# Children's COMMISSIONER

# Business Plan

## Consultation with Children

APRIL 2018

# Contents

# Introduction

The views and interests of children in England influence all the work that the Children's Commissioner's Office (CCO) undertakes. To inform the CCO's business planning for 2018/19 we consulted children, to understand what matters to them and what they think needs to improve for children growing up in England.

Details on the methodology are provided at the end of the report. In summary, we spoke with children in Primary and Secondary schools, Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), various forums for children with disabilities and through a fostering agency that supports disabled children. We held 11 focus groups and 5 interviews with children in different settings in order to gather their views on:

> What we should focus on in the coming year;

> Particular groups of children the we should speak and listen to;

> Engagement methods that we should use when engaging with children.

We also asked children for their views on the following six policy areas that the CCO thinks require further review:

> Mental Health

> Schools

> Speech and Language Services

> Unfair Exclusions

> Home Education

> Homelessness

This report provides a summary of the key themes arising from our discussions with children.


# Acknowledgements

The Children's Commissioner would like to thank all the children who gave up their time to participate in this consultation. Further acknowledgement is needed for the support and time given by the different organisations and institutions who helped to facilitate the organisation of these focus groups and interviews with children.

# Children's views on what is important

Children were asked what groups of children or specific issues we should focus on. Some of the common groups and issues which came up were:

> **Children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities**. All children felt that children with disabilities are one of the least heard groups and that the CCO should focus on SEND. Children felt there should be a particular focus on children who are blind or deaf, or who have autism or dyslexia. Some expressed concern for disabled children who are particularly isolated, for example, when they are the only disabled child in a mainstream school. Several disabled children also spoke about the lack of opportunities to take part in normal activities or how mainstream schools are not able to meet their needs.
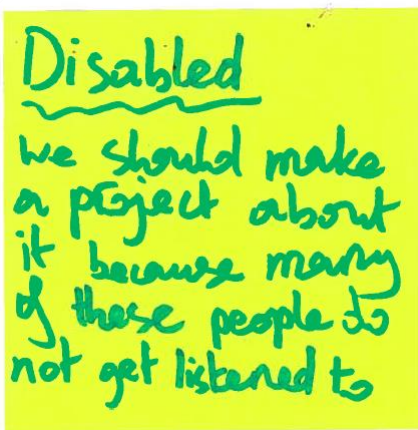


*Secondary school pupil on groups we should speak to*

*"People with disabilities don't really get much say… the government don't really hear from children with disabilities."* - Older child with disabilities

*"I would like to help children go to places they can't go at the moment. Like people who can't go swimming [children with disabilities]. I think for children [with disabilities] I would like someone to help them go on holidays."* – Child with a disability in foster care

*"Really severe autism or severe disabled children's problems don't get listened to as much."* – Secondary school child

*"My best friend can't come to school with me as she has cerebral palsy and is in a wheelchair. She uses her eyes on her computer to talk, but she is just as clever as me and should be able to make lots of friends where she lives and do GCSEs like me. It's not fair she doesn't have choice of schools."* – Child with a disability in foster care

*"I think it's important that you speak to deaf children because they would see the world differently because they can't hear people but they can see them laughing. It's like you're left out. So they'd want somebody to talk to."* – Secondary school child

> **Children in care.** A group that children commonly felt required more attention was children in care. Some of the key issues that children felt the CCO should focus on were: how professionals write about children in care and how this information is then used to make children feel labelled and stigmatised; the stigma associated with being in care; and the need to provide children with stable homes and more emotional support.

*"If I were the Children's Commissioner, I would help people in foster care, 'cos that's important. If they couldn't go back to their families I would find families, or get them help to be adopted."* – Child with a disability in foster care

*"[Children in children's homes] don't have a mother and father to lead them on, they live with loads of other children so then it might be a bit difficult for them."* – Secondary school child

*"[Children with no parents] if they don't get fostered or stuff so they could tell you how life is then for them, like if people aren't treating them right or if they want different accommodation.*" – Secondary school child

*"I don't like the way I'm described in documents or any reports I read. The wording is wrong… I'm not a victim and everything I read is always telling everyone about my past."* – Child with a disability in foster care

> **Children who are abused or neglected.** Many children, particularly younger children, felt that abused and neglected children were a key group that the CCO should focus on, because these children often slipped 'under the radar'.

