



HANSARD
SOCIETY

HeadsUp Forum

www.headsup.org.uk

'Got your back... What do you want from the children's commissioner?' (September 6th - 17th 2004)

A platform providing students with a secure and structured space to discuss proposals for the establishment of a children's commissioner for England.

Young people in the UK want to be consulted on issues and policies that affect their lives. Initially launched as a pilot exercise to monitor young people's participation in politics online, HeadsUp has proved to be an opportunity for young people to demonstrate not only their willingness to be consulted but also their capability.

One of the most important developments in protecting young people's rights and interests in the UK has been the establishment of children's commissioners. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland already have children's commissioners, and with the introduction of the Children Bill, it is now proposed to create a similar role in England.

The Children Bill - and therefore the role of the children's commissioner - is being debated by MPs and Peers. But what of the views, ideas and experiences of those who will be most affected by the establishment of a commissioner? Given the profound impact of the proposals in the Bill, a debate was set up on HeadsUp to give young people a chance to discuss with one another what they wanted from the commissioner.

The objective of the HeadsUp project is not to simply facilitate peer-to-peer debate but to then make this input available to elected representatives to inform their decision-making. 'Got your back... what do you want from the children's commissioner?' was endorsed by the Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Children and Children in Care, Hilton Dawson MP.

Hilton Dawson actively participated in the Forum, putting forward questions and debating with the participants over the two weeks. During the House of Commons' second reading of the Children Bill, Hilton was then able to directly incorporate input from HeadsUp participants into his contributions.

The debate involved students from 10 schools around England (around 100 students in total). They were between the ages of 11 and 16. Two

schools had taken part in previous Forums but the rest took part for the first time. Every school made multiple visits over the duration of the debate and in total the student posts filled 150 pages.

This report summarises the debate that took place and includes key posts from students. After reading, the Forum participants and the Hansard Society would like to invite interested parties, particularly parliamentarians and government, to respond.

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Key Findings

The debate was initiated by Hilton Dawson MP, who set questions on the following three aspects of the children's commissioner role:

1. Profile... the skills and characteristics required of the commissioner
2. Communicating... the ways in which the commissioner should communicate with young people
3. Issues... the issues that young people want the commissioner to look into.

What follows is a detailed summary of the debate that was inspired by these questions. It has been compiled by the Hansard Society, a non-partisan and independent organisation with 60 years of experience in providing political education resources. All views and ideas expressed are those of young people who used the HeadsUp forum.

Please note... It has been the practice in previous HeadsUp Forum reports to accompany highlighted posts with the names of their authors. However, in this Forum some schools chose not to register students as individuals, rather students posted under their teacher's name. As we have been unable to individually credit some posts, we have taken the decision not to credit any.

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Profile

It is intended to appoint a children's commissioner by the end of 2005. The position brings with it responsibility for championing the rights and interests

of 11.3 million young people in England, and necessitates liaison with a wide range of organisations including interest groups, government departments and local authorities.

Given the scale of the task, there is little doubt that a suitable commissioner will have to bring a particular set of skills and characteristics. In the first topic space, the HeadsUp participants debated exactly what they thought these criteria should include.

It may seem fairly obvious but amongst the first and most widely agreed upon points was that the commissioner should:

“like children”

The participants felt that the commissioner’s ability to get along with young people could not be underestimated. A good temperament was seen as important:

“Personality wise they should be friendly and understanding. A talkative and confident person”

And given the fact that the position would require regular contact with young people, the need of a positive demeanour was also highlighted:

“the commissioner should be relaxed and someone you could have a laugh with and they wont get stressed out or yell”

All too often, young people complain that when they meet with politicians and representatives, they dodge difficult questions or refuse to go too deep into contentious issues. For the HeadsUp participants, this sort of avoidance was not an option when it came to the commissioner:

“it should be someone that does not give up on a debate!”

