

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Sarah Teather): This Government are a proud signatory of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), are committed to its implementation, and believe it is vital that children and young people have a strong, independent advocate to champion their interests and views and promote their rights. That is why on 12 July this year the Secretary of State for Education invited Dr John Dunford to undertake an independent review of the Children's Commissioner for England. Today the Government publish his report and recommendations, which I welcome. I know this is an issue of great interest to many parliamentarians, and I have placed a copy of the report in the House Library.

In summary, Dr Dunford has concluded that there is a need for a Children's Commissioner if Government are to meet their commitment to implement the UNCRC. He recommends a strengthened remit to promote and protect children's rights, with the role incorporating the responsibilities of the children's rights director at the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) and also being able to assess the impact of new Government policies on children's rights. Dr Dunford recommends greater independence, with the commissioner submitting an annual report, and any other reports, direct to Parliament as well as to Government, rather than reports being submitted to Parliament through the Secretary of State for Education, as at present. It will be for Parliament to determine how else it would like to engage with the new Children's Commissioner. The full implications of Dr Dunford's recommendations will take some months to work through, but the Secretary of State and I are pleased to accept them now in principle and will consult in due course on legislative changes.

Dr Dunford was asked to consider the commissioner's powers, remit and functions, the relationship with other Government funded organisations carrying out related functions and value for money. He has carried out a thorough review of the evidence, for which I am grateful. His call for evidence attracted over 200 responses from adult organisations and individuals and over 700 responses from children and young people. He has held extensive discussions with organisations that work with and for children and young people, MPs and peers, and the children's rights director's office. He has also visited

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the Children's Commissioners in all four countries of the UK and Ireland, and commissioned an academic review of the international evidence.

The conclusions that Dr Dunford has drawn are powerful. His review makes a convincing argument for the need for a Children's Commissioner, and I accept that without one there would be significant implications for children's lives and for the UK's international standing. Dr Dunford has assessed whether the role of the Children's Commissioner meets the Cabinet Office tests against which all arm's length bodies have been reviewed, and I accept his view that it does so.

I have noted that despite some achievements on specific issues, the impact of the Office of the Children's Commissioner to date shows a clear need to reform its remit and operating model. I accept Dr Dunford's proposals that the role should be in accordance with the United Nation's Paris Principles for Human Rights organisations, with responsibility for promoting and protecting children's rights on the basis of the UNCRC, and reporting directly to Parliament as well as to the Department for Education. I also agree with Dr Dunford that within these rights lies the responsibility for children to respect the rights of others, and that this should better enable children to act as young citizens and reinforces the proper exercise of authority by parents and other adults such as teachers.

The Secretary of State is clear that the Children's Commissioner must represent value for money in exercising its powers and functions, and Dr Dunford has identified opportunities in this regard. While accepting that the commissioner needs to be adequately resourced to fulfil the role, I believe that all public funding should be used in accordance with the Cabinet Office's efficiency guidelines for arm's length bodies, and that this need not compromise independence or statutory powers and duties. Dr Dunford recommends merging the functions of the Office of the Children's Commissioner with the children's rights director in Ofsted, providing the opportunity for greater coherence and impact, and scope for savings. I believe that this is a sensible way forward, and will be discussing next steps with Her Majesty's chief inspector. Dr Dunford has also identified that the salary of the Children's Commissioner is excessive in comparison to others in similar roles and I will address this in setting up the new arrangements.

Dr Dunford's recommendations mean that the statutory basis and form of the Office of the Children's Commissioner must change. I will consult in due course on legislative changes. In the interim, the current role and functions of the Children's Commissioner will continue. This includes the commissioner's remit over non-devolved matters impacting on children and young people in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. I do understand the difficulties that the current position presents for the Children's Commissioners in the devolved Administrations. I will want to work with them to achieve a situation, within the devolution settlements, where the interests of children in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland can be fully represented by the commissioner for that jurisdiction.

While it will take some time for any legislative changes to take effect, I am determined to act in the spirit of Dr Dunford's recommendations as soon as possible. The Secretary of State does not intend to use his current power to direct the Children's Commissioner to undertake an inquiry, and while the current legislation

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will still mean that the commissioner needs to consult him prior to undertaking an inquiry, the Secretary of State will be happy to offer his views but will not expect to have any role in how the commissioner then decides to proceed.

Dr Dunford recommends that a reshaped Children's Commissioner for England holds Government to account against the UNCRC. I agree with Dr Dunford that for this to deliver benefits to children, Government and policy makers must be receptive to that approach and advice. I can therefore make a clear commitment that the Government will give due consideration to the UNCRC articles when making new policy and legislation. In doing so, we will always consider the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's recommendations but recognise that, like other state signatories, the UK Government and the UN committee may at times disagree on what compliance with certain articles entails.

In conclusion, Dr Dunford's recommendations should result in a Children's Commissioner that has greater profile and credibility, and can better impact on children's lives. At the centre of this coalition Government's thinking is a determination to see children and young people achieve to their full potential, and the desire to empower individuals to shape their own future. I believe that reinforcing our commitment to children's rights, and creating a stronger independent advocate for those rights, is an important part of delivering on that ambition.

Childhood (Commercialisation and Sexualisation)

The Minister of State, Department for Education (Sarah Teather): I am announcing today an independent review of the commercialisation and sexualisation of childhood.