



Public Services Committee

Uncorrected oral evidence: Children's Commissioner

Wednesday 18 June 2025

11 am

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Members present: Baroness Morris of Yardley (The Chair); Lord Blencathra; Lord Bradley; Baroness Cass; Baroness Coffey; Lord Laming; Lord Mott; Baroness Pidgeon; Lord Shipley; Baroness Wyld.

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Questions 1 - 12

Witness

[I](#): Dame Rachel de Souza DBE, Children's Commissioner.

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Examination of witness

Dame Rachel de Souza DBE.

Q1 The Chair: Welcome to this session of the Public Services Committee. Today we have a one-off session where we are discussing the work of the Children's Commissioner with Dame Rachel de Souza, who is the Children's Commissioner. Welcome, Dame Rachel. We are very pleased that you have been able to spend time with us today.

Your brief is so wide and all the issues are of such critical importance that, to be honest, we could have you for the day and I do not think we would have completed everything. We have chosen a couple of areas where we have particular interest or concerns and thought we would explore them. They are quite separate areas, so we will try to divide the time that we have among those areas. I hope that is all right with you. Anything that comes out of that, we have the opportunity to follow up in future.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Absolutely. I did want to say at the start that it is 20 years since Lord Laming set up my role after the terrible death of Victoria Climbié. I have spent this year dealing with the death of Sara Sharif and just today—but I have been dealing with it for four years—hearing about the girls not listened to in relation to the grooming gangs and the terrible thing of children not being heard when they have been raped by predatory men. This committee's work is absolutely crucial at this time. I am pleased to be here and I think we have lots to do.

The Chair: That is very good introduction because Lord Laming is going to ask the first question, as he should, given the nature of this hearing.

Q2 Lord Laming: Good morning. It is nice to see you again. It seems to be a terrible time for children and young people at present, including a report today of a young girl in unregistered accommodation where the authority is paying £29,000 a week to an organisation. With that in mind, and I do not influence that, what do you think are the key issues that are generally affecting children and young people in society now?

Dame Rachel de Souza: To address the illegal children's home point, there are 775 children in illegal children's homes. I have talked to children of four years old in an illegal set-up, children who are in caravans, children who are in hotels, children who are in totally unsuitable accommodation—and by illegal, I mean that no regulator is looking at them. It is often a point of desperation.

On your figure, we think the placements for 33 of those children are costing £1 million-plus, and it is costing about £500 million a year. Those are the figures we have been looking at. What have we done? We now will no longer have Ofsted giving one-word judgments for social care. There is an argument on the school side. At the moment, you can have good and outstanding authorities with lots of children in illegal homes, and they just have to say it. There is a massive issue that we need to deal with.

I do not just want to say the negatives. We need the local authorities planning strategically, using their money better and creating specialist foster and secure children's homes that can be excellent. There is a solution, it needs doing, and I think on this case my concern is pace. Everyone knows it needs doing; they need to get on with it and I need to see some reforming fire and a bit of pace here.

On the issues affecting children, I have spoken to a million children since I have been in formally. I have surveyed a million children and spoken to children everywhere. Two days of my week I am in either a prison, children's homes or hospitals. I speak to children everywhere, and I am always surprised. The good news is that most children are happy and fine, but those who are not, the most vulnerable, are the ones we need to shine a light on.

The issues with children are cross-cutting. When we talk about a child living in poverty, it is not an "other" thing. It is a child who cares about having a family, having somewhere to play, having unlit parks and being kept safe by the police, the same as any other child.

On big issues for children now, I think we are still in the middle—I am never going to let go of this—of an attendance crisis. We need to have our children, particularly our most vulnerable children, back at school because school is a proxy for safety. Also, children tell me that they have ambitions for their futures, and the only way to do it is to be at school.

Special educational needs is a key issue, and I know we are going to be looking at that today. I have just been to see Canada, I was in Australia last year, I was in the States, and I looked at provisions. I have some good international lessons for us—not all great but some good things.

I am very pleased to see the mental health teams rolled out. Mental health is an issue still. The solutions are around the things we talked about: family life, play, all the positives. The online world is a big issue. I will be publishing on porn this summer. They are very much the things I talked about to this committee three years ago, except I feel it is getting a bit worse.

Q3 Lord Shipley: You said something a moment ago that I would like you to expand. You said local authorities should be using their money better. I think they would say that they do not have enough money.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I am sure they would.

Lord Shipley: Can you give examples of where local authorities should use their money better? Do you have any comment on the statutory override that is due to come to an end in March next year, which could cause the bankruptcy of quite a number of councils because they do not have the cash?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I was particularly thinking about children in care, particularly those most vulnerable children in care, and the DoLs orders, the deprivation of liberty orders. I absolutely agree with you—I

am sure that there is a case to make for better funding of local authorities—but we find ourselves in silos. This is the right committee to address silos of public services where you have children who are extremely vulnerable and nobody will take responsibility for looking after them.