Still, despite the importance that was placed on young people feeling that they could approach and interact with the commissioner, the participants also recognised that the commissioner would have to be able to fuse their ‘young people skills’ with a capacity for working well with adults, particularly the UK’s influential decision-makers:

“They should be a relaxed/hard working force that will engage the challenges that will confront them in the stages of being children’s commissioner”

However, once on the job, the Forum participants felt that the commissioner would only be able to carry out their responsibilities effectively, if young people were able to trust the commissioner. This trust would be earned through credible performance and this would be judged on the commissioner’s ability to tackle problems:

“We would hope for a person who has the skills and ability to talk and get the problems solved quickly and efficiently”

From the contributions to the forum it was clear though, that as well as having to work well in a practical sense, the commissioner would need vision to promote the wants and needs of young people. Creativity in generating original ideas and applying those generated by young people was also seen as invaluable:

“the commissioner should understand that kids r gonna cum up with impossible ideas which may seem crazy but could be adapted to become possible”

There was some unresolved contention on the ideal age of a children’s commissioner. For some the commissioner should be in their twenties or thirties because of their proximity in years to both young people and adults. Others, however, took the view that the commissioner should have a lot of life experience, and even have had children of their own. This latter faction put their ideal age for the commissioner at between 40 - 50.

When it came to jobs previously held by the commissioner, a range of professions were suggested including teacher, social worker, lawyer and even MP. When asked why these jobs were picked out, what linked the answers was that they were jobs that necessitated a lot of work with young people from various walks of life.

But overall, the young people using this HeadsUp Forum saw the key to a successful commissioner lying in their unrelenting dedication to the position and those whose rights and interests they would be responsible for championing:

“A Children’s Commissioner should be someone who believes that the rights of children should be counted. They should be committed to helping children and finding out what matters to them. A commissioner should understand the ideas and opinions of children and take his job very seriously”

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Communicating

Whereas there was wide consensus on the sort of profile that the children’s commissioner should have, there was a lot more debate on the best way for the commissioner to communicate with young people.

The pervasive and novel nature of technology was instantly recognised. A lot of the participants saw a website as very important in keeping young people

and the commissioner in touch with one another. Supporters of the website had a lot of ideas about what should be included in the commissioner's site to make it useful and appealing. Suggestions included regular information updates, games and polls but the main feature, they believed, should be a chatroom or forum board where the commissioner could highlight their work and young people could submit their views.

Not everyone shared enthusiasm for a website. A number of participants pointed out potential limitations:

"but what if children can't get to the web, because they don't have a computer or the internet?"

In response, proponents of a commissioner's website cited their experience of using online resources at school:

"Children should be given time during their lessons to participate - as we are doing now."

Using text messaging was also advocated as a way of freeing up consultation from the constraints of time and place. Yet, again the cited merits did not convince every participant:

"txting would b a bad idea because not every one has mobile fones n it will be bad to keep getting txts from someone you don't know"

It was agreed that mobile technology did not present the decisive solution because there are young people who do not have access and the associated costs that come with sending and receiving SMS and MMS. However, supporters did take issue with arguments that regarded communication from the children's commissioner as just another form of text-message spam:

"why do people think that txt messaging would be annoying? after all don't we get txt messages frm companies that annoy us, at least if the commissioner was txting us it would be with something useful and keeping us up to date on our views and opinions."

Despite the promise of emerging technologies for two-way dialogue, in July 2003 MORI showed that television, radio and press were still the main sources of information for young people.¹ This was borne out by the participants in the Forum.

To a large proportion of the students, television seemed an obvious medium for the commissioner to use:

"why not get in contact with children via tv, you can get in contact to millions in one go. Its much simpler."

¹ Nestle Family Monitor 'Young People's Attitudes Towards Politics' prepared by MORI, July 2003.

