



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Education Committee

Oral evidence: Appointment of the Children's Commissioner for England, HC 1030

Tuesday 15 December 2020

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Watch the meeting

Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Fleur Anderson; Apsana Begum; Jonathan Gullis; Tom Hunt; Kim Johnson; David Johnston; Ian Mearns; David Simmonds; Christian Wakeford.

Questions 1 - 71

Witness

[I](#): Dame Rachel de Souza, Chief Executive, Inspiration Trust.

Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Add names of witnesses and hyperlink to submissions]



Examination of witness

Witnesses: Dame Rachel de Souza.

Q1 **Chair:** Good morning. I am pleased to welcome you today to our Committee, Rachel. For the benefit of the tape and those watching on the parliamentary internet, please give your name and position.

Dame Rachel de Souza: My name is Rachel de Souza. I am currently the chief executive of the Inspiration Trust, which is a group of 14 schools in East Anglia, and I have been nominated as the Secretary of State's preferred candidate for the role of Children's Commissioner.

Q2 **Chair:** Given that we now know that approximately 2.3 million children were not learning or doing less than one hour a day during the first national lockdown, what would you have done differently?

Dame Rachel de Souza: From my own perspective as a trust leader, our children were learning and our children were learning all day. They had full days of lessons. We ensured they had access to the internet and to computers, and as soon as we could get them back into school, we did. I support the current Children's Commissioner's approach of "Let's keep schools open". Had I been in government, I would have done everything I could not to close schools. We obviously have to be safe and take account of the chief medical officer's advice, but I would want them open as soon as possible. I spent every day of lockdown in school with our children.

Q3 **Chair:** Do you think expectations on remote learning are sufficient?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Again, if I start with what we have done, as soon as we saw at Inspiration Trust that the schools were going to be closed—so around about March—we gathered together and David Thomas, our principal, went off to set up Oak National Academy, and we contributed all of the history and English to that. We made sure that we planned the entire curriculum for the next few months so that pupils could access it remotely. Indeed, we have done that for this year. With expectations, we should have been clearer right from the start and clearer in terms of the support that, despite all the difficulties, we had to do this, this was our moment and we needed excellent remote learning for children. I do not underestimate how difficult that is.

Q4 **Chair:** What was your assessment of Ofsted's oversight of schools during the lockdown?

Dame Rachel de Souza: One of the questions that you will want to check from me, I have no doubt, is my ability to speak my mind, especially when I think things have not been done well. I was outspoken during the process that I would have wanted Ofsted to continue inspecting. I would have wanted it to continue inspecting remote learning, and if it did not, I would want to see the HMIs in schools teaching in the toughest areas. I am absolutely clear about that.



Q5 Chair: What would you have said that needed to be done during the lockdown? What would you have said publicly? We know that the current Children's Commissioner campaigned quite a bit during the national lockdown in terms of trying to get the schools open and get the kids learning and also get computers, trying to address the digital divide as well as safeguarding issues.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think publicly I would have said exactly what I have said to you: that it is essential and it is more harm for children for schools to be closed, that we need to be open. We were open. The profession—we had our schools open for vulnerable children and for key workers' children, but I would have wanted to extend that message and to have got schools open even quicker, based on the medical advice. I would have been encouraging and speaking out about schools being open right from the start. When we look at how hard a battle it was to get compulsory education in 1890, to see schools closed in my lifetime is an absolute disaster. While recognising the problems, as Children's Commissioner, we should be giving a really strong message. Anne did, and I think she did it incredibly well there.

I would also have been pushing hard for the tech to get into schools. In my schools, we knew that we had a large number of children who did not have access to either devices, to the internet, and in some cases, the broadband. As part of the self-improving system, we got together, we took action, we checked who did not have, we pooled our funds and did a £300,000 procurement, and have been putting broadband in children's houses and bought the laptops ourselves. We did that because we knew it was going to flow from Government.

Q6 Chair: Can I gently ask you to be as concise as possible in your answers? Thank you.

Looking at your CV, you have been principal of Barnfield West Academy in Luton and Ormiston Victory Academy in Norwich, which I understand became one of the most improved schools in Britain. You then founded the Inspiration Trust, which has helped to turn around schools. How did you turn around those schools?

Dame Rachel de Souza: First, it's absolute belief that we can, and we must. One great thing about the academy movement and the reform movement in education is not to be stopped by the awfulness of some of the situations. We have taken on some serious schools in serious places that have had 10 years or more of special measures judgments, have never been good and are in a financial mess.

Ultimately, however, great schools have good leaders, staff who can teach well and systems that support students. It is no different when taking on a failing school. You just have to do it at pace and be much more innovative, because you often have to scaffold teachers who failed in the past. It is almost a blueprint: you are in there, you review, you look, you get the leadership right, you talk to the young people and you create a vision for the future with them. Then you go through behaviour systems, teaching,



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assessments and outcomes. In those turnaround situations it is about pace and absolute focus.

Q7 **Chair:** I will bring my colleagues in soon. I have a few more questions. Were exclusions a deliberate part of your strategy?

Dame Rachel de Souza: No, absolutely not. The current commitment of the Inspiration Trust is that every child who starts with us at the age of three will be with us at the age of 18. We have had to do a lot of work over the past few years to ensure that is possible. It is absolutely not about exclusions. You are turning around schools, which have failed in the past, for the community, those children and those families.

Q8 **Chair:** So what did you or the Inspiration Trust do after Ofsted found evidence of off-rolling and unlawful informal exclusion at East Point Academy?

Dame Rachel de Souza: With the East Point Academy, Ofsted did not find it; we found that particular situation. Inspiration Trust had brought in a number of schools. Often, schools that come in are on a journey. I had been focusing heavily on improving teacher supply, getting a SCITT and sorting a fantastic, nationally recognised curriculum that children can achieve on in getting results. I was alerted when I started look at—

Q9 **Chair:** Can I just challenge you? I have the Ofsted letter, which says that the inspection was carried out because of concerns “raised with Ofsted about pupil movement and potential off-rolling”.

Dame Rachel de Souza: No doubt, you will ask me about exclusions. When, in 2018-19, we saw our data and a couple of our schools were not where we wanted them to be, we did a full audit of all areas of inclusion externally. That is when we found that a very small number of students in East Point Academy were in alternative provision—the school was supporting and working with them—and the school had been advised wrongly to put that small number of children on the roll of the alternative provision provider. We found that. We had them taken off from the trust centre and put back on to the school roll. The notes of the inspection show that. That is why the school was not taken out of its good judgment, because they had already acted. It cannot happen now—*[Inaudible.]*

Q10 **Chair:** Thank you. There was a fall of children on the special educational needs register of 83% at Great Yarmouth Charter Academy. That was the year after the Inspiration Trust took over. That is according to Department for Education data and reported in *The Times* in 2019. The number of SEN children fell by 55% across the trust’s secondary schools between January 2015 and January 2018, when the average drop among all schools was 2%. You have said that is down to better teaching, resulting in fewer children needing to be on the special needs register, but some of those children were autistic and will still be autistic and struggle socially, no matter the standard of teaching. What happened? Why was it so high?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Again, so Great Yarmouth Charter Academy had for 10 years been in special measures. It had not had a SENCO. The IEB with the local authority, before we took over, although we were involved in



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the IEB, reviewed the SEND register and took a number of pupils off. That was where the pupils came off. Over the past period of time, if you look at the Ofsted reports, SEND children have been well identified and well supported in Charter's reports and our SEND registers are now at the national average. There was work to do there but we did not take them off.

If we take this back to the Commissioner's role, the Children's Commissioner must absolutely be unequivocal against off-rolling and absolutely must be saying, "No. We want to bring the number of exclusions down." We must absolutely be supporting SEND children properly. The fact is that I have had to experience putting those things right, and doing that very quickly. If you look at our data now, you can see that.

Q11 Chair: Why did the Great Yarmouth primary school apparently exclude more children than almost any other in the country in 2018-19? I ask these questions that go back to my original question, whether or not exclusions and off-rolling were a deliberate part of your strategy, in terms of turning around your schools.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Absolutely not. We had had turnover of leadership. One of the biggest issues in these cold-spot and disadvantaged areas is getting great leaders and teachers. We had had an inspection that I felt was unfair, and I spoke out about that. We then had quite a lot of turnover of leadership. For the school, that is the point where that happened.

