



Education Committee

House of Commons London SW1A 0AA

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From Robert Halfon MP, Chair

Rt Hon. Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

16 December 2020

Appointment of the Children's Commissioner

Dear Gavin,

We held a pre-appointment hearing with Dame Rachel de Souza, the Government's preferred candidate for the role of Children's Commissioner for England, on 15 December 2020.

We have reported to the House our overall conclusion that Dame Rachel is appointable for the post but this was not a unanimous view. In light of this we are writing to share some of our observations with you about her suitability for the role and put on record recommendations for Dame Rachel in her new position.

We recognise Dame Rachel's strong experience in education and her work in disadvantaged communities. We also appreciated her ambition to hear the voice of every child in making her recommendations and a commitment to vocational and technical qualifications, skills and apprenticeships. She also showed a commitment to move away from the polarisation of the education debate of traditionalists and progressives.

As you noted to us previously, the Children's Commissioner must be someone who understands the issues facing children and young people, and who is able to focus on delivering solutions to these issues. While we recognise that Dame Rachel has had a prominent career in education, latterly as leader of an educational trust, not every Member was wholly convinced in her vision and grasp of several of the major issues that she will need to champion as Children's Commissioner. Whilst the majority of the Committee were satisfied that she is a competent candidate and is appointable, her evidence before us highlighted several deficits in her knowledge and experience, which she will need to address as soon as possible.

In particular, we were concerned at the candidate's apparent lack of knowledge of some areas relevant to her new role. Key among these were in the fields of

children's social care and fostering and adoption, youth services, the youth justice system, child and adolescent mental health services and the wider immigration system.

We recommend that as a priority the candidate engages with a range of organisations across the areas where she has less direct experience, in order to enhance her skills and knowledge and to build stakeholder relationships that will facilitate her new role as an advocate for all children.

We also noted that she was unable to outline a position on key issues for children's rights, such as when questioned about her views on banning corporal punishment in England. The primary function of the Children's Commissioner role is 'promoting and protecting the rights of children in England', and we recommend that Dame Rachel take immediate steps to inform herself in this area.

We are also concerned that she did not explain fully how she intends to use evidence to challenge and inform the work of Government, including existing organisations that gather evidence of good practice such as the What Works Centres.

As a Committee we also have some questions about the recruitment process that the Department ran for this role. If you are able to supply the Committee with any additional information on how members of the Advisory Assessment Panel were selected, and on the extent to which the views of children and young people were reflected in your recommendation of a candidate, it would be appreciated.

Championing the rights of all children in England, both inside and outside of education is likely to require Dame Rachel to take a different approach to that she has adopted in her career in schools. We are concerned that Dame Rachel faces a steep learning curve in taking on this complex role that serves all children in England. We intend to hold regular accountability hearings with the new Children's Commissioner and will particularly monitor how she addresses the above concerns in the early stages of her new role.

I hope you find the Committee's observations helpful.

I am copying this letter to Dame Rachel.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Robert Halfon', written in a cursive style.

Robert Halfon MP
Chair of the Education Committee

cc. Dame Rachel de Souza