*"Vulnerable children, like they went through some problems like with let's say abuse… they might try to [talk to someone] but they might hide it in because they are still upset, scarred from it."* – Secondary school child

*"Let's say someone comes into school and they've got bruises all over their hands and cuts on their face, they need to talk to those children, ask what's happening."* – Secondary school child
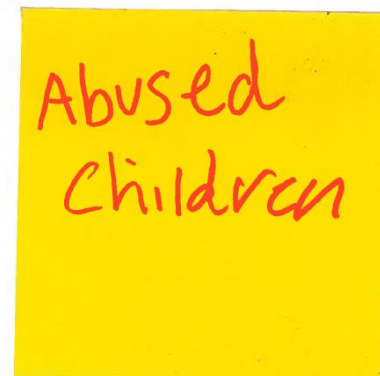


*Primary school child on groups we should speak to*

> **Children who are ill and/or in hospital.** Several children spoke about this group of children needing more attention. The need for better access to specialist health care and clinics for children, in particular for children with disabilities, came up. Geographic disparities in service provision leading to many children having to travel long distances was noted as an important issue.

*"If I had a super-power I would help everyone with an illness; I would stop them being ill and people and have a free life."* - Child with a disability in foster care

*"People, like little children who have cancer and then problems with their heart."* – Secondary school child

> **Bullying and discrimination**. Almost all children felt that bullying was one of the most important issues at their school. Many spoke about discrimination, with a lot of bullying being about a child's race, religion or sexual orientation.

*"Kids who have been bullied by their skin colour."* – Primary school child

*"Because ISIS is the Muslim terrorist group they might think everyone who's a Muslim is actually a terrorist and be rude and they might target one race and bully them and pick on them."* – Secondary school child

*"Homophobia and religious discrimination, may lead back into depression or anxiety issues."* – Secondary school child
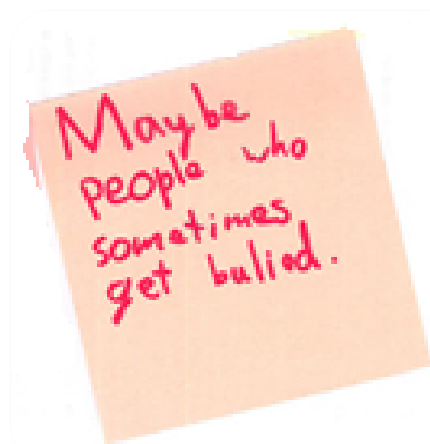


*Primary school child on groups we should speak to*

Other common groups to emerge from discussions that children felt we should focus on:

> Children with mental health problems;
> Children who are home schooled, have been excluded from school or do not get a good education;
> Children living in poverty and/or in disadvantaged communities;

*"Like kids who always have to struggle to get stuff."* – Older child attending a PRU

> Children whose parents are divorced;

*"Parents might have many troubles so then that could rub off onto children and make the children act differently compared to how they were before."* - Secondary school child

> Refugee children;

*"We could speak to [refugees] because they have seen some scary things."* - Primary school child

> Children that do not speak English as a first language;
> Young carers;
> Children with alcoholic parents;
> Children in prison;
> Teenage mothers.

*"Young mothers may lose a lot of friends and get bullied for decisions… strangers might just judge them."* - Secondary school child

## Particular issues that emerged from focus groups in PRUs

> **Social mobility.** Several children spoke about the area in which they lived and the negative impact that had on the experiences and opportunities available to them. Children also related this to the lack of motivation and self-esteem that young people had.