Since the new head has been in, which was a couple of weeks into the new year, there have been zero exclusions. More importantly, we have addressed the underlying cause. That is what we have got to see. We could not get qualified teachers and good leaders in there.

Because we were able to develop a SCITT programme, we have now got brilliant qualified teachers in that school and that school is thriving. In fact, if Ofsted was inspecting, it would have been out with the "good" a year ago. Now I am pushing them to say let's get out the "outstanding". It's not that problems don't happen. Problems happen when you are turning around difficult schools. It is what you do about them. Look at the data now.

Q12 Chair: As *The Sunday Times* reported, there is a pattern of excluding children with special educational needs and of off-rolling. *The Times* report said, "In Inspiration's eight secondary schools there were 21 fixed-period exclusions—when a pupil is not allowed in school for a set number of days for disciplinary reasons—for every 100 pupils in 2019, nearly double the national average of 11." There seems to be a pattern across your schools of off-rolling and exclusions.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I challenge that absolutely. Most of our schools, even at that point, were below the national average, and now all of them are. And Charter is below the national average. There is no way that off-



rolling could happen in our schools now. There was that one small incident that we found.

I have been through those particular issues. We have also had loads of fantastic reports on inclusion. What I can bring to this role is someone who has experienced it. What we need to be doing is talking. The only people who can improve this are our school leaders. Regulators can regulate but we need to be inspiring school leaders to look at how trust leaders and others have turned around these difficult situations, and moving the system on.

Q13 Chair: I have got a final couple of questions before I bring in my colleagues. You will know that the Children's Commissioner has a legal duty to promote and protect the rights of all of England's children, in accordance with the UN convention on the rights of the child. Under that convention, article 3 says, "The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration in all actions concerning children," article 23 says, "Children with a disability have a right to special care and support," and article 28 says, "Every child has the right to an education...Discipline in schools must respect children's human dignity." Given that we know that children with special educational needs and children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to be excluded, how do you reconcile your track record on exclusions—as a means to turn around your schools—with your ability to champion the rights of vulnerable children, who are more susceptible to exclusions, in line with the legislation that underpins the role of the Children's Commissioner?

Dame Rachel de Souza: First off, I absolutely agree with that legislation. I think it is absolutely the job at the Children's Commissioner, and it is one that I would embrace to promote that and to push that forward. We do not exclude SEND or PP children any more than the national average.

Q14 Chair: Well, you do. I have identified the figures.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Not on our data.

Chair: Hold on. I have given you figures that show that SEND exclusions were previously higher in your schools.

Dame Rachel de Souza: And do you know what we did? This is the important bit—the important bit is what we did. We pulled the entire trust together, including the principals. We all committed to trying to get to a zero exclusion position. We got a trustee who was Birmingham's former DCS—an inclusion expert—to lead our inclusion strategy. Over the last year and a half, we have had conferences and have trained everybody. We have trained our teachers to prevent all preventable exclusions, and we have trained them in SEND. We are passionate about this. Inclusion goes hand in hand with high standards, and this is the piece we have focused on over the last two years. We have done it—we have got something to share across the sector. It is not that things do not go wrong, but I am really excited about the amazing work that my teams have done, and about the data. We went straight out and made the data public in '18-19,

and we said, "We're going to get it better." We have done so, but we have done so by supporting children.

Q15 **Chair:** Did you look at our predecessor Committee's report—I was the Chair—on exclusions?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Yes, absolutely. I have also read all of Anne's papers and have been briefed by Anne.

Q16 **Chair:** Did anything stand out from that report that you thought was something you might champion?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I have looked at every single fixed-term exclusion in the trust in the '18-19 period. I have analysed and looked at every single one and at every permanent exclusion. In terms of across trust, I think we can deal with all of it with the current model that we have had, but there is a huge provision question. There are some children across the country for whom the provision needs to be different. What we needed to do was not exclude but set up alternative provision with a revolving door, so that we could put in the therapeutic and SEND support. Championing really good alternative provision in groups of schools is something that, as the Children's Commissioner, I absolutely want to do. We do not just need to say what's wrong, Robert; we need to show the system how to do better. We need to show the best practice. For us, it has come down to provision with a revolving door.

Chair: I just have a worry that you have had great success but it has also been about survival of the fittest. I will pass on to Tom Hunt, and then to Kim Johnson and David Simmonds.

Q17 **Tom Hunt:** You mentioned earlier that when the schools were closed, they stayed open for the children of essential workers but also for vulnerable kids. The reason why some of those kids were designated vulnerable was because there were concerns about their situation at home, safeguarding and so on. What was slightly concerning, particularly early on, was how low a percentage of those children went into school—many were not going in. That was something that your predecessor was concerned about—the welfare of those children. Do you think the Government could have been slightly stronger in trying to encourage more of those kids into school? They did not have to make it compulsory, but they could have gone slightly further than just saying it is an option.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Do you know, a bit of me thinks that I would have loved it to have been compulsory. I know that would be difficult. It is very easy to say, "Here's a problem. The Government should do that."

As a system, we were all at first taken aback by the pandemic. But as we found our feet, we absolutely, as a system, could have and should have done more to get those young people in. What my colleague headteachers and support across the country did do was get out into those homes. One of the real lessons of covid has been the blurring of the boundary around the physical school and child learning, because we have been in young people's homes through remote learning, and our Zooms have been going



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out and into children's homes to support them. I would like to have seen more children in school. I would have called for that. It is easy with hindsight, isn't it, but I would have encouraged the Government to call for that.

Q18 **Tom Hunt:** But you would not have gone as far as making it compulsory.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Look, I haven't thought about the compulsory question, but it is certainly not something I would rule out. We know that, on all the metrics, it is better for vulnerable young people to be in school. I personally opened schools as quickly as I could. We never closed them, like the—*[Inaudible.]* We stretched schools to get as many pupils in as we could from when we were allowed to in March, and we opened them on 18 August to get older year groups in. What we found when we did that was that children came running back, so I think children wanted to be in school. I think we are like key workers and we should be open to as many as possible. Praise to all the schools that stayed open.

Chair: Thank you. I call Kim Johnson.

Q19 **Kim Johnson:** Good morning, Rachel. You are clearly a champion of academisation, but the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* states that many academies tend to employ unqualified teachers, which is driving down staff pay and terms and conditions. In 2018 the Sutton Trust said that "academy chains perform below average" for many disadvantaged children. Can you respond to that, please, Rachel?

Dame Rachel de Souza: As Children's Commissioner, my commitment is to work with all schools. Frankly, schools are where children learn. There are a number of different models and legal set-ups. I have been at the forefront of the academies movement. I was appointed an academy principal under Tony Blair's Government in 2006, and I have worked in the most disadvantaged areas. I am committed to the academies movement, and our commitment is based on trust. It is delivering the best outcomes in disadvantaged communities.

On the question of unqualified teachers, for absolutely practical reasons, which is that we are about children's learning and making sure that children learn as best as possible, we are committed to qualified teachers in front of every classroom at my trust. I would encourage that, as Children's Commissioner. It is about what children need to learn, a qualified teacher teaching them, and being in school.

Q20 **Kim Johnson:** So does the Inspiration Trust employ only qualified teachers?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think we are there now. We had a problem in Great Yarmouth with getting qualified teachers there. My last bit of work was with Great Yarmouth Primary Academy. We set up the SCITT, got a pipeline of qualified teachers, and now that school is fully staffed by qualified teachers. That was my last one. Wherever there is someone appointed who is not a qualified teacher, first of all it should not happen because—*[Inaudible.]* Secondly, I would challenge it.



Q21 Kim Johnson: The Sutton Trust said that academy chains perform below average for disadvantaged pupils. I would be grateful if you could respond to that, please.

