Children's COMMISSIONER

Business Plan 2019-20

Consultation with children

MARCH 2019

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 2019/20 we consulted with children and young people, 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 and young people (aged 9 – 25) in primary and secondary schools, colleges, alternative provision[1], secure children's homes[2], and various youth groups for children with physical and learning disabilities, children with autism, looked after children, and refugee and asylum seekers.

We held 13 focus groups across England in different settings in order to gather their views on:

> What we should focus on in the coming year;

> What they thought the most important issues were today for children and young people;

> What needed to change in order to improve the lives of children and young people.

We also included two questions on a children's online omnibus survey, hearing from 1,000 children aged 7-16 years across England.

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

Acknowledgements

The Children's Commissioner would like to thank all the children and young people 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 planning of the focus groups.

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[1] The definition of alternative provision, as set out by the Department of Education (DfE) is education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour.

[2] **The youth secure estate in England and Wales currently comprises three different types of establishments, one of which are Secure Children's Homes (SCH). SCHs typically hold those felt to be the most vulnerable or have more complex needs and who are younger. They accommodate both girls and boys. Children entering SCHs may also be placed on welfare grounds - rather than on youth justice grounds. These children will be admitted via a welfare order (as per Section 25 of the Children Act 1989), for the protection of themselves or others.**

Findings from omnibus survey

We asked 1,000 children, aged between 7-16 years, two questions about what they worry about and what they think could make life better for children in England.

We asked children what they worried about and how often they worried about it from a list of issues we provided. The following table shows the proportion who responded always/often to the top five issues chosen by children. The most significant issues raised by children were worrying about the pressures of school, feeling happy and the future.

Looking at the differences between different groups of children we see that:

> 39% of children from London listed always/often worrying about feeling safe compared to the average of 24%. Children from BAME backgrounds were also much more likely to list 'feeling safe' as an issue compared to children from non-BAME backgrounds, 32% compared to 22%.
> Girls were more likely to list always/often worrying about being stressed than boys, and particularly older girls aged 12-16 compared to boys aged 12-16.
> Children from BAME backgrounds were much more likely to list always/often worrying about feeling happy compared to children from non-BAME backgrounds, 38% compared to 27%.
> Girls, particularly older girls (aged 12-16) were much more likely to list always/often worrying about pressure from school than boys of the same age, 45% compared to 34%.
> Older children aged 12-16 were more likely to list worrying about the future (34%) compared to younger children aged 7-11 (20%).
> Younger girls aged 7-11 were much more likely to list worrying about bullying (27%) than boys (19%) of any age and older girls aged 12-16 (20%).

Table 1 – Top 5 answers to 'How much, if at all, do you worry about the following things?'

Pressure of school	34%
Feeling happy	29%
Future	27%
Feeling safe	24%
Stress	22%

Base: Omnibus survey, 1000 children weighted to be nationally representative, 7-16 years – Nov 2018. (Full table found in Annex A)

Children were also asked to pick from a list we provided what could make things better for children in England. The table below presents the top six issues children responded to. The top two issues were having a less stressful exam system and safer places for children/teenagers to hang out. In addition to these concerns, it was seen as important for teachers to listen more to children/teenagers. Children wanted better access to free local activities such as sports and arts, parents to spend more time with them, and help to stay safe online. .

Looking at the differences between different groups of children we see that:

> Half of children aged 11-16 felt that a less stressful exam system was important to make things better for children/teenagers in England compared to 31% of children aged 7-11.
> Children from non-BAME backgrounds were more likely to feel that a less stressful exam system and safer places to hang out were important to make things better for children/teenagers in England than children from BAME backgrounds.

> Children from BAME backgrounds and young children were more likely to feel that parents spending more time with their children was important to make things better.

Table 2 – the top 6 responses to 'things that you think are the most important to make things better for children/teenagers in England'

Less stressful exam system	40%
Safer places for children/teenagers to hang out	40%
Teachers to listen more to children/teenagers	34%
Better access to free local activities such as sports and arts	30%
Parents spending more time with their children/teenagers	29%
Helping children/teenagers stay safe online	29%

Base: Omnibus survey, 1000 children weighted to be nationally representative, 7-16 years – Nov 2018. (Full table found in Annex A)

Many key issues highlighted by the survey findings were discussed in the consultation we conducted.

