



**Levelling Up, Housing  
and Communities  
Committee**

**Susan Acland-Hood  
Permanent Secretary  
Department for Education  
20 Great Smith Street  
London  
SW1P 3BT**

15 April 2024

Dear Susan,

I am writing to you, on behalf of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, about our inquiry into *Children, young people and the built environment*.

You will be aware that this inquiry relates to the policy remit of a number of Government Departments including the Department for Education. In particular, the children and young people's mental health, early years, and family hubs and childhood support have been primary themes of our inquiry. Consequently, much of the written and oral evidence submitted to our inquiry has stated that the Department for Education has a clear responsibility for these areas. This has also been reiterated to us by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities' Permanent Secretary and Parliamentary Team on a number of occasions.

It is therefore disappointing that the Department for Education and its officials have not fully engaged with our inquiry. It is especially regrettable that the Department was not able to put forward the appropriate Minister to provide oral evidence to our inquiry. We are now investigating why there has been such a poor lack of engagement.

In this letter, we set out the main activity that has taken place in connection with our inquiry between us and our Committee staff and Officials at the Department for Education and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. We ask that you to respond to all of our questions at the end of this letter in writing by 22 April 2024.

**DLUHC Permanent Secretary**

The Permanent Secretary at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC), Sarah Healey, has informed to us that our inquiry will most likely be a joint responsibility for DLUHC and the Department of Education (DfE) on several different occasions. Consequently, the DLUHC Permanent Secretary and her officials have stated that they will engage DfE officials about our inquiry.

This includes, for example:

- Oral evidence to us on 29 January 2024<sup>1</sup>
- Correspondence to us dated 12 February 2024<sup>2</sup>
- Correspondence to us on 22 March 2024<sup>3</sup>

In particular, in oral evidence to us on 29 January 2024, the DLUHC Permanent Secretary said that:

"I am very happy to pick that up [joint responsibility for our inquiry] with my counterpart at the Department for Education, but we have not yet discussed it."<sup>4</sup>

During the same session, we questioned the DLUHC Permanent Secretary about whether there was an issue of joint responsibility between different Departments. In response, she said:

"Not as far as I know, no."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [Q7](#), Oral evidence: Departmental Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24, HC 528 (29 January 2024). See also: [Qq3-10](#).

<sup>2</sup> [Correspondence](#) from Sarah Healey, Permanent Secretary at the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to Clive Betts MP, Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee (12 February 2024); p.1

<sup>3</sup> [Correspondence](#) from Sarah Healey, Permanent Secretary at the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to Clive Betts MP, Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee (22 February 2024); p.1

<sup>4</sup> [Q6](#), Oral evidence: Departmental Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24, HC 528 (29 January 2024)

<sup>5</sup> [Q6](#), Oral evidence: Departmental Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24, HC 528 (29 January 2024)



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She also told us that:

“There certainly was not an issue with internal responsibility [for engaging with our inquiry]”.<sup>6</sup>

Accordingly, on 7 February 2024, a member of Committee staff formally raised our request to take oral evidence from a DfE Minister with the DLUHC Parliamentary Clerk. The request directly referenced the DLUHC Permanent Secretary’s oral evidence from 29 January 2024.<sup>7</sup> Since then, the DLUHC Parliamentary Team have repeatedly informed Committee staff that they are engaging with the DfE officials to ensure that we are able to hear from a DfE Minister – alongside a DLUHC Minister – in connection with our inquiry.

Such discussions have taken place within the wider context of the DLUHC Permanent Secretary making many commitments to us ensure that her officials will proactively engage with our work.<sup>8</sup> In particular, last year the DLUHC Permanent Secretary informed us that she has:

“asked [her] senior team to review staffing levels for your inquiries and allocate resource to preparing options for Ministers to respond while you are still gathering evidence”.<sup>9</sup>

### **Minister Rowley**

Minister Rowley has similarly indicated to us that he and DLUHC officials had been engaging with their DfE counterparts about our inquiry. For example, during our oral evidence session on 25 March 2024, he told us:

“We [DLUHC] are always very keen to support the Committee and that the work can be done. We work very closely with different Departments at official-to-official level.”<sup>10</sup>

When we specifically questioned the Minister about whether discussions had in fact taken place between DLUHC and DfE officials about our inquiry, he said that:

“I am sure we have [had discussions with DfE officials]; no doubt we have [...] I talk with Ministers on a pretty regular basis—David [Johnston (DfE Minister)] and others”.<sup>11</sup>

**Throughout our inquiry, the DLUHC Permanent Secretary and her officials have engaged our inquiry on the basis that it is a joint responsibility for DLUHC and DfE. At point no have they informed us that there is no such joint responsibility.**

### **Department for Education Parliamentary Team**

On 27 February 2024, a member of Committee staff formally contacted the DfE Parliamentary Team to invite a DfE Minister to provide oral evidence to us on 25 March 2024 in connection with our inquiry. No response was initially received so a follow-up email was sent by Committee staff on 5 March 2024.

