

# Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Accountability hearings](#), HC 58

Tuesday 5 July 2022

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Caroline Ansell; Miriam Cates; Anna Firth; Tom Hunt; Dr Caroline Johnson; Kim Johnson; Ian Mearns.

Questions 72 - 133

Witness

I: Dame Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner for England, Office of the Children's Commissioner for England.



## Examination of witness

Witness: Dame Rachel de Souza.

Q72 **Chair:** Thank you very much for attending today. BBC Parliament Live is covering our session. Just for the benefit of those watching on BBC TV and also on the internet, could you please give your name and title?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I am Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner for England.

Q73 **Chair:** Thank you. The Department's statutory guidance states that local authorities have a duty under section 436A of the Education Act 1996 to make arrangements to establish the identities of children in their area who are not registered pupils at school and are not receiving suitable education otherwise. The scale of children missing from education is staggering and, as you revealed in your latest report, 124,000 children have become severely absent with 1.7 million children persistently absent. That is up by 100,000. That is building on figures by the Centre for Social Justice that reported that 90,000 pupils were severely absent. The Department's own figures show that 1,000 schools have the equivalent of an entire class missing. That has gone up from 800 in recent months. Before you explain what you are doing, how do you account for the significant increases in absence?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Looking at the data for the first term of the school year this year, you are quite right, those numbers are huge. They are 50% higher than they were pre-pandemic. Only 20% of them are accounted for by Covid, so I made it my business not only to find out the accuracy of those numbers but also to go out and speak to children and professionals, right across the system, to find out why these children were missing. The majority of those children are on school rolls but I am even more worried about the smaller number of acutely vulnerable children who are missing from education and are not on anybody's roll.

Therefore, we went out and we have spoken to the children. The answers that we got fall into a number of categories. There are children who just have not come back. They have disengaged from the education system and have not come back. That is why September is a moment. We need to get them back.

There are also children with special educational needs. We got 94,000 responses from children with special educational needs who basically told us that if their needs were met in school they were happier than the rest of the cohort and actually valued education more. But there are a large number of children with special educational needs who feel that their needs are not being met and they have stayed at home for a number of reasons. Sometimes there is a delay in assessment or sometimes it is just that they have given up.



The third category is children with mental health and anxiety issues. The number one issue for children coming out of the pandemic is their mental health and mental wellbeing in their own words. Half a million children responded to my Big Ask survey. That is backed up by the recent NHS digital survey. Those children are just too anxious. They are not having their mental health needs met and we need to do something about it. The place they want those needs met is in school, so I think that is our major category.

- Q74 **Chair:** While clearly additional research and information is important, heads have said that there is a lack of specialist and school support to help reengage children who have disappeared from school. You have said that you think that the heads should obsess over attendance and I completely agree. And, as you have just pointed out, you want 100% attendance on the first day of the September term. What needs to change between now and September to make sure that happens—especially those who have become severely absent—that they turn up for school engaged and ready to learn?

I sadly coined the term “ghost children” over a year ago and I have been going on about this since the CSJ first came about. Rightly, you don’t like the term “Ghost children”. Nevertheless, I feel that, although there is a lot of noise in the Department, there is not enough action being taken to get these children back into school because the numbers seem to be going up.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Chair, first of all, I might not like the term “ghost children” but I do respect your work in this area and you have kept it alive, so thank you.

I have gone for a 100% target because who do we leave out? I agree that we need to get all children back to school, so what needs to happen now? First, as a teacher and head teacher for 30 years, one thing I know is that any child who is out of school, even for a significant amount of time, has that thought about September, “It is a new start. Can we get back?”

What I have been calling for—and I have been working with lead professionals in this area—is an absolute national campaign to get all our children back to school. We need to focus on what we know, which is we need to make sure that those children with special educational needs are getting the assessments, having the meetings they need and that schools are ready to welcome them. We need to engage the disengaged.

I would like to see every single child who is on a school roll, at least, who has not come back—I want every school to have a plan of how it is going to engage each of those children with a local authority, however its services are delivered.

In the mental health and anxiety area, I have been calling for a quicker rollout of the mental health support teams. Many schools have



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counsellors and professionals, as do local authorities, and we need to mobilise that. If I was going to put my pound anywhere, as Secretary of State for Education, I would put it into attendance. It is a proxy for so much, not least when we look at Arthur Labinjo-Hughes' death and ask ourselves: had he been in school would he have been safe? Attendance is a proxy for safety and also a proxy for the ambition for the generation, which is to do well at school.

**Q75 Chair:** We know that the Department has been consulting on school attendance. Again, it is consultation, consultation, when this problem has been going on for some time. The Department is talking about fines. It is talking about simplifying how absence is recorded and that local authorities and the Education Secretary should be given access to attendance days. My own view is that the Education Secretary should have a dashboard—just like the Department for Health Secretary does—of every single school; a computer dashboard looking at attendance and working with the local authorities and the schools with attendance officers to get these kids back into school.

In a nutshell, what is your view on the Department's proposed reforms and what practical support has actually been delivered because of the Attendance Alliance Group's work in the seven months it was established? As I understand it, it is due to conclude its work this month.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** When I came into—

**Chair:** Sorry, if I could just add to that: do you know how many children have got back into education as a result of the Attendance Alliance Group's work?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I don't know the answer to that but we can check. I have made it my absolute mission to find out how many children we have. How many are not in school and get them back to school.

I push the Department hard on these questions and particularly on the live data question. During Covid, the Department for Education—for the first time ever—tracked daily how many children were in school. Normally that is done a year later after a census. Therefore, it had the figure but it did not know whether it was the same children as the children yesterday. It had a figure of x-many million but did not know: is it the same children off as yesterday? We can do better than that.

We have done a pilot in 10 areas and worked with all 151 local authorities to find out the state of data collection and what is going wrong. Basically, we have a situation where some areas are doing really well. LAs have MOUs with their schools, whatever type of school they are.

**Chair:** It is better not to use acronyms because the public do not understand.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Memoranda of understanding to share data. They are doing it really well and they have systems that do it. Others



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don't. We pushed the Department hard. For the first time, it has set up a pilot to try to achieve live data. I think it needs to move quickly on this. Basically, the data is sucked up from the school to the local authority to the Department—so that you can achieve exactly what you talked about wanting to achieve—to see in the Secretary of State's office how many children are actually in school. We can do this. It is 2022. We should be doing it anyway.

**Q76 Chair:** This problem has been going on since last year or since schools went back in fact in—when was it—April 2021? I just feel that the efforts are tortoise-like. You have been brilliant at highlighting this but it is still not making a massive impact because, as I said, the numbers are going up.

Can I move on to the catch-up programme, which is all related? You have heard me describe the impact of Covid-19 on school closures as heralding the four horsemen of the education apocalypse, in terms of educational attainment, mental health, safeguarding and the loss of their life chances, and you called for a comprehensive catch-up programme last year. Is the catch-up programme fit for purpose and what needs to happen to undo the damage caused by Covid?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I think it is no bad thing to cast our minds back and just remember how seriously affected children were by the pandemic as they came out of it, and why the catch-up programme needed to be deep and really focused.

The first thing I would say about success is I think most education professionals will say that tutoring is something that they will stick with. It is something new that has come through the catch-up programme. Where it has worked well it has worked really well. There are things you might want to change but they will carry on with that.

However, I am concerned about the very young, who should have had nursery education, who have missed developmental milestones. There are speech and language issues. I am very, very concerned about that age group and I think more resource should and must go in there. I think it is very serious indeed. I am hearing that from medical professionals, right through to schools, nurseries and in all sectors.

**Q77 Chair:** The Chief Inspector of Ofsted and you talked about the damage to children in early years and primary schools, some of them not being able to hold knives and forks or talk properly, so should the bulk of the catch-up programme be focused on the primary schools?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** There are needs right across the system. I do think that is an important area to focus on. I am also very concerned about the reporting of mental health concerns, with our teenagers particularly but for all age groups.

One of the things that I would like to see from the catch-up programme—look, I could take pretty much any school and make sure that its Year



11s caught up in their maths and English. That is not the issue. The issue is children who have been isolated away from their peers, missed doing the things they love and it has affected their mental wellbeing. I think we should be looking at longer days, supporting extended days with activities. I have delivered them myself.

Q78 **Chair:** We will come on to that in a bit. Just in an answer, and not a politician's answer, is the catch-up programme working? Is it fit for purpose?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** There are positive things about it but I want more. As well as those younger ones, the children taking examinations around Year 10 up to Year 13, who have been really affected by this pandemic, we need to make sure that they have a range of support, both career support, support to get on to their next steps because it is not just about getting—

Q79 **Chair:** What would you do substantively to make it better?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I would invest and focus on the early years. We have talked about that. I would be looking in depth at careers support and the transition support of the cohort who had lockdown. I would also be looking at mental health support in schools and the extended day. They are some pretty hefty things. We have to recognise that a large amount of money has gone in with that £5 million but we need even more.

