

Education Committee

Oral evidence: [Accountability hearings](#), HC 341

Tuesday 14 November 2017

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Members present: Robert Halfon (Chair); Lucy Allan; Michelle Donelan; James Frith; Emma Hardy; Ian Mearns; Lucy Powell; Marion Fellows.

Questions 160 - 216

Witness

[I](#): Anne Longfield OBE, The Children's Commissioner for England.



Examination of witness

Witness: Anne Longfield OBE.

Q160 **Chair:** Good morning, everyone. I welcome Anne—if you do not mind me calling you by your first name—to give evidence today. For the benefit of the tape, could you give your full name and title, please?

Anne Longfield: I am Anne Longfield. I am the Children's Commissioner for England.

Q161 **Chair:** Thank you for coming. I am going to start with some general overview questions and then my colleagues will come in with further detail. In your recent report, the mental health lightning review, you said that 28% of children who were referred to child and adolescent mental health services—CAMHS—were turned away. What is driving these trends and what can be done to address them, and what further work are you planning to scrutinise child mental health services?

Anne Longfield: Thank you for having me here today. It is really good to be here to talk about the work we are doing. You will have noticed that I am pressing hard on children's mental health because, literally from the day I walked into the job, children have been coming into rooms that I have been in, talking to me, their parents have been talking to me and professionals have been talking to me with concerns about mental health. I have been shocked by some of the stories they told me; children have told me that they understand that feeling suicidal is not enough to get them help—they will have to try to commit suicide first. For a 12 or 13-year-old to tell you that is quite shocking.

My first piece of work on that was to undertake a lightning review, as you said, and recently, three or four weeks ago, to circulate the briefing paper to MPs. I am very clear—

Q162 **Chair:** Can I interrupt to ask you to give brief answers, because we have a lot to get through? Thank you.

Anne Longfield: I am very clear that there is increasing prevalence, from what I can see, of children's mental health issues. There are a number of facts driving that: complexity of life, social media and problems in their home life. All of those come together. The exact cause is largely unknown, but everyone I meet, from teachers to parents, tells me that that is the case. It is something that I have been keen to shine a light on, keen to let MPs know about—members of the Committee will have had the briefing—and keen, in an ongoing way, to look at what I can do about it.

Q163 **Chair:** In a House of Commons debate last week, on children and mental health in schools and colleges, I said that there should be a serious review by the Government of the impact of social media on mental health. You kindly retweeted that. Can I ask what you are doing on that and how serious do you think the review is? The Government said they



were doing something with the Department for culture and sport. What more could be done and what are you doing precisely?

Anne Longfield: The digital impact is immense. It is largely unknown. I agree completely that Government should undertake a review of the impact. I am currently holding some focus groups with eight to 12-year-olds, to look at what the impact is on them. An awful lot of children are online from a very young age. I am going to continue to shine a light on that, continue to bring forward the evidence from that and continue to push social media companies to be more accountable, but there is also a role for Government in terms of the recognition of the impact on mental health and the distress that causes. Certainly, from your Committee debate last week, I would agree that siting mental health support within schools is an urgency, and one that really will address some of the low level anxieties.

Q164 **Chair:** My colleague, Lucy Powell, will address some of those issues later. I want to come on to something else—children in need. They are, as you know, children who are on the social services radar and considered in need of social services but who do not reach the threshold of significant harm. At any one point, there are around 390,000 children in need, and they perform worse at school than children who have been in care for 12 months or more. Why are those children's outcomes so poor and what support do you think they should receive inside and outside the school gates?

Anne Longfield: I am very worried about that number of children. For children who have vulnerabilities and are in care, clearly there are immense difficulties, but we have a care system which at least is giving them the support they need; we know where they are and they are getting support. These children, largely, fall outside that. A large part of my work is shining a light on the children who are not getting support.

There was a welcome commitment in the Government's manifesto to look at children in need in more detail, and I look forward to seeing what that means and that coming forward. We know from my vulnerability work that we have a number of children—780,000—who are living in families with complex needs themselves. These are children who are largely hidden; they are not getting support and they are not coming to the attention of the authorities. With increasing limitations on spending, the early intervention and preventive work that we know is so important is not coming through for those children.

Q165 **Chair:** What do you think of the idea of family hubs, given the impact a strong family has on children's lives?

Anne Longfield: I am a big fan of family hubs. I have been banging on about family hubs for probably about a decade. In my previous work, I ran children's centres and, largely, those developed into family hubs themselves. I recognise the importance of families, and I really recognise the importance of working with families to strengthen them in a very



HOUSE OF COMMONS

accessible but really joined-up way. We have 2,500 children's centres. The potential to expand those into family hubs is enormous, and the hubs are there in themselves. To be able to bring services together around those hubs, to be able to meet the local needs of families and work with communities, is huge.