However, on which programmes and at which time of the day coverage of the commissioner should appear could not be agreed upon. In the face of this quandary, many participants turned to the press as a more effective means for the commissioner to report on their work:

“I think the commissioner should communicate with young people through ordinary magazines but don’t produce one especially for the commissioner as I don’t feel many people would buy it”

Perhaps the most widely supported route through which young people and commissioners could engage with one another was by meeting face-to-face, something the participants felt was happening too infrequently with current representatives:

“I think there should be someone that visits the local towns once every couple of months to be able to link with what the local children would like the commissioner to talk about.”

However, the idea of using schools as the setting for these meetings was not well received by everyone:

“people are completely different at schools. They wouldn’t want to be the loser who contributes.”

Suggestions for more conducive environments were limited. Youth clubs were touted but there was also interest in making use of established representative structures:

“There ought to be a representative of every town council or on a county council, so they will be able to communicate more easily with the young people in their community. This will be much easier to report to the children’s commissioner.”

From the debate around this topic it was clear that not one medium would win out over all the rest, reflecting the diverse nature of young people. Still, whatever communication strategy the commissioner settled upon it was recognised by all, that proactive reporting and consulting was an important aspect of their work:

“the commissioner should be interacting with the people and should get involved and not just be a faceless office person.”

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Issues

The third topic-space in this Forum asked participants what issues should the children's commissioner be most concerned with once they are installed in the position. The suggestions put forward covered a wide range of issues and policies.

The young people who use HeadsUp are regularly consulted on what issues they should debate on the site. The topics suggested can be broad and not exclusively related to young people's lives or even the UK. Given the opportunity in this debate, again issues deemed worthy of the commissioner's attention included trade justice, the environment and the asylum system.

The participants, however, acknowledging that these might be difficult issues for the commissioner to address, also suggested domestic issues that might be considered more immediately applicable to the scope of the commissioner.

Bullying, sex education, drug abuse and racism all emerged as important issues to young people growing up in the UK. Participants also drew attention to minimum age limits for consuming alcohol and driving a car. In a similar vein, one issue that has maintained a consistent presence in the concerns of young people is the minimum voting age:

"we have to have someone who will stand there ground and make sure people listen to us and dont just dismiss us cause we cant vote. They should lower the voting age to 16"

Although, proposals for issues often had a national and even international focus, there were also many put forward that were more localised in their focus. The interest in having an input on school management matters came through strongly from a number of posts:

"I think the first issue that the commissioner should think about is maybe asking the children to say how they think their school could improve or be adjusted."

This willingness to be involved in the decision-making process extended to matters dealt with by local authorities, particularly those related to the availability of recreational facilities:

"i think the first things to be tackled are things like sorting out more things such as clubs and places that are free of charge so anyone no

matter how rich or poor they are can go there. This will help cut down on young crime.”

Related to this last concern was an issue that appeared for the first time in the HeadsUp Forum, the concept of which troubled the participants and, they felt, presented an issue definitely worthy of the attentions of the commissioner:

“the commissioner should tackle the upcoming issue of curfews. I can understand why they might be necessary in some areas or for certain people, but I don’t think that all young people should have 2 be in at a specific time. It diminishes our sense of independence.”

This topic-space was an opportunity for some of the UK’s young citizens to indicate those areas of their lives they feel warrant the time and energy of the children’s commissioner. The issues that they wrote about were diverse but no matter what issues the commissioner eventually chooses to focus on, if the commissioner is to be taken seriously and respected by young people, then their work has to be action-orientated:

“I think that the most important thing for the commissioner to do is to talk to loadz of young people of all ages and backgrounds, to get to know all the different attitudes and needs and then act on them.”

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Summing Up

The scope of the role of children’s commissioner will ultimately be set with the passing of the Children Bill. MPs and Peers will choose the most workable solution to address the many complex challenges that the children’s commissioner was engineered to address.

As they work to reach their decisions, they will seek the advice and support of recognised experts. However, what this Forum has demonstrated is that the one group of experts they must be careful not to overlook are young people themselves.