Q80 **Chair:** I have a few more questions. I will bring in my colleagues in a minute.

In the last parliamentary session, you kindly supported my Private Members' Ten Minute Rule Bill, which was about making schools part of the national infrastructure and ensuring that, if schools were ever closed, the Children's Commissioner would have the power of veto and that there would be votes in Parliament every six weeks. Do you still support the premise of the Bill and hold the belief that schools should never again be closed to most pupils?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I go round the country talking to children and people who work with children. The damage that locking down children did to them is immense. We should not close schools.

**Chair:** Thank you. Do you still support the Bill?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Yes.

Q81 **Chair:** You will be aware that the parent-campaign group, Molly Kingsley and Liz Cole, has published the "Children's Inquiry". What it talks about is increasing powers for the Children's Commissioner, so not just the example I have given but making sure that your mandate is beefed up, that you possibly have vetoes of other major pieces of legislation or proper input that affects children. What do you think of that? Do you think your powers should be extended?



**Dame Rachel de Souza:** The first thing I would say is that in this last year and a bit in the role I have used the powers I have quite extensively. My 2f power to get data, my power to enter premises I have used fairly extensively. I have been taken seriously and managed to get in front of every Secretary of State who has anything to do with children, from the Treasury right the way through. I have not been excluded from anywhere, so I hope I have built through influence—if not by having powers—the ability to put children’s voices there. I would certainly support any further powers they wish to give me.

Q82 **Chair:** A longer school day, which you indicated support for, we know that young people who participate in sports clubs are 20% less likely to suffer from mental health difficulties. Girls are 25% less likely to be at risk of anxiety and 11% less likely to self-harm. The Education Policy Institute said that an extended school day can increase educational attainment by two months. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport said the same thing: that it can also boost numeracy skills by 29%. Wales is doing pilots on longer school days. What do you think of them, would it make a difference? Do you support longer school days?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Absolutely. My own former trust published an article in the Sundays on how in the existing funding envelope, using timetabling skills, they have managed to add an extra year by doing longer school days.

Why I support it is that in the Big Ask over half a million children gave it to me as one of the key solutions for both their catch-up, for their good mental health, in terms of the activities, and to support them to have the careers and jobs they want in the future, by doing the wider skills, the wider learning, the learning about life. I think there is something fundamental that children miss.

In my head, I have a picture of the head of the football team in a school in Bolton—and this is the top of the school, the brightest and whatever—just coming out of lockdown saying, "I was totally bewildered. My life fell apart. I couldn't do sport and that is where I find out about the world. That is where my friendships are". Education and school life are so much more than academic learning. I think we have learned that and I would recommend an extended day, a longer day for all of our children.

**Chair:** How long?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Schools need to work out what suits their children and their community. I have done it right up until 6 o'clock to 5.30 pm. I have run models with extra hours. I think all of them can work.

**Chair:** It is not just academic, it is wellbeing, sports, music, creative?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Yes, absolutely.

Q83 **Chair:** A final question and then I will pass it over to Caroline Johnson



and Tom. I went to Cooks Spinney school in my constituency of Harlow last Friday, which has some pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. It has previously had attendance difficulties but since it has been doing breakfasts the attendance has gone up quite substantially. The charity, Magic Breakfast—I went with the charity to see the school—says that 73% of teachers thought that breakfast provision has had a positive impact. The Education Endowment Foundation found a 28% reduction in late marks in a term and a 24% reduction in behavioural incidents. The Government provide a breakfast provision service that just reaches 30% of schools with high levels of disadvantage and it costs £12 million a year. By comparison, the taxpayers spent £380 million on free school meal vouchers.

The Magic Breakfast proposal is to invest £75 million more per year. It is not asking for new money but the money raised from the Coca-Cola tax or the sugar levy, which provides value for money. It says it would reach 900,000 pupils with a nutritious breakfast throughout the year and would complement other ideas, like the strategy supporting family hubs. What do you make of the importance of breakfast provision?

I appreciate that there is an argument that this is the responsibility of parents but it is not always the case that parents, for one reason or another, are able to do this and the child is not getting breakfast. Do you think that using funds from the soft drinks levy would help support breakfast provision in schools?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I have seen your work on this, Chair, and a big well done for all you have done on that.

Since coming into the role, I have investigated this. Coming out of the Big Ask one of my policy papers, straight after the Big Ask, which we used to try to influence the Spending Review, was on the cost of living and one of our top recommendations was breakfast and breakfast clubs. It is very personal for me, in the sense that I know it is very cheap to deliver, as a head of a school, as a country and it brings in children, particularly teenagers. I think that having it right through to 18, certainly to 16, is something that is highly valued by families, young people and teenagers who will get out of bed, and come to school for the day because they know they are going to get something to eat.

Q84 **Chair:** Would the sugar levy be a good way to fund it?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** The sugar levy is a very interesting option. It is worth looking at and at a range of options. Some schools are doing it.

**Chair:** Some of my colleagues are sceptical of levies. This is an existing levy, so I am not asking for a new levy.

Finally, I missed one question I wanted to ask you on the Schools Bill. There has been a kind of esoteric argument about the level of intervention from the state in terms of academies. We know that the Secretary of State has taken a big chunk of clauses out of the Bill. In



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some way, is this not dancing on the head of a pin? Yes, of course, we want academies, absolutely, but we know that disadvantaged groups are 18 months behind their better-off peers and white working-class boys and girls underperform at all stages of the education system compared to every other peer group. Only 17.7% of free school meal pupils achieve grade 5 or above in English and maths GCSE. Only 18% of children with SEN get a decent maths and English GCSE, 7% of children in care the same; just 5% of excluded pupils get a good pass. What is your view on the Bill? Should it not do more? Rather than having these very intellectual arguments about state intervention and DfE intervention in academies, should it not be more to address these kinds of problems, what I regard as social injustices?

It is not woolly to want these groups to do better and be able to get on that ladder of opportunity. Do you think the Schools Bill and the Schools White Paper are missing a trick by not doing enough to concentrate on these cohorts? There is stuff about maths and English that we all agree with but should more be in the Bill about this?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** A couple of thoughts there. I have pushed really hard for Ministers to see the Schools Bill as just one in a suite of new Bills. The SEND Green Paper, the Care Review, which may not be a Bill but the recommendations of the Care Review, and the Schools White Paper and a range of other things, such as the 10-year mental health strategy, these things need to talk to each other and speak to each other. If they do that properly, some of those elements are going to be picked up. In terms of the Schools White Paper, I was pleased to see the EHE register. I pushed really hard for that and I know many around this table have, too. I absolutely think SEND and AP and the quality of SEND is critical.

One of the things that I think the Schools White Paper is trying to do that will help with that is the families of schools argument. Whatever a family of schools is, we need to work collaboratively with families of schools and that can dovetail with the SEND Green Paper and the thoughts of specialist SEN provision in families of schools, in local areas, and AP, so that we have revolving doors and we can move away from some of the things that we all hate to see, such as exclusions and children being moved out of mainstream and never getting back in. I think the families of schools argument plays well to that.

There was something else important in that Bill and it could go further about clarifying the roles in the system. When we are thinking about feeding children, it might seem very separate to be thinking about that but for many years there have been complaints and concerns, both from local authorities and from schools, about: whose job is this? The making sense of the system, if we are going to ask LAs to provide services around the child and services around schools, we need to clarify that and make sure they are funded and supported. We need to make sure that



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schools understand their responsibilities in relation to other schools in the area and local authorities too.

**Chair:** There are a few direct interventions in that Bill to look at those cohorts.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** For me, my entire educational life has been working in the most disadvantaged areas. Over the years, the focus has been on attempting to make sure that those children do as well and have as many opportunities as others. Of course, I want that front and centre of the Schools White Paper. Of course, I do.

**Chair:** It isn't.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Well, it is up for discussion now, isn't it? I think now there is a chance for us to make sure that happens.

Q85 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** What do you think the role of parents is in looking after and raising their children?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** It is absolutely fundamental. Never mind what I say; I think about what children have told us. For example, in the Big Ask response, children who are not happy in their family lives or where it is not working, are nine times more likely to suffer from other vulnerabilities. They absolutely value their families. That is why I was pleased to take on, from the Minister for Women and Equalities, the job of doing the family review, to understand even further what family means through the lens of children's eyes and how we can support families better with services and policy.

Q86 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** I am confused because what we have heard so far is that a small number of children are not receiving breakfast, which is clearly wrong and needs fixing. But the answer seems to be that all children should come in to school and have breakfast, and that the majority of children who currently have breakfast round the table at home with their parents and have the opportunity to engage with their family members shall no longer have that and that some children don't get activities.

