

## **Craigmyle Lecture – 2023**

Good evening, thank you so much for welcoming me tonight. My name is Rachel de Souza, and I am Children's Commissioner for England.

It's an honour to deliver the Craigmyle lecture here with the Catholic Union not least because growing up in a Catholic family and community had such a profound impact on my childhood. That sense of community; of belonging; of being part of something bigger; of faith. And that's why, I want to capture the spirit of that Catholic upbringing to find many solutions to help us improve the lives of England's children. So many of whom are lacking in those fundamental tenets of happy, fulfilling, successful lives.

### **My own catholic childhood**

Let me start by telling you a little bit about my early life, and some of the defining memories that have been defining and foundational.

First, a picture that I carry close to my heart. This picture is of my mum shortly after she arrived at an orphanage in Bavaria. She's the young girl in the middle of this picture, surrounded by nuns.

My mother was born in 1945, to an Austrian, Hungarian mum & an East German Father whom she never met. Left in an orphanage near Passau in the care of nuns with 50 other children. She had malnutrition, hepatitis and TB. Even now she looks on those nuns as mothers and stayed in contact throughout her life. Those women. Those women of deep faith. Were her mothers for that time. What a gift to give a child whose own mother could not care for her.

You'll be wondering what happened next. She came to the UK aged 7, as an unaccompanied displaced child to be reunited with her family. I am forever grateful to England for that. And it is here, that she met my Dad, a steelworker, from an Irish catholic family, who came as workers in the late 1800's.

And that's where I arrive. I was born in Scunthorpe. A place which grew around the steel works and as the Catholic communities arrived they first built the church and then the schools. Just like with my mother, no child was left behind. Families was more than just mums and dads. Families are your first community, and from families are communities born. You care about the children where you live. And most of all those who are vulnerable, disadvantaged, whose parents can't be there.

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And so this gave me my first sense of the power of the church being foundational in delivering, and improving, services. From the beginnings of our school system, the church has trailed a path for the advancement of educational standards and care of the communities children.

But, back to me. I went to my local Catholic comprehensive school, and, like my mother, I was taught by nuns. I was at times a handful, but they certainly loved my soul. They would have done whatever it took to keep me safe and cared for. Those nuns enshrined my lifelong love of education, but they also instilled important values in me.

I often think back to my time at high school. I believe those years shaped the rest of my life. They were formative. Surrounded by such inspiring women, it was no surprise that I went on to become a teacher, headteacher and defender of children, their rights and their innocence.

After I finished school, I went on to study Philosophy and Theology at Heythrop College with the Jesuits. I went on to become a teacher of religious education and then one of Tony Blair's first academy Principals and grew a family of schools in East Anglia.

The Catholic thread still deep within me, providing guidance and purpose. St Ignatius' reform spirit deeply influenced me and inspires me still in all my work. Whenever I had or have a difficult conversation with an official or Minister or Trustee about taking on a failing school or needing a new building I'd think of St Ignatius when the Pope would say no to his requests and he would keep going .. asking every day until the Pope agreed.. 'storming heaven' and off I'd go. A remarkably successful method.

And so it is, after thirty years of trying to improve children's lives, outcomes and experiences, on the frontline, in schools, that I am here, as Children's Commissioner, in front all of you this evening.

I took up the role in March 2021, just as we were emerging from the last of the strictest lockdowns. Over that, and I don't say this lightly, unprecedented time, I had been in school every day and I started to become deeply concerned about what was happening to children, particularly the most vulnerable.

An impact that we knew was happening, but the magnitude and acuity of which I think we are only truly understanding now.

## **Big Ask – Key Themes**

So, how could I turn this instinct and sense from the children I'd spent that covid year with into something more fundamental. How could I capture not just those children's voices, but the voices of England's children. Across the whole nation.

It is a generation of children who have endured a period of unseen before disruption. A generation of children who were veterans of a global crisis.

And so that's why I launched The Big Ask survey. I wanted to understand, as we were emerging from the shadow of the pandemic, what children wanted for their futures, and what worries were holding them back.

They had seen how colossally frightening life can be, far too young, and had made a lot of sacrifices. But they had endured. Bruised, yes, and in many cases seriously vulnerable, but for the most part, happy, optimistic, and ambitious.

The survey was open to any child in England aged 4–17. I was determined to reach as many children as possible. Children were taught about the Big Ask in assemblies and in community group activities. To capture the harder to reach groups we surveyed acute children's settings such as children's mental health hospitals, youth custody settings, and children's homes.