Mental health and wellbeing

The gravity and scale of mental health issues for children was repeatedly highlighted during this consultation. Key themes to emerge included issues with self-esteem and self-image. Social media in particular was seen to exacerbate this (see social media section).

"How many people are depressed is so unbelievable, like I know so many people for example they just got depressed when they were so, so young and they feel like they're trapped, and they don't know what to do." (Older child in college, female)

"People's self-esteem and self-image, comparing themselves to others, that's not good for them, and social media is terrible for that, constantly comparing yourself to others." (Older child in youth group, female)

"Imagery of oneself is like a massive thing, like I've had, and all young people, not just kids in care, become very self-conscious about themselves. Especially in care, because you've got that extra piece of feeling damaged, like oh, no one's going to want me. And it like, affects a lot of people." (Older child with care experience, male)

This section mainly focuses on views given about the support that children receive (or do not receive) for their mental health and wellbeing. It also covers key themes that emerged about substance misuse and bereavement.

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

1. Invisibility – many children's suffering goes unnoticed. Parents and professionals need to be better at looking out for the signs that might indicate mental health issues;

"With young people, the kids that have the most support are the people with like mental illnesses or the higher risk kids. But then you look at some kids and you think, oh they look fine, they look like they're all right, so you think they're going to be all right and just don't really pay much attention to that… it could affect anyone they [school staff and other professionals] just don't think of it like that." (Older child in secure children's home, female)

2. There is a lack of knowledge and understanding amongst various professionals about the impact of mental health or possible behavioural indicators – teachers in particular need to have more time and be better equipped to listen to children and respond appropriately to their behaviour and needs. Children can also sometimes feel that professionals dismiss their mental health concerns;

"I was going to say mainly people just need [to be] educated on like, so say for example with teachers, they need to know how to talk to students that maybe they assume they're lazy or assume they don't want to get involved, they can be dealing with depression, kind of thing." (Older disabled child, female)

3. The importance of having a trusting relationship with an adult in order to seek or accept support was emphasised – allowing time to develop trust and a bond with professionals was particularly important for younger children and those who had been through the criminal justice or care system;

"I feel like when someone wants to go in and speak about their problems they need to actually create a bond, because it's not easy to just open up. Don't even speak anything about legit, just talk to them because that way it can at least be, OK I can start trusting the person, maybe not completely but I am having a bond." (Older child in college, female)

4. There is a need for more confidential spaces to talk about mental health issues – children worry that they cannot talk to anyone without that information being passed on to other services or to their parents;

"I went to CAMHS and they said, it's OK we won't tell anything to your parents, they then go and tell everything. Like how do you want me to trust this psychologist when they can't keep their word?" (Older child in college, male)

"Some people worry that the person tells everyone." (Primary school child, female)

5. The stigma attached to mental health issues can act as a barrier to children who might want to speak about it or seek help – with particular issues around stigma for boys and children with disabilities.

"Mental health has an awful stigma attached to it anyway, add to that if you're a man, add to that and seriously though, add to that if you are a man in a wheelchair who has a disability." (Older disabled child, male)

Children raised five main problems with the provision of statutory mental health support (CAHMS[3]):

1. There is not enough support to match the need – more funding is needed;
2. How long you have to wait to receive support is unacceptable;
3. Criteria for referrals must change – children felt that they needed to hit crisis point in order to receive support;
4. Children wanted professionals to take on a more holistic approach to how support is given - they often only address the symptoms – not the underlying causes;
5. The transition from youth to adult mental health services can be very difficult and exacerbate issues.

"In [resident city] there is a massive problem, I'm sure across the country too – massive overcrowding - those who want to go to CAHMS – have six months between appointments – I have seen it with my friends – there needs to be a better more secure way for people to get access." (Older child in youth group, female)

"There was this girl last year... She literally tried to kill herself and only then was she referred to CAMHS. Like she had, she showed signs of so many mental health issues before that, she even went to teachers and said, I'm not feeling well, could you please refer me to CAMHS. And you know they said, no, we can't. And it only took to the point where she'd literally tried to take her own life by drinking bleach that they actually realised." (Older disabled child, female)

Charities offering mental health support, often through schools, were seen to be more accessible and capable of meeting the needs of children. Reasons for this included:

> They offer support to children not only when they are in crisis;
> Their approach and style is more relaxing, friendly and youth led;
> It is often easier to access the support, particularly when the service runs through schools;
> Staff are easier to relate to and more emphasis is placed on building trusting relationships.