The young people who took part in this HeadsUp Forum recognised that they were the ones with the most to gain from the establishment of a children’s commissioner. They were excited by the prospect of a commissioner who would work not only to protect their rights and interests but would also be able to promote those rights and interests at the highest level of decision-making.

To this end, the forum participants seized on their chance to voice their ideas and opinions on the profile of the person they would like to see in the

role, they suggested ways that the commissioner would best be able to communicate with young people, and presented issues that they thought should be investigated and tackled by the commissioner.

The participation of young people in the setting-up of the children's commissioner should not stop with the HeadsUp Forum. Hilton Dawson MP took part in the actual online debate and then utilised the evidence he gathered in a reading of the Bill in the Commons. This heralded a massive step forward in the young people's participation agenda, and should send out a clear message about the value of young people's contribution to the policy process.

On behalf of the young people who took part, we now invite stakeholder organisations, other parliamentarians and the Government to take up their contributions and build upon them. In doing so, they can be confident of a more representative, effective and respected children's commissioner.

Those individuals and organisations who wish to respond to the ideas and opinions detailed in this report should contact:

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All responses will be distributed to the participating students and, unless otherwise requested, published on HeadsUp to inform further debate.

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Key Posts

** Key posts are those which are representative of consensus in the forum, those that introduced new or alternative ideas. Those included earlier in the report are not reproduced here. A full transcript of the forum is available in a MySQL format on request.*

Children's Commissioner - right person, right skills?

"I think the children's commissioner should be of a similar age to the young people today. If there is to be someone to represent children, they should have the experiences of children today. 21-25 year olds should be best, because they would be able to communicate and understand children more and put forward our point of view."

"They should be able to get through to adults and be persuasive enough, but at the same time see things the way that people our age would."

"But how do we know that the commissioner won't make all kinds of promises and then break them all in parliament? They could just turn out like every other politician and just do their own thing. It would have to be someone that children felt they could trust."

"yo, i think that the commissioner should be 18 years and over because they are likely to be able to understand the things that we children are talking about plus they will be able to give reasonable answers that make sense."

"i think that a teacher or a social worker would be a good person to take up this job because they would have handled lots of kids with different opinions before, and would probably know a lot about kids."

"the children's commissioner should know what children want and need"

"The children's commissioner should be able to look at things from a children's point of view. To be able to do this they would have to be at a youngish age because people around 25-35 tend to understand children more. They should aim to tackle the problems that happen around school and in the home. Personality wise they should be friendly and understanding. A talkative and confident person."

"A Children's commissioner should be someone who believes that the rights of children should be counted. They should be committed to helping children and finding out what matters to them. A commissioner should understand the ideas and opinions of children and take his job very seriously."

"The children's commissioner cannot smoke or have a criminal record this he will show us to run a sensible and creative life"

"The commissioner has to have their priorities sorted out so they know when to be serious and when to be slightly more relaxed e.g around children. They have to come across as an easy going individual, but still have a serious side when it comes to putting across views. They have to be dedicated to their job to show children they are there because they want to help with problems."

"I think the commissioner should be a youngish person that possibly went through trouble in their childhood such as was in foster care or something because then they will have had experiences of a bad childhood and then will probably want to make children's lives better than what they experienced. I think he/she should also be a person that travels around the country to actually hear children's views on what should be done for us!"

"We would hope for a person who has the skills and ability to talk and get the problems solved quickly and efficiently."

"I think the children's commissioner should be renamed to 'the young persons commissioner' because they are working with anyone under the age of 25 a child is classed as someone age 13 and under!"

"I don't think that a UK person is needed. All the commissioners should meet regularly and discuss matters that arise"

How should the Commissioner communicate with you?

"I think there should be someone that visits the local towns once every couple of months to be able to link with what the local children would like the commissioner to talk about. I know it's not really that easy to do but maybe the commissioner should change the topic we talk about every fortnight that way there won't be old news on the website but only new and in date news/topics for everyone to talk about."

"And there should be a way that young people can get involved and express our views via the child commissioner. Like a chatroom or email or survey!"