Dame Rachel de Souza: When we started the sponsored academy movement, we had a relentless focus on raising attainment in schools that had been left, that were disastrous and that had been failing children often for decades. That is where I come from on this. Now, like I say, over 50% of the sector are academies at secondary. When I was a regional schools commissioner, a lot of my work was about challenging underperforming academies. I would like to see the school improvement remit of the regional school commissioners' office come back. We need to co-ordinate improving academies where they are not working. There are good ones and bad ones—we've got to sort it. Schools are where children learn; there are a variety of them, and they have all got to be great. That is what the Children's Commissioner should be fighting for.

Kim Johnson: Thanks.

Chair: Can I just bring David Johnston in very quickly, please?

Q22 David Johnston: Rachel, can I just clarify something? Will you leave your position at the Inspiration Trust to take up this position?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Yes.

David Johnston: Thank you very much.

Chair: David Simmonds.

Q23 David Simmonds: Rachel, nice to meet you. You have a very impressive track record of turning around the schools in the Inspiration Trust. But I would like to just ask you a little about your motivations for taking on the role of Children's Commissioner, in that, clearly, institutional interests and the interests of the individual child are not the same thing.

Like you, I was a governor—of the second school that ever became an academy, back in the days of the Blair Government. It was very clear that while the school's performance could be transformed, the children who were excluded as part of that transformation were in an even worse position because they weren't getting an education.

I am interested in how you see yourself stepping from being someone who is able to champion institutional interests and get impressive results, to being the champion for the children who are gaining nothing, and are perhaps put in an even worse position, by the progress that those institutions are making.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Do you know, what you have just illustrated is exactly why I am interested in the Children's Commissioner role? I think we have done an amazing job in education reform. I think schools are almost unrecognisable to the schools in the system I was looking at 15 years ago. But we have got to a point now where we have to put every individual child back in the frame and make sure that there is provision, and the right provision, for them. We cannot have excluded children going

off to a life of—well, we know the problems that can come. We need provision and revolving doors. We need to use our school groups to put every single child's provision at the centre.

I think that we are not going to be able to continue the really good reforms that we have done if we don't tackle these big issues, system-wide for every child. I am talking about all the issues that we have raised today. I am talking about support for every SEND child; making sure that exclusion does not need to happen, or very rarely, because the opportunities for provision are so good; and ensuring that social care is joined up with education so we can put the child at the centre of that.

We are about to have the care review. I think it is essential that someone who really understands education and has worked in it for years can bring that education piece to that review, and also bring the voice of every child to that. The next steps for reform of the system have to be about putting the individual child and all their diverse needs at the centre and meeting them.

We can do it. One thing that we have learnt from education reform is that we can start in a totally difficult place and do really amazing things for communities. If you look across the sector—both education and care now—you can see innovations are starting to happen that are showing us that we can do it.

I look at my good colleagues at Reach Feltham, who are doing nought to work. They are using the schools as the anchors in the community, but to bring in all the care that is needed around every individual child—from charities such as NCT and its training for having babies right through to careers and work. This is what we need to do now, and that is why I am interested in this job and championing the rights of every child.

Chair: As you have been saying that, we have Simmonds Jr appearing on the link.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Perfect.

Chair: Again, may I ask you very gently to be as concise as possible?

Q24 **David Simmonds:** What is your assessment of the care system, and its performance, and that of children's social care? In particular, based on your experience, what is your view of virtual schools?

Dame Rachel de Souza: As a teacher, headteacher of 15 years and CEO, I have experienced all the agencies' social care, children in care and social workers. What causes me concern and is captured absolutely in Anne Longfield's report—I am not telling you anything you do not know—is the real problem about the child being at the centre of the whole system. I was talking to a little girl just the other day whose family are in extreme difficulty. She has a social worker who is meant to be working with her in a consistent manner, but over a period of two months I think she has had five different social workers. The only adult who is consistent in her life is the policeman who is called out when there are problems with the family. I



am critical of all of us, and Anne's report has highlighted that really well. We can do better with care, and we must.

Q25 David Simmonds: As a final follow-up, you have fantastic credibility as a school leader and as a trust chief executive, but your critics would say that to some extent that is built on saying that those children are not your problem—get them out the door, and forget about them, and focus on the ones who flatter the results. What can you say to the Committee that demonstrates that in respect of those children you will be able to say to such schools that their behaviour is totally unacceptable? It needs to be totally different. Can you assure us that you will be a credible champion for those excluded children as you have been for those institutions that you have led?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I would say that I look after 8,000 students and young people, and I do not recognise some of the criticisms that have been made here. I do recognise some of the problems—issues in the system and provision issues—but on behalf of my organisation and teachers and headteachers across the sector, I do not consider those criticisms to be fair or accurate. I have been about getting things done in the most disadvantaged communities. When I look at the Children's Commissioner role, I think that an amazing amount of work has been done on shining a light on the issues and the real difficulties that children face in all areas. I want to be the Commissioner who brings the children's voice; I want to ask all children in Britain. We have the mechanism to do it—we have Oak National Academy, and I will teach the lessons myself. We have the mechanisms to do that. I also want to be the Commissioner who puts the child at the centre of all policy and policy making. I have a series of ways in which I think we could do that.

Q26 Chair: Can I just ask whether you have applied for any other national educational roles over the past few years?

Dame Rachel de Souza: No.

Q27 Chair: You didn't apply for any other national roles in any other body?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Absolutely not. I noticed some newspaper comment that I had applied for HMCI, or been involved in that, and the answer is absolutely not. That is just some journalism churn. My commitment has been to the Inspiration Trust over the past eight years.

Chair: Thank you. I will now bring in Ian Mearns.

Q28 Ian Mearns: Thank you, Rob. Good morning, Rachel. It is good to see you.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Good morning, Mr Mearns.

Ian Mearns: I have been listening very carefully to your answers to previous questions. There is a litany—you can say that it is not true—of exclusions and rolling reductions in SEND children. Those kids are out of the system at the Inspiration Trust, and at the same time the trust has the choice of who it replaces those children with in those localities where the



schools are based. You have told the Committee that you have brought all sorts of experts together to look at the overall situation and rectify it. But I would ask you to comment on the fact that you were the CEO of the trust all the way through that period; you were in charge and the buck stops with you. By bringing those people together and looking at the overall situation was that not an instance of closing the door after the horse had bolted? If that is not the case, how many of the children in those schools were then re-enrolled or had their exclusions overturned by the schools?

Dame Rachel de Souza: First of all, I would say that many of our schools are absolute champions of inclusion, with outstanding Ofsted records showing that they put inclusion at the centre of everything they did, with no or low results—certainly lower than the national average. There is no question that when you bring in pupils from troubled backgrounds, sometimes exclusions rise. When we saw the data, we acted on it immediately, and I examined every single exclusion to check whether it was fair and whether it would be upholdable.

Q29 **Ian Mearns:** But this wasn't an act that happened overnight. The data did not suddenly appear out of nowhere. An awful lot of this stuff was tracked over several years. At Great Yarmouth Charter Academy, the group that took GCSEs in 2019 was 22% smaller than it had been in 2017, when the trust took over the school.

Dame Rachel de Souza: When a school becomes an academy, some parents choose to go elsewhere. That was not about active whatever, and in fact now, most of our schools are oversubscribed. All those schools are for community children, so I do not recognise this picture. As soon as we saw a problem, we acted, and as soon as we have seen an issue, we have acted on it. I do not want to get overly defensive, because the data and Ofsted's reviews of our schools are showing that things are where they should be. We want them to be even better.

For me, that inclusion, going in lock step with high standards, is what is critical, and also the question of provision. In some of these areas, the schools we have taken in have been in a dreadful state. They might have had massive SEND. Were those children getting a great quality of education? No, and what I can say about Charter is that when Ofsted came after two years, looked at it and explored everything, they felt that the approach to SEND was great and the actions we had taken were right. Nationally—

Ian Mearns: Sorry—[*Interruption.*]

Q30 **Chair:** I think we've got gremlins. Could the broadcasters kindly help with that, or could whoever is not muted go on mute? Just on the Charter Academy, I mentioned to you the fall in children on the SEND register of 83% at Great Yarmouth Charter Academy the year after you took cover. That is a huge number of children.