During discussions between Committee staff and the DfE Parliamentary Team, our understanding is that the DfE Parliamentary Team put forward Baroness Barran to provide oral evidence. Subsequently, a member of Committee staff had repeatedly relayed our preference to take oral evidence from Minister Johnston.<sup>12</sup> This is because Minister Johnston’s portfolio includes, for example:

- children and young people’s mental health
- early years and childcare
- family hubs and early childhood support
- disadvantaged and vulnerable children<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [Q5](#), Oral evidence: Departmental Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24, HC 528 (29 January 2024)

<sup>7</sup> Private correspondence from Committee staff to the DLUHC Parliamentary Clerk (7 February 2024)

<sup>8</sup> [Correspondence](#) from Clive Betts MP, Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee Sarah Healey, Permanent Secretary at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to (1 March 2024); pp.3-5

<sup>9</sup> [Correspondence](#) from Sarah Healey, Permanent Secretary at the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, to Clive Betts MP, Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee (10 November 2023); p.1

<sup>10</sup> [Q114](#), Oral evidence: Children, young people and the built environment, HC 94 (25 March 2024)

<sup>11</sup> [Q115](#), Oral evidence: Children, young people and the built environment, HC 94 (25 March 2024)

<sup>12</sup> Private correspondence from Committee staff to the DfE Parliamentary Team (13 March 2024; 19 March 2024; 20 March 2024)

<sup>13</sup> Gov.uk, [Ministerial role: Parliamentary Under Secretary of State \(Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing\)](#), [webpage]



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The DfE Parliamentary Team then decided to not put a Minister forward to provide oral evidence to our inquiry. On 20 March 2024, the DfE Deputy Parliamentary Clerk explained to Committee staff that:

“I think there has been a misunderstanding - when we spoke on the phone, you confirmed that the thrust of the invitation was that the Perm Sec at DLUHC had indicated that this was a joint responsibility with DfE, and you were looking to discuss those areas of joint responsibility.

[...] this is not a joint responsibility. I confirmed that I would do further work to understand where this came from, but have found no policies in this space that we have “joint responsibility” with DLUHC.”<sup>14</sup>

This response also stated, in relation to Minister Johnston providing oral evidence to our inquiry, that:

“[It] was out of the question given the invitation to Minister Johnston came so late in the day, and during the phone call, you had confirmed that the invitation was predicated on the understanding of that joint responsibility, and therefore understood that Minister Johnston would not be able to attend on that basis.”<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, at 4.33pm on 22 March 2024, at the end of the last working day before our final oral evidence session on 25 March 2024, the DLUHC Parliamentary Clerk informed Committee staff that:

“Minister [Rowley] was looking forward to attending the session on 25th March with a DfE Minister, as this session would cover a wide range of matters. He understood that Baroness Barran from DfE agreed to attend the session, however this was challenged by the Committee and therefore DfE then decided to not send a Minister to this session.

[...] [H]e [Minister Rowley] believes the session would be most constructive to the Committee if he was accompanied by a DfE Minister. Therefore, if a DfE Minister cannot attend on Monday, the Minister would like to postpone the session to a later date”<sup>16</sup>

We take our responsibility to scrutinise the work of the Government seriously including policy areas that involve cross-Government collaboration.<sup>17</sup> We are therefore concerned about the lack of a joined approach between DLUHC and DfE which has, in turn, posed a direct and clear obstacle to the progress of our inquiry.

### **Questions**

Please could you answer the following questions:

**1) Has the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Permanent Secretary directly discussed our *Children, young people and the built environment inquiry with you*? Please answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’.**

**1a) If ‘yes’, please could you set out when these discussions took place?**

**1b) If ‘yes’, please could you set out the form of communication used for these discussions?** For example, whether emails were exchanged, meetings took place etc.

**1c) If ‘yes’, please could you summarise the content of these discussions?**

**2) Please could you set out what wider discussions the DLUHC Parliamentary Team and other officials have had with their DfE counterparts?**

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<sup>14</sup> Private correspondence from the DfE Deputy Parliamentary Clerk to Committee staff (20 March 2024)

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Private correspondence from the DLUHC Parliamentary Clerk to Committee Staff (22 March 2024)

<sup>17</sup> See, for example: Liaison Committee, [The effectiveness and influence of the select committee system](#), 9 September 2019, HC 1860 [report]



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**3) Has there been or is there currently any joint responsibility for the policy areas raised in our *Children, young people and the built environment* inquiry between the Department for Education and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities?** Please answer 'yes' or 'no'.

**3a) If 'yes', please could you set out in full what this joint responsibility is and how it is being delivered?**

**4) In your view, is Minister Johnston's portfolio related to the policy areas raised within our inquiry?** Please answer 'yes' or 'no'.

**4a) If 'yes', please could set out in full what aspects of Minister Johnston's portfolio relate to the policy areas raised within our inquiry?**

**5) Why was Minister Johnston unable to attend our oral evidence session on 25 March 2024?**

We ask for you to respond to our **all** of questions directly and in full in writing by **22 April 2024**.

Yours sincerely,

Mr Clive Betts MP  
Chair, Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee