. We expect to be awarded our silver awarded in the coming months, largely down to the energy and initiative of the pupils involved.
16. Our current PSHE programme addresses pupil voice directly, and in each year time is dedicated to 'speaking out'; reminding pupils who they can talk to if they have concerns or worries. Our safeguarding mantra of 'Notice-Check-Share' extends to all aspects of school life and it is not unusual for colleagues to report concerns to Housemasters or Tutors if they see a subtle change in a boy's behaviour in class, in House or elsewhere around School. It is longer acceptable to expect boys to simply 'fit in or ship out' or for them to be left to find their own way if they are isolated or struggling to find their feet when they join the School. We treat every pupil as an individual and work with them to find ways to settle and integrate into life at Merchiston. When identified, such wellbeing concerns are logged and a plan is put in place to ensure that support is given to boys to help them develop friendships or find interests that appeal to them. It is not always the case that we succeed, but this is never through a want of trying and it is never because the structure in place cannot be flexed.



17. We have also run programmes on MVP – Mentors in Violence Prevention. Mentors in the Sixth Form receive teacher training from staff to deliver the same types of session to our younger pupils. The positive messages and skills coming from older pupils can have a much stronger impact than when they come from teachers and have been found to encourage open discussion.
18. In 2019 we redrafted our Pupils' Charter – this was drawn up by pupils and is a concise and easy to follow articulation of what the boys feel they wish to be known for. Themes of compassion, respect, support and positivity are prevalent and the boys are encouraged to follow the charter's guidance in their daily interactions. While Merchiston is still known for sporting success, it is certainly not at the expense of academic achievement and no longer is it solely confined to rugby. We have been fortunate to find success in other sports such as tennis and golf, and more recently hockey and football. Our Pupil Charter encourages boys to be modest and to recognise that success comes in many forms. We strive to strike a balance in congratulating and recognising achievement across a wide variety of activities and we actively encourage the boys and their parents to share news of any success they or their sons achieve outwith school activities.
19. In addition, our re-articulated school values mirror the Pupil Charter; there is a commitment to being part of a strong community which encourages tolerance, compassion and responsibility, one that is built on a foundation of self-belief and happiness. These values are frequently referred to both in encouraging the boys in general approach to school life or in the context of addressing any issue that might arise where it is important to be reminded of their positive message; they are shared by staff with boys in variety of ways; through lessons, House meetings, assemblies and co-curricular activities.
20. In line with our values of self-belief and happiness, wellbeing plays a significant part in our support of our entire community. Boys are encouraged to develop healthy habits of mind, body and soul; this message is supported across the formal curriculum, in houses, and through activities. The School hosted its first conference in Wellbeing in 2019 and since then we have also had visiting speakers address specific topics such as male adolescent mental health in support of this. Staff have a committee where they too develop initiatives to support their wellbeing.
21. Pupil voice also plays an important and significant part in the decision making process when it comes to families choosing Merchiston as their next school. Prospective pupils have the opportunity to experience a typical day (or days) at the School before they enrol. Day pupils can experience lessons and activities, while those considering boarding can spend a night in a boarding house to get a genuine sense of what school (and boarding) life is like. Parents are actively encouraged to play as full a role as possible in

their son's educational journey. Parents of boarders are readily encouraged to visit site when they can (current COVID restrictions aside) and in my twenty plus years in the sector, I have seen this welcome evolution and feel it is tremendously positive. Of the boys that we have who enrol initially as day boys, some do convert to boarding and it is evident that this is a choice made by the boys themselves as they seek to get more out of their School experience.

22. Pupil Leader roles in the Sixth Form reflect a changed attitude to pupil leadership in schools and they are no longer designed to be a substitute for staff in any sense. They are there to support activities, mentor younger pupils and act as another listening ear. They are trained to fulfil these roles are selected via published selection process. Prefects fall into three broad categories: House based Prefects (each House has a Head of House and Deputy Head of House who live in the boarding houses with younger boys. They are supported by non-resident House Prefects); Non-House Prefects (they are afforded the same responsibilities and privileges but live in the Sixth Form House. There are Prefects for academic subjects and they offer support during prep to other pupils (of all ages) in their area of subject specialism); Wellbeing Prefects (each House has a Wellbeing Prefect with strong mentoring skills. Further training is organised, particularly in safeguarding and confidentiality).

#### **Care Inspectorate Inspections and Reports**

23. The School has been inspected twice by the Care Inspectorate since I was appointed Headmaster; once in November 2019 [provided to the Inquiry in December 2020] and again in November 2021 [final written report awaited].
24. The report from 2019 assessed our support of our pupils' wellbeing as being graded as Very Good, with boarding pupils expressing a strong sense of happiness and contentment, both in the opportunities boarding provides and the way in which they were cared for. There were some areas where improvement was recommended and this around the use of our school MIS to record and share information with relevant staff; this was addressed accordingly.
25. We await the report from the 2021 inspection, but the verbal feedback received immediately after the inspection suggested that the School was continuing to operate at the higher end of the evaluation scale, with positive comments from pupils on their experiences at Merchiston.