Q166 Chair: What do you think of the opportunity areas in terms of helping children? Have the Government identified the right cold spots? Will they divert resources from other deprived parts of the country? For example, there is not one opportunity area in the north-east. Will it make a big difference to children in those opportunity areas?

Anne Longfield: I favour the idea of place-based initiatives, because there is an awful lot that can be done, by bringing resources together in an area, to be able to support children in that community. On that basis, the opportunity areas have an awful lot to offer. As part of the work that I have been doing with Growing up North, I have been really keen to look at what is happening with the opportunity areas in the north. I want them to have a broad brief; I want them to look outside education and to look at children from birth, right up until they leave school. It is an opportunity to bring different agencies together, bring different professionals together in an area and really look at what that area can offer children.

Q167 Chair: Do you think it is working at the moment?

Anne Longfield: It is so early in the lifetime of those opportunity areas that they are only just getting going. Certainly, I am going to the Whitby and Scarborough one that Martin Narey chairs. I am going to talk with them about how they can plan for children throughout the lifecycle. At the moment, it is too early. I would wish the plans to be broader than just education, though. That is my core message.

Q168 Ian Mearns: Do you not think it is a little odd that there is an opportunity area in the constituency of the children's Minister, but there is not one in the entirety of the north-east of England?

Anne Longfield: I have nothing to do with where the opportunities are chosen. I would—

Q169 Ian Mearns: You are meant to be an advocate for children all over the country though.

Anne Longfield: Absolutely. Clearly, there will be a lot of areas in the north-east that would really benefit from an opportunity area, so I will be pressing for more opportunity areas. Certainly, in areas where there is not one and there is a great need for one, I will be really happy to work with you to put the point on that.

Q170 Ian Mearns: You have not raised an eyebrow about the fact that the north-east of England has been missed out entirely in what has happened so far.



Anne Longfield: I would want the north-east of England to have an opportunity area, and to be able to look at what that means. There are a lot of areas. There are only 10 of them at the moment, but I want them to expand.

Q171 **Chair:** My final question, before I pass over to my colleagues, is about alternative provision, on which our Committee is about to do an inquiry. Just 1.1%—it has even gone down in recent times—of students in alternative provision get five good GCSEs, less than half of students in alternative provision are entered for maths and English GCSEs, and just 3.4% of students are able to achieve an A to C grade in those subjects. I have described what is going on as a modern Victorian workhouse. Why are there such poor outcomes, and are schools doing enough to manage those complex needs in-house? Should teachers be trained specifically for alternative provision? What is your view and what do you think should be done about it?

Anne Longfield: I really welcome the Committee's focus on alternative provision. I put out a briefing paper to members of the Committee just today, and to MPs as well, on children falling through the gaps in education, which looks at alternative provision, PRUs and, indeed, home education. I do not yet have the answer as to why all those things are happening. I know the numbers are rising. I know the outcomes for children are, I would say, unacceptably low. I know that the price per head for children in alternative provision is possibly five or even six times what it is in mainstream school, so for all those things we should be demanding more.

Interestingly, I have just produced a publication that asks children what they think of alternative provision. Some like it because it is less pressure than school, but children generally say they are disappointed with the curriculum and what it can offer them. We should be demanding much more, on a very consistent basis, for children from alternative provision.

Q172 **Ian Mearns:** Something that I have been aware of is a public concern that since your office is now embedded in Sanctuary Buildings it, in some way—in the public view—compromises your capacity to be completely independent of Government. Do you still feel that is a tension, after the time you have been there?

Anne Longfield: I inherited the office in Sanctuary Buildings with a five-year lease, so I have not yet been able to easily get out of it. That seems a bit churlish. I am very grateful for the buildings, obviously. I have to say, they are fantastic offices; they are right in the middle of Westminster, I pay about a quarter of the market rate and the office has its own private secure space, so in terms of what it offers there is a lot going for it. It is in a building that has lots of different organisations in it, as well as the DFE.

I understand the point about independence. Independence, first and foremost, is a state of mind and I hope you can see, through the work



that I and my team do, that independence goes through us like a stick of rock. We know our responsibilities towards children, we are answerable to Parliament as well and we challenge Government, both behind closed doors and publicly, on a very regular basis. That said, I intend to move from Sanctuary Buildings over the next year, but I do not think you should have any doubt that independence is absolutely at the core of all our mindsets.

Q173 Ian Mearns: Since you have been in the role, what are the key things that you have done since you last appeared before this Committee?

