Children and young people consultation
Key points 2019 - 20

Children's COMMISSIONER

Mental health and wellbeing

Children identified five broad issues around being able to access the mental health support they need:

- Invisibility – many children's suffering goes unnoticed
- Lack of knowledge and understanding amongst various professionals about the impact of mental health or possible behavioural indicators
- Importance of having a trusting relationship with an adult in order to seek or accept support
- The need for more confidential spaces to talk about mental health issues
- The stigma attached to mental health issues can act as a barrier

Social media

Social media led children to feel more self-conscious and worse about themselves. They described it as isolating, impacting on self-esteem and self-image, addictive and 24/7 – impossible to get away from.

There was repeated criticism of how social media had influenced the scale and nature of bullying.

Children are being exposed to inappropriate material through social media at too young an age. Examples of inappropriate material ranged from pornography to weapons and beheadings.

Curriculum

The constraints of the school curriculum was a common issue raised, particularly by older children. Whilst children acknowledged that school was a place to learn core subjects such as Maths and English, they spoke about the lack of time given to teach life skills. Schools were seen to focus more on academic achievements, which did not reflect the different abilities and interests of all pupils.

It also failed to provide young people with the opportunity to develop skills that would enable them to pursue a range of career aspirations, such as construction or mechanics.

Exclusions

There was criticism of the lack of time schools gave to understanding reasons for a child's behaviour.

Older children who had often been excluded felt that teachers would often label them as being disruptive, assuming any misbehaviour was caused by them.

Bullying

A key theme to emerge was bullying stemming from ignorance amongst children about differences, for example differences in ethnicity, gender or disability.

Groups we engaged with

Children with care experience, refugee and asylum seekers, young carers, children with autism, children within the criminal justice system

Future opportunities

Particular groups (as some focus groups were run with particular groups of children) raised concerns about the lack of future opportunities for young people: BAME children; looked after children; children in secure children's homes; and refugee and asylum seeking children.

The perception was that good future opportunities are not available for all children and that an unequal playing field exists. The opportunities available to children are based more on what school you go to, who you know and what your parents do – not on how hard you work.

Safety

For younger children, their experiences of feeling unsafe related to walking to and from school although their awareness of specific incidences, such as terrorist attacks, had also caused them worry about their safety.

Relationships with police

Older children spoke about a persistent 'them and us' culture which can act as a barrier to children feeling like the police are there to protect them or their communities.

Gangs and knife crime

Children we spoke with, some of whom referenced their own experience, offered a wide range of reasons about children get involved in gangs, carry knives or are affected by youth violence. These included:

- Living in poverty and joining a gang as a way to earn money
- The glamorised and positive lifestyle image of gang members (particularly through music videos on social media)
- Having relatives that belong to a gang
- To obtain respect and agency against a backdrop of youth disempowerment and low self-esteem
- The feeling of belonging to a family of peers that you can relate to
- For security and having a support network
- The lack of youth clubs and activities for children.

Youth clubs

A consistent message from the discussions we had was that there is a lack of things for children to do outside of school.

In particular, children spoke about how youth clubs were constantly closing down, and how those still running were often too far away or situated in areas they did not feel safe travelling too. Children talked about how youth clubs were a vital part of many people's lives.

Youth clubs were described as a lifesaver for many children.

Engaging with politics

Children we spoke with wanted more of a say in political issues and decisions that affected them the most.

A persistent argument was that in order for children to be able to participate meaningfully in political debates and decision-making, more has to be done to educate and equip them.