## **Pastoral Leadership and Governor Oversight**

26. We have provided the Inquiry with examples of documentation shared with Governors to help with their oversight of School practice in relation to Safeguarding and Child Protection. Over the last number of years, we have developed a much flatter leadership structure within the School, encouraging and empowering middle leaders such as Housemasters, but also providing them with direct support from the senior leadership team. On the pastoral leadership side, the structure is as follows: there is a Deputy Head Wellbeing, who is also the Child Protection Coordinator (CPC) and they are supported by an Assistant Deputy (who acts as Deputy CPC). The Pupil Support Leadership comprises of these two members of staff as well as the Chaplin, the Senior Medical Sister and the School Counsellor. They meet regularly to discuss matters arising and any issues that require greater intervention can be passed up via the Deputy Head Wellbeing to the School Leadership Team (SLT). Having the CPC as a Deputy Head and a senior Leader means that any issues are readily discussed by leadership and any responses can be swiftly coordinated. They have full access to personnel information as required and have the benefit of having sight of any overall picture. If required, the Deputy Head Wellbeing's other responsibilities can be reallocated to allow them to focus on any Child Protection Issue demanding their full attention.

## **Learning and ongoing training**

27. Staff training remains vitally important in respect of Child Protection. All staff are given child protection training as part of the induction and this is revisited and refreshed each term.
28. In addition, key pastoral leaders (SLT, Housemasters and Medical Centre staff) have been given Child Protection training for the intensive contact workforce (formerly known as Level 4 CP training).
29. All Housemasters and key pastoral staff have been trained in Mental Health First Aid.
30. Safer recruitment policies and procedure as set out in documents provided to the Inquiry in December 2020, are followed carefully and any concerns around applications or the veracity of an applicant's qualifications are acted upon. In my experience, Merchiston has and follows robust procedures when it comes to the recruitment of staff. Merchiston is no different to many Schools in the sector who

will now look beyond the references given and, in the case of particular roles, we may seek permission to speak to former employers not listed as referees.

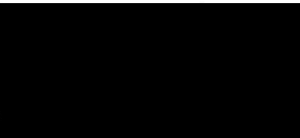
31. I can point to instances where we have acted swiftly and decisively on pupil concerns raised regarding members of staff, following correct procedures to ensure the safety of the pupils in our care. This has included suspension, termination of employment, referral to external agencies such as the SSSC and the Police. For instance, one member of staff was reported to us by a group of pupils for using inappropriate sexualised language in front of them. This member of staff was suspended, the matter was investigated and they have since left the employment of the School. The appropriate authorities were informed and the School co-operated with their respective inquiries. At no point were the young people in our care at imminent risk, but instead we feel that in acting decisively and at the earliest opportunity, we have removed any threat of a concatenation of behaviours leading to a more serious event in the future.
32. New staff in senior posts on the wellbeing and pastoral (Deputy Head Wellbeing and Assistant Head Pupil Support) roles within the school have been mentored in their role by Heather Smith. Heather's background is in single and multi-agency child care and protection learning and development, with special interests in the following areas: Working with children and young people and adults to keep themselves safe, confidence in knowing when it has gone wrong and how to help, perpetrator behaviours, sexually harmful behaviours and exploitation, abuse across the lifespan and the impact of trauma on early childhood, child and human rights and managing allegations of abuse against staff.
33. Traditionally the role of a Housemaster has been filled by a teacher who wants to pursue a pastoral route; this was the route that took me into house-mastering. We have explored non-teaching Housemaster roles, recruiting one Housemaster to the role from a social care background. Both routes have validity; but greater breadth and diversity of experience helps develop better practice.

#### **Where we are now and going into the future – our processes**

34. Merchiston has learned not to be complacent when it comes to matters of safeguarding and wellbeing. The threat of a determined individual accessing a school environment to abuse children and young people is ever-present, and the most difficult aspect of much of the evidence that I have heard is that greater vigilance

and swifter identification of abusive behaviours might have lessened the impact on the lives of those abused. I believe that we are a more vigilant school, one that listens and responds to concerns when they are raised and I hope that this can only help encourage greater candour and openness in the future. That said, we do not assume that we are always going to get it right and the experiences shared over the last few weeks act as a reminder that we must continue to look and learn.

35. In cases where pupils in our care have raised concerns regarding their experiences and treatment outside school, perhaps in the home environment, we have listened and acted promptly and thoroughly, involving external agencies as required.
36. We feel that in the years where the School has been under scrutiny and since, we have developed good working relationships with the external agencies we can call on for support and those who are responsible for regulating our provision. We are always keen to learn and improve, ensuring that relevant colleagues are involved with organisations in the promotion of and training in best practice in the boarding schools sector – Boarding Schools Association (BSA), Headmasters' and Headmistresses' (HMC) Conference and the Scottish Council for Independent Schools (SCIS).
37. As I have said before, I feel that Merchiston is a reflective organisation. For instance, we continue to reflect on our boarding structures to best support our pupils; while much has been said about the horizontal structure at Merchiston, there is in fact aspects of verticality in the most junior and most senior houses. Both systems have their strengths and weaknesses; critical to running the most effective and successful system is understanding and mitigating the risks associated with those weaknesses.
38. I would like to thank the inquiry for their work and for helping me, on behalf of Merchiston to better understand the profound impact our School has had on the individuals who came forward. We will continue to listen and to learn to ensure that Merchiston remains a safe, inclusive and supportive environment for the children and young people in our care.

Signed  Jonathan Anderson

Date: 24<sup>th</sup> January 2022