Anne Longfield: I have a team that has really strengthened the evidence base, and that means that I am able to use the powers to gather evidence and put forward children's views and experiences to decision makers. I am really proud of what we have achieved, and there are a few things that I would like to highlight as part of that. One of those is the particular responsibilities around children in care. I have an advice and representation service, which is now very well used, with 850-odd callers and people getting in touch already this year. I represent half of those to the director of children's services, the head of the health trust or the head of police in that area, with the needs of those children. In the main, their issues are, I am very pleased to say, resolved very quickly. That, and tackling stability for children in need by creating a new measurement for children in need—a stability index—is something that really addresses what children have been telling me.

On the broader point of view there is a lot of concern, of course, across Parliament and in the public about vulnerability. I was very aware that there was no common definition of vulnerability, and there were huge gaps in the data about the number of vulnerable children and quite how they were vulnerable in their outcomes. With my director of evidence, Professor Leon Feinstein, we have established a vulnerability framework that counts, for the first time, the nature and the scale of vulnerable children. I would like that to be recognised by Government, academia and charities. These are ongoing pieces of work; they are already in their first year, they will guide what I do for the next three years or so and they are already having a good impact.

Q174 Chair: Can I gently ask you to keep things brief because we have a lot to go through.

Anne Longfield: Of course.

Q175 Ian Mearns: To be fair, you have tried to expand on the fact that you have been busy.

Anne Longfield: Yes.

Q176 Ian Mearns: Would you see it as your role to carry out any kind of cumulative impact assessment of the role of Government policy on children over the last five to seven years? There is a whole range of different Government Departments whose policies and their



HOUSE OF COMMONS

implementation have had an impact on the lives of children. With them being from different Government Departments, has anybody ever done any cumulative work on the impact of the role of the DWP, the Department for Education or the DCLG, and so on, on children's lives?

Anne Longfield: The most thorough assessment, of course, is the United Nations convention on children's rights impact, which happened last year, and takes place every five years. That is the most thorough investigation across government, indeed across UK countries. Certainly, from my office, we have broad antennae that look across government. A huge part of my job is about bringing together different Government Departments—joining the dots across Government Departments.

From the start I have said that government is not always designed around the needs of children, because children do not live their lives in neat boxes. If you look at things like the wide spread of concerns and policy levers, around care leavers, for instance, they go across all Government Departments; the same for mental health. A core part of what my team is doing is scanning the horizons across government, looking at progress and looking at where policy levers can be brought into play.

Q177 **Ian Mearns:** Will that be brought together in some sort of quantifiable way, so that there will be an easy-to-spot guide to what the implications of Government policy have been on children? You are there as the Children's Commissioner; you are acting on behalf of children, you are an advocate and a protector of children, so are you doing that?

Anne Longfield: That would come into my report to Parliament, which happens every summer, and attempts to give a broad view of where Government and, indeed, the public sphere are.

Q178 **Emma Hardy:** Reflecting on your Growing up North, do you think it has challenged or reinforced a simplified analysis of how disadvantage occurs in different regions of England?

Anne Longfield: Both, to be honest. I undertook that work and started that work because I was very aware that there were new mechanisms in place looking at regionalisation and at devolution. I wanted to look at how those could help children progress in those areas. I am a proud northerner, so I had some kind of vested interest.

I have lived in London and in the north at various points in my life. I was really impressed with what has been achieved in a lot of London schools, raising achievement and attainment for children. I was very aware that a lot of the outcomes for children in parts of the north were far behind. It has been an interesting discussion. At the heart of it is, again, reaffirmation that the place where you grow up is very important. There are lessons to learn from London and the south-east about how attainment can be boosted, and stats to back that up.



More than anything, it comes back to how you can use new mechanisms such as the metro mayors, the powerhouse and the like, to put children at the heart from the start, in terms of offering children the opportunities they need. I am in no doubt that children growing up in large parts of the north—you cannot generalise about every part—do not have the same level of opportunities as some of the children growing up in London and the south-east.

Q179 Emma Hardy: Would you think that was partly to do with poverty and deprivation, rather than just the fact that they are northern?

Anne Longfield: Clearly, poverty and deprivation are a large part of that, so looking to reduce risks and reduce poverty is part of it. There is so much more that can be done to help those areas connect, to build aspirations for children and to build attainment within schools. The issue in Growing up North was to look at children from birth, right through their schooling, until they left school. There were gaps at every stage—before school; primary school did very well; in secondary school, less so. Pulling civic leaders together into summits in each of those areas, I was really struck by how few of them had come together in one room to talk about how they could support children to grow up in that area. I suspect it is the case for lots of areas, but in the north there was a particular benefit from being able to do that.

Q180 Michelle Donelan: Digital rights have been a big theme of your work and you have set up a digital taskforce. You recently called for a simplification of the terms and conditions for children using social media, and you launched teaching resources to assist with that and had a dialogue with parents as well. I wanted to know, first of all, what was the response from social media companies, parents and children themselves? Have you had much dialogue to see the reaction from your work and whether it has been helping?