I sit on Friday afternoons, often before it goes to court, dealing with cases—I should not be—where health is saying that this child does not have a health need. The child has just been in specialist provision and tried to kill themselves for the past 48 hours, but “Oh no, they don’t have a health need”. Social care say, “It is a health case”. I have spent days trying to get them together, and they end up taking a family judge’s time up on Fridays getting deprivation of liberty orders. These £1 million cases are because our siloed way of working around children means that nobody will take responsibility and we end up paying a fortune anyway.

There has to be a better way of doing this. I am not an economist, but come on—money following the child, perhaps; better joint working. Lord Laming, you have been calling for this for 20 years. We have to do this better.

When I see it working well, I have seen some amazing things. I would love to take all of you—and if you have not been, please go—to the Lighthouse in Camden. It is a very appropriate place to discuss today. It has health, social care and police working with children who have been sexually abused, truly doing the hard work of multi-agency work with fantastic outcomes, with funding streams and with health leading there. One of the things I would like to see following the grooming gangs scandal is a Lighthouse, a multi-agency provision for sexually abused kids, in every single one of those areas. That is a practical thing that would make a difference.

We do have great practice and we can do more. It is the multi-agency bit that causes all these problems. Everybody is looking after their budgets and their thresholds and whatever, instead of looking at the child and thinking about what we need to do. I am sorry that I did not give you a technical financial answer, but I am not here to do that. LAs are a corporate parent, so should be doing better. That is what I will say.

Q4 Lord Bradley: You have laid out all the problems extremely well and chime with the briefing we have had. In many ways, what is going on is quite shocking. I absolutely agree with you about silo working. There is a whole range of activities in this—new legislation coming through now, previous parts of legislation, different funding streams to support pilot arrangements—but, as you say, we know what the answers are or the direction of travel. How would you pull together a coherent package of proposals that deals with the issues that you have rightly raised in those different areas, rather than continue to have the problems of out-of-area placements, inadequate quality of provision and different providers providing different arrangements? How do you get a coherent package that you could present and say, as you rightly said at the start, “Let’s get on with it”?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I share some of those frustrations about everybody being down in the knitting. If there is one thing this committee can do, it can stay high and think about this. I think there are some key accountability issues and a leadership issue.

I ask, "Who is the adult responsible for this child?". Anything is going to happen if this child ends up like lots of my children who go into DoLs, which is end up in the youth estate or in prison; they often assault their carers because they are deeply upset. I find girls on deprivation of liberty orders with serious mental health issues and special needs in prison.

I think it is a leadership issue. I think we need government to show leadership and genuinely start getting services together, because it starts here. The siloing starts up here, but I also think that there is leadership at local level. There is so much that can be done.

I do not think it always takes legislation. I think it takes will and high-quality leaders. A piece of work I did recently in Manchester—it started as part of the attendance alliance under the last Government, but was embraced by Andy Burnham and Kate—was to set up the local attendance alliance. It is a low-key sounding thing, but we got 10 chief execs and 10 DCSs around the table, we trained 420 schools, and we got dentists, health and mental health around the table. They had never spoken to each other or looked at each other's data.

It is that local convening. Surely the new Government are passionate about localism. I want to see some vision for it. We are paying all these leaders lots of money. Let us get some accountability in there and, please, the regulators as well. What are the regulators doing in judging these?

One thing that I have seen coming through in the Bill that I am happy about is an outcomes framework. That outcomes framework needs to not be bad outcomes that we are trying to avoid—a race to the bottom. It needs to be about the highest outcomes that we will try to achieve: a child going to school, a child being reunited with their family or kin, a child's health outcomes. These are the things that will make the difference. I would like to see an ambitious outcomes framework across all of the public sector that we can all agree on, and to use the regulators to hold leadership to account on this, with some vision from the Government, please.

Lord Bradley: Or perhaps reintroduce Sure Start.

The Chair: Does anyone else want to come in on that question?

Lord Laming: One of the things that you have expressed extremely well is that it can be done because it is being done. We are not being starry-eyed or seeking the impossible.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Absolutely.

Lord Laming: It is about how we can best take that agenda forward,

because I agree completely with the agenda.

Dame Rachel de Souza: We need to learn from each other and from different sectors. I cannot tell you how inspired I get when I work with young paediatricians who are clever, smart and have really good ideas. I have seen them over in Australia doing amazing things, leading on indigenous health and development and social care.

I personally was an education reformer—part of a 20-year education reform development—where we showed the difference that we could make with a passionate commitment. It does not matter where you come from; with the right education you can achieve as well as those boys at Eton. You can do it. Nothing has been perfect, nationally and internationally, but we need to learn from the bits of the public sector where we have had success, like the Lighthouse, and scale it and replicate it. The Lighthouse, the sexual abuse clinic, is a fantastic place. It was set up based on the Icelandic model and the whole world comes to see it. All the other countries and territories have scaled it up. We have one. Come on—we need to be ambitious. Do it; have a plan.