"I'm not sure I would ever go to CAMHS after everything I have heard – I don't know anyone that has actually been helped by CAMHS. But yeah I would definitely use things like [a charity organisation] – because even if you aren't in crisis point they are there to try and help." (Older child in youth group, female)

"They [a charity organisation] have a different approach in a good way – it's down to earth and friendly – it feels like they are your friend – but in a professional way – and but with CAMHS it's just the professional and the patient." (Older child in youth group, male)

Views on what kind of support should be offered to children in schools for mental health or wellbeing problems were divided, illustrating that a one size fits all approach would not be appropriate. The range of ideas included: worry boxes; small group discussions at school; a flagging system on the school

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[3] Child and adolescent mental health services

intranet where students can raise concerns they have about others; and raising awareness that Child line is not just for when you are experiencing abuse. In particular, peer to peer mentoring was identified as a very important source of support for children who may be struggling with their mental health and wellbeing. Speaking to children their own age or their friends, or even older children, could be easier and more comfortable than speaking to an adult. Having easier, more immediate access to trusted members of staff at school to talk to was also deemed important. To encourage children to use any of these initiatives, children spoke about the importance of how any initiative is portrayed. It needs to be presented in an informal and fun way and not just been seen to be for children with serious issues.

"So basically it's, we just walk around every break time with yellow lanyards on and, like everyone knows where we are and which lessons we're in so if they're really in trouble or if they just want someone to talk to really quickly about how their day has been, even not an issue, just having someone there who's, like there's a whole group of us as well, so not just one student or two, it's like a whole group of 50 of us, which they can choose which one they talk to." (Older disabled child, female)

"I don't want to be put in that stereotype with the people who go there. Yeah, so some people might not go there because they see someone who's gone there and think, they're not like that. I wouldn't feel comfortable going… the way it's portrayed is you have to have massive problems to go there." (Secondary school child, female)

"In my old school they made sure everyone had a connection with the pastoral workers – like when you had team building weeks – or activity week, and during that the pastoral workers would be working with you all, so everyone bonded with them and felt safe around them. It worked really well – I had a really good conversation with my pastoral workers and always felt like I had someone to talk too." (Older child attending youth group, female)

Substance misuse

A consistent theme from the discussions we had was the need for children to be listened to and time given to understanding why children are behaving in certain ways. It was felt that more time should be given to try to understand why children take drugs, not solely punishing or trying to stop the child for taking drugs. In addition to understanding the reasons for young people's substance misuse, one child spoke about the importance of how children are educated about the risks of taking drugs or drinking alcohol.

"I think I know in my school, all the teachers know the kids substance abuse but they don't go about it in the right way, they're just like, you shouldn't do this, you shouldn't do that. And they're almost kind of speaking in a very violent tone, you know, that's not going to want to make a kid sort their life out, that's going to make a kid think, they can't help, no one helps, I'm even more alone than I thought I was because now I know I definitely can't depend on them. I think there should be more of a focus on like the person as a person, instead of like just going straight to them and being, I know you substance abuse. You should go into it gently… you shouldn't like go straight in with, I know you're substance abusing, let me help. Because that, it doesn't allow them to have a choice about what they open up about which can make them feel even more locked in." (Older disabled child, female)

The number of children taking drugs are fuelled, children said, by how accessible drugs are. Drug use was also thought to affect the behaviour of students at school – particularly the ability to focus on schoolwork.

"Probably about three quarters of my year, substance abuse a lot. It's not like extreme drugs like cocaine but they just use weed every day. And to be honest you can see that they're distracted and you can see, from the things I've heard in the corridor, you can see that they're having trouble paying attention." (Older disabled child, female)

Bereavement

A few key issues around bereavement emerged from our discussions with primary school students. The importance of receiving support from family and friends following a bereavement was emphasised. However, receiving help from staff at school was also important, and teachers were criticised for not always providing adequate support.