Dame Rachel de Souza: It wasn't the year after. The SEND register was reduced by the local authority and the IEB. We have increased it, and it



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needed to be increased. If you look at the inspection report two years in, they praised the SEND work and said it had been done absolutely accurately, and they looked absolutely forensically at it.

Q31 **Chair:** Is the figure I mentioned correct, though—the 55% figure for the number of SEND children falling across the trust’s secondary schools between 2015 and 2018?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I do not have my figures to hand. What I can tell you is that our SEND is in line with the national average.

Q32 **Chair:** But the national average was a drop across all schools of 2% at that time.

Dame Rachel de Souza: The work we have done over the two years on SEND is in line with the national average. Can we just go back to what this has taught us? We have done a huge amount of work to make sure we are absolutely leading now on inclusion; it is something we are really proud of, and we have looked at provision. As Children’s Commissioner, the fact that I have had to put this right, that I have experienced this, means that I can share the putting right of it across the sector—that teachers do not have to hide in fear. There are solutions, answers, and things we can do to bring inclusion, provision and high standards together. That is the holy grail; that is the message. That is what the Children’s Commissioner needs to be doing.

Chair: Sorry, Ian, carry on. I beg your pardon.

Q33 **Ian Mearns:** Thank you, Chair. Just for the record, though, I did ask you how many children who had been off-rolled were re-enrolled, and how many who had been excluded had their exclusions overturned. I think that is the acid test, because if those youngsters were incorrectly off-rolled or incorrectly excluded because the procedures in those schools were wrong—which is why you did this review—how many were then re-admitted to those schools?

Dame Rachel de Souza: In East Point Academy, every single one. I ensured that happened myself. In Charter Academy, our vice principals and teams reached out and tried to make sure everyone was welcomed back and, if there was any issue, to resolve it. I do not have the figure on Charter Academy.

Going forward, we have the whole trust and all our headteachers committed to inclusion and working in the right way. The lesson is not “let’s hide something that is wrong” but “let’s learn from it”. Let’s learn what works and get it right. That is the way we need to work with the whole sector and the way the Children’s Commissioner needs to work with the sector. If we are going to get into dunny, we have to go drains up and say: “Start there, what needs to happen, what works, what innovations are there—what can we do?” That is what I have experienced. Having had that experience will make me stronger as Children’s Commissioner. Rather than saying, “I am going to write a report to say how bad this sector is”,



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of course education is the answer. Where is the great practice, how can we make this right? That is what the next level of this role needs to be.

Q34 Ian Mearns: Do you currently or potentially have any conflicts of interest—business, financial or other non-pecuniary interests or commitments that might give the perception of or arise to conflicts of interest if you are appointed? If you do, how do you intend to resolve any potential conflicts of interest if you are appointed?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I have a couple of board director positions in the education sector: Ambition School Leadership, and Parents and Teachers for Excellence. The answer is straightforward. I would need to step away from them.

Q35 Ian Mearns: So you would step away from the council?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Absolutely, 100%.

Q36 Ian Mearns: How has your previous experience of exposure to public scrutiny prepared you for taking on the role of Children's Commissioner? This is an interesting start today, isn't it?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think to really change the difficult things for children in this country we need a Commissioner who is resilient, who is not judgmental, who is able to identify best practice and take the time to do the hard things to turn things round. That is what I have learned through all of this.

Q37 Ian Mearns: How do you see your role in terms of challenging government across the board? The policies of many Government Departments, and their implementation, have an impact on the welfare of children—the DFE, the Department of Health is vital to the welfare of children, the DWP, and MHCLG, to name just four. How do you see your role in challenging all those Departments on the interests of children?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I have watched Anne Longfield and had a good briefing from her about how she does it. One thing I would like to bring in to do that slightly differently, because it is an essential part of the role, is to take the views of children and set up a children's Cabinet. I want to get young people to be able to support me in challenging Government. I think that is incredibly powerful. I will obviously challenge and work across a broad area; we need to shine a light on things that need to change, but we need children and children's voices to be given a way to challenge. I think that is an incredibly exciting potential next step.

Chair: Thank you. By the way, the gremlins might be your speakers, Rachel. Can you turn them down? I have been told by Broadcasting, it might be your speakers.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Okay, I might be speaking too loudly.

Chair: I think it is your speakers. I will bring in Tom briefly, then Fleur and David Johnston.

Q38 Tom Hunt: Knowing a fair bit about the area where you have been



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leading schools in East Anglia, and your role with the Ambition Institute, I want to know your views on teacher recruitment and retention. What is the best way to attract the very best teachers to our part of the world, where there are significant pockets of deprivation? It may not be the most glamorous place for a young teacher to be. Are financial incentives helpful? What are your thoughts there? And, secondly, you may know that the Education Committee is currently carrying out an inquiry into the academic performance of white pupils who are eligible for free school meals, and how, academically—when it comes to GCSE and A-level results—they have been underperforming against other pupils who are also eligible for free school meals. I would like to know your thoughts on that, why it may be the case, and how we tackle that. I know that Lowestoft and Great Yarmouth are not too dissimilar from Ipswich in terms of having lots of those kind of pupils.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Thank you for that fantastic question. The issue is a complex one, but all of these are issues of the day. The Inspiration Trust is now fully staffed with qualified teachers, and it has taken me a good few years to achieve that excellent pipeline of teachers. How have we done it? In a number of ways: we are absolutely committed to developing a fantastic curriculum with our teachers that they are really excited about; we have subject communities; we have a massive teacher development programme; and we have brought out the best people to come and train, develop and speak for CPD.

You don't go to London now, you come to Norwich—we have become a centre of the curriculum, and that attracts young teachers. Secondly, I have a director of teacher development whose role is to look at what teachers want, why do teachers stay, why do teachers come. Excitement about the curriculum is one. Then there are opportunities; young teachers want opportunities to be mentored, to develop and be put in placements.

I struggled for a number of years wondering how to get the best teachers out to Yarmouth and Lowestoft. I can get them to Norwich—if I put a job out in Norwich, I get hundreds of applications. It was actually the commitment to the curriculum, the commitment to mentoring, giving young teachers lots of development opportunities, asking them what they wanted, and using the trust schools to give people placements. But also setting up our own SCITT was fundamental, our own teacher training.

We train our own teachers, 40 a year. Those are the teachers who are now teaching in Yarmouth, passionately delivering an outstanding curriculum to my once-failing Yarmouth primary schools. But we also work with the teachers who are still there; an exciting and challenging CPD teacher development programme for every teacher who has joined us from a failing school, to say. "You can do it." So that's important. Also, we need whole-trust approaches to behaviour, so that all staff realise we are in this together; there's behaviour we need to teach the children. But we do need standards so that teachers absolutely can teach, and that has been critical too. So a whole range of things.

Chair: Can I bring in Fleur briefly, please, and then David Johnston. Then

I'll bring in Jonathan Gullis.

Q39 Fleur Anderson: Thank you, Chair, and good morning Rachel. I want to move away from education to ask you about another area of the Children's Commissioner's role, which is about children in care, and being the voice of the most disadvantaged children. We know that 39% of 19 to 21-year-old care leavers are not in education, employment or training currently, compared to 19% of other young people of the same age. How would you use the powers of the Children's Commissioner? What is your experience of doing this, and what would you do?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I don't want to pivot back too much to education, but one of the key things we have to do with our sixth form pupils—right across Yarmouth and in a range of places—is ensure that we are preparing them for work, finding them opportunities for work and finding them the right apprenticeships. I am used to working with a broad alliance of people who can help in this area and can help with creating opportunities—apprenticeships and work opportunities for young people. In this case, we are talking about young people in care as a specific focus. There are charities working on that that we can link up with and promote.

I was looking at Kickstart, for example. We are taking 70 Kickstart trainees. I have been wanting to campaign to get organisations that take on Kickstart trainees or apprentices to make sure they take care leavers as a priority. I have a particular duty as Children's Commissioner to ensure that children leaving care thrive. There are real resource issues, and they have been made even worse by covid. You can provide support workers, but this is about what those young people need. I would go further in the covid situation and say that all young people are now challenged, so we need some proactive work on ensuring joined-up thinking about work opportunities—next steps, apprenticeships and, yes, let's even use Kickstart too, if it gets things going.