Anne Longfield: There has been a great reaction. This was an area that clearly has moved really fast. When we put the teachers' resources online, over 3,000 downloads of teachers' packs went that morning, so we know that teachers are using the resources online, and using our simplified terms and conditions online. We consulted with children when we were drawing those up. They are very keen to use them themselves and we are, again, working with children to raise awareness of them.

Parents have absolutely been the audience shouting out for help in this. Over the summer, I was really pleased to be able to help parents with a digital five a day, giving a green light to parents to talk to their children about it. When I was doing lots of media work around it, what was really noticeable was that everyone, from the cameramen to parents to people in the studios, was saying that it is something they have in their everyday lives. Parents are desperately trying to battle with it, and I hope the tools that I am putting out are helping them do so.

Q181 Michelle Donelan: What about social media companies themselves?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Anne Longfield: With social media companies, to some extent, it is difficult to say. I have lots of meetings with social media companies.

Q182 **Chair:** Should the law be changed to stop cyber-bullying and trolling, especially of young children?

Anne Longfield: I am not necessarily one to go straight to legislation, but I think there needs to be more.

Q183 **Chair:** They do not do anything to stop it.

Anne Longfield: My message to social media companies is that they should and they must.

Q184 **Chair:** But it means nothing because we know that people can be trolled, from children to adults—

Anne Longfield: They are giants. I absolutely take that they are giants and very powerful, so potentially legislation is needed. There have been some changes, but they have chosen to take soft options around the edges.

Q185 **Chair:** What would the legislation be to protect children?

Anne Longfield: It is about the right to report, for children to be able to report and get a response. One of the things I asked for, in the digital taskforce report, was for a new post of digital ombudsman to hold social media companies to account. That is something that I know has had a good discussion. DDCMS are open to the notion. I am in discussion with the Information Commissioner about how it might work, so I think there is a role for Government there. Clearly, the digital world is here to stay and one where parents and social media companies have a strong role to play.

Q186 **James Frith:** Just last week, the Minister talked about it being very difficult to engage with young people, because they do not really want to or seem interested, which for me is an entirely wrong-headed approach to what we know social media do in terms of finding young people where they are, their interests and the message you take to them. My concern would be that if we have not got anyone at the Cabinet table understanding this—set aside the position that he is in; he is not sat at the Cabinet table, which is a later point—do you think there is a cultural mismatch between what is the reality of children on social media and any Government legislator, as to their understanding? Is it your role to amplify and connect the two?

Anne Longfield: Yes is the short answer. Children, we know, are very easy to engage, but it has to be in a way that is engaging to them.

James Frith: Absolutely.

Anne Longfield: There is a whole job to be done to rethink how children can take part in discussions. One of the things I am doing is setting up a digital hub for children in care to be able to find out more information, to



be able to take part in disseminating information and to learn what is going on and what their rights are. For me, that is a really important way to be able to get to children on their terms, especially those who do not necessarily come forward and self-select in some of these discussions. I would say the same not just for Government, but for public bodies locally as well; children will engage very well, they clearly have an awful lot to say and contribute, but we need to think much more creatively about how that is done.

- Q187 **Chair:** To sum up, you accept that social media are having an impact on children and there are a lot of bad things happening that the social media companies, like Twitter and Facebook, do very little to combat. You accept that there needs to be a serious review of what is happening and what the impact on children is, with possible legislation following that.

Anne Longfield: I do. I support all those things.

- Q188 **Lucy Allan:** I would like to move on to child protection and children in care, which are two very important parts of your brief and your five commitments—your very important five commitments. There are those in the sector who feel that there are now too many children in care as a result of a risk-averse approach to child protection. Do you agree?

Anne Longfield: My starting point is that we want—as I guess everyone here would—all parents to be able to look after their children. Throughout my work, I have always worked with parents to support their strengths and try to prevent children coming into care. That is my first and foremost point. I am also well aware, and have become increasingly aware through this job, that there are some children who need help and need to be in the care of the state. The numbers increasing might be a very good thing, because maybe they needed to be in care and were not getting the support before. We need to note it, but we should not jump to conclusions about its being necessarily a good or a bad thing.

- Q189 **Lucy Allan:** Do you think Government are sufficiently sceptical on this point? Clearly, any Government do not want to see anything happen to any child, if it can be avoided. The flip side of that is that many, many children will end up in the care system when there might be early intervention or preventive measures that would far better benefit the interests of the child, but Government do not want to take that risk. I wondered if you felt that Government were sufficiently challenging and sceptical in their current attitudes.

