

## **Commons Education Committee Accountability hearing – 6 October 2020**

First session:

Anne Longfield OBE, Children's Commissioner for England, Office of the Children's Commissioner for England

Second session:

Michelle Donelan MP, Minister of State for Universities, Department for Education

### **Overview**

MPs heard that more work remained to be done in order to expand access to laptops and tablets for pupils in England. They heard that while there had been some progress on children's issues over the last five years, the "disadvantage gap" in education and poverty had worsened. The witness provided some ideas for how to close these gaps, including welfare measures and expanding the government's £1bn catch-up fund. MPs asked questions about food poverty among children, with the witness telling MPs that the figures on this matter were "stark". The witness discussed ways of reducing educational inequalities, mentioning in particular the importance of early intervention. MPs also asked questions about the powers of the Children's Commissioner, home schooling, and "county lines" gangs.

In the second session, the witness said that she did not know how many students were currently under lockdown at universities in England but that Covid-19 rates were still relatively low at universities. MPs were told that most students were abiding by guidelines but that a minority were socialising in a way that was driving spikes in infection. MPs were told the government was committed to ensuring that all students could return home at Christmas and that various measures were under consideration as to how this would be achieved. The committee heard that it would be up to universities, rather than the government, to determine whether students should receive refunds, but were told that online and blended learning were working well. MPs were told that universities that had not yet adopted the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism would ultimately be forced to do so by government. MPs heard that the education secretary would make a statement later in the week about next year's A Level exams, and they also asked questions about university funding and staff issues.

### **Laptop scheme for pupils**

The provision of free laptops and tablets by the Department for Education should be widened to make "all disadvantaged children" and, ultimately, all children without access to such technology eligible, Anne Longfield OBE, Children's Commissioner for England, Office of the Children's Commissioner for England, told the committee.

She also said she would have preferred that the government had been quicker in making the devices available, and she called for the government to make funds available to schools to distribute the devices, saying this would make the process more speedy.

Longfield said the process of solving the problem of access to digital technology was far from over and that, despite the return to schools, the issue had not gone away.

She told MPs that the issue was not just about children having access to devices but also about them having access to the internet and space at home to work. "It is more than laptops", she said.

### **Changes over the last five years**

Reflecting on the changes that had taken place over her five years in post, Longfield said that while she thought there had been progress on certain issues, problems remained.

She highlighted work on children's mental health and the development of an "index of child vulnerability" as areas in which progress had been made. She said more schools now had a mental health counsellor thanks in part to her work, although she said she hoped that all schools would at some point have such counsellors.

But she said that the "disadvantage gap" in education and poverty had worsened over her tenure, with poverty rising and problems of disadvantage becoming more acute. At the same time the digital world had "exploded", she said, posing a variety of challenges for young people. The pandemic had revealed these problems and also exacerbated them, she said.

Asked by Fleur Anderson (Lab, Putney) whether a change of policy on the benefit cap and the two-child limit could make a positive difference, Longfield said that it would, adding that an increase in the child element of Universal Credit would also be an effective measure.

More broadly, she said, the welfare system as a whole had to be "reset around families with children".

### **Catch-up fund**

Committee chair Robert Halfon (Con, Harlow) asked whether the government's £1bn catch-up fund for children was being spent in the right way.

Longfield said the fund should focus on disadvantaged children in the first instance, and described the funding as "welcome" but "just the start". She said her concern was that getting the right support in place for children required "bandwidth" that senior staff in schools simply did not have at the moment.

But she also told MPs that the fund should ultimately be a "comprehensive recovery package for all children" that tackled the underlying causes of vulnerability.

She said there had yet to be a "Nightingale moment" for children in the pandemic, and that such a recovery package could be it.

### **Food poverty**

Longfield said the government's responses to the issue of food poverty among children had been "incremental" and "disparate", telling the committee that there was a need for a "clear, joined-up plan to reduce poverty" and "reduce food poverty".

She described the UK's figures on food poverty as "stark", saying that 2 million children from 0–14 lived in food insecurity. Longfield said tackling the issue meant tackling the issue of poverty "on a much broader basis".

Asked by the chair whether the government's response to the issue amounted to a "Band Aid" approach, Longfield agreed, saying that the government had been forced to react to public pressure.

## **Reducing educational inequalities**

Anderson asked about specific measures the government could take to reduce educational inequalities.

Longfield stressed the importance of early years' interventions. She said the check-ups carried out on 30-month-old children should be used more effectively, as these were often carried out inconsistently, with needs identified sometimes not being followed up on.

She also pointed to the importance of measures to ensure inclusivity in schools and avoid pupil exclusion. She said schemes like breakfast clubs and after-school clubs were important in bridging the gap between schools and home. The government could also put a "rocket booster" under the expansion of "family hubs", Longfield said, telling MPs that the government had been "coy" about the initiative.

She said that while these measures would require more funding from government, they promised reduced public spending in the long term. She said these sorts of measures could be one "legacy" of the government's "levelling up" agenda.

Longfield also said there could be a role for a "London Challenge"-style programme in the north of England in order to attract more teachers to disadvantaged areas.

## **Powers of Children's Commissioner**

Apsana Begum (Lab, Poplar and Limehouse) asked Longfield whether she believed the powers of her office were sufficient.

Longfield said her powers to gather data were important, allowing her to present evidence and persuade others, but she said the powers of the Children's Commissioner could "be broadened", citing in particular the power to undertake more formal investigations.

She said the Children's Commissioner's power to enter premises was exercised around two to three times a month. Longfield said such cases often involved her visiting children in, for instance, secure accommodation who were complaining about their living conditions.

Longfield also explained that her office had an independence not enjoyed by Ofsted or Ofqual. Her business plans were not seen by the secretary of state until just before they were published, she said.

The recommendations of a review of the work of the Children's Commissioner 18 months ago had all been implemented, she said, telling MPs that the recommendations were minor issues relating to the amount of information the office made public. But she also accepted there was more to do in order to communicate her role to children themselves.

## **Home schooling**

Longfield called for a stronger inspection regime for home-schooled children and for a compulsory register of children being home schooled.

She said such a register had been agreed to by the government but had yet to emerge.

## **County lines and vulnerable children**

Longfield said the levels of abuse of vulnerable children by "county lines" gangs were now back to pre-lockdown levels.

In response to a question from Tom Hunt (Con, Ipswich), she said that in order to address the problem, vulnerable children needed to be identified in advance and support given to families.