"I think that the children's commissioner should understand children and their needs. They should also visit schools and have conversations with different children of different races and religion"

"There ought to be a representative of every town council or on a county council, so they will be able to communicate more easily with the young people in their community. This will be much easier to report to the children's commissioner."

"Other ways in which we can communicate with the commissioner other than the internet could be phonelines, forms/questionnaires, text services or even just letters through the post"

"I think that they should have their own Web site so young people can put their points of view across. I think that this is the best way as I cannot see any other way."

"But what if Children can't get to the web, because they don't have a computer or the internet..."

"by making a video and send it to schools"

"I think that the children's commissioner should communicate with us 1 to 1. He/she could also make a website asking for our say and the website should be advertised so all children can give their say."

"yeah if you have live web chats games and so on because it would keep us interested but some children would go on and just play the games nothing else."

"The best way a commissioner could communicate is either face to face maybe in school or at home . Talking about the matters taking the child's opinion into account and writing or phoning to tell them that was a good idea and saying thank you for co-operating .They could also set up a website with the answers on also on it could be some votes and debates.Since if it was an attractive website with funny animations on it would appeal to the children.They could put up posters up about where you can find the decision of the debate and how you can contribute to a new debate."

"A children's commissioner should communicate with children by visiting schools and talking to students of all ages about what matters to them. They should take notes and report back to the parliament. They could also set up websites and take votes (or debates) asking questions involved with the issues concerned. A children's commissioner could also set up speeches on what's happening, to involve children. They could hand out fliers and leaflets for advertisement of the website and should be enthusiastic about making appearances at public places."

"The commissioner should communicate with children by arranging meetings with schools in the U.K.If this system fails to work then a television programme would be good as this would probably appeal more to children.Again if the system fails then a small leaflet could be sent to each home for the child to read and understand"

"i think the government should send out monthly text messages to children's mobiles saying about what they have been doing and going to do. Then we have to send back a message saying what we think they can improve."

"The technology available to the commissioner is an emmencely large field of choice they could;

. Text every mobile once a month explaining the months plans.

. The radio broadcast could tell the plans for his work.

. He could also have a time slot for an advert or something to show themselves to the children of Great Britan."

"also they could send letters, and leaflets. the only thing i would hate though, is if a person with a questionare form asked me loads of questions at my front door"

"a good reason for not using texts is that perhaps people really dont want to recieve texts from the government"

"with post you could fill a form out if you want to be involved and that way you dont have to have a say if you dont want to"

"it shouldn matta what we know, it should be simple, we should tell him what we want and then he should try and get it or atleast talk about it"

What should be the important issues for the Commissioner?

"i agree that the commissioner should know what the children want, maybe he should set up an online page so anyone can acess it and tell him what they think!"

"The important issues that a children's commissioner should explore are children's fears. They should talk about general, every-day issues that a child may come across in their life-time. A children's commissioner should look over things such as: bullying, racism, drug abuse and more. They should look deeply into these matters and try to solve them."

"we should have more youth clubs and things to do so then the crime rate should go down on youngsters because they will have something to do. most of the young crime probably happens because the kids are bored so i think we should have more government run projects to keep us out of mischief!"

"I think they should also go out to schools and talk to children and see what they would like to happen in their local area!!!"

"The most important issues of a commissioner should be....."

1. Bullying - many school children are unhappy in school because of bullies.
2. Sex - this is happening more and more and no-one is showing a good example and showing how at a young age having a baby can ruin your life!
3. Drugs - People under the age of 16 are being able to get hold of drugs."

"they should actually do research into what different teenagers want not just a majority, not everyone wants the same things!"

"the first issue that the commissioner should look into, i believe should be finding out what under 18's like to do with their spare time, this could lead to allowing for more recreational activities, and hopefully stopping vandalism and such."

"the first issue that should be looked at by the commissioner should be the legal voting age and the driving age laws"