Anne Longfield: I want there to be good judgments that are in the best interests of the child, whether that is to stay with their family or come into care. What I know from local authorities is that they have been protecting their budgets around children in care, but they are very open that they have only been able to do so because they have reduced their budgets for early intervention and prevention, so not only is there a real problem with that today, but it is a problem that will only be exacerbated. That could be one of the feeders for why more children are coming into



HOUSE OF COMMONS

care. I do not want children to come into care because people are risk averse, at all, but I also—

Q190 **Lucy Allan:** Do you think too much money is being spent on the monitoring, assessing and investigating of families, rather than where it could be better spent, on supporting and preventing families getting to a stage where they need to be investigated?

Anne Longfield: Clearly, the money that has been spent on children in crisis and in care needs to be spent, because they are in crisis now and we need to respond to their needs now. However, I would prefer that more money was spent also on early intervention and prevention. If I was asked, one of the things for an intervention that spent money wisely would be some kind of transition fund that enabled local authorities to maintain and rebuild their preventive service, at the same time as spending on care. I do not think it is an either/or. Early intervention is not a quick fix, but both of those are needed because, clearly, it is unsustainable to carry on leaving children in conditions that worsen as crisis develops. It is unsustainable economically—

Q191 **Lucy Allan:** Are you telling Government this?

Anne Longfield: Yes.

Q192 **Lucy Allan:** Good. Are they listening?

Anne Longfield: Well, I have been telling Government this for some time.

Q193 **Lucy Allan:** So, no.

Anne Longfield: You can make your own choice on that. It is a strong message. It is one that the LGA are also making clear around reductions in budgets and the amount of money that they are still protecting for children in care. It is something I am asking the Chancellor to look at in the Budget, and something that I will be following through.

One of the things I am doing is undertaking work on spend on children. The IFS are looking at that at the moment, because I wanted to be sure that I had the figures, that I knew where they came from and that I had confidence in them. The IFS are looking at that. I am also undertaking public-facing work with the general public on what they think we should spend on children in this country. That is going to be very valuable and very interesting, and I am very hopeful that they will agree with me that we should invest to prevent crises developing.

Q194 **Lucy Powell:** This relates to some of the other things that have come up around social media, mental health issues and so on. You and I have worked on some of these issues over many years, particularly around compulsory PSHE. We had the Youth Parliament here last week. They took over Parliament, and their big ask of Government was about a curriculum for life. The Government have finally made a commitment to compulsory PSHE, but do you think they are moving quickly enough? Do



you see progress there? What more can we do to keep the pressure up?

Anne Longfield: I am pleased there has been a commitment to PSHE. It seems to me that the case grows stronger, day by day, for why it is absolutely necessary, and children would be the first to say that. It needs to be consistent, it needs to be high quality and there need to be specialist individuals delivering it. We have to see that come through in firm plans. I have not seen those yet and I am asking questions about that. There is an urgency around plans for PSHE coming into place. I would worry if they did not go down the road of being full in terms of consistency, specialist teachers and high quality—meaningful—lessons. I want, and said very clearly that I want, digital literacy to be part of that. I want it to be full-blown lessons for life. There is an urgency about that. I am keen, as I am sure members of the Committee are, to see Government come forward about that at the earliest opportunity.

Q195 **Lucy Powell:** Great. Slightly related to that, you mentioned digital literacy, but there is also critical literacy—being able to discern false from true and being able to discern what information you are getting is obviously going to be a critical issue. What is your view about making sure that gets embedded across the curriculum, rather than just being in bespoke lessons like PSHE? Do you talk to Government about that as well?

Anne Longfield: Clearly, I am very concerned that children should have critical thinking skills. A lot of teachers have been using our terms and conditions as a support for that. Are they real? What do they mean? How do you make judgments? A lot of the things that I think need to be in PSHE also need to be across schools, so I want those embedded within a whole-school approach, critical thinking being one of them. It is something I intend to speak more to Government about.

Q196 **James Frith:** This is about your children's budget, as I hope you will call it, or it becomes known. What specific reference to mental health, which you spoke very passionately about, does the impact of Government policies, of any Government, have on each young person? It strikes me that it is very easy to think or to assume that everything relating to young people or children is a schools issue. I reference things like cuts to legal aid and access to domestic violence refuges, all of which build up our assessment or picture of a young person's mental health. Could you elaborate on some of the work that you are doing in that regard, that is not school-specific but children-specific?

Anne Longfield: The vulnerability framework and the vulnerability work are very clear that a significant number of children are living in families with complex problems. They are families who have addictions to drugs or alcohol, mental health problems or domestic violence. The *Standard* has been highlighting some of those this week, and will be looking at domestic violence today. Those children have vulnerability within their home, often from birth; they have complex lives, often not with the support or guidance of parents. That in itself brings vulnerabilities, and



HOUSE OF COMMONS

we know as well that disabled children are particularly vulnerable in that situation.