*"If you grow up in a council estate yeah, all you get is 'good luck', you get thrown in the deep end and you've got to work your way out yeah, crawl yourself out."* - Older child attending a PRU

*"Nowadays you're either born in to money and you succeed and if you're not then you're out on the dole."* - Older child attending a PRU

> **Substance abuse amongst children.** Older children spoke passionately about the effect that alcohol and drug use had on their friends and family. They saw the problem with drugs as insurmountable and were pessimistic about what this meant for children as they became young adults.

*"The only way to stop it [children taking drugs] is to send people to prison straight away."* - Older child attending a PRU

**"My friend yeah, every morning when she wakes up, she's got to have a drink."** - Older child attending a PRU

> **Interactions with the police** was a very important issue for children. They recounted numerous stop and search incidences and described police actively seeking out children to question or bother them. Children wanted to be taught about the law and their rights so they would know what to say to the police in these instances.

*"They just drive around looking for trouble... by doing that they're stopping so many people who aren't doing things wrong."* Older child attending a PRU

> **Knife crime** was of real concern to children. Several spoke about young children carrying weapons. As with a number of issues, there was a sense of helplessness about what could be done to solve this problem.

*"Knife crime, it's so bad."* - Older child attending a PRU

*"There are kids aged 11 yeah, carrying machetes."* - Older child attending a PRU

# Children's views on policy issues

In identifying a range of policy issues deemed by CCO to require further review, children were asked specifically for their views on six of them;

> Mental Health

> Schools

> Speech and Language Services

> Unfair Exclusions

> Home Education

> Homelessness

This section summarises the views and often the experiences of children across these six areas.

## Mental Health

Children were asked about their views on mental health. Just as in last year's Business Plan Consultation, all the children that took part in the consultation identified that mental health was a very important issue and many ranked it as the most important issue for us to focus on.

### Information and support

Better access to information and mental health services were issues that many children spoke about. Younger children said that they did not know what support for mental health was available, particularly online. The majority of older children said that they believed access to teenage mental health services (e.g. CAHMS) is poor, mentioning long waiting lists and referrals only being made when a young person is at 'crisis point' as key factors.

*"I haven't really seen support for mental health online like on kid's websites or on television except 'ChildLine'."* – Primary school child

Mental health support was seen as a '*post-code lottery*' and some discussed the disparities between schools in the mental health services they provide. Feedback about schools' mental health provision was mixed amongst secondary school children: some children felt that their schools had good mental health services (in-house counselling, peer support) whilst some felt that teachers were not able to deal with mental health issues.

*"I've been to two different [secondary] schools. In my first one, I wouldn't have anyone to go to, if you had a mental-health problem you would have to just see a teacher; but do all teachers have mental health training?... Now at my new school they are pretty good. I can talk to an actual counsellor."* – A child with a disability in foster care

The idea that mental health can be *'invisible'* came up in several focus groups, as well as school staff and parents not being able to spot the warning signs. Older children said that there was not enough training for professionals and adults about children's mental health. Several children felt that teachers in particular (and other school staff – e.g. lunch staff) did not know enough about the impact of mental health and consequently were unable to understand and respond appropriately to the behaviour and needs of many children. Some older children also felt that professionals tended to dismiss their mental health concerns when they try to seek help and support. One disabled teenager referred to this as a *'denial industry'*.



*An older child on mental health support at schools*

*"It feels like… with depression you can just be happy… with anxiety it's like… you'll be alright in a minute… people don't take it seriously."* **–** Older child with a disability



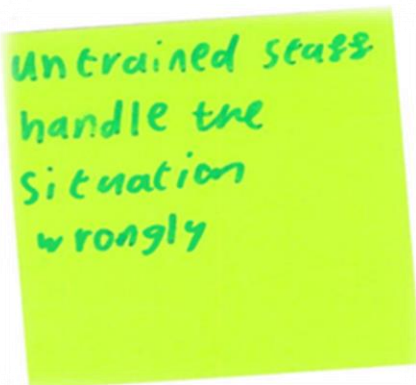*An older child with disabilities on mental health support at schools*

