

# Children's Commissioner for England

Year in Review  
2017-2018



**Children's**  
**COMMISSIONER**

Half way through my term as Children's Commissioner, I am as ambitious and aspirational for children as I ever was. Most children in England are doing well, yet sadly too many vulnerable children in England are failing to reach their potential, because they are missed by the agencies that should be helping them. That is why the core of our work remains focused on four particular groups: children living behind closed doors, children invisible to the system, children in care and digital children.

Over the last year, we have continued to shine a light on the experiences of the most vulnerable children. Our major **vulnerability study** showed how many children are living with multiple risks in their lives and our series of '**Children's Voices**' reports gave first-hand experiences of children who are rarely heard, living in a number of different vulnerable settings.

Last year our briefing for Parliamentarians highlighting the lack of available care and treatment for **children suffering from mental health illnesses** prompted much debate about the failings of the present system. Our briefing on children **falling through gaps in the schools system** raised the issue of 'off-rolling' of vulnerable children from school rolls.

**“Where something needs changing, we will continue to fight for it. Where it needs to be seen and understood, we will shine a light on it.”**

In March, we published our '**Growing Up North**' report, revealing the unacceptable gap between the educational outcomes of the poorest children in the north of England and those in London and the need to put children at the heart of the Northern Powerhouse. Our study of the experiences of children **growing up in service families** showed the unique issues facing young people whose parents serve in the Armed Forces.

The special responsibility we have to speak up for children within the care system remains a key part of our work. The number of cases coming to us through our **Help at Hand advice and assistance service for children in care** continues to grow. Our team of advisors responded to over 1,500 enquiries last year - double the number of the previous year. Our second annual **Stability Index** highlighted how many children are 'pinged' around the care system between social workers, placements and schools, leading to the beginning of a change in the way that stability is managed in the care system. The launch of our peer-led '**IMO**' **digital platform**, linking children in care councils together and offering a space for children in care and care leavers to share their experiences and access special offers, is an exciting initiative that we want to continue to grow over the coming years.



In January, we published our '**Life in Likes**' report, revealing the experiences of children aged 8-12 growing up amidst the whirlwind of social media. To help build children's digital resilience we created **simplified terms and conditions** for apps they sign up to and a Digital 5 a Day guide to help parents talk to their kids about using their time online healthily and responsibly. We have also successfully campaigned for a **new clause covering the digital rights of children** to be added to the UNCRC, a huge achievement.

I am proud of the excellent team we have built to deliver this work. We work in many different ways to bring these important issues to the attention of Parliament, the Government, local authorities and agencies, the public and the media. As I enter my fourth year as Children's Commissioner, my office will continue to be an independent voice for children and to do all we can to make sure their views and interests are at the heart of policy-making and shape the world around them.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anne Longfield". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

**Anne Longfield**  
Children's Commissioner for England

# The year in review

## 2017 - 2018



### Strategic objective

### Key activities

#### Digital Children

Our **'Life in Likes'** report shone a light on the experiences of children aged 8-12 growing up amidst the whirlwind of social media - chasing 'likes' and trying to emulate the lives of the famous. The report highlighted the step-change in digital use between primary and secondary school and the need for a comprehensive digital curriculum which recognises this 'cliff edge'.

We published a **"Digital 5 a Day"** guide to help parents and their children ensure time spent online is productive. It is being used widely by schools and parents and has been referenced as good practice in the DCMS Green Paper and the Government's Green Paper on Mental Health.

We worked with privacy law experts Schillings to produce the main **terms and conditions of major social media companies** in straightforward, child-friendly language. With Tes, we turned these into accessible teaching materials which have proved popular with schools, parents and children. The Commissioner continues to challenge all the social media giants to behave responsibly in designing products for children.

We successfully campaigned for **children's digital rights** to be incorporated into the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

#### Children in Care

Stability - or the lack of it - is the top issue raised with us by looked after children. Our **annual stability index** tracks whether children in care change home, school or social worker - and how often. The first report found that 2,000 children experienced all 3 changes in a single year. Local areas can use this research to monitor their own performance and we are working with Ofsted to embed stability as part of inspections.

We conducted research with children in care to inform Sir Martin Narey's review of foster care for the DfE. We are now working with local and national government, advocacy providers and children in care to ensure that the report's recommendations lead to a step-change in the way children are listened to during their time in care.