"I think, when it [a bereavement] happened to me I mean like my friends kept me up. But, it was back in the infants and the teachers didn't really care, my mum had even told them that I'd lost someone in the family and they didn't really care, if I was sad and crying, they'd give me some tissues and they just told me to get on, they wouldn't say anything else about it." (Primary school child, male)

Children spoke about the support that might have been helpful at school, such as being able to leave the classroom when feeling overwhelmed, having safe spaces to retreat to, being asked by teachers how they were feeling, or being offered counselling. Children also spoke about wanting the option to access counselling sessions either within school or outside of school.

Children spoke about worrying about their friends who had lost a family member and wanting to know how to help. Those who had suffered a bereavement highlighted how important it was for friends to be nice and supportive and help distract them – but that they did not necessarily want their friends to ask them directly about the bereavement. Having schools provide information to students about how they can support friends who have lost someone close to them was regarded as potentially useful.

"[What support would children like?] Counselling and children being nice because, friends wouldn't try to be horrible to someone who's had bereavement issues but try and like, if you were their friend don't ask them about it, you should just support them." (Primary school child, male)

Social media

Older children we spoke with linked social media use to mental health problems, saying that social media led to them feeling 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. Children reflected on how social media could have an impact on their lifestyle choices. For example, children are spending so much time on social media it can stop them from taking part in certain activities, such as reading or sports. Older children spoke about how social media could influence teenager's attitudes to sex and their sexual behaviours, both off and online.

"I think a big thing that impacts mental health, and I know it impacted a lot of my friends, is social media. Just because you get this perfect image of somebody in a magazine or this super model on TV, all dolled up and they've just rolled out of bed. That's not real life, I don't look like that at 6.00am. It's not always a confidence boost, you wish you could look like that but you don't, and that's difficult to handle when it does happen." (Older disabled child, female)

"Because they're so into it [social media], they don't read books and stuff, or go outside. They're consumed by the internet." (Older child in college, male)

"But social media for me, I think it's like if you're working at home, sometimes there's no break from it, you know, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, when you were with your mates at school, now it's 1.10 in the morning and you're replying to your pal, it's, it is non stop. So it becomes that constant pressure." (Looked after child, male)

"This generation, the more sexualised it [a photo on social media] is the more likes they will get on pictures and stuff." (Older child in college, female)

There was repeated criticism of how social media had influenced the scale and nature of bullying, mainly due to how it made it easier for people to say things they would not have the courage to say face to face. They suggested that schools and government should do more to raise awareness of cyber bullying, as this will make it more likely that children being bullied online will come forward and ask for support.

"When you go on to social media, you've got like this sort of mask, you've got a different persona and it's blank until you do something. So if you're someone who posts really nasty comments, you feel like you've got this mask, which is like, it doesn't matter, people don't know who you are, people are not going to find out who you are, you can do whatever you want, however you want to say it." (Secondary school child, male)

"If it's [cyber bullying] shown more and if the government talk about it more then they will have the confidence to talk to teachers or parents but now no one talks about it, so they really keep it on the low. They [teachers] don't really ask children questions about it." (Older child in college, male)

Children criticised schools for not providing adequate education in schools on social media use. They thought schools were either ignoring the problem or failing to facilitate constructive discussions with students about how to use social media responsibly. Children also thought there was a need for better tools and training for teachers on how to talk about but also use social media creatively.

"In my school there was a case where someone in my year was groomed online – and we had a community police officer in our school – in assembly – and all they said was 'um so this is illegal, you can't do it, here is a leaflet, ok now go back to your lessons' – it was on a level where it was something everyone knows but didn't really look at what the problems were and why it was happening – it just wasn't very helpful." (Older child from youth group, female)

"My school is terrible – they just ignore that anything is happening – haven't had a single assembly [on social media]." (Secondary school child, male)

"I think schools should embrace social media, and guide it more the way they want it to go – not ignore it or be too controlling." (Older child from youth group, female)

A persistent concern raised by younger and older children was that 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.

