

Three Commissioners – Professor Janet Walker OBE, David French, and Esther Gregory-Witham – participated in a panel discussion on Monday 15th November hosted by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Couple Relationships and Reducing Inter-Parental Conflict. Chaired by Andrew Selous MP, who serves as an ex-officio member of the Commission, the event brought together parliamentarians, researchers, and relationships experts to consider a range of issues relevant to the Commission’s work.

Professor Walker introduced the work of the Commission, expressing its vision that families and households of all shapes and sizes should be places where people of all ages, cultures, faiths and no faith are best supported to thrive. This requires understanding the varied lives of individuals, families and households in order to develop a bold vision of how they can be assisted to flourish, as well as grappling with sensitive issues including domestic violence, racial and economic inequality, and human sexuality. Having issued its [Call for Evidence](#), the Commission is seeking to hear about the challenges and pressures facing families and households as well as examples of best practice through written responses, evidence gathering visits and meetings, and by convening focus groups.

Esther Gregory-Witham then described the Commission's particular focus on couple relationships. Through its work in this area – which will consider marriage, civil partnerships, cohabitation, and conflict resolution – the Commission is exploring ways of promoting and encouraging sustainability and resilience within couple relationships of all kinds. This will involve consideration of couple relationships today, under 18s and couple relationships, and adult couple relationships, separating out these categories in order to consider particular challenges and pressures relevant to each. These categories also enable analysis of issues as varied as the social history of marriage and couple relationships – including the notion of commitment and changes in the law – to the opportunities and risks that come with technological advances. Once the Call for Evidence has closed and submissions have been analysed, the Commission hopes to call upon examples of good practice – and identify gaps in support – to assist making recommendations for developing new policies and programmes of support for families and households.

The subsequent presentations served as a useful reminder of the highly unusual context in which the Commission is considering the pressures and challenges facing families and households. Research commissioned by Tavistock Relationships indicates the challenges faced by families during the pandemic. Couples with children reported being nearly twice as likely to consider splitting up as a result of lockdown, whilst separating and separated couples reported particular pressures and difficulties as a result of the pandemic. Presenting the findings of a longitudinal study comparing the impact of the pandemic on relationships and family life between the UK and Australia, Dr Gabriela Misca noted the greater tensions experienced within families in the UK (where lockdowns were more prolonged and severe) and the challenge caused to families by bereavement.

In his summing up, Andrew Selous emphasised a comment that emerged during the meeting that ‘levelling up begins in the home’ and he urged parliamentarians to consider this further within the current policy agenda.

The Commission will continue to engage with parliamentarians and others in the families sector and will return to the APPG on Strengthening Couple Relationships and Reducing Inter-Parental Conflict in the spring to outline some of the key findings from the Call for Evidence. If you have not yet participated in the Call for Evidence and wish to have your say about what can be done to support couples to flourish, please answer as many questions as you wish from the survey, which can be found [here](#), before the deadline on 13th December 2021.