In the end, over half a million children responded to The Big Ask. Making it the biggest ever survey of its kind.

We were able to breakdown the answers by all types of characteristics. And the amazing thing is, that across age, gender, ethnicity, family income levels, locations, and vulnerability, what children want is consistent – a good education, a job, to feel well, to grow up in a loving family and to be part of a caring community. How incredible is that.

It is not enough just to listen; we must also act. So, I have used the responses from The Big Ask to shape my work as Children's Commissioner. My priorities are the children of England's priorities.

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## Education

So let me start where they did. Education.

It was clear from children's responses how much they valued their education. How keen they were to get back to school – they even told me they loved their teachers! Children see education as valuable in and of itself and also as a pathway to opportunity. Children were worried about catching up and their fears about the job market can put a lot of pressure on their experience of education.

I've visited very many children in their schools across the country and I can confirm there is no lack of ambition. I have met the next few Prime Ministers, the next Sir Isaac Newton, the next Elon Musk. But I also have heard from so many children whose dream is to find a meaningful job in their local area. These children wanted to be equipped with the skills they needed to give back to their communities. They see education as the way to achieve their goals.

One young person told me: 'Something that motivates me to go to school, is that if I learn today, I can have a very good job when I am older.'

Schools can transform the way children see themselves in the world and help turn aspirations into tangible

opportunities and outcomes. What separates out the very best schools is the level of belief they have for each and every one of their pupils.

This belief defined my childhood. It sits at the heart of the Catholic approach to education and underpins the commitment to the highest standards and support. And I think that if every adult who worked with children shared this belief, we would go a long way to improving the life outcomes for all children.

We need to strive for every child in every school, because if there is one thing, I learnt in more than 30 years of education, it is that all children can do amazing things, and every child deserves to be at a school that believes in them.

It was because of what children told me that I made attendance in education such a core part of my work – because children can only benefit from an education if they are actually there. Of course Covid reset that relationship between schools, children, families, communities. But we need to maximise the positives, not allow complacency.

I have grown deeply concerned about the number of children who are regularly missing school. Last year, 1.8 million children were persistently absent which meant that



they missed the equivalent of a day a fortnight in school. Nearly 60% of children with a child protection plan are still not attending regularly.

Over the last two years, I have been working steadfastly to go and find the missing children who are regularly absent from school. I have spoken to hundreds of them.

I have seen that the reasons for absence are complex. For some, the pandemic has led to disengagement, for others it is waiting for a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities assessment, and for some it is the lack of mental health provision.

People talk about ghost children. I don't use the term ghost children because they are real flesh and blood! And we need to know where they are. The number of completely missing children is estimated at over 100,000.

When a child misses school, not only are their life chances at risk but they are at greater risk of safeguarding issues and criminal exploitation. Of being unhappy, and anxious. Of lacking a routine, stability, belonging.

Attendance is everyone's business, meaning that everyone involved with the care of children is equally responsible for ensuring children's attendance. This means schools, local

authorities, children's services, and community groups all have a duty to support children who are struggling in school. And of course, parents. We really do need a national campaign to support our children back to school. Without that everything will be harder.

## **Family**

So next, family.

Before becoming Children's Commissioner, I dedicated my professional life to education – as a teacher, headteacher and CEO of a multi-academy trust. I am of course a believer in the immense power of education. But over the years I have come to believe there is one institution more powerful, more important, more transformational for children than a school – and that is the family.

The Big Ask showed that having a loving, stable, and supportive family life is extremely important to children. Children believe in family. Not just the nuclear family - families of all kinds.

That is why I was so pleased to be commissioned by Government to undertake my independent Family Review. I wanted to understand the nuts and bolts of family life in

the UK in 2023, to find out what families looked like, and to examine in detail the power they have.

Irrespective of ethnicity, gender, or age, when I asked children and adults to describe family the most frequently used word was love. Children recognise that family has a protective effect.

They share the belief that families have a duty to protect and care for their children. They can see how families insulate us from life's adversity, and they are clear that every child should have the benefits of it.

However, my research has also shown that there is a fundamental disconnect between how policy makers talk about families and how children see them. All too often, families are seen as 'households' and 'service users'. Whereas children and adults talked about parents, grandparents, uncles and Aunts, the Lady on your road who you hold in such esteem you call her Aunty.

The government tends to see families for the collection of challenges they face, rather than the innate power they hold. My research shows that a strong and loving family can cast a protective net around its members, helping all its members to flourish and stopping problems from turning

into crises. When facing challenges 78% of respondents told me they would turn to family first. You all know this only too well.