Lord Laming: Would you agree that in the last 10 years, each of these silos that you describe has withdrawn into itself, that they have become very inward-looking, and that all the collaborative work that used to be in place is gone? How can we reverse that and get this collaborative work well established again?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I was a teacher. I started teaching in 1991, and I feel that the narrative I am getting in schools and from social care now is often like the 1990s narrative. It is as if everything did not happen. We need to be way more can-do and way more intelligent, and leave old binaries behind. I know we are going to talk about special educational needs. I was in Canada looking at some of the things they are doing for their kids with the most complex needs. Instead of full special, they are doing special kindergarten attached to the hospitals, and then those staff are helping get those kids settled in schools. We need to use our brains and be innovative. We need to unleash that a bit and move away from the idea that everything is terrible and there is not enough money. We need our leadership to be on fire for these children.

Q5 **Baroness Coffey:** I should say that I have known Dame Rachel for some time. She used to run Inspiration Trust. It was mainly in Norfolk and I tried to get her trust to come to the bit of Suffolk where I used to live, but DfE would not allow it because she was already too successful, which was very frustrating at the time.

However, I think there are a couple of things there. It is quite interesting to hear the silo stuff, when things such as the integrated care boards, the moving of health and the responsibility for children in local councils being very much a statutory element were supposed to have brought people together. Is it broken everywhere? I appreciate that you have singled out the Lighthouse in Camden, but are there other local authorities? I do not know whether your data is spread across the country or you are getting

pockets where it is really bad. That would be helpful to know.

Dame Rachel de Souza: There are some fabulous individuals doing amazing things around the country. I see some DCSs who are bucking the trend and taking genuine responsibility for children. I was very impressed with what Manchester was trying to do. They got me in to convene, but they backed it all the way and everybody came.

Size is an issue. We are 151 local authorities, and if you are a tiny local authority it can sometimes be difficult to do these things—and sometimes you are too big. The mayoral groupings are good, and we ought to think—I know that people have tried—about how we lay over ICBs, social care areas and schools to do some of this work that we need to do. Sorry, it is not at the top of my head, but there are some great examples.

You are right that there is a statutory requirement to do it, and that is why I started with Lord Laming telling us to do it 20 years ago. Unfortunately, I have to report what I see with my own eyes, which is not enough working together. By the time it gets up here, it is about bureaucracy and money. It is not about what a child needs and who is responsible for that child. That is my concern.

Baroness Coffey: Right now we have the Bill that is going through Committee stage in this House, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, which are two quite distinctive elements. We are still on the first part, children's well-being. I appreciate that you may have commented on this publicly, but is there anything you would like to share with the committee that you think will help the outcomes for children due to this legislation, or where you think it might hinder?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I was very keen on some of the things on the children's well-being side. That was the Bill we were expecting, and I was able to contribute to that a lot. We need some things done well: the unique identifier, the sharing of data, home education, the keeping of the register. Some of those things are timely and ready and will help, if only to make sure we get support focus there because we know what is going on.

On the school side, I am keeping a very close eye on it. It must not negatively affect outcomes. I am going to make sure it does not and will be calling out where it does. We have worked very hard to get families of schools and groups of schools to look after the education of children in their area. I had hoped that a schools Bill would be bringing the pieces together locally. I did not think we needed new legislation around academisation, for example. I think 80% of schools are good; 40% of local authorities are not yet good. I felt we needed to focus much more on how we support the child around the school and bring schools into that partnership to do it.

The recruitment of teachers is excellent, and I think there is yet a vision to be seen for how we can make sure we are building on the reforms. I

was a principal in 2005, one of Tony Blair's first academy principals. We need to be building on the 20 years of work we have done, not going back to some of the debates around old binaries that we do not need. Standard school is the silver bullet for everyone, if we can get it right. If we can get them to school and get them achieving, that is what kids tell me they want.

The Chair: We will go on to special needs now; it is quite a good link.

Q6 **Baroness Cass:** Yes, I am going to ask about special needs. I will just say that the Lighthouse is amazing. Some of my colleagues are working there. I do not know whether you have also seen the Well Centre in Lambeth, which is primary care-led and you can walk in as a teenager or young adult with anything. It is completely multi-agency.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Sunrise in Royal London was excellent as well. There are people doing great things.

Baroness Cass: Sorry, I am off the agenda. On SEND, we have this dynamic with increasing need and not enough money. Even with all the money in the world, there are workforce shortages, so how do we start to crack that nut? Perhaps you could say a bit about what you think about the increasing need that we are seeing.