This year we have developed the **first national peer-led digital platform for children in care and care leavers**. Called **IMO**, this platform will enable children in care to share stories, experiences and achievements, get and give advice, and gain access to tickets and gifts donated by Google, the BBC, the V&A and NYO, among others. The platform was developed in collaboration with children in care, and it links Children in Care Councils across England together around common campaigns. The site is being piloted and we will launch it nationally later in 2018.

#### Children behind closed doors

There are about 30 girls in custody in England and little attention is given to them or how they ended up there. The Commissioner and Dame Louise Casey spoke to these girls. **'Voices from the Inside'** told a tale of chaotic family backgrounds including substance abuse and domestic violence, time in care, and school exclusions. Many of the girls said going into custody had been a welcome time of safety and stability.

A programme of visits to youth justice settings in England has uncovered a dire lack of specialist mental health and educational support for children within the institutions. The Commissioner continues to put pressure on NHS England to publish research into **children in the secure estate** and the provision in place for them. It is now due to be published at the end of July 2018.

Last summer we used our statutory data-gathering powers to ask NHS England how many children are referred for sectioning, how many get a bed and how long they wait. Worryingly, NHS England did not know and have been unable to find out. We are now working with NHS England to **improve the process of tracking and monitoring of these very vulnerable children**, and reporting progress to the Health select committee.

#### Invisible Children

Last July we launched the Commissioner's report on **child vulnerability**, the first attempt ever to assess the scale of childhood vulnerability in England. It found at least 670,000 children to be living in high-risk family situations. This work and bespoke analysis drawn from it has been presented across Government and will be updated in July 2018. We are working in partnership with ONS to fill gaps in the framework.

It is widely recognised that there is a crisis in **children's social care funding**. Ahead of the next spending review, we worked with IPSOS-Mori to understand what the public expect the state to provide in terms of support for children in difficulty. This research found a clear consensus that the state should be providing services in cases currently below the threshold for help.

Child refugees and children in gangs are some of the most marginalised in society, so we commissioned research to **understand their experiences**. The Commissioner is using this work, along with the vulnerability framework and some bespoke analysis on the links between exclusions and knife crime, to inform the Government's Serious Violence Taskforce.

More and more children are being 'off-rolled' from mainstream schools, sometimes just before exams, or because of challenging behaviour. Often these are children most at risk of criminal exploitation. In November we produced a briefing that confirmed there are tens of thousands of children outside mainstream education in alternative provision, home education or unregistered schools, where the level of inspection and quality is a real concern, and presented it at the Education Select Committee.

#### Putting children at the heart and start of policy-making

The hundreds of thousands of children in England who are EU nationals face a set of unique issues securing their future **post-Brexit**. Children were not mentioned in the Government's white paper on EU Nationals rights, but after our research, conducted with Lisa Giovannetti QC, was taken up by the Chair of the Brexit Select Committee, the Government promised that children will be able to apply for settled status in their own right after Brexit.

We commissioned the Institute for Fiscal Studies to assess the impact of the £7,400 threshold for free school meal eligibility under Universal Credit. This analysis confirmed that about 210,000 children will gain entitlement under UC while about 160,000 will miss out. But it also showed that the Government's decision to freeze the threshold until 2021 (rather than let it rise with inflation) will mean 100,000 fewer children gaining entitlement by 2021.

Our **'Growing Up North'** report laid out the nature and scale of attainment gaps within England. Building on good practice across the North, the report gave a blueprint as to how local areas could break the link between poverty and attainment. The report was well received by MPs and leaders across the North.

In October we published a briefing for MPs on **children's mental health**. The report, which exposed shocking gaps in children's mental health provision and NHS England's lack of action to address them, led to a special session of the Health Select Committee ahead of the Government's Green Paper.

We also commissioned the Institute for Fiscal Studies to map out all Government spending on children. This research identifies how much is spent, how it is spent and on which children, and how this has changed over time.



**"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



# Help at Hand Advice and Assistance

Our **Help at Hand** advice service is a key part of the Children's Commissioner's office. It acts as an independent voice for the most vulnerable children, including those in care, leaving care, living away from home or working with children's services. Help at Hand takes up issues with local authorities, the NHS and other bodies, often at a very senior level – and directly from the Commissioner.