Looking at what the response is to increasing anxieties, which I am very certain are there, the school has a strong role to play, alongside parents, the community and specialist services. I would slightly go back to the conversation we were having about family hubs; I do not think this is schools and teachers taking on additional roles as part of the teaching time; it is looking at how schools can be a catalyst to bring together services and support in a community.

Children tell me that they want mental health support where they feel comfortable. They want it to come to them. They do not want to have to go off to a GP or a clinic. They want it to be in places where they feel comfortable, which might be a school or it might be a youth setting. They also want it online, too.

Q197 James Frith: We have also seen—again, I am trying to be categorical about it rather than political—the removal of Sure Start centres; 600 to 700 Sure Start centres have gone in the last seven years.

Anne Longfield: About 1,000.

Q198 James Frith: A thousand—I apologise. We then have the emergence of CCGs, and I agree that your point about access to where they are is also strongly supported by your earlier point about the sense of place and access to where they are growing up. They are quite expensive provisions, aren't they—to find young people where they are? What engagements are you having with NHS England and, at a more regional level, CCGs about commissioning services that go into schools and engage with young people in a timely manner at their doing, as opposed to the drop-in or drop-off service that it too frequently becomes because of financial pressures and the change to Sure Start?

Anne Longfield: As a long-term supporter of Sure Starts, I believe they are a mechanism to save. There is a cost, but with pooled budgets they can reduce costs all round. There is a cost but it comes back in cost-benefit. I know the Committee has discussed this and it was discussed in the debate last week. I am really keen to look at how you can use and build on the very good work that is going on in schools on children's mental health.

Teachers tell me that they spend an increasing amount of time helping children cope with whatever is happening outside school. Last week, a very experienced head teacher said to me, "We spend all Monday dealing with what has happened over the weekend. We spend the first week of term dealing with what has happened over the holiday. It's not like it used to be and we can see the role of the school is really growing in importance." They had a very good mental health strategy in school but she told me that she is stretching every sinew to balance the books, and was in real danger, constantly, of having to cut back on those services.



Q199 James Frith: Finally, on that point, in terms of the experience at school for young people, and with anxieties on the up, some of that is through a lack of teaching our young people—children—ways to cope and manage, with mental wellbeing and mindfulness. The argument most recently has been one of schools needing to return to rigour, and English and maths being the best preparation for working life, some of which I have huge sympathy with and would support. Without the mental health and wellbeing of our young people, it does not matter whether they can read or write if they are headed towards a breakdown at some point. Where do you see the balance in the demands on the curriculum, to ensure that we prepare young people to manage themselves mentally, perhaps even before they need to access the services we have discussed?

Anne Longfield: Children's resilience is something that I have been very clear about from the start. We all want our children to attain. We measure attainment ad infinitum, but I am concerned that what we do not measure is children's wellbeing around school. I would like to see a much greater balance around wellbeing in school. I would like to see it judged in terms of the success of the school. I would like to see a whole-school approach. Yes, we want teachers to be more aware of and alert to what mental health means. We want teaching in school about coping mechanisms, possibly as PSHE, but we also want them to be able to refer to specialists who can offer a specialist service, either in schools or around schools. At the moment, that is where teachers tell me the gap is.

Q200 Marion Fellows: Given your role as children's champion, what do you think of giving children the vote at 16 and 17? I have a vested interest.

Anne Longfield: In the past, in my previous life, I have campaigned, in my previous charity, for children to have the vote at 16. I was part of the parliamentary group that last looked at this; I am failing to remember when it was because the years are now merging, but it was probably about a decade ago. An esteemed set of experts on the voting mechanism, and the like, sat on that group. I was one of the individuals on it. It got to the point where the recommendation came in that it was not introduced.

What we have seen over the last couple of years is a great interest in politics from young people, something that we should embrace. What we have seen with the Scottish referendum is children taking part, and having education in school to help them do that. While it is not clear-cut, and if you talk to young people you get a split between those who say yes or no, I think it is something that has earned another one of those inquiries that really looks at it in more detail.

Q201 Lucy Powell: It is a long-standing thing that you have campaigned on, but the work you have done about shining a light on vulnerable children and child inequalities has been really important in your role. With that in mind, and from the sort of evidence that you are gathering, what impact do you think the further roll-out of universal credit will have on those inequalities and those vulnerable children?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Anne Longfield: I am worried about the roll-out of welfare reforms. I am very aware that families with children are being very hard hit, and families with more than two children and lone parents are very hard hit within that, so we have a set of families whose life is quite precarious. Often, they are the ones in work. I am not sure that everyone has recognised that the new poor and the new insecure are those in insecure work. The roll-out of universal credit was not tested on families with children, which is a benefit, but now we are moving into roll-out not knowing what that means.