Dame Rachel de Souza: The problems are well rehearsed, are they not? The 2014 EHCP model was meant for that 3% or so of children with really complex needs. We have seen a massive rise, particularly in NDD, children with neurodevelopmental disorders, and we are seeing parents with low trust. I did an analysis of the 13,000 parents who went to SEND tribunals, of which 90%-plus won. Immediately you are into a standoff and we have this adversarial thing.

The two things I can bring you, because you can get SEND specialists in to talk, are what children with SEND say and what we have seen recently internationally that is interesting, that we can learn from and that genuinely will work. There are some examples of great things that we have seen here too.

What do the children say? I have surveyed a million children and about 200,000 of those are children with additional needs or special educational needs. We have heard directly from them with no gatekeeper. They want to be in their local school; they want to go to school with their friends where they live; they want to get the support they need. In 2001 when I did my first half a million survey, if the children were getting their needs met in their local school, they were happier than the rest of the cohort. That has gone down a bit. The narrative from the children is really quite different.

We work with different groups of these children. I want to differentiate them a bit. There are the children with extremely complex needs, and it is a small percentage but it is fairly stable. We know from birth what their needs are. It drives me mad that they have to apply for EHCPs every

year and we are not supporting that. They are having a rotten time, and we need to do something there.

Canada was amazing on this one. The specialist kindergarten year is often attached to children's hospitals that looked great with academic institutions there—let us get them. The question was not, "Prove you have a need or jump through this hoop". The question was, "How can we help you? How can we help you be a parent? How can we get you integrated into your local school?" There was no question of not going to your local school. There was no desire to go to full-time special, whereas our system has become so adversarial and everyone is saying, "Let me in special", which is completely different from 20 years ago. The hubs that did the kindergartens kept the relationship with the families. What an effective way to do it, bringing resources together so that they could help with advocacy if anything happened. We need to look at the complex needs children.

Wherever I have been over the last couple of years in the English-speaking world—Australia, Canada, LA—I have looked at the data and talked to people. I have to say that our data is the best data. I tried to drill into Canada's data and Australia's data, and it is nowhere near the quality of ours, so please feel proud about something we do well. But they still have this huge uptick of children with neurodiversity, autism and ADHD. It is interesting, and they are challenged by that too. What I saw internationally was that Canada, for example, does not have an Ofsted or a regulator, so commenting on the quality was tricky, but it definitely has different models of specialists within mainstream or special school attached to mainstream. They were very inclusive with all their disability work—same with Australia.

Most of those countries are putting a fortune into early help and early support. I have some bad news for you. It is great that they do it, and for the right reason, but it is not changing the outcomes. I think you need to know that. Everybody is going to sit around here saying that they are great, they have no Ofsted and we are poor, but actually it is not reducing diagnosis or changing outcomes. I think that is important because we always think it is about just pulling more in and doing more. It is doing the right things, such as the early kindergarten, that is so effective.

We are talking to children all the time about the autism, ADHD and NDD diagnosis, because that is the thing that is breaking the bank. I have some real worries that we are giving children—first of all, children are often diagnosing online—diagnoses that will be with them for the whole of their life and telling them that they have these lifelong issues, and that is it. Then we just send them back to school. It is a real concern for me. I have raised this with CMO and the Royal College of Paediatrics, and I am on the case. I think we need a clear evidence base for what we are doing here. That is the next place I would go.

Among paediatricians around the world, there are probably four or five different groups of approaches to this and what we should be doing, and I

think we need clarity. I have been trying to pin CMO down, and I think we should be asking him, "What do we really think about this?". SLD diagnoses have gone right down, so you are diagnosed with autism. I am concerned that we are giving children diagnoses for life that make them feel they cannot, when we need to be doing adaptive teaching and making them think they can. Schools have a major place to play, but so does health, and we need to be getting together more and making common cause.

Baroness Cass: I totally agree on that one, this having been my specialty back in the day, but I will ask you a supplementary. Do you think that we are looking at the right outcomes for this group of young people? There is data on academic attainment, but what is the right outcome? The other question is, what are the barriers here to having more SEN units within mainstream, which has huge advantages?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I agree about moving into mainstream, because kids want to go to their local school, play with local kids and have a normal upbringing. The concern about special is a concern about what parents are worried about: the quality of education for their child. If we address that and we start answering the question, "How can we help you?", rather than, "What's wrong with you?", and we get a different system in—lots of good early support to pick things up—that will give parents confidence. There is a brilliant example in Peterborough, Vikat—I cannot remember his surname—doing early screening of all nurseries and not diagnosing kids but asking what we need to do to help parents behaviourally so that they can hit the things. In Canada, you just get an appointment for speech and language. You do not wait on a waiting list for whatever.

The outcomes question is a really good one. There is a fantastic special school in Bolton that I visited early on, where they have kids with really complex needs. For them it is work experience: getting a job, choosing your life path. They are really ambitious about the right kinds of qualifications that suit their children. They were as ambitious to put their kids on the qualifications that they were doing as I was for any child in Inspiration Trust. We were getting them; we were going for it; we were can-do.