*"It is a really big issue because the children who have mental health issues, they, people don't actually understand it, like adults."* – Secondary school child

*"Depression and anxiety is kind of like extreme and not everyone can see it, because you may put an act to it, so not everyone will see it unless actually, you actually tell them."* – Secondary school child

*"In mainstream yeah, if you have problems going on at home, they don't know."* – Older child attending a PRU

**"Some mental health [issues]… they don't get noticed as much and they don't get the help that they need as much."** – Secondary school child

Children also talked about the lack of understanding amongst children on how to interact and engage with other children who may have mental health problems.

*"Children and teens might not understand how to interact with them [child with mental health problems] and how they act and how they behave and because I've known him all my life I've got used to him and know what to say in front of him and what not to say and what to keep back."* – Secondary school child

Several children spoke about their positive experiences of the mental health services in their schools. Factors associated with a more positive experience included when those services were run by younger adults who children saw as peers and could relate to, and when those services were normalised within the school culture and there was no stigma attached to using them.

*"There is no stigma attached to going… accessing it is something we've all grown up with."* – Secondary school child

*"It's OK not to be perfect."* – Older child with a disability

When children spoke about mental health, they often focused on the pressure they received at school. For younger children their stress tended to relate to the transition from primary to secondary school, whereas older children

were more concerned with the stress of exams, the lack of healthy work/life balance, and the demand to achieve very high grades.

*"There really is pressure to achieve success... You have to meet (or exceed) your target grades."* – Secondary school child

*"They [children] get put under pressure and that, then they stress out ... when they say that you're going to be doing SATS soon and everything."* – Younger child attending a PRU


### Impact of social media

Older children were concerned about social media, and the impact it had on their mental health. Many children felt that social media caused them a lot of anxiety. Some spoke about the way social media pressures children to 'conform' and the anxiety and depression that can be caused when children cannot afford to buy the clothes or brands that they see everyone wearing online.

*"I think it's [mental health] important because it's becoming a big issue with children because of social media because they see other people and other people their age who look great and then they get lower self-esteem about their body, causing depression and then they get mental health issues thinking they're not worth it."* - Secondary school child

*"Young people's mentality has changed. You wanna know why? All this social s\*\*\*, this social media s\*\*\*."* – Older child attending a PRU

*"You can't get certain things [that you see on social media], that makes you feel like you're left out and that could cause depression."* – Older child attending a PRU

*"Mental health: it's important because it is becoming a big issue with children, due to social media; they get low self-esteem causing mental health issues."* – Secondary school child


## What are schools for?

All the children who took part in the consultation felt that issues relating to school were very important.

Older children spoke about how, particularly in sixth form, the focus from schools is solely on academic success and achieving good grades. This can mean there is less time to take part in other activities and it can have a negative impact on wellbeing.

*"There really is pressure to achieve success... you have to meet or exceed your target grades."* – Secondary school child

Children said school should not only be about academic studies but also about building confidence and preparing for life after school. Some mentioned the need for schools to be more flexible in how they teach as not everyone learns effectively in the same way.

*"Schools should allow kids to follow their interest, we can't all cope with every subject and schools just have to meet targets so those of us whose brains are wired differently aren't catered for. I should be allowed to give up*

*French and work with animals, my friends who are autistic need to move around more and also do more practical stuff. We aren't all the same so don't treat us the same."* – Younger child with a disability in foster care

Some children with disabilities and children in PRUs felt that their schools did not offer them enough support. Specific issues included:

> a lack of support with their EHC plans;
> a lack of adequate disabled access in schools;
> a lack of funding for support workers;
> and the lack of longer-term support for children with autism.