"I feel like at a younger age people have been exposed to things that we shouldn't be exposed to… when you're on social media you are literally exposed to a different life… say for example Instagram, you can follow the page like on, they do a review of guns or whatever. You can literally find anything on social media." (Older child in college, male)

"And when it comes to pornography especially all websites say if you're not 18 you should not be allowed to enter this site, but can't prevent you. So people still do that - but especially with Instagram, Instagram actually has so many hashtags, you can find dates, you can find hook-ups on Instagram and there is not much that companies can do themselves." (Older child in college, male)

Younger children wanted websites to be more secure – so that it was harder for children to lie about their age and access sites that were not age appropriate – but they also appreciated when their parents helped protect them online, for example by showing them what was and wasn't safe. Older children emphasised how important it was for parents to understand the online risks their children faced and to learn how to protect their children from those risks. A key theme in relation to younger children in particular was video games, which expose them to inappropriate content. Children talked about two problems in particular: being approached by strangers, and adverts that seem to be much more violent than the game certification should allow.

"I think parents need to be aware of it, or just show parents what their kids could possibly see, traumatise the parents a little bit into showing, well your kid is going to see this on Instagram or on this website." (Older child in college, female)

"And I think the parents don't realise they're on it, that the parents don't realise their kids are doing this or they don't realise, they just don't care." (Primary school child, male)

"And that [video game], I had it, my mum said I can have it because she trusted me and I was still worrying about what could happen, but then once I really got into it I was fine. But then I kept on watching it and it just scared me to life and I knew I shouldn't trust it." (Primary school child, female)

Life at school

School was a consistent issue raised by children. Children provided positive and negative insights about their experience of school, ranging from day to day life, their interest in the curriculum through to the availability of support and pastoral care. Older children were particularly critical of the education system and the way it expected all children to follow the same academic pathway.

"I feel like with the education system what's wrong with it is like we, in schools there's so many different people, every single person is different, and they all have their own unique differences. With schools they all expect, even though everyone's different - they want us all to go down this one path, how can you expect everyone all to excel in this path when everyone's so different? And what they

want in life is different as well… it's not built in a way that we can all succeed in my opinion." (Older child in college, male)

"Like you have to do all these different things just to pass exams and then you finish and then you go back and do more exams until, so you can get this job, and it's like the whole system educates everyone in the same way to get the same outcome, like robots. And so I think there should be a bit more, less focus on exams and more focus on like actually doing what you want to do." (Secondary school child, male)

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.

"You don't need to know what happened in World War II or stuff like this. It's good to know, yeah, but obviously for a job you're not going to need it, so instead…you could do things to like, more helpful for a job, things you're going to need like writing, understanding ICT sort of thing as well like knowing how to write letters, emails, knowing how to send it to the right person, knowing how to make it sound professional, it's like writing a CV." (Older child in a Secure Childrens Home, Female)

"Yeah more choice – cause I see a lot of the schools – they have to do Maths or English – sometimes a lot of the subjects you are doing are not for life outside – they need to be more about what they'll do when they finish school." (Older Child with autism, male)

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.

"Like they [secondary schools] could do, you know like if you go college they give you like options, courses, they could, instead of doing work in the day they should give you like a course what you want to do. Like when you're 11 they should give you a course, so if you wanted to do like construction or something then you do some construction like once a week or something." (Older child in a Secure Childrens Home, male)

Exclusions[4] and how schools address student behaviour

Criticisms about the school curriculum often influenced the attitude some had towards schools as well as their behaviour in lessons. Some spoke of misbehaving in class, due to boredom and perceived lack of relevance of the subjects to their future. For some this behaviour had led to being excluded.

"I had problems a lot of the time being in lessons unless it was something I was really interested in – stuff like PE , food tech and music I was fine, I was usually there – but a lot of the lessons I would be out of class." (Older child with autism, male)

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[4] Exclusion is where a child has been removed from school, usually because of their behaviour, and is not allowed to attend for a certain number of days (fixed term exclusion). However, if you child is excluded permanently, their name is removed from the school register and they will not be allowed to return to that school at all.

"A lot of kids end up coming out of school from being disruptive and things like that, and then they end up like not going to school and maybe there's something that they're more interested in then you can keep them focused so that they won't, so that they're not in school getting bored and want to be disruptive." (Older child in a secure children's home, female)

The importance of having a space within school to go to when feeling angry and frustrated, outside of the classroom or during play time, was advantageous to helping children calm down and then return to lessons and reengage positively. Likewise, the importance of teachers taking the time to understand why young people disengage with education was viewed as being essential to ensuring better training and employment outcomes.