If you have a child with life-limiting disabilities, the steps and what good looks like—it might be being verbal, it might be being able to express yourself—are massive positive milestones. We could be really intelligent about what we do with curriculum. We could incentivise schools rather than disincentivising them for having special units. Most of our heads wrongly think, "If I take those kids, it's going to affect my place on the league table". Rubbish. It is a tiny number. We have to dissuade them of that and make sure that Ofsted is praising them for being inclusive. I think that is starting to change a bit anyway.

The Chair: In both the areas, perhaps special needs in particular but also with looked-after children, you have not said anything about the parents. In my role as an MP, I used to talk to people in the constituency, such as

the police. There was always this discussion as to whether it was best to target the parents. I remember a police officer saying to me once that he had started camping trips for local kids. He said, "I've given up with the parents but I'm going to put all my energy into their children, because that's how I think I can change it". I have remembered that for 30 years and think it is a very interesting thing. With SEND, is a lot of the pressure for statements and for special schools and diagnosis not coming from the parents? That is my feeling, but I have no evidence of that. Therefore, does work need to be done there as well as with the authorities?

Dame Rachel de Souza: There are two things. We have to understand parents. Parents are desperate for their child to be supported. MPs' postbags are full of it. There are well-organised groups because the current system is an adversarial one. If we had parents' needs being met with their children at nursery, if we were thinking about parents and enabling them early on—think of the Canadian parents where you are straight into a specialist kindergarten and are supported. None of the parents I spoke to was desperate and concerned. They said, "Yes, it is great, and they helped me do this". We need to bring back trust with the SEND parent group. They are hanging on to the current model because they are terrified of it being taken away and nothing being in place. We have to bring back trust and talk to them.

On parents generally and parents in SEND, there is the Pears Family School—the Anna Freud Centre works with it—which has kids with some serious mental health concerns, but also autism and kids who have been excluded and secluded. That school is incredible because it brings family to the school. A parent will come to school with a child. It only has normal AP funding. To go there, you have to have one of your relatives come with you. The success rate is incredible, with most of the kids back into mainstream after two years, fine. It is worth it because it is family. Lots of these issues are complex. It is worth a look.

I think of parents with kids in care and parents with kids on the edge of care. Given that children tell me all the time that the most important thing for them is their family life and a happy family life, we must—as government and politicians—not shy away from talking about parenting. I was in the *Sunday Times* on Easter Sunday telling parents to watch their own phone use before they start talking about bans, because kids will copy you as a parent more than you can tell them. Yes, of course we need to be working with parents and talking to parents. It is an effective thing to do.

Lord Mott: I was interested in the comment you made about the example from Peterborough. If we were to screen all children as soon as they hit nursery, would that, first, start to give us a direction of travel, and, secondly, start to allocate resources in the appropriate way and perhaps stop some of the issues that can come further down the track?

Dame Rachel de Souza: As long as screening does not translate into getting a diagnosis, because a lot of these NDD diagnoses are done by, "So you are exhibiting these behaviours", tick, tick, tick, and therefore

you are—boom. I have sat with children in local community health having their diagnosis, and then it is back to school. We need the speech and language professionals and the paediatricians not having to spend all their time waiting to see a child for four years and then doing formal diagnosis, but wrapping around the young ones. How can we help these behaviours? “What can we do?”, rather than, “What is wrong with you?”. If screening is that, fine. If screening is, “I am going to give you a diagnosis and then off you go; try to get an EHCP”, we are still in the same problem. How can we ensure our teachers are trained in adaptive teaching so that they can support all children? How can we manage the behavioural issues that some of our children are exhibiting, not, “What is wrong with you?”.

Q7 **Baroness Wyld:** I just need to remind the committee of my registered interest as a board member at Ofsted, but I actually want to talk about the private sphere. You picked up on parenting, and if I may just broaden it out from children with special educational needs, you talked about what is going on at home, the role of parents and the work on social media. Are there any other societal issues that you have seen in many families? Is family breakdown more of an issue than it used to be? Do you think parental attitudes have changed? Do you have any views on the home sphere?

Dame Rachel de Souza: On the family stuff, a couple of years ago, after I had done the Big Ask, I did a national independent family review. It was fascinating because basically the people of this country—we did nationally representative research on the adults and the children—think family is the most important thing in their life. They define family in a very broad way, not like the census data, but when I dug into the millennial cohort I saw that 50% of children were not growing up with both parents and were in positions that were quite unstable. There is a lot more instability for children growing up, for all sorts of reasons, and particularly in areas that feel more underserved. That can be in both city and rural areas, where you see quite a lot of instability and pressure on family life.