And instead of targeting those activities towards those children who need them, the state should keep all children at school for another two and a half hours a day, until 6 o'clock, so that all children get the same.

My seven year-old son wants to start football. For £70 a year, £70 a season, he gets a strip provided by a local company—I don't know what company logo he will be wearing but we will find out—and he volunteers are the dads mostly. They will play football and they will have a lot of fun. So, basically, you are going to nationalise all those volunteers so that it is all provided by the school.

Presumably, the range of activities will come down to a small number of activities that can be uniformly distributed across the country, rather



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than the plethora of different opportunities and activities they have now. Why do we have to do all parents' activities for them rather than giving parents autonomy with their own children and targeting interventions to those that need it, rather than providing a blanket approach to those who do not?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** It is a great challenge. When I was giving examples, I don't think I was talking about compulsory. I talked about local areas and local schools and communities being able to.

**Dr Caroline Johnson:** You said "all children".

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** The opportunity for all children. In terms of longer days, I think I talked about varying ways of doing that. If I was a parent, looking at some of the lengths of school days and the lengths of lunchtimes, I would be concerned they were not long enough. Therefore, I do say that I think that the proposal for the minimum, getting everyone up to the minimum, which is going to take us at least another year or so, in terms of the DfE's proposals is pretty paltry actually.

When I look around Europe and look elsewhere, I think we expect more of just time teaching. Particularly in some areas in some communities, having significantly longer days with activities and wider things built in works very well because it avoids the cost issue. Other schools may want to do it differently and do. However, you do tend to find that schools in affluent areas often put lots of these things on voluntarily and it is the schools in disadvantaged areas that don't get them. Please don't get me wrong, I am not trying to mandate. Although I would mandate longer school days than the current basic, I am not trying to imprison everyone at school. Quite the opposite. I am listening to what children are telling me. They are saying, "We want opportunities and school is a place we feel safe to get them".

In terms of breakfast and things like that, I have worked in a range of schools. I have seen schools all around the country and it works well, particularly for those with working parents where there is nobody at home or where there are issues around vulnerable children. I think that is the priority for me: to make sure those children are supported and that every school—when I talk about "everyone", everyone has the ability to put that offer on.

Q87 **Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you. The other question is what role do parents have in catch-up? It seems to me, as I go round the different schools around my constituency and talk to teachers, that many of the gaps left by the Covid pandemic are quite predictable. They tell me that the younger children may have issues with spelling, for example; slightly older children have problems with creative writing. It has been the things that have been more difficult to teach without training, effectively. Obviously, many parents are quite keen to ensure that their children do better. They want to try to help them to catch up but they don't know where these gaps are.



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To what extent could providing information to parents, about where the gaps typically are or where the gaps in their children are and how to resolve them, be a much more efficient way of resolving things for the majority of children than providing poor people with a tutor at great cost and arguable effectiveness?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Tutoring is proving to be an effective way of supporting all children in school anyway, so I think it is one of those secrets that the independents knew and that state school staff now say, "Look, this is really useful".

Your point about recognising where the gaps are and giving that information to parents is a really good one. I would hope that is happening anyway, but I think there is no harm in suggesting it and promoting it further. Parents are the first and most important teachers of their children, and whether it is materials, whether it is advice on how to teach things well based on the best evidence base, we should absolutely be sharing that with parents.

**Q88 Dr Caroline Johnson:** Thank you. My other question is about what I see as a major health issue affecting children, which has not been touched on yet, and that is obesity and unfitness. We know that about 14% of four and five year-olds go to school obese and by the time they get to 11 over a quarter of children are obese and, on top of that, a further 15.5% are overweight. This is clearly a huge threat to children's ongoing life, health and wellbeing. What do you see as the solution to that?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** One of the things I have done since coming into the role is to engage both with—I was in Liverpool speaking to the Royal College of Paediatricians and child health last week on some of these issues. We have engaged with the children's hospitals, communities, health and schools and with the Health and Social Care Select Committee on this issue. It came out strongly from the Big Ask findings and from our visits on the Big Ask.

I am very mindful of one school I went to in the north-east where it put on a fantastic health strategy to combat—the children themselves with peer mentors. They were supported by Manchester United Football Club and they were all working on healthy living, how to manage obesity because of the lockdown, how to get ourselves into shape. Some of the things that they were requesting from their school and doing was putting on sport after school, the extended day, looking at healthy eating in schools. So, there are some very practical things that we can be doing that children want to do and that health and education are talking to each other about doing. We are doing some work on this in the year to come.

**Q89 Dr Caroline Johnson:** At this point, I should refer members to my declarations of interest. I am a member of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and a consulting paediatrician.

What about the role of parents? I have seen a number of patients; I have



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seen a 12 year-old who weighed over 120 kilograms. I have seen a nine year-old who weighed over 90 kilograms. Some children are extremely obese. When you talk to the children and say, "What do you have?" I am thinking of one recently. "What sort of things do you eat when you get in from school?" "Oh, she is always going to that cupboard and getting the crisps out. I find her in the cupboard eating chocolate".

Okay, but if this child is six or seven years old how do they have access to that? They did not walk to the shops and purchase it themselves using their own money that they earned somewhere. Somebody has purchased that for them, so to what extent do we ensure that parents understand their responsibilities and the availability of food that they are giving? We can feed them healthily at lunchtime. With your plans, we can even feed them healthily at breakfast time, but unless you are suggesting we bring them in from dawn to dusk, which you may do, at some point they are going to be at home with their parents and most of the children that are obese it is because they are eating too much food rather than doing too little exercise. How do we ensure that everybody understands what the options are and that they can do them affordably?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Some of the findings we are getting through the family review work because we are surveying children and families about issues right across the country. That is where I can talk to you about parenting because the Big Ask was very much focused on children. We are finding some issues related to cost of living, quality of food and how to manage that in terms of feeding your children.

I think schools could play a key part here. Now, poor schools I am always giving them more jobs but actually in PSHE children do learn about how to keep themselves well and healthy and eat well, but I think that has to come off the paper and become wider projects. That is why I referenced the peer mentoring work. There is absolutely no reason why we cannot be working with parents through schools, as well as through family hubs and the other places that we meet parents. Of course, it is the parents' responsibility but I think we need to support parents in understanding how to keep their children healthy and well.

A key thing that has come out of the initial family work is that children don't see themselves separately from their families. They very much identify. They don't see themselves as service users of education as separate from their families. I think we absolutely do need to be finding better ways to talk to the whole family, to a child and their parents. It is something that we are going to be bringing in proposals on in October.

**Chair:** Thank you. Just to be clear, personally, when I was asking my questions, I was talking about breakfast for disadvantaged kids who are not getting breakfast, not for all kids.

Q90 **Tom Hunt:** In terms of early years that was touched upon quite a bit earlier, about the importance of early years, I am pleased that there is I think a growing consensus that it is hugely important and perhaps in the



past, there has not always been the right level of focus on it.

Last week I went to an early years setting in my own constituency, Noah's Ark early years. I was very impressed by the work that it does, and the difference it makes in the formative years of young children's lives. I do sometimes worry—I do not think enough funding has gone into it. Some of the early years settings in my constituency find it very difficult to ensure that they have the right ratio there. The Living Wage has been positive but of course that does come with an additional cost to the employer.

I think there is this wider point about—and I always say this—those who work with children do so not to make money but because of their passion for supporting young people. However, they want to get by as well. It does concern me. Bearing in mind how important the role of working with young people in early years settings is and the difference it makes to those young people and society, but personally I do not think they are being paid enough. I don't want them leaving that job to do another job that may not have the same huge staff and importance. I want to know what your thoughts are on that.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** As well as engaging with Ministers and early years leaders, I have been out and seen lots of nurseries and early years settings. It is amazing the work that colleagues do. Particularly coming out of the pandemic with some of the difficulties of reopening nurseries because of funding issues. We have a mixture of private and state provision and it is quite a complex area. I agree with you that it has been difficult.

What I am overwhelmed by is the gratefulness of parents and the way that parents see their nursery as an integral part of the community. Especially young parents who are living away from their families because they have moved away for work. We are seeing amazing work from nurseries and early years settings having a massive impact on children and I obviously want to see them supported.

Because it is such a complex sector—private and state—it is hard to give a broad sweep answer. I know that child care provision is being looked at, at the moment. For me, it is supporting high quality, supporting the workforce but that centrepiece of just seeing the impact of brilliant early years support for young families and particularly kids.

Q91 **Tom Hunt:** It just concerns me, though, because it is not the first time I have been to an early years setting where I have heard the same thing, which is that some brilliant members of staff, who are working there and doing a great job, have not felt able to stay there because of the salary they are on. That does concern me.