*"In mainstream, yeah, you can sit and talk to teacher and they can give you all the support they know that you want, but they don't actually want to give it to you. Here [at a PRU centre] they do. You can see it in their faces."* – Older child attending a PRU
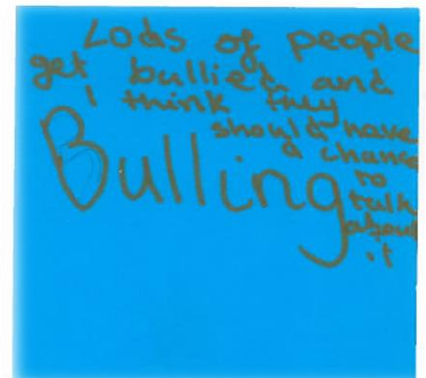


*A Secondary school child feels that schools should help with social media*

Children, particularly older children, felt that school should teach them more about social media security, rather than focusing only on the dangers of social media. Children also felt that their schools did not provide them with enough support when it came to online bullying. Older children spoke about forms of bullying such as 'baiting' - which is where children send round indecent images of each other – and about schools failing to stop it.

Children across all age groups spoke about bullying for being different (e.g. about race, religion or sexuality)**,** with many older children having direct experience of this. Some of the older children said schools should be more innovative about how they educate children so that prejudices are not so prevalent – for example rather than just holding assemblies about these issues they could organise school trips that would educate children about different cultures, sexualities and religions.



*An older child on bullying in schools*

*"My experience of school is that you kind of get judged a lot."* – Secondary school child

*"Yeah my sister … she has received it [homophobic bullying] but she tries and blocks it out but people used to say things like that to me as well and it was harder for me to cope with it."* – Secondary school child

## Speech and language services

Many children who took part in the consultation did not have a lot to say about speech and language services, and younger children did not always have a good understanding of what speech and languages services are. However, once we explained what speech and languages services are for, common views and concerns were raised. Children with disabilities had the most to say about speech and language services.

*"[Speech and language services] do not exist for young people at a certain age."* – Child with a disability

The most common concern in this area was the lack of access to these services, and the very long and difficult referral processes. Children also stressed the importance of equal opportunities for all children in accessing speech and language services and in having access to these services in school. This was particularly pertinent because some children with disabilities spoke about the difficulties of travelling to and from speech and language services when they were not based at school. Not being provided with a sufficient number of speech and language sessions was another concern raised.

*"Times at which they were doing it [speech and language sessions] didn't seem enough... they didn't do it as often as they should have."* – Older child with a disability



*An older child with disabilities on early intervention for speech and language services*

Other issues that emerged included the stigma attached to using speech and language services and how having speech and language problems could make learning and expressing oneself difficult.

*"It can affect daily life. It can affect how you convey feelings."* – Primary school child

*"He'd just be dead embarrassed with the thought of mum even saying to him I think you need to go to someone for your speech."* – Older child attending a PRU

Children in several focus groups (those in Secondary school and those with disabilities) spoke about the need to focus on identifying children who need speech and language services much earlier on, like in nursery, and providing those services when children are much younger.

## Unfair Exclusions

*"[Unfair exclusion are] Bad, will be missing out on learning."* - Primary school child

The overwhelming issue that came through when we spoke to children about unfair exclusions was that certain groups were more likely to be excluded. This was most likely to be children with disabilities (although reference to BAME children was also made). Children also spoke about how, if a child has been in trouble or been excluded before, it is more likely that they will be blamed when an incident happens and they are more likely to be excluded again.

*"They'll just point the finger at you because it'd happened before."* – Secondary school child

*"My head of year didn't like us 4 boys, so he kicked us all out, I was first, then the rest were kicked out."* – Older child attending a PRU

*"It feels like... guilty before being proven innocent."* – Older child with a disability

Children with disabilities shared their experiences about how they had been excluded from school because **the school did not have the resources to appropriately deal with their behaviour**, or did not understand the full impact of their disability.

*"At my old school... they permanently excluded me for having autism ... that's a bit out of order."* – Younger child attending a PRU

Children were also concerned that children with disabilities may **not always receive appropriate levels of support at home** once they have been excluded, particularly if parents do not have the capacity to deal with the child's educational needs.