Q40 Fleur Anderson: There is a high number of children who achieve less in school and then out of school. What is your analysis of the problem with the system now?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I agree with Anne Longfield that the situation is really difficult for children in care, and in the covid situation it is even worse. We need a laser-like focus on it, both in terms of educational standards and support outside. I have worked with lots and lots of looked-after children, and the key things to enable success have been stability, creating a plan and ensuring their voice is heard when decisions are made about what happens to them. The plan is the bit that is about the plan for their future, and there must be support to ensure that that happens, because that is really the bit that has been missing.

I think it is as tough as it ever was and probably tougher, but what I would like to do as Children's Commissioner is bring the stakeholders together to get some action. I want some practical action. I don't want, in three years, to be writing a report about care leavers and the situation



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being as desperate. There are innovations across the system and things we can do.

Fleur Anderson: We might come back to this. Thank you.

Chair: Thank you very much. I call David Johnston.

Q41 **David Johnston:** Rachel, I preface this by saying that I am someone who wholly supports the role of the Children's Commissioner, but we have schools commissioners, an FE Commissioner and the Social Mobility Commission. In your own words, why do we need a Children's Commissioner?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Because it is the one role that is there to promote the needs of every child in this country, amplify their voice and protect them. It is the best role. It is the only role I go for, because its duty is to seek the views of all children—particularly disadvantaged children and children in care—expose everybody else to that and ensure action is taken. I would say that it is the most important role. We could do away with lots of those other commissioners, but this one needs to stay.

Q42 **David Johnston:** Maybe we will look at that. Given your view of the role, how do you imagine that you will amplify that voice differently from the way Anne Longfield has?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I want to build on Anne's great work. She has done fantastic things. She has taken the views of about 1,000 disadvantaged children a year, and she is out in the sector looking at things. I would want to start by explaining what the Commissioner is and what the children's charter of rights is to every child in England and taking their views. Those would then form the basis of a plan to go forward for forming a children's Cabinet, being incredibly vocal and having children out there telling us what they need and want. If covid has taught us anything, it is how fantastic our young people are. They have taken the brunt of this. We have 20-year-olds worried about what will happen with the economy and their future and work, yet they have still been supportive. It is now time that we take their voice and listen. They should be at the centre of every policy decision. I would be a real pain and would put the children's voice everywhere. I want them in the media, I want them in government. I want that children's Cabinet at the centre of every policy decision. I want action.

Q43 **David Johnston:** Just very finally and quickly, is part of your rationale for wanting to survey all children that you think we do not have a representative view at the moment of how life is for them?

Dame Rachel de Souza: We have lots of reports and data and so on, but when I seek the views of my 8,000 young people up here, they tell me very specific things. They tell me that they are worried about their education and about work and about their future. They are deeply worried about fairness in society, and about inequalities. They are worried about mental health and how they feel and what to do about that. We need to



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listen to their concerns and then engage them with creating the future. I think we do not know unless we listen.

Chair: David Simmonds has a quick question. Fleur, did you have an additional question, or have you done all yours?

Fleur Anderson: I do, yes.

Chair: Okay, I will quickly bring in David Simmonds, and then I will come back to you, Fleur.

Q44 **David Simmonds:** In terms of outcomes and specific things, do you intend to follow the lead of the Children's Commissioners in Scotland and Wales in seeking a complete legal ban on corporal punishment in England?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I would need to look into this properly. At the moment, my answer would be that the most important thing is safeguarding children. We need to make sure that all children are safeguarded, and then any questions about corporal punishment need to flow out of that. I would need to look at that properly to give you a proper answer.

Chair: David, do you want to come back on that at all?

Q45 **David Simmonds:** Only to observe that, given that it has been one of the central planks of the work of the Children's Commissioners in Wales and Scotland and of those devolved Administrations, as well as of international children's commissioner organisations, it would be quite positive to have a view about it soon.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Agreed.

Chair: Thank you. Fleur?

Q46 **Fleur Anderson:** I would like to ask you again about your experience, particularly experience that you can use—your education experience and other experience—to lobby in the wider aspects of the role of Children's Commissioner. How does your previous experience equip you to campaign and lobby on behalf of children? One example of children whom you would lobby and campaign on behalf of is unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Many of them are in care, while others are with kinship groups or in different circumstances. They really need a voice. They face specific barriers to education and in other aspects of their lives. How would you campaign and lobby on their behalf, and what are the key issues that they face?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Obviously. I look at all the questions about the wider sector, and I have to look through the lens of my own experience first, as someone who has been a headteacher. In my first years of teaching, I taught in Tower Hamlets, where we had a large number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking and refugee students. There were cases where the school worked proactively to support those children. In my maths and science classes at a really high-performing sixth form, I have a Syrian pupil who is unaccompanied and is now at risk of deportation as



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she goes to university. We are lobbying MPs and Government on her behalf. I would want to be at the centre of all those discussions in Government, with MPs and with the agencies working on it, putting the individual child's situation at the start of it.

I have not talked much personally but my own mother was a refugee who came here unaccompanied and was in a care setting, so this is an absolute passion of mine, 100%.

Q47 Fleur Anderson: Finally, how would you raise the visibility of the Office of the Children's Commissioner?

Dame Rachel de Souza: In my education work, I have been able to personally raise the profile of a number of issues, whether it is curriculum or school things, right across the sector with my peers. So I am used to being very direct and quite visible—again, that is where you see quite a lot of media, and I am strong with my views. I would want to continue that personal, direct approach to try to raise the profile of the office.

Another way of raising the profile of the office is by working with a really broad set of stakeholders. There are so many people who are committed to these issues. One thing I have found even since being the preferred appointment is the number of children's charities and children's care organisations who have got in touch and said, "We want to help. We want to do things." So I think it will be about convening, bringing those people together.

It is interesting, because people often say to me, "Would you criticise the Government?" Of course I would, but I think there are some really intelligent ways that we can raise the profile of issues and lead the debate as Children's Commissioner. Quite a bit of it is about getting out first and leading—that is what I have done in education debates. Before any Government decision on examinations, I was on the "World at One" and "BBC News at Six" saying that we must keep examinations. Sometimes we raise a profile by leading, not by getting into a critical thing. I would want one of the key features of my tenure to be that we are out there saying what is right and doing what is right, promoting the voices of children, working with a variety of stakeholders and making the issues so compelling that everybody has to listen.

Chair: Before I bring in Christian, Tom has a quick question.

Q48 Tom Hunt: Obviously you feel very passionately about what it is that you do and, in this role, about what you believe to be best for all children. But when you are in this role, I guess there is also a need to be a unifying figure and not be politically divisive. If we look at something like the school closures and the reopening of schools we have seen over the last year, that has become quite politically tricky, for want of a better word. There have been those on one side of the argument—the NEU for example—who have got a particular set of views about this issue and others who have got a particular set of different views. Having read some of your opinion pieces and views over the last year, I would say you



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probably have a very different view to, say, the NEU. How would you approach that in terms of balancing the desire to speak freely and passionately in accordance with what you truly believe to be in the best interests of children but also perhaps looking to steer clear of having a public row with an organisation like the NEU?

Dame Rachel de Souza: For me, it is really simple, and the really simple thing is children first. The Children's Commissioner puts children first. When I have been writing pieces as a chief executive or as a headteacher, I have often been contributing to a debate within our sector—within a sector of professionals. This role is about putting children first and doing what is right for children. It is not about different, competing views in education and trying to put those over; it is a completely different role. Some of the people you mention—it is surprising, actually, that we all have incredibly good relationships as people. My view is that everyone is trying to do the best they can. and the Children's Commissioner needs to be saying that.

That was my answer to where there are problems in the system. We are not going to get a self-improving system that puts children at the centre if we do not work together and we are not collaborative and all the rest. So for me it is children first, but then of course there is the level of skills, influencing skills, working together, collaboration and praising what is great, recognising that everyone is trying to do their best. Not having a particular view, which would have been appropriate before taking the job, is paramount.

Chair: I am going to bring in Christian.