Moving on to children's services, we had a session last week about Star Hobson and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes. That was a very long session, very intensive and difficult. I found it a very difficult session. To be perfectly honest, many of us were not particularly satisfied with the response that



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we got from the representatives of the two local authorities in question. I want to know from you how closely you have been involved in looking at what happened there. What lessons do you think can be drawn to ensure that it never happens again, and the final question would be: do you think that there has been adequate accountability for what has happened?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** In fact, one of the reasons I took this role was because I had seen the focus and the reform spirit and how it had impacted education since I became a head teacher in 2005 and have seen the sector transformed. I was looking at that 20% of children, and particularly the most vulnerable, who we just were not able to improve through schools. I think I wanted to see—and I still want to see—the resource, the focus, the reform spirit, and the change that is needed in the children's social care sector.

We have had the Care Review, which I worked on closely with Josh MacAlister, and I have done my own work before that started. I made a set of recommendations and shared some of them with this Committee on the children's homes review. We have to accept the fact that 50% of children's social care areas are "requires improvement" or "inadequate". Some of them like Bradford, who you talked to, have been for a long time. My concern is that that needs the absolute laser-like focus of the Department for Education, children's social care services and everyone to improve that.

If a children's social care area is inadequate it means that children are not safe, so just think about that in terms of the size of the issue. We need to be doing everything to support. I have seen some of the best leaders, professionals and colleagues working in children's social care. We need to really support them with a reform programme where there is strong accountability, so that everyone can be as good as the best.

I have been to Leeds. I have been to outstanding, multiple outstanding ones. I was very involved and close to, with the deaths of Arthur and Star, calling for change. I have obviously looked at the recommendations there. Again, I would say to you that recommendations are great. We had the Munro report years ago. It is 20 years since my role was set up with the terrible death that caused that set-up, and the same thing is happening. So, again, a set of recommendations. Multi-agency working is fine, but how are we going to put these into practice, really improve these areas and support the social workers and create systems as good as the best so that this does not happen anymore?

What I have done is push the Secretary of State and the Department for Education on setting up an implementation board for the recommendations, following both the national review of Arthur's death and the Care Review. I am really pleased to say that has now been formed. I said that the people on it should be system leaders who have delivered outstanding and very good, time and time again. They should be there as a board pushing through the Department on the



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recommendations to do just what I have said: a laser-like focus on improvement, resource, support and not turning away, looking at children's social care to get it better. I have loads of things I could tell you about how to do it but it would take at least three hours.

**Q92 Tom Hunt:** It is good to see that you have been as intensely involved in it as you have been. I appreciate that 50% of services are in the place they are in.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Judged by Ofsted, yes.

**Tom Hunt:** Fifty per cent judged by Ofsted, which is deeply concerning. I also appreciate that some colleagues have said there have been some issues with funding and it has been a difficult environment for social workers. However, at the same time, many of us on this Committee find it very difficult to sit, as we did last week, through a very difficult session, where we can see a chief executive of Bradford Council—what happened there was after years of failure. That was judged as inadequate many years ago. She said she was intricately involved in trying to turn it around and failed. That is what failure looks like. She is still in place on the salary she is on.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** That is absolutely wrong. First, the thing I have spoken out about the most is we must not turn our faces away from these deaths. You have not, you have gone deep into it. What is the one lesson we have learned? We have known it for years; we must listen to children. I have read those reports in depth and the harrowing evidence—I will never forget Arthur Labinjo-Hughes' voice saying, "Nobody loves me, nobody is listening to me". That will be with me for the rest of my life, and with all of us.

We must listen to children but then we must focus on implementation. Some areas are doing this really well, we should be spreading that practice and not allowing areas to stay unsupported. We need to challenge everyone from the Department for Education right through to do their job and hold accountability for the children properly.

**Q93 Tom Hunt:** I understand that is the most important thing. There are some big structural changes that we must confront. The solution to ensure this never happens again or the tragedies never happen again is not to go around sacking people, however I stand by what I said with regards to it. It is difficult for me to see us getting to a better place if we have a system where we allow that kind of failure to happen and then the individuals most responsible for it not to be held accountable. That is what seems to have happened with that chief executive and also the two social workers at Solihull who were in the prime position to have prevented what happened to Arthur. We saw catastrophic misjudgments made by those two individuals, yet when I asked the chief executive, "Would you happy for them to work with vulnerable people again?" he said, "Yes". I find that extraordinary.



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I want to make it absolutely clear the answer to making sure that this does not happen again, the answer to making sure that 50% of children's services aren't inadequate is much bigger than just going around and getting rid of a few rotten apples. They are just a few rotten apples. I appreciate that most people who work in children's services do a great job. I struggle with it, and I know that is more of an opinion than it is a question.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Your accountability is a strong one. Particularly we need to look at how leaders are managing their social workforces well. When I see it done the best you have social workers out listening to children, acting when they need to, with managers who are having the proper conversations, supporting social workers to do that on the frontline, not worrying about is this the threshold, is this whatever, and leaders who are setting a tone of no blame but you must speak us, we must act.

There have been moves, but for me it is just not quick enough. It is a culture right the way through in some places. There are excellent as well.

Q94 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Rachel. I wanted to pick up on this panacea of children and parents sitting around the table eating breakfast, because we know that is not the case for a lot of children and we know there are that increasing numbers of children going into care. I was concerned to hear on the radio this morning how children as young as 11 are being placed in budget hotels, Airbnb's without any support.

What work do you think needs to happen in supporting parents to prevent that happening in the first place?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** To support children going into care because of financial issues and worries about money, yes?

We have seen a big increase in children, and particularly older children, going into care, often with no—and this is one of the things that is worrying me—intervention before then. I need to look at it but I would like to track the reasons for that and see if it is a cost—because it does ring true. There is a piece of work for me to do there.

What does need to happen? In our child social care paper that we talked about the last time we were here, what did children tell us that they need? They need stable adults in their lives, they absolutely value family, and they need the support around them when they need it, particularly in vulnerable families, whether that is mental health support, breakfast or whatever. I am very pleased to see the emergence, and the strong emergence in many areas, from Salford right the way through our visitor family hubs, that are reaching out and trying to get early support in to deal with things like parents' debts, worries about money and to do that in a respectful and positive way that helps keep families together.

To your point about children under 16 in unregulated, that is not legal now. Any child under 18 should be cared for and for me that is critical.



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We have put a range of policy proposals together about that and shared them with this Committee previously.

**Q95 Kim Johnson:** I commend the work that you have done in speaking with young children, 500,000. Last week we had the opportunity of speaking with some pupils from Everton preschool in my constituency and one year 9 pupil talked about their concern about the cost of living and increasing poverty. Yesterday, *The Guardian* published findings of an IFS report about the impact on lone-parent families and how they say that is linked to the reduction of benefits over the last 12 years. What impact do think austerity has on the educational attainment and the mental wellbeing of children? As the Children's Commissioner, what have you done, or are going to do, to look at addressing some of those issues?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** First of all, it was great to see Everton preschool, and indeed the whole of Liverpool, it was great to see the Alder Hey, to talk to 11 schools and particularly to talk to the Everton preschool kids who were great. Thank you for having us.

When we did the Big Ask it was interesting to me that cost of living—I could not see answers from children around poverty being a barrier. I thought this was strange because I expected to see that. When I looked into it and we looked really deeply into it—we had 250,000 text responses—what came across was that children were talking about that far more in relation to their parents. What children talked about was mum's job, dad's job, not being able to buy things and there was quite a profound strand in there on that and also their hopes for their own futures, that they would have enough money to buy the things they needed.

As one of our nine policy papers coming out of the Big Ask to influence the SR, one of them was on poverty and the cost of living. We had a range of asks and I went to the Treasury and went right across the Departments asking for them and they included breakfasts. We fought hard for the UC uplift to be retained for families with children because we felt that was an important place to put money. There was a range of asks there.

Doing the family review, we have been out talking again to parents and children and this time it is far clearer. There is a real concern coming now from children themselves about the cost of living. They are hearing it; they are talking about it. One of the things I called for in my first paper was a strategy to address child poverty or the cost of living for families with children. I still call for that.

When I looked at the Chancellor's recent intervention, giving money to all families, it was welcome but I could not see children in his statement. My plea would be to ensure that we have children and families with children strategised properly in Government so we have a proper plan. I suspect, though I am no economist, that this issue is going to get worse into the autumn.



Q96 **Kim Johnson:** Thank you for sharing that, Rachel. Were you surprised when the Chancellor failed to recognise the need to put children and families at the—

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** As I say, I was pleased about the money but I would have liked to have seen children mentioned. We have written to and engaged with the Treasury on this issue.