"[Has the quiet room made a difference?] Yes I have more time in classroom – I spend more time being happy – being at school – instead of being miserable and not wanting to get up in the morning." (Older child with autism, male)

Some of the older children we spoke with had experienced both fixed and permanent exclusions from school. In addition to speaking about the lack of interest in school influencing their behaviour, older children felt that other factors, such as home life or mental health issues were often impacting on a child's behaviour at school. 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.

"They don't look at core issues that people have – just look at the behaviour they're exhibiting and punish or exclude them. They need to be looking more at the roots the problems." (Older child attending a youth group, female)

"Because there's obviously stuff outside of school which is affecting them. Something like home life or yeah, people are in the wrong groups that hang around with the wrong people. I think they should help more rather than just try and do well in lesson, maybe the student do well overall and then there wouldn't be any problems with them in lessons and that." (Secondary school child, female)

"Yeah, also a lot of the problems with youth, they are often more underlying reasons so like mental health might be rubbish, like the family might not have come from a good area or so sort of knowing mostly that will often help so that we do understand." (Older disabled child, male)

"With teachers, they need to know how to talk to students that maybe they assume they're lazy or assume they don't want to get involved, they can be dealing with depression, kind of thing." (Older disabled child, female)

Bullying

For children still in primary school, bullying from peers was a significant day-to-day issue. Older children who spoke about bullying tended to do so retrospectively. Younger children spoke about how bullying could impact on their self-confidence, make them feel sad or stressed, stop them from wanting to go to school or hang out with their friends, make it harder to concentrate in class or do their homework, and even lead to self-harm.

"[What is the impact of bullying?] Obviously they get worried, stop doing as good in school, they stop doing things they enjoy doing in general – like they don't really want to speak to people and keep them self to them self. And then in some cases it can end up in hurting themselves or just other things, hurting other people, anything." (Older child in secure children's home, female)

"Any type of bullying can put stress on people in school meaning there will, they won't learn as well, they won't pick up the information, they'll be too worried about that at home." (Primary school child, male)

A key theme to emerge was about bullying stemming from ignorance amongst children about differences, for example differences in relation to ethnicity, gender or disabilities. It is also important to note that older children with physical and learning disabilities spoke about how being bullied by strangers in public was a common experience.

"I walk by myself to school sometimes and sometimes I get bullied by people on the street. I was walking home on Saturday and then when I come back home there were two kids trying to be rude and punching me and I had to run away home – they were strangers and I don't know them and I felt scared so I had to run away." (Older child with autism, male)

"From experience I was picked on because of my ethnicity and because I didn't fit into social norms at school, which is a society in itself. Bullying is about ignorance, not knowing what difference is and how to understand it." (Older child in youth group, female)

Several ideas about how to support children who are being bullied were discussed. Children in primary schools spoke about the importance of speaking up on behalf of others who are being bullied or of encouraging their friends who are being bullied to seek help from a teacher. Having specific roles for children in school who are supposed to look out for others and help resolve disputes was viewed as very helpful and was repeatedly described as an incredibly positive experience. Children wanted teachers to be more proactive in how they dealt with bullying, and were critical of the 'just ignore it' approach. Other ideas included having break out rooms for children to relax in when being bullied or schools teaching children to celebrate differences.

"Well we have play leaders and peer mediators, so play leaders will go around and if people are sat by themselves, not really having much fun, we go and play with them and include them in games. And then the peer mediators will go and if there are people that are arguing or people that have friendship problems and are being bullied they can take them and do mediation where they sort out their problems." (Primary school child, male)

"Yeah, like a teacher who comes over and sorts out arguments and stuff like that because at the moment we're just told to ignore people, nothing is being done about it unless it's like something serious." (Primary school child, female)

"People [teachers] just tell people that are being bullied, just ignore them and it's really hard to when they're constantly in your classroom or they're sat next to you or they're out in the playground in the place where you like to go or your friends start going off with them. It's just, I've witnessed a lot of that and it's quite sad." (Primary school child, female)

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. Children spoke about how they felt this could have a significant impact on what work experience you are able to get, whether you go to university at all, what degree at university you are able to study, whether you will get a good job and what career you end up having. Furthermore, it could contribute to low self-esteem and a lack of motivation.