Q49 **Christian Wakeford:** The role of Children's Commissioner is obviously wider than the education sector. You touched on your experience with the care system, but the Commissioner would also cover sectors such as the youth justice system and immigration, and—increasingly—child welfare and child and adolescent mental health. What experience do you have working within these sectors?

Dame Rachel de Souza: As I said to Fleur, as a headteacher with a career spanning 29 to 30 years in particularly disadvantaged areas, I am constantly working with these sectors. I have been in prisons, and I am passionate about and interested in prison education. I am very interested in the new model of secure schools that has come out of the Charlie Taylor review, and in ensuring that we create provisions for children and young people so that they can be rehabilitated. My 29 years of experience working with these people has meant that I have views on all of that and have engaged with all of it.

On the subject of mental health: if I could cite a success criteria as a Children's Commissioner, it would be to work with the health system and join with the care system to ensure speedy mental health support and assessment for young people. I would love the data to be so strong that we could give the health department targets on that. I have experienced those issues, and Anne has shown what the problems are. We all have

compassion and want to do better. The issue now is what we do. How do we make provision better? As Children's Commissioner, I would want to be questioning and challenging on those areas.

We need to join up the whole system much better. We have the care review coming, but the whole care system is based on an out-of-date model that is not allowing join-up to be where it should be. I want to be in that debate, working with everybody and also bringing the children's voice and experience in on that. I could go through any area and talk about it, giving examples of the children and agencies we have worked with to try to improve things.

Q50 Christian Wakeford: Sometimes in processes like these the most difficult thing is to be critical about oneself. Of these sectors, where is your experience and knowledge lacking, or perhaps need topping up? How would you go about acquiring any new skills or knowledge that you need to fulfil the role?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I have thought deeply about that. Anyone coming into this role takes on a huge, wide brief. I have worked with sectors, but it is different from having a deep understanding. In my home town of Scunthorpe, the DCS said, "Come and spend a week with me and I will show you everything." It is about immersion into the sector. I want to be out there visiting places where children and young people are held in custody, and I want to immerse myself in local authority care systems. Anne does that well. There is no shortage of people wanting to brief me, the most profound impact lies in doing visits, and getting out there and seeing it.

There is a lot of learning to do, and there is also a lot of expertise in the Children Commissioner's office. One of the key things is to put the best people around you who know what you do not know. I have made a careful assessment of where my expertise is and is not. I would say that upon reading virtually every report from the Education Select Committee or from the Children's Commissioner, a key recommendation to make things better is education. There is a concern that education is not delivering. The bit I bring is how to unlock the education system to work with the other agencies better and seamlessly to make sure that education does deliver, and that we do deliver and can work together to deliver.

Q51 Christian Wakeford: As a final question, how will you ensure that the views of children are central to your work, especially those children who do not have a voice? I declare my interest as a father of a young toddler, but I am thinking especially of early years children who are not able to speak up.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think I have spoken about my views on the paramount importance of seeking the views of every child in England, which we can do through the school system, from school age to the point of leaving. There are very straightforward ways of doing that, and of working with the care system and charities to get the views of people who are outside of school.



Early intervention and early years are absolutely critical. To get those views, we need to be accessing the parents of the nought to twos. From three, we have got access. I have been looking at some of the fantastic work around family hubs, and at some of the innovations where there is joined-up work with NCT and using schools, in particular, as places where those things can happen. We need to be inviting in and capturing—whether it is in GP surgeries, or wherever it is—the professionals who work with the nought to twos. In the very early years, we need to be reaching out to them. I do not think it is as hard to do as people think it is; we just need to commit to doing it. It is a big job—seeking the views of every child in England is a big job—but it is absolutely doable, and I have got a plan.

Q52 Christian Wakeford: I apologise, because I lied and said that my last question was my final question. I do have one final question, which is related to care. I recently spoke to a campaign group called Hope instead of Handcuffs, and it was essentially trying to make sure that when children were being moved around the care system, they were not handcuffed and put in the back of secure vehicles. I was just wondering what your thoughts were about the transition in relation to those in the care system. Surely, we need to make sure that the child is central in all this and focus on their wellbeing, rather than just slapping them in a pair of handcuffs and driving them to the other end of the country.

Chair: Can you answer in a nutshell, please?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Horrendous, and obviously we need to sort that out. I would want to campaign on that. Care for children is everything.

Chair: Thank you. I am going to bring in Apsana, who has not spoken yet. Fleur, I will bring you in a bit later.

Q53 Apsana Begum: Given the context that we are currently operating in, with the new and serious challenges of the pandemic, do you feel that the powers that the Children’s Commissioner holds are sufficient to meet these challenges?

Dame Rachel de Souza: In terms of the powers, the Children’s Commissioner can go anywhere, request the data that they need from anywhere, and demand that information reports from anywhere are given within a period of time. I think those powers are extremely powerful, but that is not to underestimate the problem.

I think the Children’s Commissioner needs to be working with everyone in the system to show and amplify the experience of children and the difficulties that they are experiencing under covid. I was just listening to the CRAE report that was released recently, which talked about what is happening with children’s rights under covid and how things are getting worse. The Children’s Commissioner needs to be amplifying those things, showing them and making sure people are aware of them, and we need to be talking to Parliament and other groups about this. With the powers of being able to go anywhere, ask for any data and demand a report, we can do an awful lot. I think we have the powers, and we need to use them.



Q54 Apsana Begum: In Jersey, they have the power to undertake more formal investigations. Other than just gathering data and presenting it, do you think that the role should have more powers to carry out formal investigations, and to go much further and instruct? Do you think the role should allow for the powers of instruction?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I would really like to look at the model in Jersey and see how it works, and whether it works. Anything that supports the child—if there is a power that helps me to do that, then I would like it.

Q55 Apsana Begum: Are there any current Government policies or areas within the remit of the Children's Commissioner that you think should not be under the remit of the Children's Commissioner?

Dame Rachel de Souza: No. I think the remit is extremely broad and wide. If anything, the issue is that it is so wide making sure that we are absolutely on what is happening everywhere is key, but I think the breadth of the role is excellent.

Q56 David Johnston: Rachel, how would you assess the current state of childhood in England?

Dame Rachel de Souza: If we were talking before covid, I would be talking about an improving picture, still with lots of challenges. I think we are in a completely different space now. Anecdotally, in areas like mine in East Anglia we are seeing increasing basic need worries around food poverty. I am extremely worried about education loss, and children not being able to hit their developmental milestones because they are not engaging in school and with young people.

There are tremendous worries for young people and children. They are stressed about their futures and what they are hearing about what it will mean in terms of work and university. They are seeing this on TV. We have particular issues around BAME young people who have been hit harder. Children with special educational needs seem to have been hit harder. Vulnerable children, and children in care particularly, have been hit harder.

There are some real concerns, but when I look at my own 8,000 children in the Inspiration Trust—how they have run back in and how positive they have been—I am positive that we can find the solutions.

Chair: Okay. Can we try to be concise? I mean that really politely. I know it is difficult, because there is a lot to say.

Q57 David Johnston: Given that, what will your priorities for your first year be, and what is your broader ambition for your term when it comes to children and young people?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think I have made it really clear that in the new world of the pandemic we need to seek the views of all children and vulnerable groups of children. We need to put children at the centre of policy making. We need to find out what children's concerns are and address them. The first children's plan should be based on what every

child in Britain, and every disadvantaged child and vulnerable child, is telling us.

All the things that I have talked about around education futures, basic needs work, fairness and mental health are absolutely critical. Also, on some of the first actions, some of the key things that are happening are the care review, and probably the SEND review. I want children to be at the centre of those and engaged with those. That is absolutely critical. I particularly want to look at the provision of a wide variety and high quality of education. For our held-back communities that is key. I work in those areas.

I would want to champion and improve partnership working, structural change and review, because it is a consistent factor in why things go wrong. Very hard-nosed, I want to develop the dataset in the Commissioner's office and get those data and accountability measures, really making sure that we know how children are accessing services and that we are putting pressure on there.

I would like to see clearer standards. I do not think that children have a clear enough guarantee of what they should expect from many areas of public service. The lack of a clear standard makes it harder for them and their advocates to challenge provision. For example, should we have an expectation that children get access to a trained mental health professional within three months of being referred to a GP? No child should miss out on education for more than two weeks.