**Kim Johnson:** Maybe our Committee could do the same. Thank you, Rachel. Thank you, Chair.

Q97 **Caroline Ansell:** I want to touch on something that does represent a very significant Government investment, that is a targeted strategy that could speak to levelling up as well as catching up and attendance at that big September return. As a teacher myself, September is still a mountain to climb in the imagination. That is the holiday activity and food programme, which is still just in year 2. We were very pleased when we met on Eastbourne beach with Buzz Active and one of our stellar activity camps, talking very much around this being able to bridge some of that holiday time. Perhaps one of the things that is not recognised is that while schools are increasingly providing those same opportunities for learning and advancement, it is what happens in the holidays where that enriching, inspiring and motivational experiences are so unequal.

I have been a passionate supporter of the holiday food activity programme. It is early days but what is your assessment of what this Government investment can do and how far it can reach?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I called for the holiday and food programme to be extended and I am really pleased it was. I have made it my business to get around as many as possible, including Eastbourne beach. I have been in parks in Sheffield, I have been all over the place.

One of the smart things about the holiday and food programme is it engages all those community groups who are just waiting to do those activities with children that they love, whether it is surfing, whether it is drama or whatever. One of the things I have asked for is an analysis on—because I think it would make our case stronger—whether attending holiday and food clubs actually impacts on attendance and achievement the rest of the year round. I think that would be powerful data indeed. That is something we are definitely looking at.

The early signs have been encouraging. I am going to be attending them all summer, I attended some at Christmas and I think they are great. Children tell us they love them too and so do families. There are so many different varieties. I have, again, been talking to local authorities and schools about this, could we use the school estate, particularly in big cities, as places where groups could put these on because they are safe. Finding safe places is very important.

Q98 **Caroline Ansell:** Part of the attraction is being out of school. Certainly the beach and the arthouse I should mention too, being in those new



settings.

Do you feel that it is reaching those on whom it is focused in terms of the cohort coming forward?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** This, again, is where services working together could help schools and the groups working even more closely together. There has been good attendance on some, the attendance could be better and we could reach more children that is why I wanted schools and LAs to work together to make sure those children get the offer of the place.

Q99 **Caroline Ansell:** To build the evidence base to substantiate this investment, what measures are there around quality? Not that we want to bring in an inspection regime, but how can we ensure that they are real quality learning experiences up and down? In those I have visited I have been hugely impressed by the relationship building, the confidence building, the new skills and all the above. How do we ensure that is the case?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** The hard data, the proxy has to be attendance. Attendance at it. Then I was talking about looking at the impact on engagement, for the rest of the year. We could do a simple national feedback from the young people who attend them and from their parents, which would be quite useful to give us qual data as to how users think it has gone.

Q100 **Caroline Ansell:** My groups have sought that feedback and have fed back to the county council. Is that the intel and insight that will come your way?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Exactly. I have been talking to some of the groups, particularly down on your coast who are offering these things. We went on a couple of visits about could they model that and share it with the Department. I would like to see some national feedback on it and I think that will mean us asking the same questions in the same way.

You had a very switched-on group in Eastbourne so it would be good to look at what they have done.

**Caroline Ansell:** Fantastic. Thank you very much for that. It is a substantial investment; it is really important we know it is making a huge difference. Thank you.

Q101 **Ian Mearns:** Good morning, it is nice to see you again. You have been in post now as Children's Commissioner since March last year. What have been your main priorities and why? What has been your proudest achievement since you have been in post so far?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** My main priorities are set by the children. All the things I thought of, I had to take a second look at after we had done The Big Ask. The first thing I did when I came into post was do the national survey. It was a unique time; children were coming out of lockdown literally. We opened our survey for six weeks, as they came out



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of lockdown until the end of May. We asked the children what their barriers were to thriving and what they wanted to achieve for their futures. I couldn't resist that. Out of that came the themes around which my business plan is set.

While I was doing the survey, it was wonderful watching setting after setting doing it online, they would post their pictures and you were seeing it all going on around the country. We made sure that we went to YOIs, we went to mental health secure units, you name it we went there, care councils, we made sure we reached every child with our network, as well as a big thanks to the schools who really took it on.

What did they tell us? The good thing is they told us that 80% of them are happy or okay. I think that is really important and it shows how resilient and brilliant those children have been after what they have been through. One in five were seriously concerned about mental health and wellbeing and they talked about education, life at school and education being critical and the need for support. We had 94,000 children with SEND respond and talk about how they want to work hard, they want to do well but they need more support in school. Education was a key thing that came through. Skills and work.

As I went around the country—and I went everywhere from Gateshead to Bristol to Manchester to wherever—I met the next two Prime Ministers, I met the kids with big ambitions for university but I also met a huge cohort, and it is reflected in the survey, of children wanting to know how to get a good job, how to get a career, how to get an apprenticeship. We have focused on particularly looking at girls in maths, that has been a big thing that has come up because girls are talking to us about wanting engineering or good-paying careers, so how do we do it? I have worked with some of our local MPs, some of our best maths heads, to look at girls in maths careers.

We also look particularly at children in care. I think I have fed back to you the feedback that came from The Big Ask on that. Children in care want the same thing as every other child. We also talked to children who were arriving at the Kent intake units, staying in the hotels in Kent and we have just been to the hotels in Luton. We have talked to children from every setting.

They gave us seven big themes. The seven big themes are now laid out as my business plan. They are going to guide my strategy over three years and when I have to make a decision about what comes in and what stays out, we are using those seven themes and what the children have told us to help shape that and make those decisions.

You were asking me what we had achieved that I was proudest of. For me the attendance work because it was so thorough going and we used everything from, "Do we know how many children there are in this country" right through to finding the children. Our online harms work has been really strong. With the online harms work, we have basically taken



children's voices and seen it right through the Bill and will continue to see it right through the Bill's passage. That child safety issue in the online world is massive. We have done a lot there. Our mental health work, both on the CAMHS side—we published our big report on the state of children's mental health—and on the wellbeing side. We have worked with everyone from challenging Ministers, Jeremy Hunt and the Health Select Committee, been to every children's hospital, looked at the backlogs in paediatric areas with ASD and sat in on some ASD diagnoses to try to understand what is happening there. We have come up with some real solutions and we are starting to see those be implemented, both on the school side and the CAMHS side, which needs not ships moving around the deck but a real rebuild.

A range of areas there; I have probably missed some—

**Q102 Ian Mearns:** Are you confident that in the responses from The Big Ask survey you have managed to reach the children that all other surveys could not reach. You have talked about different settings that you have been to but in terms of the general population of youngsters, are you absolutely confident that you have got the responses from the most deprived kids from the most deprived backgrounds who do not have mobile phones, who possibly still do not have access to communications technology in the home because they do not have wi-fi?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** That is exactly the question I challenged my research team with. We have no fewer than 3% of children's responses between four and 18 from every local authority area. We have 6% of the age cohort nationally. We have it by postcode, we use the ONS data so we can understand the range. It is an excellent survey in its coverage. We literally took the questionnaire printed off into every YOI and received responses from all of them, into secure mental health wards where they could not do it online and collected them. We have gone through care councils, DCSs right across the country. We have been into children's homes. We have been out and spoken to thousands of students and we have done hundreds and hundreds of personal visits as well to make sure we can answer that question in the affirmative.

If you look at The Big Ask, we have 2,800 Gypsy Roma students—we can cut the data by every region, and we can cut the data on every answer. Nothing is perfect but it is the biggest survey response ever done in England and second only in the world to the US census. My data people have been all over it to make sure it is representative.

**Q103 Ian Mearns:** One of the fundamental questions is, and I think it is laudable and to be applauded that you have done this work, should it have been necessary for the Children's Commissioner to do that level of work in the first place? Is that not the job of the DfE to be collecting that data about the children's population? They are the Department that looks after children, not only throughout their entire school life but also for managing children's services.



**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Great question. Some of the work we do does get adopted by the DfE. Our stability index has been adopted by the DfE because they have now realised to measure children's social care stability is absolutely a key indicator. They have looked at how to do that from us.

If you look at my responsibilities in relation to the UNCRC, listening to children is key. This is a fundamental part of my job. We rather over manifested in size but I will always do that work. What I am happy about is that Government Departments are now seeing the Children's Commissioner's office as a repository of knowledge about children and come to us to ask us either to do new research or to give them data from the Big Ask to inform policy. That is one of the key ways we can make our policymaking better.