## Cases and enquiries

Help at Hand continues to grow - roughly doubling in the number of enquiries year on year. In 2017/18, we responded to 1,579 individual enquiries.

### Typical Cases for Help at Hand:

- Keeping two teenage sisters with the foster family they loved
- Sorting out housing and support for a homeless 17-year-old with mental health difficulties
- Helping a care leaver without regular immigration status to remain at university
- Making sure a young disabled boy living at home received a proper education
- Successfully challenging local authorities to forgive a care leaver's council tax debts



## Get in touch with Help at Hand

If you have an urgent, high-level issue, if you feel no-one is listening and you need a powerful voice to speak up on your behalf, then get in touch with us.

We are a service for young people but are happy to accept enquiries from professionals and carers.

Help at Hand is open 9 to 5, Monday to Friday and can provide out of hours telephone appointments for children and young people if required.

**Free Phone:**  
**0800 528 0731**

**Email:**  
**help.team@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk**



## Top issues

### Top five issues raised by Help at Hand:

- Unwanted placement moves & instability
- Poor support for care leavers
- Housing and homelessness
- Education for children in care
- Not having the right service at the right time – especially mental health support



## What children and young people tell us

"I am absolutely grateful for all your help and support because I honestly believe that if it was not for your hard work and chasing up the university this matter would not have been resolved and I would not have been awarded the bursary. All credit goes to you and your colleagues. Thank you very much indeed for helping me to get the bursary which will make a massive difference in my life and studies."

**Care leaver who was helped to get the right support to stay at University**

"I am accommodated and happy as ever! Thank you so much for your help. Words can't describe how much you have changed my life for the better. I am so grateful, thank you so much."

**Young person who was homeless**

"I would not have got this far without you. Thank you all for believing in me and getting me so much!"

**Young person in care who was supported by Help at Hand with her claim of abuse by foster carers when no-one else believed her**

"Many thanks for your help in pursuing Anon's case; it has been invaluable. When people in an official capacity put the needs of a child first without being distracted by who they are or where they have come from it is not only a huge relief but is what is right. Thank you."

**Refugee charity worker**



## What kids tell us

"[The best thing about being in foster care is] that we do things as a family. Could be going to the park, a restaurant, parties and stuff or holiday".

"[The best thing about being in care is] the family I am now placed with; I see my foster carers as my mum and dad."

**- Fostering Stocktake**

"I think Manchester is a good place to grow up. There's different things around every corner."

"We're a lot more realistic. We know that some things aren't likely to happen."

**- Growing up North**

"When you get 50 likes it makes you feel good 'cause you know people think you look good in that photo. I know that people like the look of me, it makes you feel that you are kind of popular 'cause you got a high amount of likes."

**- Life in Likes**

"My Dad went away to the Falklands and he went away for a year. And I missed him like every second because I knew how long he was going away for... And the thing that I didn't like about that is because he missed Father's Day, Mother's Day, my birthday, my Mum's birthday."

**- Military Families**

"My mum would overdose and then I'd have to deal with it from like the age of 6, like picking her up off the bathroom floor, having to call ambulances, bullied quite a lot at school because of wetting the bed, always smelt like wee...was constantly running from the police and social service and moving around a lot ..."

".. and the woman said 'your Mum was found dead this morning'... They told me that T (younger brother) had been with her body for a number of days. So he was found by someone, it could have been 1 or 2 days ... I think I cried for 1 or 2 seconds.... I don't know but I didn't deal with it. I just shut it out..."

**- Voices from the Inside**



"YOU DO ONE THING AND GET EXCLUDED, AND THEN NO OTHER SCHOOL WANTS YOU BECAUSE OF YOUR PAST... NOT MATTER HOW MUCH YOU SAY YOU CAN CHANGE."

**Child who participated in our business planning for 2018/19**



"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 Pupil Referral Unit**



"IF WE ARE NOT WITH OUR MUMS AND DADS THEN WE NEED SOMEONE TO LOOK AFTER US AND SUPPORT US AS WE ARE QUITE VULNERABLE AND IT'S EASY TO GO OFF THE RAILS."

**Teenage girl in the care system**

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