Our Review evidenced the strong link between parenting and behaviours and child outcomes. Parents who spent time and play with their children, set boundaries, and guide them through life's challenges, help to create some of the happiest children.

One of the most important insights from the Family Review was that all parents have some struggles, and times they will need to reach for help. Acknowledging this is a vital pre-requisite for changing the relationship between the state and families, but it starts not with Government policy, but with all of us.

We all need to be more vocal about the importance of families. I am sure I am in a room of people who are deeply aware of the joy and power held within families. We understand that strong families are the fabric of any healthy society, but also that families should be able to get help without facing judgement. Families need to be able to turn to their community when they face the inevitable

struggles that parenthood brings, whether that's the church, their neighbours or family support services.

If a child is unhappy at home, they are over nine times more likely to be unhappy overall. It is fundamental.

And that's why, I want us to talk about families in the same way that children do. In our Family Review, one young boy told me: 'A loving family is worth more than money and will give you guidance, support, love, and advice'. He was exactly right.

## **Community**

Next, community.

Children told me how vital it is that we create warm and welcoming communities. The Big Ask also showed me that this generation of children are civic-minded, social, and outward-looking. After a long period of isolation, children told me that they were desperate to feel part of something larger than themselves - a caring community.

In The Big Ask, thousands of children spoke about the importance of 'play'. Children wanted a place to play and fun things to do. Whether it was cricket in Crawley, karate in Newcastle, or dance lessons in Lewisham – children

recounted countless times the importance of clubs and activities in their local areas.

Some children also confided that they had deep concerns about their safety. Tackling online sexual abuse and harassment among young people quickly became a priority for me. In my first year, the government asked me to look at children's safety online and how it can be improved.

My research found that children are exposed to various forms of harmful content online, which simply wouldn't be allowed to cross their paths in the real world. According to our national survey, 45% of children aged 8-17 have seen content they felt was inappropriate or made them worried or upset.

I have grown increasingly concerned about the normalisation of sexual violence in online pornography, and the role that this plays in shaping children's understanding of sex and relationships.

I was shocked to learn that the average age at which children first see pornography is 13. Children are often not seeking out this content, they are being exposed to it. 38% of 16-21 year olds said that they had accidentally come across pornography online. This is unacceptable. I believe

when faced with these challenges, we have to ask, what kind of world are we creating for our children?

While I will continue my work in holding big tech to account and making sure that the Online Safety Bill protects all children, I also think there's a role for those of us who children trust. We have a duty to teach children about healthy relationships and support them to grow up into respectful and caring adults. We should be playing a much more active role in restricting harmful material online.

When I asked 16-21 year olds what they wished their parents had known about social media they were absolutely clear that they wished they had not had phones/ been on sites as children, that they needed their parents to help them set boundaries especially as older teenagers and that they would not allow their own children on social media sites.

Children value their communities, on and offline. We are all so important in making sure children are cherished, and they trust all of us whose job it is to keep them safe.

## **Mental health**

And that brings me to mental health.

This is important for its own sake but also because online harms have far-reaching consequences for children's mental health. Whether it's pornography, violence, or content that promotes self-harm, I have seen firsthand how content online can lead to immense distress for children.

Mental health was children's biggest worry overall in The Big Ask. While most children who responded were happy, our findings showed that 1 in 5 children are unhappy with their mental health. They were far more fluent and articulate in talking about their mental health than lots of us are.

While it is of course vital that children can access clinical mental health support when they need it, when I think about children's mental health it is clear to me that we need to think holistically about a child. So much of a child's wellbeing will be down to things such as their relationships with family and friends, their participation in education, or just simply their sense of purpose in life.

I have spoken to hundreds of children about what support they need when they start to struggle with their mental health and their ask is clear: they want adults that they can turn to and confide in.



We know that children want to access the right support in a setting familiar to them. That is why this year, I'll be doing a deep dive on the role of pastoral support. I want to work with you in outlining this vision. So many Catholic schools define their duty to their community not only in terms of the quality of academic education, but also with respect to the social and emotional development of their children.

## **Social care**

When I think about making England the best place to grow up, I always start with thinking about the life chances of children in care. As Children's Commissioner for England, I feel personal responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of children in care.

I was determined to give them a voice through The Big Ask and so I reached out to children's homes, kinship carers, foster carers, social workers, anyone who plays a role in supporting and caring these children. In total, over 5,900 children in care and 13,000 children with a social worker responded to our survey.