Many children felt that schools should pay more attention to the pupil's background – such as their socio-economic status, their situation at home, or their future prospects – before making decisions about exclusions, particularly permanent exclusions.

*"[The schools should] consider the background of the child in question." –* Older child with a disability

There was a concern amongst older excluded children that their records would be 'tarnished' and that schools would not want to take them on because of their history of bad behaviour. Younger children shared a similar sentiment – although their focus was on the fact that the school may not believe them 'if they're trying to be good'. Children were also concerned with how a record of exclusion would influence their future prospects.



*An older child with disabilities on unfair exclusions*

*"You do one thing and get excluded, and then no other school wants you because of your past … no matter how much you say you can change."* Older child attending a PRU

*"Once you get excluded, you get this feeling yeah, you've just f***** up, no going back." -* Older child attending a PRU

Children also spoke about how being excluded can lead to a loss of confidence and feeling alone.

*"Maybe you would feel alone, like nobody believes you and you don't know what to do." –* Secondary school child

*"Say if you get kicked out of mainstream … the kid probably thinks like, I failed … they just lose confidence." -* Older child attending a PRU

## Home Education

Several common themes emerged from the discussions about home education. Some children spoke about children being home educated because schools were not able to support their needs.

*"My friend's been home educated all his life because he has lactose intolerance, really severe so he can't really go to school because it's too severe." –* Secondary school child

A common concern amongst older children and children with disabilities was that home education could **be very lonely and make it harder to make friends and develop important social skills.** Older children who spoke about their own experiences of being home schooled felt that the lack of social interaction, coupled with the lack of structure, made them feel depressed and unmotivated.

*"For like eight months before I came here [I was home schooled] and like, I never saw my friends. I literally had like no friends for ages… I used to smoke all the time." –* Older child attending a PRU

*"Going to school is good because then you get friends. But then if you don't [home educated instead] you're not going to build up that confidence to make friends in further life." –* Secondary school child

Younger children focused more on the '*stigma*' surrounding home education and felt that home-educated children could be viewed as '*weird*'.



*A secondary school pupil felt there was stigma around home education*

Where children had experience of home education, they felt that their school or local authority did not '*check up on them*' as much as they should have. As a result, they often felt '*forgotten about*'. Several children felt that they **did not receive enough work or structure** when they were being educated at home. They often felt that the school did not provide them with enough homework, and even when they were given personal tutors, the quality of education was not good.

*"I had work sent home for like 2 weeks and then they [the school] stopped sending it."* – Older child attending a PRU

*"You don't get any learning done."* – Younger child attending a PRU

*"Sometimes they don't even learn… they just stay at home and do what they want."* Primary school child

Older children had some positive perspectives on home education, particularly for children who were bullied a lot or who were underachieving at school. Children spoke about how home schooling could be more personalised to the particular needs of the child and could provide more freedom in the range of subjects a child can learn as opposed to in school.

*"I actually think it's [home education] a good thing because people don't get bullied"* – Secondary school child

*"And the good thing about it [home education] is it's personal, you can learn your own things you like."* – Secondary school child

*"It could help people who are socially anxious."* – Older child with a disability

## Homelessness

All the children that took part in the consultation felt that homelessness was a very important issue for us to focus on. Although younger children had a more simplified understanding of what homelessness in England could involve (living on the streets), older disabled children and children attending PRUs spoke about many different types of hidden homelessness experienced by children. For example, children spoke about children who are '*sofa surfers*', staying in hotels, living in unsafe accommodation, and teenagers who may have chosen to leave home or have been kicked out of home and have nowhere to go.

*"Some people who got homeless they might have been taken out of the house because of their landlord… and then you get sent to a hotel… some hotels don't actually have good quality."* – Secondary school child

*"Like maybe they have… lots of different family members and they're in a flat… and they have to sleep in the same bed."* – Secondary school child

Not having that safe space to go to. being judged upon because of home life.