The Children's Commissioner has looked at unregistered children's homes. We should have clear standards of what is and is not acceptable accommodation for a vulnerable child.

We should have clear standards of what is and is not acceptable accommodation for a vulnerable child. I want to update the accountabilities to stop children falling into the gaps between services. Much of the framework for children's rights is old. It has not been updated in the current world. This has been exacerbated by covid. I could go on.

Chair: That was a slightly unconcise answer. David, do you want to come back, please?

David Johnston: No, that's fine.

Chair: Thank you. Please, if you could do what you can to knock it on the head, Rachel, I would really appreciate it. Kim?

Q58 **Kim Johnson:** You indicated earlier that you have no political activities or conflicts of interest as part of the recruitment process. Can you tell us if there are any Government links to PTE?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I have no political links in terms of PTE. I did say I would be standing away from PTE.

Chair: Do you want to explain for the people watching what PTE is, Kim?



Kim Johnson: Parents and Teachers for Excellence.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Parents and Teachers for Excellence was set up as a group to champion four areas of education reform outside of Government. The original desire was to be absolutely non-political. I am a Director, but I will be standing away from PTE. We look at four things: the curriculum—a really brilliant, knowledge-rich curriculum—the behaviours systems, the work assessment and wider experience of children. The majority of teachers who are engaged with PTE, we would not call Conservative. The majority are people who have a particular educational view that they would almost certainly define as not Conservative. For me, it is a non-political thing.

The reason I am a director is because Rodney Leach, who was going to be the chair, died, and his widow asked me to step in. I have done my term, and I will be stepping away from that. But I think it has done some great work.

Q59 **Kim Johnson:** So it campaigns for traditionalist education, Rachel, as you have just mentioned? Is this something that you will continue to push for if appointed? I would also like to ask what your opinion is of decolonising the curriculum, which has been pushed for during the last couple of months, and ensuring that it is more diverse and represents non-white pupils in school?

Dame Rachel de Souza: That is an absolutely great question. At my last Trust conference, we raised equality as our conference theme. We heard from a range of speakers on these areas, and I declared my absolute avowed intention to reclaim the word progressive to have excellent examples of diverse scholarship and diverse educationalists. I think it is absolutely key. Every child should be able to see that. In fact, in the Oak National curriculum, where they were praised for a diverse curriculum, it was, in fact, Inspiration Trust's curriculum. It is something we really, really believe in.

I think this traditional/progressive dichotomy is not really real. I think there was a swing, where we were really passionate about setting up subject-based knowledge. It is people like Michael Young's work on powerful knowledge that made me think that disadvantaged children needed great subject knowledge. But I think we work across the two; there are swings this way, swings that way.

Chair: Can you just answer the question in a nutshell?

Dame Rachel de Souza: The question was would I hold to a particular view of the curriculum? No. In the Children's Commissioner role, the view is to look at all the great practice, and make sure it is working for children. I am very comfortable with that.

Chair: Thank you. Kim.

Q60 **Kim Johnson:** Moving on a little bit. About equality, you have spoken about inclusion quite a bit, and you have referenced SEND. I would like to



raise the issue about the disproportionate number of exclusions of black pupils. How will you use the unique powers of the Children's Commissioner to challenge systemic racism in the sector and to improve the outcomes for this group of pupils?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think this is probably one of the foremost questions that the children would and will ask us when we seek their views. It is not acceptable that black Caribbean boys are still at the bottom of their performance tables and are not performing as they should—nor is it acceptable that white working class boys are, but that is another question. Right across the services—it is getting worse during covid—we can see BAME communities, particularly boys from black Caribbean backgrounds, are being badly hit.

There is showing the data and showing what the problem is, but there is also seeking the places where solutions are making things happen and showing that. I think we need to do that. There is great practice.

In our equalities conference, we heard from some of the most amazing charities and workers in this area. We need to be amplifying their voices and bringing them together and making things better.

I am optimistic we can do it. I worked in Tower Hamlets with the Bangladeshi community and watched them go right to the top of the table. I watched my Pakistani-Kashmiri pupils do that in Luton. It has got to be a priority that black Caribbean boys are at the top—I want them at the top. I want us to be ambitious.

Chair: Okay, got it.

Q61 **Tom Hunt:** I have a question about special educational needs. What precise things have your schools done that you are proud of and you think have been unique in helping provide the support that special educational needs children need?

You spoke about the transitions and movement between the mainstream settings and so on. What is your vision? Is it a mixed vision? Do we need to have more good special schools, but also more support in mainstream settings? I would just like to get a sense of your vision. I was very encouraged by what you said about the individual child being the centre of education. We know with SEND that there are often unconventional thinkers who, given the right support, can be above average achievers and can go on and do really well. Unlocking that potential is key.

Finally, on apprenticeships and technical education, we have seen lots of kids leaving education settings without even level 2 qualifications. Do you think the education system could do more—not giving the sense that no child should not go to university if that is the right thing for them, but also highlighting that there is this other route that is not inferior, and be more focused on that in the curriculum? And this is a bit of a tricky question, but it is a little bit to do with your role: do you agree with the Government's movement away from a 50% target of young people going to university?



Dame Rachel de Souza: I am going to deal with the last bit first, which is moving away from 50% and a greater commitment to technical and vocational. I am just going to say yes. I am finding young people that we work with are seeking and getting far more out of university apprenticeships, apprenticeships and the vocational path, when it suits them, than being sent to do low-calibre university degrees in academic subjects that they do not really want to do. It is on the way and we are doing it, but I think we need to look at that. I would love to champion apprenticeships and vocational education with the same rigour that I have championed the subject-specific academic curriculum.

Chair: That is music to my ears, as my colleagues will know—the word “apprenticeships”.

Dame Rachel de Souza: On SEN, to jump on your question about what I am particularly proud of, I want to give you just two examples. I could talk to you at length about how we do it and why it is different in our schools, but just two things. I have a maths and science free school that comes in 17th in the country for achievement in those areas and beats Eton, and that is children from all our East Anglia hotspots. Championing STEM has been key. There is a high number of young people in that school with special educational needs. We have a deputy head there—senior leaders are key—who has made herself an absolute expert on mental health special educational needs and supporting students, so that they get brilliant outcomes. She starts with engaging with the family before they are even here and just makes sure that they are a success, and there are other techniques and training and development. I am particularly proud of that.

At Charles Darwin Primary school, in the heart of Norwich, we spend four times as much as most schools spend on SEND, because that is the head’s passion. She has just got an outstanding Ofsted and when you walk through that school and look at the support given to individuals, the extended day, the places to withdraw and the right places for learning, it is just fantastic; come and visit.

Those are two places that I think are great, but I think the real issue is that vocational technical education needs a really good look. We have been trying it for years and we need to get the model right.

Chair: Tom, do you want to come back?

Q62 **Tom Hunt:** Are there any ways in particular that you think SEND pupils have been disproportionately impacted by school closures in the last year?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think that is a very interesting question. Where groups of schools or individual schools have been able to provide strong online learning, some SEND pupils have actually benefited; HMCI showed us that recently in one of her reports.

However, where the SEND issues are much more linked to behavioural issues and things like that, I think it has been an incredibly challenging time. That is one of the key reasons that we do not just do great online



learning; we need schools to open, because that is the place where the best support is.

Q63 Tom Hunt: We have had some other sessions recently on a number of different issues where SEND has come up. A common theme has been that some witnesses have felt that there have not been enough incentives for schools to be known for being great at SEND; that sometimes, the money that follows the number of SEND children that schools support is not enough. Could any changes be made to the funding formula to incentivise schools to be great when it comes to providing SEND support?

Dame Rachel de Souza: We are expecting a SEND review and a response to that; I will be looking at it in terms of answering your question.

The way we work now, in school groups, where we share our budgets, we can make provision for things we choose to. Funding is always tight, but we have done that with the curriculum and with supporting our primary schools with SEND; we pool our budgets and, as a group of heads and leaders, we say "Let's put the money there". We have done that with inclusion; we have supported central SEND teams and a director of inclusion—that is one of the things that we did over the two years.