> *"You grow up when you're at a state school and you see it's not how good you are or what you've achieved, it's who you know." (Older child in college, female)*

> *"They'll probably grow up feeling like a bit rubbish about themselves because they don't know what they want to do because no opportunity has been offered to them." (Older child in a secure children's home, female)*

> *"Through networking, it's the reason why the middle class kids or the upper class kids stay on the ball – it's because they have a lot of networks. Their mums are like doctors, their dads are doctors, they know people, in comparison for example to me my mum doesn't know anyone like that." (Older child in college, female)*

Another key theme to emerge was the lack of constructive support for children in schools and colleges around their futures. The children we spoke with wanted more help to think through what they might want to do and to develop plans on how to make that happen. They also felt schools and colleges needed to do more to help children develop positive aspirations and believe in their own ability to reach them.

> *"If a young child says that they have a certain aspiration in life then they [schools] should probably take it on board and try and help them get what they want to get. If it's something that's just not possible then that's obviously understandable but if a child would be willing to, like compromise with them, then you know, it should be offered." (Older child in a secure children's home, female)*
> *"One thing that really worries us, some of us don't know what we want to do when we're older. So we don't have enough support to help us decide." (Older child in college, male)*

> *"I feel that everyone has dreams and hopes of what they want to do in their future, I think the school should show them success stories or bring them opportunities which they can actually try. Like if you want to be a journalist they should provide an opportunity where you can go somewhere and you can write for them." (Older child in college, female)*

Discussions took place about the viscous cycle of needing work experience in order to apply for many employment opportunities, but not being able to get work experience. Older children we spoke with felt that government, local authorities and schools should do more to secure work experience for children while they are still at school or college.

"Some kids can't get jobs… just give them a chance to have a job or something." (Older child in a secure children's home, male)

"I think they [government] should provide more job opportunities to the child who wants to start a job because when you are starting, you are in the beginning, no one gives you job easily but they say we need experience. But children who are, who want a job first time, they don't have any experience so of course they need opportunities so that they can get experience. So, when I started, I was looking for a job for two month or more than two month, whenever I did, I went they said, you must need an experience. How will we get experience if you not give us job?" (Older child, refugee, female)

Safety

Children raised safety as an issue that concerned them. Experiences and perceptions of safety varied according to the age and characteristics of those we spoke with. 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. Older children spoke more about feelings of safety when out in public, with disabled children being particularly concerned about safety on public transport. Older children also spoke about their use of social media.

"And my friend she was walking home on her own, I think with….her friend, and they were talking and then this man started videoing them. So they were really scared." (Primary school child, female)

"I've been chased by someone….I just, as I was, with my bag and this person who is naturally just walking and suddenly I looked back, he looked at me and he started running. I managed to lose him down one of the paths but as soon as I knew that I'd lost him I text my dad to say, come and pick me up from where I was…. I went round the corner, I went round the corner, hid, and obviously where I hid, I just hid somewhere." (Primary school child, male)

"I walk by myself to school sometimes and sometimes I get bullied by people on the street. I was walking home on Saturday and then when I come back home there were two kids trying to be rude and punching me and I had to run away home – they were strangers and I don't know them and I felt scared so I had to run away." (Older child with autism, male)

"Actually because I remember a time, about last year – about this similar time, last year – I was on my way to work and a nasty girl said, because the train was about to leave, this girl said to me 'your not allowed to be on this train' and being very repulsive and negative to me and so I had to get off at the next stop and wait for the next train." (Older child with autism, female)

The impact of feeling unsafe were evident and included older children restricting their day to day activities such as attending youth activities or not walking in public after dark.

"No, at the night time, when it's dark I don't walk." (Asylum seeking child, female)

"It's the increase in knife crime and children not having a place to go…a safe place to go."(Older child in college, female)

"I hate walking in town, I just don't like it, especially like down alleyways and that. I don't like, especially when I'm on my own. It's just too scary." (Older child in alternative provision, female)

Keeping safe

Children spoke about strategies they had developed to help keep themselves safe, such as walking home from school with friends, walking routes they knew would be busy and knowing to run into shops when they felt unsafe. These strategies were often informed by their own experiences combined with advice given by their parents or school.