*A secondary school pupil on homelessness*

Children spoke about homelessness having a negative impact on mental health and wellbeing, with many comments made about how homelessness could lead to feeling sad, anxious, scared and embarrassed. Many children felt that homelessness could also lead to some children being bullied at school and create barriers in socialising with or making friends.

*"Because they [children who are homeless] don't get to live their childhood… it's not a good childhood to live."* – Younger child attending a PRU

*"I feel like it [homelessness] may lead into mental health issues."* – Secondary school child

*"If people who are homeless go to school they'd be bullied for what they are."* - Secondary school child

*"If they are homeless they might bully them. Be mean about how their clothes are."* – Secondary school child

Other issues that came up concerned the impact that homelessness can have on physical health and access to food, water and clothing. Children also mentioned how homelessness could lead to tension and fighting amongst family members or lead to a child being split up from their family.

*"Children who are homeless … they can't look after themselves and can become ill easier."* – Primary school child

*"It's just really hot when everyone's walking about, and the kitchen gets crowded, and there's people going up and downstairs… my dad and grandad have arguments all the time… I just think they get fed up."* – Younger child attending a PRU

Several children spoke about the difficulties of being able to attend school or do your homework when you are homeless.

*"If homeless it can be hard to do things like get your homework done."* - Secondary school child

Children also spoke about the need to improve the safety and quality of accommodation made available to children and families who are homeless. For example, children spoke about how temporary accommodation could be very cold or very hot, unclean, or unsafe.



*A primary school child's response*

*"I lived in a hotel for 8 months … it's like where all the prostitutes live."* - Older child attending a PRU

*"It was disgusting … it was literally just a room. And my mum had to sleep on the floor."* - Older child attending a PRU
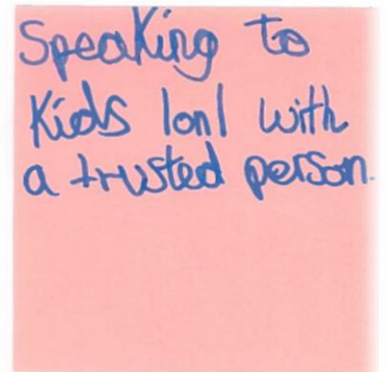
# Engagement

## Approach

*"Sometimes the people who need to be heard the most are the people who are never asked or included – we have a lot to say."* – Older child with a disability

We asked children how they thought we should listen to the views of children and what methods worked best for all children.

*"You have to go to children and young people and seek out their views – make the effort."* – Older child with a disability

A key message to emerge was that we should use a wide range of methods to listen to the views and experiences of all children. Children also said that we needed to make sure we spoke to children all over England, particularly those living in rural areas. Suggestions of where to find children to speak to included schools, youth clubs, hospitals and homeless shelters.



*A primary school child's response*

Children also discussed key issues that we should be mindful of in speaking with children.  Some of the key principles were:

> Make the engagement activities fun and informal – not boring and formal;

> Don't use jargon and develop simple questions;

*"I think using big words [does not work well] because people nowadays they use text slang and wouldn't really pick up on all the big words and know what they meant straightaway."* – Secondary school child,

> Don't try too hard and be natural;

*"[Does not work well] I guess if the person [researcher] tries too hard to be their friend."* – Secondary school child

> Ensure sufficient time is set aside to gain a child's trust before beginning to ask them questions;

> Consider what a child might have gone through and be sensitive to that when asking questions;

*"I think you should think about what you would do if you were in their shoes because in that way it would make it easier to understand and also, to relate to them a little bit."* – Secondary school child

> Conduct engagement in environments that children will feel comfortable in and are familiar with;

> Take the time to really listen to what children say;

> When discussing sensitive topics ensure that support is available for children who may get upset.

*"For the vulnerable, you reach out to them and listen to what they're saying even if they're shouting at you, try and get into what they're saying."* – Secondary school child

## Methods

The most common methods of engagement discussed were face-to-face and online.