I think the answer is: how are we using the money that we have got in the system, and how well joined up—and how well—are we working at promoting these individual children with SEND?

In terms of being proud, lots of people are proud of their SEND. Maybe we need Ofsted to be doing some best practice reviews and showing us where the great people are in SEND. When you do that—and certainly, as Children's Commissioner, I would want to be doing that—you want to look for the best everywhere; the best children's home, the best SEND support, the best whatever, and I would want that up on the website.

What I have found, in my years of working on curriculum issues, is that if you show the sector examples of where things are working, the sector will follow; it is not always just about putting money in—although, of course, more money is great.

Q64 Fleur Anderson: I wanted to reflect on the fact that you have not mentioned youth services up to now, so I will give you the opportunity to do so. Some 763 youth centres have been cut since 2012; do you think youth services are important alongside formal education, and would you challenge the Government's cuts to youth services?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think youth services are critical. If you ask our children in these, sort of, "left-behind communities" that we work in, one of the big things that bothers them is that they have nowhere to go and nothing to do.

Youth services have been key to giving that provision. We can't undo what's done and bring back things. I think we need to be saying, "Right, let's look at where the anchor is, where the buildings are in a community



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that we can get youth services into." Schools can be critical for that—not to deliver them, but for youth services to deliver from. We need to get smart, and those kinds of partnerships are the way to do it. At my Hewett Academy, we have the boys boxing club and so on. It's in the UNCRC: we need to be developing cultural, sporting and all these—

Q65 Fleur Anderson: This is about your independence as well. Are you prepared to stand up to the Government on this issue and others?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I stand up to anybody, but again I would say to you that, in terms of getting things done, we don't just need to be standing up and saying, "Do this"; we need to be saying, "This is how it can work. This is how we can do it. We want to do it together, and please fund this." There are different ways of working. This role has been really good at shining a light, standing up and being critical. Where I want to take the role next is to continue that but to say, "Where are the solutions? Where are the solutions in the sector? What can we do?" I would want you to judge me at the end of the period of six years by saying, "What did you achieve? What is different out there?" That is what I want to be judged on and that takes working with a wide variety of people and getting them onside, innovation, great models—bang; that's what we need to think about.

Q66 Ian Mearns: Rachel, you have been in charge of the Inspiration Trust for eight years, and within the Inspiration Trust you have 8,000 children, but in this role, your responsibility will be for every child from Penzance to north of Berwick-upon-Tweed and all points in between. It's something like 10.5 million or 11 million children in total. Going from the job that you have been in to the job that you are currently up for is a huge jump in terms of breadth of remit. Can I ask you this again, particularly in the light of the answer that you just gave to Fleur? You obviously think that the cutting of all those youth centres was probably inappropriate and, in hindsight, a bad thing to do. You have said that, in your role as Children's Commissioner, you want to work with Government, but you also have to be able to challenge Government. Is there anything you can think of in particular that is within the remit of the work that you have to cover and that is current Government policy that you fundamentally disagree with?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think I would want to be very strong on unregulated children's homes. I would want to be asking really hard questions about that. I would absolutely be challenging on mental health services and assessments for young people and why they have gone down to the bottom of the list; we have to get them up again. There probably isn't an area where I wouldn't make a really strong challenge. High-needs funding is, for me, absolutely critical. We need to secure that so that we can support the most vulnerable children. So yes, I am very comfortable challenging, but I am also about solutions. We can't just go to the table and say, "This is wrong." We need to go to the table and say, "This is what we could do, and this is why this is what we could do. Please let's do this." I have challenged all my life, and I think you could not take this role representing young people if you were afraid of challenging.



Q67 **Chair:** You made a speech recently that I thought was important, because I have always thought this myself. If I'm right, you said that the argument between progressives and traditionalists is a false one, and what I understand you to be saying is that you need both knowledge and skills and you can't have one without the other. I have believed that for some time. Can I ask you to expand on it and to explain what you meant, because I think it would be quite interesting to hear your views on it?

Dame Rachel de Souza: On social media and in lots of places, people tend to put themselves into two camps. You have people who would identify themselves by saying, "We are traditionalists. We like subject-based education. We want a deep knowledge of subjects. Children should follow traditional, subject-based and well-sequenced education." In many ways, that was a pendulum swing from the 1990s and early 2000s, when we moved to talking about assessment rather than curriculum for children. With every pendulum swing, you need to swing back, so a lot of that work on the knowledge curriculum has been inspired by people such as Don Hirsch and our own Michael Young's view of powerful knowledge.

I am a steelworker's daughter from Scunthorpe, and I needed a really good curriculum to show me the world and to increase my vocabulary—that needed to be there. Unfortunately, that pendulum swing then said, in terms of policy, "No vocational before 14. Let's put all the effort into subjects now." I want to push back. I have been saying this for years. I was invited by the EPI to speak at the Conservative party conference, which I did, gladly, to fight for vocational education. I would actually like to see a knowledge-rich vocational education. We need to push back on that.

Not only that, but this traditional/progressive divide is really unhelpful. We need to claim the progressive space—all of us—and say that we want our curriculum and our education system to be progressive. We need to look at models of assessment; we need to keep going. For me, holding the two is really important. I challenged my staff on that at staff conference, and we shared that. Yes, we believe that a knowledge-rich curriculum is the entitlement of every child—for me particularly, that little girl from Scunthorpe with no academic background needed that—but yes, we want to keep moving forward and be progressive, looking at different models of assessment. We want to bring vocational education into the piece, because that is right for lots of students. I am really passionate about that.

Q68 **Chair:** Do you think that in the long term, it might be better to have, instead of A-levels, a wider baccalaureate that includes academic, vocational and technical education?

Dame Rachel de Souza: That is a great question, and I think you should have a Select Committee investigation into it. I am just setting up a new post-16 provision at Great Yarmouth Charter Academy, where we can now open a sixth form, and I am looking at our Thetford Academy, because we have some academic sixth forms doing gold standard A-levels. What is the right offer at post-16 in those areas? What do most of those young people



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want to do? The first thing I want to look at is baccalaureate-style models. We need the mix. Great Yarmouth cannot hire any level of engineers and technically qualified people from STEM into jobs. They are going abroad to do it. I have young people leaving at 18 who want jobs. We have to prepare and get them ready. If I want to hold both those things—

Q69 **Chair:** So, as Tom partly asked earlier, as Children's Commissioner, will you champion vocational education and skills as well as the academic?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I always have and always will. At certain points when we are debating the curriculum, I do not think we should say that we must not have a good, subject-based and well-sequenced, knowledge-rich curriculum. I want both those things, and our children need both those things, so yes.

Q70 **Chair:** Finally—this relates partly to what Ian and others have asked—given that you have very good connections with some figures in and around Government, which is a good thing in a way because you will be able to open doors, if you took on the role, would you be a real battler and not afraid to challenge the establishment, even if they are your friends or people you know very well? That goes back to David Simmonds' early question about being a battler for children and really challenging existing opinion, even if you are connected with those people and agree with them or have known them in the past.

Dame Rachel de Souza: The answer is just 100% yes. I always have; I always do. We could go into some misunderstandings about how many of those people I know and what those relationships are, but the answer is simply yes. I took this role after discussing it with Sally Morgan, the Labour peer, who said to me, "Anne Longfield has owned that space. You get in there and own that space." I take that challenge incredibly seriously.

Q71 **Chair:** I am not saying anything about being friendly to Labour or Conservative. I just want someone who will upset the applecart, basically, and who will not be afraid to tell things how they are even if it upsets people.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Robert, the irony of some of the things that I have seen in the press is that I am probably considered absolutely difficult, a change-maker, a pusher and a fighter for change where I work, by my board, in my sector. Yes, that is exactly what I want to do, but with an intelligent, evidence-based background and with children's views, supporting children.

Chair: Okay. Thank you very much; I really appreciate you sitting there for more than two hours for some pretty tough questioning, but we have to do that—it is our job. I wish you well and a very happy Christmas, and wish good health to you, your trust, staff and employees.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Thank you very much.