These children told us that they have the same aspirations and ambitions as any children, but they need even stronger foundations. They want to grow up in a loving home, to be

able to access a brilliant education, to have their health needs met, and to be supported into adulthood. They are no less ambitious than other children, but they felt more acutely that their ambition wasn't always matched by those around them.

I want every single child to grow up in a loving family, even if that cannot be with their biological one. I have heard from so many children who love and care for their adoptive, foster, or kinship family – and I want that especially for those who need it most.

And this includes the children arriving in the UK seeking refuge from conflict, fleeing persecution, or as victims of human trafficking and exploitation.

Unfortunately, the Illegal Migration Act is now being enacted. Since this Bill was first introduced, I have been deeply concerned about the impact it will have on some of the most vulnerable children – those who have been trafficked, or fled persecution and abuse, and arrived on our shores in need of protection.

Of course it is right that we must do all we can to prevent dangerous small boat crossings from happening. I don't want any child arriving here on a small boat. But we must

also do all we can to keep children who have experienced war, persecution, and trauma safe when they arrive on our shores.

My mother came to this country many years ago, seeking asylum. Under the new legislation, she would not have been able to seek refuge.

I remain certain that changes are required to avoid devastating consequences for some of the most vulnerable children I have met. I will continue to advocate for an improved piece of legislation which protects and enshrines the rights of children.

But I also think we need to do more, as a community, as a society, to replicate the kind of support, care and welcome that my mother received. That was not as a result of the state, but as a result of the church, and individuals coming together, to show compassion and love.

One of my most important aims is for no child to live in an institution. These settings struggle to provide the kind of caring, familial environment that children desperately need. It is central to my statutory role to hear from all children, particularly those who are living in some form of institution rather than in a family.

Over the last couple of years, my team has been conducting visits to Young Offender Institutions. There are over 500 children in prison in England. I have serious concerns about the safety and condition of the children's secure estate. Some of the things we have seen are completely shocking. Chaos, violence, and a race to the bottom.

We must do better for these children. It is our duty to protect all children, especially those with additional vulnerabilities. I know that is a duty that all of us carries in our heart. I know we can do better than we currently are.

### **The role of the church in creating a better world for children**

And that's why I am so happy to be here this evening and so honoured to be invited here to deliver the Craigmyle Lecture tonight.

Every one of us has a role to play in creating a society where children can flourish. Children have told me that they do not believe that it is solely the role of the state to provide for them. The Church has an important role in shaping the world we want to live in.

The Catholic Union has played a key role in defending the common good and helping to shape the national conversation.

So, I want to put a series of challenges to us all tonight. Each morning I wake up and I ask myself, 'Am I doing enough? Are my actions helping to create a better world for our nation's children? What more can I do to support the most vulnerable children in society?'

I want to put the same questions to you.

## **The Big Ambition**

While I have endeavoured to put children at the heart of everything I have done so far as Children's Commissioner, I believe that there is still much more to do to give children a voice, and to not let children's futures be defined by their history.

When I speak to children, they are so articulate about what needs to change. They do not just tell me about what is wrong in the world. They tell me about what could make the world better. It is this spirit that I want to capture.

So, over the next few months, I'll be embarking on a new mission. Tomorrow, I'm going to be launching 'The Big Ambition' a chance for every child in England to tell

decision makers how we can make England the best place to grow up.

This is an opportunity to hear from all children, in every part of the country and in every setting. I'll be using the findings to help shape the national conversation, to ensure children's voices are reflected in the decisions that will affect them in years to come.

I hope to use the findings from The Big Ambition to influence leaders and decision makers. Children are much more eloquent than adults, they are best placed to tell us what needs to change. I want to take their voices to parliamentarians, of every party, to put children's voice at the heart of all political debates.

On that note, it felt only suitable to end my remarks today with the words of children. So, I wanted to share with you a quote from 'The Big Ask' that I carry around in my heart each day. When we asked children what was holding them back in England in 2021, a 16-year-old boy told us something sad: 'The social stigma of children from lower class backgrounds trying to achieve something bigger than themselves.'

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Let me repeat that one more time, this young child was saying to me that the biggest thing he worried about was *the stigma of children from lower class backgrounds trying to achieve something bigger than themselves.*

We should tell him of course that there is nothing bigger than the lives of children. So-not to scorn ambition- we could try to build something equal to it.

It is my mission to make England the best place in the world for children to grow up. I hope you will join me in the months and years ahead to achieve that ambition.