There are big shifts and changes. We often do not talk about them because we worry—politicians, particularly—about talking about family. It is concerning, but for children the stability question and what they perceive a family to be is absolutely crucial. I would rather be a Children and Families Commissioner than just a Children’s Commissioner. I think it holds all of it.

Baroness Wyld: It is a huge question and I know there is no perfect answer, but what could help with that? What could help with family instability? What can help those children? What interventions do you think are most useful? I know it is case by case, but are there any major interventions that you think might help?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Key points are birth of children, so becoming a parent, and support in those key points. Adults told me that they wanted the support to feel familial, local and sustained. They first said they

wanted to turn to their own families, then to their friends, then to something local that felt familial and local. We need to listen carefully to the support that people think will work for them.

This is a little bit off to the side, but there is a great model in Norway where basically if a person been involved in criminal justice—for example, a child has been involved with the law—they are given an adult mentor, often retired, who they have to see every week. It makes a massive difference. When I interviewed every child who got a custodial sentence or any sentence from rioting after the Southport riots, the children who had been sent to do community service, such as with age support in the shop, had older mentors and did the best. All across the English-speaking world, you have fantastic volunteering work, mentoring work, support work. We do not. That is what we need to try to revivify in our communities. When services are state-delivered, they need to ape that. They need to look like that and feel like that. That is what makes the difference.

Lord Mott: You mentioned that our data was very good. Also, you touched on the absence of a national identifier. Do we have the prospect of a single view of the child? How many databases are there and would it help? If we do not have it, how come the data is so good?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I am really pleased to see in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that a unique identifier has been committed to. That is something that we have been working on for a number of years, and I certainly tried to get it in there; it is a good thing. I remember, in my first few months as Children's Commissioner, going to Bedford, where the police gave me a list of children who were not on any doctor's surgery, not on any school, not on any whatever. It is the 21st century; we can do this.

I would like this committee to keep your eye on that. The unique identifier is probably one of the biggest public sector reforms for children, and again it must not be a race to the bottom unique identifier. We could be digitising the red book; we could be making sure that parents can interact with this information on the front end. We could do some exciting things with this. I would love you all to take this as one of your missions. It sounds boring but it is so important. Just think about it for the grooming gangs girls. If police and social care and others could see that, we could have made a difference.

Q8 Lord Laming: The Children Act 1948 established a contract between the state and parents, which was that the state will provide education for every child, and the parent of every child is expected to ensure that their child gets to school. Do you think that contract has now broken? Are we in a situation where a lot of parents will acquiesce if their child either does not want to go to school or is not willing to go to school?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think that contract is wobbling. I do not think it is broken. Most children are back, but we have a number of groups of children, and I have gone and met them. I made it my business to find

the missing children. I have found many of the 100,000 ghost children. I have gone and seen the children who are not attending. If you look, you have children with special educational needs who just gave up and did not come back. You have children crippled with mental health anxiety issues that we need to sort out. They would be better in school. They need to be in school. We have to get them back. Only playing with their friends and being back will help. We have to do something about that. Then there are the children we really worry about, those children at risk of criminal exploitation who perhaps were on the VRU's list. There are some clear buckets of children.

When I see the Friday absences, I worry about parental commitment. It probably feels very familiar for us all. I remember my mother saying, "You think you're sick; you're going to school", and the school was right. While we need the understanding, inclusion and support for all children in schools, we also need to be absolutely clear that school is not negotiable. I want the Government, local authorities and school leaders to be harder on that. We all have to do it. Most parents will breathe a sigh of relief once we get back in the right lane on this.

Baroness Pidgeon: The parents I talk to say that some children are opting out of school and there is no consequence as such for the child. It is for the parents, and the parents are desperately trying. Is there a balance there?

Dame Rachel de Souza: You are absolutely right. It is interesting: we are still feeling a bit of a tail of what happened with school closures. I wish it had never been done, and we must never do it again. The evacuation was the last time schools were closed. The Church of England gave its primary schools into the state's care at the turn of the century—I can go back further than you on that one, Lord Laming. School has been the centre of children's lives.

It taught us that school is good for kids. We need accountability of our leaders. We need Ofsted and everyone to be on it to make sure that there are plans in place for the children who are struggling to get back, that we get them back, and that we are held to account as public servants to make sure they are at school. I was very disappointed with some of the things I saw, for example, in LA and Canada: "No, it is okay; they are just having online school". A child should not be having online school. They need to be growing up with their peers, learning and having fun.

Q9 **Baroness Pidgeon:** You have given us quite a lot of examples. You talked about the silo working, which is still problematic all these decades later. You have talked about the importance of sharing data. Do you have any specific examples, either UK or internationally, of where there is some good sharing of data across organisations centred around the child that we might want to look at?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Some local authorities do it well. Leeds has set up its hubs where it has a range of agencies working together, almost

like their pre-family hub model, where the police and social care are sharing data, so that is on the larger scale. They have done well. I gave the example earlier of the Lighthouse in Camden, where the police are sharing data with social care, and that works well. That is the small and the large, so we can do it.