One of the things I will be asking the Chancellor to do is to pause universal credit roll-out for families with children until we better understand what that means. I understand that the vast majority of families going to food banks are doing so because of welfare failures. I am well aware of the impact of the rules around two children, and of the benefits freeze. Coming on top of that, there is a cumulative impact, so at this stage, with such a vulnerable group of children and families, it is the right thing to pause universal credit.

Q202 **Lucy Powell:** More generally on child inequalities, do you agree with me that the first 1,001 days, or the first few years, of a child's life are really when those inequalities become set, and that it is very hard, for the rest of the child's life, to overcome some of those inequalities? If you agree with that, what do you think about the Government's almost wholesale focus on childcare over early intervention, early education and other policies, and what more would you like to see done in that area?

Anne Longfield: As you know, I have been around the early years and early intervention world for a long time, so I have been convinced for decades of the benefits of early intervention and early education and care for children. I have seen the difference that makes. I have seen the difference it makes to families who can become financially independent, and the difference it makes for children. The evidence is very clear that, if you can help children in the first two years, you can really help to address a lot of the difficulties they might have in later life if they do not get that help.

The good thing is that there is now significant investment in children under the age of five in this country, but it is fragmented. For parents, it is still difficult to understand if you are or if you are not eligible. The fragmentation means that you often have to juggle your arrangements, you have to choose between childcare or early intervention, or you have to choose between different forms of care. The two-year-old provision, in particular, needs to earn its keep a little better, in terms of really having the impact to drive social mobility, and really having the impact potentially to identify the children who need extra help. The system needs to speak together better.

Q203 **Lucy Powell:** Do you think that the Government focus sufficiently on the social mobility drivers, the early years, or do you think that they have become too focused on the childcare side of it?



Anne Longfield: I have always thought that the two are very interrelated, so I would not want to say that it should go to either end, but, with the investment we have, we need to look at how that money can be simplified, possibly pooled into a budget for children under the age of five and possibly realigned to meet both the social development needs of children and early intervention, and to help parents with the real childcare costs. At the moment, we are missing a bit of a trick with that; there is a lot of investment going in, but I do not think parents are feeling the benefits and I do not think we are getting the benefits we need for children either.

Q204 **Chair:** What impact is there on the households who are not working and not getting the extra 15 hours of childcare?

Anne Longfield: There is an immense impact, and I would like that to be available for all parents.

Q205 **Chair:** What do you think the impact is?

Anne Longfield: It means that parents cannot plan to take up work or extend their hours, so you have parents who have benefited from those 15 hours of childcare but are stuck at that point and not able to extend beyond it. Childcare needs to be as fluid as possible. I would like it to be universal for all parents to rely on and to plan, but it needs at least to be flexible and to fit in with parents' lives.

Q206 **Emma Hardy:** One of the things I am really concerned about is the rising number of informal exclusions that are happening in schools, and the increasing number of school behaviour policies that ignore the rights of the child. I am going to read an extract from one behaviour policy: "Little baby voices that no one can hear waste everyone's time. We need confident, professional projection. If you have your hands over your mouth, your head down, eyes averted, and you are mumbling and you are just too quiet, you come across lacking in confidence, immature and not even that bright." That is a school's behaviour policy. As you know, article 28 of the convention on the rights of the child says: "States Parties shall take all appropriate measures to ensure that school discipline is administered in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and in conformity with the present Convention." It is an extreme example, but I can provide more. I would like to know your opinion of schools having behaviour policies that seem to run completely roughshod over the rights of children.

Anne Longfield: I agree. Part of the purpose of circulating the briefing paper that you have this week is highlighting the number of children being excluded from school and the profile of those children. We know that half are children with special educational needs and many have not been excluded, but are none the less ending up in alternative provision. Often, it is about behaviour and, clearly, those kinds of policies do not have regard to children's own needs. It is something I have been inundated with conversations from local authorities about. They have



been telling me, on a very regular basis, for at least the last six months, that they see a rising number of children who are either being excluded from schools or—

Q207 Emma Hardy: Encouraged to leave.

Anne Longfield: Encouraged to move from schools. That means that the numbers of children going to alternative provision are growing, and the numbers of children going into home education are growing. When I did a very informal straw poll at a recent children and families conference for local authorities, and asked the audience what their experience was, about 30 hands went up and said that the number of children who were now being home educated had doubled over the last four years, and some said it had trebled. Those are significant numbers. In the paper you have today, we estimate that about 50,000 children are being home educated. Probably only about 20% or 25% of those are the philosophical parents—the families who do it for philosophical reasons. Often, it is because the child is seen to not get on with the school or the school to not get on with the child and, as you say, encouraging families to look at another approach. For me, the fundamental right of children to a good education is paramount. The briefing paper we have given you this week is a starting point. I am going to look at alternative provision and home education over the coming months.