### Face to Face

Children thought that face-to-face methods were important to use:

> because not all children have access to online services;

> when discussing topics where it is important to understand and respond to a child's feelings and emotions;

> in order to gain the trust of a child.

One-to-one interviews were seen as important in order to gather the views and experiences of children who are not confident speaking in groups or who would not want others to know about some of their feelings and experiences.

*"If a child is not confident with speaking in groups, you can talk alone."* - Secondary school child

*"If they've got something that happened to them as a child, then they might not want their friends to know about it."* – Young child attending a PRU

Children also stressed the importance of having a trusted adult in the room and the value in using gatekeepers, like school staff, teachers, parents and social workers, to reach children.

*"If you wanna talk to kids, talk to the people who listen to them."* – Older child with a disability

### Online

Children thought that online methods were important to use:

> because it can be easier to reach children online;

> because it can be easier for children who may feel nervous about talking in person to do so anonymously online (particularly for children who suffer from mental health problems or who have suffered abuse).

Children thought that we could use:
> **Instagram** (a popular platform);

> **Snapchat** (a popular platform);

> **WhatsApp, YouTube** or an online

> *Website/forum*

Children said mainly adults used **Facebook** so they would not use it. Some children mentioned that they were not on social media so it was important to be remember that not all children can be reached online. It is important to note that some children said that engaging on social media would not feel private enough to discuss certain issues and topics.

*"They could get bullied by people they don't choose who've seen that information."* - Secondary school child

## Other methods

Other methods children suggested we could use to engage with children:

> Interviews over the phone (particularly useful for those who may not have the confidence to talk face-to-face);

**"You could phone them...** *because they might not have the courage to talk to you face to face."* – Younger child attending a PRU

> Requests for letters with self-addressed envelopes to the CCO;

> Surveys (although it was noted that this method does not allow for open discussions and that many children would not want to fill in surveys).

Various tools children suggested we could consider using to engage with children:

> Using different types of communication, such as non-verbal, BSL and Makaton;

> Using **pictures**;

> Using **emojis**;

> Using **toys**

*"With younger children they may want toys and stuff around them."* – Secondary school child

> Using games (like a quiz);

> Using alternative means of expression such as drawing or dancing.

*"They may not want to go on social media, if you do stuff, others can see it. And if they don't want people to know that they've got to talk to people, then they might not [want to engage on social media]."* – Younger child attending a PRU

# Methodology

To inform the CCO's Business Plan 2018/19 the Children's Commissioner's Office (CCO) consulted with children across England in January and February 2018. The consultation heard from a wide range of children, many of whom tend not to be heard, including children with severe disabilities and special needs, children in foster care and children who have been excluded from school.

The views of children were gathered through focus group discussions and group activities, whilst individual interviews were conducted with children in foster care with disabilities. We held 11 focus groups with children across England in different settings and conducted 5 interviews with children with disabilities in foster care. The focus groups used a topic guide that included a short number of questions in order to gather their views on:

> What they thought we should focus on in the coming year;

> The particular groups of children we should speak and listen to;

> Six key areas the CCO is intending to focus on;

> The engagement methods we should use when engaging with children.

The table below outlines the different settings in which the focus groups took place:

| Number of focus groups | Setting |
|---|---|
| 2 | Secondary schools |
| 4 | Primary schools |
| 2 | Pupil Referral Units |
| 3 | Youth Councils and groups for children with physical and learning disabilities |
| 5 interviews | Children with disabilities in foster care |

A thematic analysis of the transcripts was undertaken.

## Ethics

Information sheets for children were provided which explained the purpose of the consultation and how their views would be used to inform the CCO 2018/19 Business Plan. This also provided the opportunity to discuss any ethical or safeguarding concerns. Children were asked to sign consent forms and to confirm their understanding of their participation and use of the information gathered. Reassurance of confidentiality was also given; however, children were also notified that if they said anything that indicated that they or someone else was at risk of harm then this information would need to be shared. All children that took part consented to the anonymous public use of their response.