Baroness Pidgeon: That is funded partly by MOPAC, is it not?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Yes.

Baroness Pidgeon: So it has money coming in from the mayor's office to make that happen.

Dame Rachel de Souza: And health. There are models where it is working, but a lot of local authorities are trying to set up their own data-sharing model. I think we need to go high and help them.

Baroness Pidgeon: Have you seen anything internationally that you think we should follow? Do you have some examples?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Not on data.

Baroness Pidgeon: Nothing around data at all?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I am sorry, honestly, and I have been right through Europe with my Children's Commissioner counterparts, and no, on data I have not.

Baroness Pidgeon: That is extraordinary, because we feel we have a long way to go.

Dame Rachel de Souza: Take the praise.

The Chair: We do not say that of ourselves as a nation, do we? There are lots of stories about data collection. Is that the digitisation of it rather than the collection?

Dame Rachel de Souza: I think part of it is federal and state government. Because we are so centralised, our data is better, whereas with federal and state governments, some states could not tell me how many children they had in care or how many children were leaving every year. It took me ages to get under in LA.

Baroness Cass: Even Scandinavia, which is reputedly good?

Dame Rachel de Souza: They are amazing, but I do not know what the data sharing in the Barnabus was—I would need to check. I am talking about the English-speaking countries.

Baroness Coffey: I was going to make the point slightly that you can have as much data as you like, but if your analytical capabilities are low, there is an element of: So what?

Dame Rachel de Souza: Act on it.

Baroness Coffey: Be able to interpret it and, as you say, act on it. Are we on to other questions yet?

The Chair: If it is a short one, yes. We have two or three minutes before we get to our last question.

Q10 **Baroness Coffey:** We are also doing an inquiry at the moment on child maintenance. There are over 1 million children who are due to be getting money from another parent. Unfortunately, about 170,000 children do not get a penny that we are aware of. I wondered whether this had ever come up in your looking into aspects of child maintenance. They can end up being the baddie. I just want to get a sense of money and how that has come up.

Dame Rachel de Souza: I have been asked by the Government to do a piece of work for the poverty commission. We have been asking children about their experiences. The interesting thing is that children do not talk about themselves in terms of, "I am in poverty". They talk about things such as not having food or their housing.

It is interesting that three or four years ago children did not, when they talked to us, talk about money at all, not even their parents' money. In recent surveys, they are talking about it far more. They are feeling much more of a squeeze and talking about parental income. They express it in terms of, "I wish my mum could get a job". We have some evidence from kids talking about financial things. They tend to express it as, "I wish my parents could get a job that paid enough". They are ultimately always positive.

We work with Ministers, and have done for a number of years, on legislation and child maintenance. I am very aware of what has been tried, and I absolutely think that parents should take responsibility for their children and pay what is owed. We should use every power we have to make sure that is done properly.

Q11 **Lord Blencathra:** Commissioner, it is refreshing to see your dynamism and hear your views on these subjects. It leads me to reflect that there are two other women who are responsible for saving the lives of tens of thousands of children, admittedly appointed 15 years too late. One is our own Baroness Casey and the other is our own Baroness Cass, and you seem to be in that same category of three dynamic women doing their best to help young children.

In about 2012, just after I was appointed to the Lords, I put down a question to the Government asking them what assessment they had made of the effect of social media and mobile phones on children in school, and particularly bullying of young girls. The answer came back, "No problem at all, all hunky-dory, social media, wonderful thing". Ask them that now and you will get a different answer.

I have just been looking at your reports on pornography and the effect on young people, giving them weird ideas on sexual violence as normal sex; on deepfake porn, where people can now impose the photograph of

another school kid on a porn star person; and on school phone policies in England. You point out that more than 98% of schools have policies restricting phones in schools, but that is only six hours in the day, and the other 18 hours they are accessing all this vile stuff on social media and doing bullying. What more can be done to control the other 18 hours, or is the battle all lost now?

Dame Rachel de Souza: It is so interesting, and I have given this much thought. As you say, when the average age of seeing horrible degrading porn is 12; when 25% of girls are afraid of going out because someone might take a picture of them and put it on a deepfake—and many of them have seen that happen to their teachers and others; when parents are desperate because they do not know what to do and they are getting mixed messages all the time about whether they should buy a phone or let their child on, we are in a pickle.

I meet regularly with Baroness Jones, who is new at DCMS and has children's online safety as her brief, and I have been quite concerned about the children's code. I do not think it is strong enough. We have had the online safety legislation. I regularly bring the tech companies in. I have seen a real shift in them to more confidence since changes—basically international changes, which is why I was recently challenging Elon Musk in the press and telling him that he needed to behave like a father when it came to children because he was one.

