**APPG for Education Meeting with Dame Rachel de Souza DBE, Children’s Commissioner – Tuesday 23 November 2021**

On Tuesday 23rd November, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Education hosted the Children’s Commissioner, Dame Rachel de Souza. She spoke about work she has already undertaken as well as the policies that she hopes to see implemented.

Lord Storey chaired the meeting and introduced the Children’s Commissioner, praising her 31 years of experience in the sector. Rachel de Souza (RDS) then began her address by talking about her past experience in turning around failing schools in areas like Luton, and Norwich. She explained that the opportunity to become the Children’s Commissioner was too good to miss, and is grateful to have been appointed given her efforts to improve the lives of children. She is excited to be able to promote and protect children’s rights, especially for the most vulnerable, because her scope runs across many governmental departments and public services.

She talked through the first big project that she undertook, The Big Ask, a survey seeking to understand how England’s children were feeling post-lockdown, what they felt they needed to succeed, and their aspirations for the future. With over half a million responses, it was the largest survey of its kind in the world. RDS was particularly happy to receive feedback from the most vulnerable groups, like 2,300 responses from a gypsy or Irish Traveller background, with whom it has traditionally been difficult to engage.

She then ran through some of the findings from the survey. 80% of children said that they were happy with their family life, and there appeared to be a higher degree of cohesiveness amongst different identity groups than had been anticipated. This generation appears to be caring, very interested in equality, environmentally aware, and ambitious. Children said that they liked school and 69% of respondents believe that the most important thing for their future is a great job.

The survey also highlighted a strong desire for more support, both in education and outside it. Understandably there were concerns around mental wellbeing after not being able to see friends and family throughout lockdown. Children also expressed worries about ‘failing’, that fears about the job market can put pressure on their educational experience. Many, especially SEND pupils, were worried about catching up in learning.

Outside of education, children wanted more support for stresses at home, and RDS praised the announcement of Family Hubs. Children were also concerned about their communities and being able to ‘play’. Children spoke about how social media affected their mental health, with teenage girls the most unhappy. RDS outlined the offices work on online safety. She then mentioned how children in care want the same things as other children, like loving relationships and getting into a good school, but they were on the whole less happy than other children. She ended by reading out some quotes from responses in the survey.

Lord Storey began the question and answer session by asking the Children’s Commissioner what she wants to achieve by the end of her tenure. RDS replied that first, her team wrote a series of policy papers on which they based subsequent discussions with Government departments. One of her top priorities is ensuring that children get mental health support, and she has been speaking to individuals (like Secretary of State for Health and Social care, Sajid Javid MP) for support teams in schools to be rolled out faster. She has also been commissioned by Government to provide advice for the Online Safety Bill, and she wants to see the implementation of Family Hubs joined up with early education. She noted that she wants the same focus has for improving standards in schools as support for vulnerable children and the SEND Review.

Helen O’Donnell from the Children’s University raised how local and national Governments can better maximise community extra-curricular offerings for disadvantaged children. RDS agreed that all children should have access to good youth provision, and she has called for renewed focus on community youth services. She suggested that this could be done within existing budgets by harnessing existing spaces.

Lord Watson of Invergowrie, Labour’s education spokesperson in the House of Lords, then emphasised the importance of early years, asking about the services that nurseries can currently provide. RDS replied that the lessons of the Sure Start programme will be key in ensuring the success of Family Hubs. She agreed that the 15- and 30-hour childcare offers do not always fit with working parents. However, she likes the diversity of providers, and said it is crucial that outcomes in early education and family help are joined-up.

She was also posed questions by Paula Talman and Molly McLeod on alternative approaches to teaching about mental wellbeing and resilience, and how to engage policymakers seriously with these ideas. RDS noted Secretary of State Nadhim Zahawi’s MP interest in feedback from children. She said that there is a lot to learn from concepts like trauma-informed approaches already in practice, and agreed with Paula on joined-up policy. The Commissioner expressed a desire to alter the system so that more children can have their voice heard.

Jane Harley from Oxford University Press followed on, asking where funding for catch up learning is most needed to have a positive impact. RDS is focused on attendance as it is a good proxy for vulnerable children who cannot get support if they are not in school. She supports a longer school day and prioritising extra-curricular activities within it, but suggested that related catch up support could save money by focusing on schools that were not already doing it. She is also big fan of the Pupil Premium and wants to incentivise more teachers into working at underperforming schools.

Bea Stevenson, Head of Education at Family Links, asked about adopting a more holistic approach to address why ‘gaps’ in the education system appear, not just how to plug them. RDS said that system design is key in this regard, understanding whether tests and the curriculum meet a child’s capacity. She is particularly concerned about SEND support and would like to see more specialist services embedded within schools to address this.

This was followed by Marcus Fysh’s researcher, Jack Freeman, asking whether face-to-face diagnoses between vulnerable children and assessors can be sped up after lockdown delays. The Commissioner said that she would look into this , and that more broadly she wanted to see a more national SEND system rather than over 100 separate ones.

The final questions came from Ji Li who asked whether Ed Tech had earned a bad reputation post-lockdown because of the amount of necessary catch-up learning for pupils despite learning moving online. Dame Rachel said that this was an interesting perspective and that although time in front of a teacher is crucial for learning, Ed Tech has been very beneficial. She gave an example of Oak National Academy, where multiple school and trusts could share resources during lockdown. She argued that technology has changed schools forever in a positive way.

Julia Garvey from BESA closed the meeting by thanking the Children’s Commissioner for her enthusiasm for education. She said she was looking forward to future cooperation and to see the impact of The Big Ask.