**Chair:** Please be as concise as you can as we have further questions.

Q104 **Ian Mearns:** The other question coming out of that is, in terms of the responses you got, particularly about what children want for themselves, did you get any significant, massive variations when it comes to poverty of aspiration, for instance? I will give you an example. I was talking to a head teacher in my own authority, no names no pack drill, who was very concerned at what he saw coming from girls within his school establishment in where they wanted to be in five, 10 years. He used the term "poverty of aspiration" particularly among girls.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** We saw quite an ambitious—within children's own definitions—generation. It was a generation that did have real desires, in the privacy of doing their own thing, for their own futures. They were very much their own desires. In a lot of responses there was a real concern about opportunities and a concern about lack of knowledge. How do we know? We want to know more about adult life, we want to know more about careers and such.

On the girls' issue, in the mental wellbeing, mental health we saw older teenage girls hugely impacted. There is definitely an online link to that. Where younger children were definitely seeing mental wellbeing as an issue it was 14 year-old to 17 year-old girls, and particularly 16 year-old to 17 year-old girls, where 40% of them were concerned about their mental wellbeing. There is a real link there.

Q105 **Ian Mearns:** In one of your earlier answers you talked about the importance of PSHE, but PSHE, as you will know, has been severely squeezed within the curriculum in many schools. In answer to Caroline's questions earlier on about obesity, we have also seen other subjects being squeezed, like what used to be called domestic science—home economics, food technology—which is also about not just coping and managing but about healthy eating as well. They have all been squeezed out because of the drive towards the knowledge-based curriculum that we have.



**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Yet, the thing that children talked to me the most about—one of the key themes—was PSHE RSE being better so they could learn about their futures, how to keep themselves healthy, how to keep themselves safe.

One of the things in my business plan this year is to do a review of RSE—I did teach it myself so I have a particular passion that this is done well—and the Secretary of State has just written to me to ask me if I would do it. I was doing it anyway so that is even better. I want to go out and see it is taught, see the materials that are used to teach it and have a look at that because I think it is a critical subject and we have heard it around the room today.

Q106 **Ian Mearns:** You have come from the background of being a high-profile head teacher and head of an academy trust, you have thrown yourself into the role, have you found it a steep learning curve?

**Chair:** In a nutshell, if you can because we have to get on.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I was very experienced in one public sector area so that was helpful, but what I have just done is make it my absolute business to be in front of every Minister, have roundtables with the key practitioners, and go see for myself the services. I don't think I could have done more in making sure I understood and listened to all of the sectors around children and children themselves. We have worked at it. That is now very exciting for me because we can do some good policy work now that starts to join these things up and support the child.

Q107 **Ian Mearns:** You have also just been appointed as a director of the School-Led Development Trust running the National Institute for Teaching. Are there any potential conflicts of interest there? Are you at all concerned that in accepting that role it will distract from your important work on behalf of the nation's children as Children's Commissioner?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** When I took this role I gave up all of my directorships and trusteeships. The only one I have taken up other than that is with the National Crime Agency for children's protection and safeguarding around online harms.

The reason I have said yes to this—and I have carefully examined and talked to the Department everywhere about the conflict of interest issue, and if there was a conflict of issue I would get myself out of there, no question—one of the key things children talk to us about was school, life at school, teaching. Some of the things you are raising are about a certain type of rigid curriculum not suiting them. I was approached to do this by the team there, the chair there, and I was thinking, "I could bring inclusion, children's voice, SEND and the qualitative teaching around those issues to that". If it does not work I would step away but that is what I tried to do it for. It fits with the business plan.

Q108 **Caroline Ansell:** My ears pricked up when you talked about children and their talk of their prospects and job opportunities. One of the things that



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we heard in an earlier inquiry was about a dearth of work experience places. As the repository of knowledge, what are our children and young people saying about work experience?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Coming out of lockdown, which is when I surveyed them, they were extremely concerned that they had not had the work experience or internships they needed to progress to their next courses. I have a plea—and I am going to be tracking this with businesses and schools—to all businesses and public services to get children back. They need that real-life work experience. If anything, I would like the curriculum to have more real-work experience in it and opportunities to do it because there are groups of our children for whom that is highly motivational and they are the paths in life they want.

Even our medics, potential medics and vets are just not getting the work experience they need. I need to check back in and make sure that is on track. That is very much on our agenda this year.

Q109 **Miriam Cates:** Good morning, Rachel. I enjoyed reading *The Big Ask*; there were some interesting findings in there such as the fact that most children are happy, most children enjoy their family life is very important to recognise and we need to be careful not to catastrophise. Having said that, mental health is clearly a bit issue. One in six children now has a diagnosable mental health disorder. What I thought was interesting was that after mental health, the second biggest cause of unhappiness was a lack of things to do in the local area for teenagers. Do you think those two things are linked?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Yes, and I would put the online world in the middle of those as well. Straightforwardly, we are seeing—and I have been to every children's hospital and a range of settings and we are looking at the NHS data—a real increase that the NHS and professionals are telling me is Covid-linked. It is linked to isolation, being out of school and related issues.

You are absolutely right, and it was a surprise to me that it came so high up—the number one word in *The Big Ask* was play. Children from four right through to 18 wanted sustainable, safe places to go. Nobody asked to build a new shopping mall, they wanted places to do cricket competitions, sport, safe places to play, libraries, things to do. That is why we have made that one of our big policies asks to the SR and we were pleased to see that 500 million for new youth clubs. I have seen some of the best practice in youth clubs as well.

We all know the great things that the internet provides for children and we want them to have access to that, but I think there are some real issues everywhere I go from children and young people about harms around the online world. We must do more around that. It is an absolute source of unhappiness and we know that.

Q110 **Miriam Cates:** Thank you, I will come on that in a little bit. To push into



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this idea of play, which is very important, I do know if you read a book called "The Coddling of the American Mind"? In it, the authors link a lack of unsupervised play, a lack of ability to take good appropriate physical risks, to build relationships and work out fights and arguments without an adult presence and then almost catastrophic anxiety among children when they become young adults. Do you recognise that link? As well as we need to do more to treat mental health problems, should we be doing much more to prevent them by reinforcing this idea of free play and unsupervised play in younger years?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Yes, younger years and older years. In our policy papers and in our work on preventing or early pick up of mental health issues, absolutely it is good relationships with a small number of peers that is incredibly preventative against mental health problems 10 years later does not need to be—Sarah Jane Blakemore and the Oxford neuroscientists have the data on that. They are unequivocal that those relationships formed through play or doing activities together are critical and that is why I want the extended day.

We talk about it as the extended day but it is also a safe place to go out and do sport, do drama, play. Social norms have changed vastly with younger children so whereas I certainly remember being put out the door at nine with my three brothers, I would come home for lunch and come home again for tea, I do not think that is the world we live in anymore but we do need to recognise the need for free play.

Q111 **Miriam Cates:** Brilliant, thank you. Moving on to RSE, really pleased that you are looking into that and that the Secretary of State has asked you to do that as well. As you know, I had a debate in Parliament last week where I spoke about some of the resources that are being used in RSE. Of course not in all schools, of course many, many schools are doing a good job.

One of the things that concerns me is the introduction of adult ideas about sex, but about other things as well, too early for children when they are not developmentally able to process it. The analogy I have used is you do not start teaching maths to four year-olds with quadratic equations. There is nothing wrong with quadratic equations but you start very, very basically and you are led by the developmental age of the child. I am overwhelmed by the number of people who have written to me since the debate last week with things like, for example, a nine year-old coming home shaking, white as a sheet, because they had been taught in detail about rape.

Of course at some point children need to know the reality of the world we live in and to be taught how to keep themselves safe, consent and so on. What are your thoughts about the understanding of age appropriateness that we now have in society and is it damaging children?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Age appropriateness is critical when we are working on any issues with children. I have particularly looked at it so far with the online world. Eight year-olds or nine year-olds coming across



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pornography, how do you speak to them about that? You have to do it in an age-appropriate way, which is, "That is not real, that is dah, dah, dah". Your point is well made. I am looking forward to going out and looking at how RSE is taught in the country, what works well and what is not working well.

You gave some horrendous examples and one of the things I thought about when I read your speech was head teachers and trust leaders often talk to me about they are worried about teaching well in this area and therefore outsourcing it solves the problem. We need to look at that. We need to look at that because children tell me they want to know about adult life, they want to know about relationships, they want good information and I know that is the family's job but school has a role here too.

The curriculum on paper is great. What we need to do is make sure it is age-appropriate, it is thoughtful and they want to hear from them because they trust their teachers. We need to make sure teachers are equipped to do this well, leaders are equipped to get the ethos right to make good decisions about doing this well.

I was shocked by your examples and I am going to be looking at it.

Q112 **Miriam Cates:** Finally, Covid has, as you say, had an unbelievably negative impact on children in so many ways, do you think that the Government—by which I mean everybody in positions of authority, whether that is elected, unelected, leaders of health services and so on—do you think we value children enough as a society?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** If there is one thing we should learn from the experience of Covid and the lockdown, everybody probably thought they were caring for everybody, and that is why I try not to throw—all the decisions made, I am sure, were done with the best of intentions. What we have learnt subsequently is that we should have looked closer at the issue around children and we should have put children at the centre of our thinking, right down to I would have loved to have seen and urged—and I want to see more—children at those press conferences asking questions. There were ways of doing it that are just thoughtful. We could have done more.

It has exposed a massive issue about services and all of us not thinking about children and children in families in a central way. We need to do that.

Q113 **Chair:** RSE obviously comes under PSHE, so are you looking at PSHE in general or are you just looking at RSE?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Yes, the Secretary of State has asked me to look at RSE but I already had in my business plan—what he has done is he has given me an independent commission to look at RSE, which is a useful way as independent Children's Commissioner to feedback straightforwardly. However, my interest is wider. I am interested in the



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whole PSHE piece, to Caroline's point about health and the health issues, but also I am very interested in careers, learning about adult life. I cannot tell you the number of children who talk to me about—

Q114 **Chair:** Are you going to report back just on the RSE part of PSHE?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I need to report back to the Secretary of State of RSE but the piece of work I am doing will report back on the wider issue.

**Chair:** The whole thing, because I think it is all combined.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I agree.

Q115 **Chair:** When are you going to report back? What is the timeline for this?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** We have started some initial work, we will be doing it more fully in September, so before year-end I would say.

Q116 **Anna Firth:** One of the advantages of being tail-end Charlie is that a lot of the points have already been made.

**Chair:** You are not completely that because Tom has some questions on special needs.

**Anna Firth:** Rachel, can I say how lovely it is to hear your passion and positivity? I have agreed with an awful lot of what you have been saying. I want to underline for the record that you are absolutely right to say that schools are in many cases a safe haven, a place of safety for children, and that we must never have complete school closures again.

I hesitate to say save in the most exceptional circumstances because it is difficult to see what those exceptional circumstances could be, given that schools were not even closed during the Second World War. I would be grateful to hear your confirmation once again on this.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** The first thing I would want to say in response is to thank all the teachers, head teachers and workers in schools who did keep schools open for the most vulnerable. I was in a school every day during lockdown in Cromer, right until March when I started this role. My 50+ year-old TAs were saying, "Can we come in and help the children?" The problem was that only a few of them came in. Looking back now, I remember having absolute dread at the thought of closing schools. I think back to before the Second World War and think to the turn of the 20th century when the first Education Act came in and brought in compulsory education. Everything in me would not want to close schools and I cannot think—apart from the greatest catastrophe, the obliteration of the country—why we would close schools.

Q117 **Anna Firth:** Thank you, because it is important that we learn these lessons and keep reiterating these points.

Obviously we want to protect children who are not in school and those who are on roll but not attending school. You have talked about the very



sad case of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, who of course was in school prior to the lockdown, although his murder was during the lockdown, and concerns were raised at his school. One of the things that the Secretary of State for Education said in a speech on Friday is that he wonders whether we should have social workers based in schools in order to achieve a more joined-up practice between the children's services and schools for vulnerable children. What are your thoughts on that?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I visited schools in Harrow and looked at their social workers in schools programme. I think it is excellent and a good use of money. I have also pushed hard for schools to become full partners in local safeguarding boards so they understand and are brought into the responsibilities in this area. They do a great job but I think they should be full partners there.

Q118 **Anna Firth:** I am rushing slightly because of the time; my next point is: what about children who are not in school? It is a very good move that we are going to bring in a register for these children, which local authorities are going to administer. They are the best people to do this work. How do you see us engaging meaningfully with these families because we cannot say if you are home educating that is bad, those children may be getting an excellent educational experience? How can we engage with this cohort in a meaningful way, which is going to help us to pick up those that need our intervention but leave well alone those who are doing a brilliant job?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Absolutely. I would just say it is a parent's right to home educate and there are excellent examples of high-quality education at home, that is not the place I am looking. I do think we do need a register but I am most worried about children who have been taken out for some odd reason or children missing from education completely. I was horrified to go to one county and be shown a list of children who were on nobody's roll. Didn't have NHS numbers or anything. There is a group of children I am very, very concerned about. When I ask local authorities, one of our largest cities told me they only had three children missing from education, whereas one of our inner London borough councils could tell me 770 and get it exactly right.

There is something about keeping excellent data. If there is one lesson from my attendance work about what is important it is good systems and systems that talk to each other. I favour a unique identifier being brought in so we use the same number for a child's school, a child's NHS—

**Ian Mearns:** We had one.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Yes. I think that needs to happen.

Q119 **Anna Firth:** It is not just people having a number. It is how you actively encourage them to be visible, to come to some sort of annual event where you can engage with these families, not in a threatening way but in a positive way.



**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Baseline, we need to know who our children are, where they are, so I agree with that bit. We need to clarify and support what LAs do about attendance and these issues so they can go out and do that outreach or enable schools to do it. Of course, we need to look at what is happening and support those children and families. When we did our research for the attendance work we found too many children sitting at home, who were just disengaged. We could have them back in.

Q120 **Anna Firth:** I would like to talk about online harm. You have had a lot of involvement with the Online Harms Bill and you will know that the Department of Culture, Media and Sport's impact assessment has referred to research showing that in 2020 there were 22 million reports of child sexual abuse online. That is an increase of 28% since 2019. That is a shocking figure. We also know from their impact assessment that 51% of children aged 11-13 have seen pornography, most of it unintentional, and one in five children aged 10-15 years in England and Wales have experienced at least one type of online bullying behaviour. I am interested to hear your thoughts on whether the Online Safety Bill is sufficient to tackle these very pressing issues for children.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** The data you gave reflects what we have discovered from the work we have been doing. Following Everyone's Invited, the Government commissioned us to look at keeping children safer online, which is why I have engaged so fulsomely with the Online Safety Bill with DCMS and gone out and done my own research too. We did a key piece of work with 16-21 year-olds, asking them what they wish their parents had known. They talked about how boys particularly are stumbling across pornography very young. They wished for not allowing underage children online and making sure the companies do deal with that and for proper age verification, particularly on porn sites that are now completely open so anyone can get on them. Pornography goes across onto social media and we know the rest.

I have heard harrowing testimony. A young girl in that group talked about going to have her first kiss with her new boyfriend. He put his hands round her throat and tried to strangle her because he had seen it in pornography online. Now she has lived to tell the tale and looks back on it but kids are facing some extreme things.

Q121 **Anna Firth:** The question is, is it sufficient?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I was pleased to see the adult companies brought into scope in the Online Safety Bill. That was critical. I was very pleased to see that was in there. I would push further on age verification. DCMS and the Minister know I want more on that. We are seeing movement. I am pleased to see some of the other key issues we would be interested in such as work around eating disorders and how that is pushed online starting to come in and to be looked at in the secondary phase of the Bill. Overall, we need to get this Bill through.

Q122 **Anna Firth:** My final point comes back to the sad cases of Arthur



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Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson. We heard evidence last week from two chief executives. You will remember clearly the case of Victoria Climbié and the absolute outrage at that case and the Every Child Matters policy that followed it. You will remember Baby P in Haringey and Sharon Shoemith who was sacked by Ed Balls at that stage in 2008. Do you think that in all the circumstances it is right for two chief executives who are earning in the region of £250,000 a piece to still be in post?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** In the Arthur case it is a different chief executive, is it not? I thought so, but I am not sure.

**Anna Firth:** No, I am afraid it is not.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I might be wrong there but I think there needs to be strong accountability at the Department for Education in the local areas and social care. I want to see a change from that accountability. What we need to do for Arthur and Star is to never let this happen again, and the way we do that is through change at all those levels. My place as Children's Commissioner is to suggest those changes and policies and push hard, which is what I am doing.

Q123 **Chair:** On online harms and before I come to Tom, I have been meeting children in schools and some of them have said to me they were on TikTok and they wish they were not but they cannot stop it. It was almost like a Drug Addicts Anonymous group and so on, kids in anguish that they cannot get themselves off these social media sites. Geoff Barton of the Association of Schools and Colleges said TikTok will not remove videos when awful stuff is put on about teachers and support staff. We know TikTok has videos that are quite harmful.

You talk about age verification. Parents know what Pornhub and those kinds of organisations are and they are more aware, but most people of our generation, dare I say, think these social media sites are pretty harmless. I think TikTok is a Trojan horse whereby on the surface it acts as a regular social media platform but underneath is a sordid underbelly of abuse and inappropriate sexual content. I think it is one of the worst of the lot of them. I may be wrong. They all have faults.

Do you think there should be a levy on these social media companies that would then be used to fund mental health resilience for children and also proper awareness on how to use these sites properly? To be fair to Google, for example, I went to a school in my constituency and saw Google educating the kids on how to use Google properly and the internet. Do you think that would be worthwhile considering?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Thank you for the work you are doing with children in this area. I think a levy is the least we should ask of them. As part of my commission to keep children safe online, I met with the adult companies and the big eight tech companies and with Ministers from Education and DCMS. I asked the companies to take down underage children—I do not know how many underage children they have on their site—and why they cannot put better age verification in place and a range



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of questions. They pledged to meet with me every six months and they have done it, to supply information and be helpful. I invite you to come and speak to them, to put this idea to them. I think it is the least we should ask of them. I intend to carry on those six-monthly meetings as long as my tenure lasts because I want to hold them to account.

I think you are right. Giving children unlimited access to social media is putting something in their hands that is as powerful as alcohol or drugs. It is a dopamine hit and they cannot manage it. We need to educate adults, parents, teachers, everyone around this and we particularly need to hold social media companies to account.

Q124 **Tom Hunt:** I am very vocal on special education needs. What are your thoughts about the SEND Green Paper?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** When I came into post there was an initial iteration of the SEND Green Paper and I read it and spoke to the Secretary of State and said I could not support it and it needed to go back. I am sure I was not the only voice but I was quite strong on that. To his credit, there was a reset during summer and then we worked very hard on trying to make that Green Paper better and now I do think it is one of the better papers of the current suite of papers around children coming out.

There are some things I like very much in it. The idea of a national system is good. The idea of being clear about schools and inclusion being where children should have their needs met, and making sure teaching and schools are set up to be inclusive is strong. I like the idea of clarity around tariffs. There is a range of things that are good. There are some even better ifs. One of our problems is it is a paper that is good for setting out what the system should look like in the future, for what we move to, but if you are a parent with a SEND child you want help and support now. That is where we need to do more.

As part of the publication of the SEND Green Paper we published our review of EHCPs. We reviewed them across a number of areas and found there was huge variation, some of them so long a child could never read them. I would like to see digitised, child-friendly, time-bound and specific EHCPs sorted as quickly as possible, also making sure all the information is given in child-friendly language. That is a Children's Commissioner thing.

Q125 **Tom Hunt:** What about the initial iteration of the review that you could not support? What made you feel you could not support it?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** It needed to be written for and from the perspective of children and their families. I felt it was more written as system policy as opposed to trying to address what children and families need.

Q126 **Tom Hunt:** Like a lot of colleagues, I receive lots of e-mails from constituents trying to get places for their children often at special schools.



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I realise special schools are not always the answer. You must have good provision support for SEND within mainstream if that is possible but some special schools will be the option. I am also an associate governor at a new special school in Ipswich that has getting towards 80 pupils, which is more than it was originally meant to have, so it is stretched being 70 or 80, but there are still more than 100 people still trying to get in. We have another special school on the way, which is good news, but it still does not appear to be enough. There has been an increase in funding for SEND spaces, but do you think it is enough? My experience from my casework and my visits would be that it is probably not.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** In my attendance work I spoke to so many children who were staying at home because they felt they were not assessed quickly enough. That is one thing that needs sorting out now. We need to make sure those needs are assessed and quickly.

I was pleased to see the money going into capital money for special spaces. I have been around and looked at special SEND facilities round the country. I think those new specialist provisions need to be built in collaboratively in families at schools and that will be the way to move forward, and definitely in local authority areas, so we get the partnerships around the schools and special schools working really well.

Q127 **Tom Hunt:** Moving on from SEND funding nationally to the regional disparity in SEND funding, you were a teacher in Norfolk, were you not?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** In Norfolk and then Norfolk and Suffolk.

Q128 **Tom Hunt:** You will be aware that historically, Suffolk schools had not the best deal when it comes to fair funding. My view is it does not matter where you are in the country, every young person is entitled to the same funding. how can I explain to a young child in Ipswich, particularly vulnerable young children, why I have less investment and money attached to them than a child in another area? It is not just a comparison with London. We are also getting less funding per head than Essex and Norfolk. I found it difficult to get hold of the detail. From written questions and letters I have been trying to get, comparisons between SEND funding per head for people and I cannot get the data.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I am very supportive of fair funding protocols so that the families you represent, and their children, get the funding they should get and is fair that they get.

One thing the Green Paper will sort out in terms of per head SEND funding is bringing greater transparency and holding the people who hold the budgets to account. There will be clarity in tariffs but also not allowing higher-needs budgets to be taken elsewhere in councils rather than being spent on SEND. There are some good things there but there is a long way to go. It is tricky.

Q129 **Tom Hunt:** You have a Member of Parliament tabling repeated written questions to try to get information. There should be a comparison. We



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should be able to compare young people with SEND in Hampshire and Suffolk and know what is the funding per head. Only then can we make a comparison. I talk to teachers and I have seen some data from academy and trust heads and head teachers and for some reason, we have become used to schools in places like Norfolk and Suffolk being underfunded compared with London and there are some valid points about salaries. There are some points that are vaguely plausible but not completely plausible. I still do not really understand it. When you have pupils from Suffolk getting less per head than Norfolk and Essex it makes absolutely no sense at all.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** We have been talking about reform in the areas of SEND and in children's social care. A good foundational issue to solve would be around transparency around things like funding. There is so much confusion and it is hard to see. I agree with you on that. I think the idea of the tariffs is sensible. There are arguments for and against, but at least it will give clarity to families and people working in the area.

**Chair:** Ian Mearns has a supplementary on this.

Q130 **Ian Mearns:** It is about the SEND Green Paper. This Committee produced a report on special educational needs in 2019 that was very well received by the field and that had many decent recommendations within it for the Government to act on. Is a Green Paper at this stage, after a report of that nature only three years ago, just kicking the can down the road?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I hope not.

**Ian Mearns:** To be fair, you said yourself that there were no answers in there for parents and children who have problems now.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** There is a lot that is good in the SEND Green Paper. I have made sure of it. The lead on the SEND Green Paper has also tried to consult widely. I am positive about some things in there but absolutely, it is the child on the seat now, the child in the dentist's chair. We really need to act. I read your Committee's report. Some of your recommendations around advocacy, Tom's recommendations there about funding, my view about EHCPs—there are some really good, easy wins. I am also keen to see national standards because that is what the Green Paper will be predicated on, and see them quickly. Then we can hold providers and government to account on it.

Q131 **Ian Mearns:** Will you urge the Government, if there are some low-hanging fruit there, quick, easy wins, that they should just get on with it rather than wait for the response to a consultation process?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I do, regularly and will continue to do. This is one of the major issues.

Q132 **Chair:** To clarify, you agree with our recommendation of a neutral advocate for families to navigate this awful system of bureaucracy they



have to wade through.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Yes, and there is a range of ways of doing that, depending on where the child is. I have been looking at children with SEND in very different settings and thinking about how that could work. We are certainly looking at that.

**Chair:** The Government have been reluctant on that part of it, our suggestion to implement that, the idea of a neutral advocate.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Maybe we need some conversations about how that could look because I do not think it is necessarily about creating a new workforce. It is about using what we have in different ways.

**Chair:** Existing people in the councils and schools.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Yes. There is that pragmatism when you know.

**Ian Mearns:** In terms of kicking the can down the road, this is a Green Paper we are looking at with a consultation process. This looks very much from my perspective like putting off spending decisions after an election in 2024.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I hope not. If there is one area that needs acting on it is this. Although there were delays, we have ended up with a better Green Paper that is worth fighting for and taking forward. I can see the activity in the Department. We are very engaged with the team working on this and are raising it to ministerial level regularly.

Q133 **Chair:** My final question, to end this session: when you launched your commission, you said it should have the same ambition as the Beveridge Report. The ambition of the Beveridge Report was to tackle the five giants of idleness, ignorance, disease, squalor and want on the road to post-war reconstruction. What are your five giants? If you could choose any one of these giants to slay during your time as Children's Commissioner, which would it be?

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** That is such a great question.

**Chair:** I wish I had asked it when we interviewed you.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** I will come back to saying that for me it is all about outcomes; in the end, it is delivery and outcomes for children. I want to see every single child in this country, whatever background, especially if they are from a disadvantaged background, get great opportunities for education, for a good life, for a happy life, through the seven themes that I have come up with and that is what I am judging myself on.

**Chair:** I was hoping you were going to say getting the kids back into school.

**Dame Rachel de Souza:** Definitely.



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**Chair:** Thank you so much. We have asked you about a huge number of topics and you have been really detailed. I respect the work you have been doing since you have been in post and it is appreciated, if I can speak on behalf of the Committee. I look forward to having you back. I wish you well and appreciate the way you have responded today. Thank you.