So what can we do? I brought into the DfE hundreds of 16 to 21 year-olds who had grown up with social media and tech, and asked what they wish their parents had known about tech? I felt that was something I could do as Children's Commissioner, so that it was not just me getting involved in the debates. What did they say? "Don't give us mobile phones and access to tech too young. Manage our time on it. Be careful with what we're looking at. Keep open conversations with us. Don't let us take our phones to bed at night." After seeing "Adolescence", I think we have all worked that one out.

My young people come up with far more sensible rules. Have a childhood rather than be on these social media sites. Personally, I did not give my own son a phone until he was 16, and then it was a non-internet connected one for when he was going to and from school. Although he used tech and online, he did not want one. He was too busy playing tennis.

I have never been a banner but with social media, the experience I have had with the tech companies and the parents of children who have killed themselves because of what they were seeing all night—if I was ever going to go anywhere, it would be those social media sites that I would want kids off. I have told X that if they do not get hardcore porn off it, they should not have children on it. We need to think carefully about what we are exposing our children to and to recognise that these tech companies are not benign, and it is not great for kids to spend all this time on them. We need to just be clear about that.

Parents have a job, and I am constantly speaking to and challenging parents. I was on the Radio 4 "Today" programme with Emma Barnett interviewing me about banning, and I said, "Well, how much time did you spend on your phone and your tech yesterday?". She went green and chased me afterwards and said, "But I was reading newspapers". I said, "Your children will see what you are doing", and that is the key thing.

There is something for parents to do. We did a survey recently of every head teacher in the country. I used my powers to find out the five things they are most concerned about. I asked them about phone usage; I was really asking them about pastoral systems. One of their highest concerns was social media use outside school. It is changing children's lives. I have had children in my own schools. I had never seen a girl take her own life. She was from a very vulnerable family and had done something with a boy. He put it all around on social media—and they are bullying on social media—so she went out into the woods and left a note saying, "Here you all are, this is what you wanted". They learn how to do it online. We have to grip this. For adults, I am not interested in regulation; for children, we must protect them.

Q12 The Chair: That is a very strong message, and thank you for that. We come to the last question now. As you know, we do different inquiries. From what you have said and your area of responsibility, what recommendations or suggestions would you make to the committee as to inquiries we could do in the future that could have a real impact? That is what we want to do, rather than produce another discussion document.

Dame Rachel de Souza: There is something I would really love your help with—a short one that I have at the top of my mind. I went to the Royal London Hospital a few months ago to see Martin Griffiths, an amazing trauma surgeon who is sewing up children and getting families elsewhere. When I was there I popped down to the children's ward, because I always do, and a little girl—a three year-old tiny tot attached to a great big machine—walked around the corner, and said, "Hiya". You know when you get the hair on the back of your neck? I thought, "What's going on there?", so I asked, "Who's she?". I think the chief nurse had taken me down there on purpose, and she said, "She lives here". I said, "What do you mean she lives here?", and she said, "Well, she could be at home but her parents don't want her; it's too much hassle. Social care won't do anything or find her a foster placement".

That child had never seen grass, been to a nursery or been off the ward, and had a different person put her to bed every night. She was three years old. As you can imagine, my advocacy team took up that case, but my hackles were up. I have done a statutory request to every hospital, and chief nurses and ward sisters everywhere are saying, "This is a massive problem". I have just got the data back, and up to about 3% of beds are being blocked by children who social care are not picking up and families are not picking up. For me, this is a fundamental children's rights issue. It is the right to a childhood. I would love your assistance around this if you had a short bit of time. No child should be growing up in an institution or a hospital when they could be in a home.

The Chair: It is the mirror of the adult social care hospitals with children, is it not?

Dame Rachel de Souza: But childhood lasts for such a short time. For me, that is a key issue that I would love to shine some light on and try to make a difference with.

Baroness Cass: Birmingham has a team for children with medical complexity with a fantastic team lead. They have a housing person on the team and they are very focused on getting children home in these circumstances. To declare an interest, I started a multi-agency group looking at how we best serve children with medical complexity. It goes back to what you said about Canada having people who specialise in this where we do not. Our care is much more fragmented, so it is very close to my heart.

Dame Rachel de Souza: There is a problem around specialist foster, and that feeds into a lot of what we are saying about children with DoLs and others, but also, because of pressures on social care, children have just been left there. I think it plays into a lot of the things that we are concerned about. It is that or grasping the nettle on NDD diagnosis. I think that is at the heart of special needs, but that is a big one.

The Chair: Thank you very much for those suggestions and for a very interesting session. The thing I have learned is that asking the right questions or putting the issue in the right way, when you are talking to children and those who run children's services, is as important as ever. We have benefited from it greatly and we are very appreciative of your time. We know you have been before and we hope you will come again. Thank you very much, and we will close this formal meeting.