Q208 Ian Mearns: Just for the record, Children's Commissioner, when I made an inverted comma sign when you said home educated, you nodded. It is important that we note that; an awful lot of youngsters, in those circumstances, having been excluded from schools, are not receiving anything like what should be classified as home education.

Anne Longfield: Yes. These are parents of children who have had a difficulty with the school or there has been an issue within the school and, as you say, the school has encouraged parents that the child might be better off or more comfortable at home. I do not have any evidence of what the teaching curriculum is, and I do not have any evidence of the outcomes for the children. What I do know is that the vast majority of those discussions take place in years 10 and 11—72% of them—which leads me to believe that there must be something as an incentive to the school to get those children into a different situation.

Q209 Emma Hardy: To go back to the behaviour policies, could you see a role for sending recommendations or just reminding schools that, when they write behaviour policies, they have to take into account the rights of children?

Anne Longfield: That is a very strong idea, a very good idea. It is something that I will recommend to the DFE and would be very happy to co-author.

Emma Hardy: Brilliant. Thank you.

Q210 James Frith: I refer colleagues to my register of interest; I am a director



HOUSE OF COMMONS

in a careers education company in Bury. It is unrelated, but I am going to ask a question about SEND.

In Bury, we have 136 children in out-of-borough provision. It costs £5.5 million. Do you see a way around saving money and keeping young people in their original place of school as a better alternative to an increasing trend of young people being excluded for the variety of reasons you have touched on? Is it a better model, or do you think there needs to be distinction of mainstream and alternative provision? Is there a moment where alternative provision becomes—

Anne Longfield: Not alternative.

Q211 **James Frith:** —not alternative, but a kind of optional provision for the school in considering their performance, especially when it tips into 136 children being educated at a cost of £5.5 million in the case of Bury? There is a better way to do things, isn't there? I would like to hear your view on that.

Anne Longfield: I am concerned that the basic definition of alternative provision is starting to—

James Frith: Mission creep.

Anne Longfield: Yes—that it is seen to be the reality. We need to know more. We need to understand better what is going on in schools and why it is happening. The DfE needs to ask schools and to require information on the number of children who have been excluded, the purpose and what is happening to them—the destination. I believe schools have responsibilities, which they carry with them, for children in alternative provision. We are in the position, at the moment, of seeing children moving out of schools wholesale, especially those with special educational needs. There will always be children who need specialist provision, but at the moment this is something that seems to be benefiting schools more than the best interests of children.

James Frith: Absolutely.

Anne Longfield: I have had local authorities using phrases such as "Schools are gaming the system." That is a really dangerous position to be in.

Q212 **Chair:** You talked about progression and lifetime skills, and Growing up North is part of that. What do you think of the careers passport idea? It seems to have stalled in Government. Do you not think it would be incredibly beneficial for children to have a career passport, whether electronic or otherwise, all the way through their schooling, from primary right through, that they would be able to show employers? Do you not think it should be something that we invest in? The Careers & Enterprise Company was originally set up to do that and not a lot has happened. Is this something you would back and that the Government should put a rocket booster under?



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Anne Longfield: I certainly would back strengthening careers support. The proposal for a career passport is a way of children being able to demonstrate their skills and experience, so yes is the answer in terms of backing. I have not met a child yet who has been able positively to articulate the careers support they have had. I am sure that is not the case for all of them.

I have been struck, in the north-east, by innovative ways that businesses are working with children, some as young as primary school, to look at options going forward in their career. There is a huge amount of potential to engage businesses, which often want to do something but feel they cannot get into schools, and bring schools and businesses together around creative career options for children. The work in Growing up North has really brought that into focus, especially in areas of the north-east where there is a lot of deprivation and low income.

Q213 **Chair:** Can I suggest that you engage with Lord Young if you back a career passport?

Anne Longfield: Very good.

Q214 **Chair:** We have talked about social inequality. I started off with some statistics and problems, and Lucy and others have talked about it. For children climbing the educational ladder of opportunity, what would you identify as the biggest social injustice of all the problems that there are?

Anne Longfield: Early years and school readiness are very important, also the follow-through of progression for children in school, which speaks to all the points about children being able to get that continuing throughout, and the real ability for schools to look at the wellbeing of children and the mental health of children within school. We have a Green Paper coming out on mental health. I am really hoping that that will come up with a bold and brave proposal.

Q215 **Chair:** Are you saying that the biggest social injustice is mental health?

Anne Longfield: Mental health and vulnerability, and the gap between what we know about vulnerability and the support available to children to tackle that vulnerability early on.

Q216 **Chair:** Thank you. The Committee look forward to working with you, addressing those social injustices, as far as we can in our role. I very much appreciate your evidence today.

Anne Longfield: Thank you. We are looking at our business plan for next year; if there are points that you feel it would be useful for us to consider, please do let us know.

Chair: Thank you.