"When I'm scared I just phone my dad and just speak to him on the way home or I walk home with my friends." (Primary school child, male)

"I think for me and lot of people my age who are girls, like especially, we always worry about sexual assault because the school that I go to isn't really surrounded by a lot of houses, so people have to take buses home, have to take, have to walk home. I have to have at least, I have to whenever I go out, I text six people where I am and say, if I'm not back by this time, ask me where I am, text me and if I don't respond, you know what to do. And I think it's an increasing number of young women that I know, but I'm not sure about men because obviously I'm not a man, but I know it happens a lot with me and a lot of people that I talk to." (Older disabled child, female)

"And like me, I'm not scared but my mum tells me not, be careful and look back and forward to see if anyone following you even though they're still coming your way. My mum tells it to me every day so I can be safe." (Primary school child, female)

"I, so say when I'm walking home alone, say for example I'm walking to school alone and there's children messing around, and I just said face forward and just ignore them because they're, if you, if they see that you're just looking at them then they might want to come up to you." (Primary school child, female)

"Well I just am walking home and then maybe I stick to the paths where loads of people are because people can see you then and it'll be, there's just you on your own." (Primary school child, male)

When they felt unsafe, some older children spoke of wanting help but often being fearful of the repercussions of speaking about it to a professional, like a teacher. Often their own and others' experience had shown how speaking about certain incidences can trigger a safeguarding referral being made. As a result, this concern was often seen as a barrier to them confiding in someone, with friends instead often providing this support.

"I feel like there needs to be someone that, it would never happen, but someone that if you talked to them and there's safeguarding concerns they could help you, but they, they won't report it, if you know what I mean. Because if you report something then you think you're doing it for the good of the child, and sometimes it can turn out so much worse. (Older child in alternative provision, female)

"I think children might worry that if they speak to someone something will happen to them or there'd be, they'd feel, they won't feel better only feel worse." (Primary school child, female)

Children in schools spoke about helpful lessons they had been given on keeping safe as well as school assemblies that have focussed on specific issues such as gangs and knife crime. Some argued that having smaller interactive group discussions about safety could be more helpful than lectures delivered through large assemblies. The benefits of receiving this information was sometimes outweighed by the fear it created, with children sometimes feeling more scared about going out in public.

"Because they showed some of the points to keeps them safe, but also at the time it worries people like me because when they speak about it they, and they say this and then they show a video then you just get more scared…" (Primary school child, female)

"I found it helpful because they told us about ways they can try and make you join and so it helps so you know what to avoid and stuff like that." (Primary school child, male)

"One thing that definitely does not work is in big assemblies where, or places where or activities where children are just sat there taking in the information. Because I think there's this like bit, there's this idea especially around adults that you know, that what they're saying will appeal to them more if they do it in a video because of course all kids love technology and everything, but I think that's definitely gone around on its head. Kids today, they want to feel equal, they want to feel that they can get involved in a conversation. And I will say like the most I've seen people on my year engaged in conversations like these, is when we're in small groups with a teacher we already trust. So don't bring outside agencies in, just train the teachers up to be able to deal with these things instead of bringing in the scary stranger who's not even from school. Because although that's a small thing, if someone they already know and trust is trained to do it, it will make a much bigger impact." (Older disabled child, female)

Gangs and knife crime

Not feeling safe about walking home from school or walking around when it was dark due to gang activity was a key theme to emerge from several discussions we had.

"You can't walk at the night in a park. Can't feel safe in a park in the dark. A lot of gangs and afraid of getting stabbed - you can't feel safe from them. Sometimes yeah, in daylight on a normal day [you can feel safe] but at the night? Never ever. Not just me, everyone not feel safe." (Older refugee child, male)

Children we spoke with, some of whom referenced their own experience, offered a wide range of reasons as to why 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);

"[Why do you think young people are getting involved in gangs?] They want to be at top and that, they just want to make mates and stuff. It's more expensive than ever before to survive, so we need money, we need money from somewhere, don't we? It don't matter how old you are, you need money, I think that's one thing. It's glamourized more with not only rap music, but that's a large part of it. (Older child with care experience, male)

> Having relatives that belong to a gang;

"They might be children growing up in gangs, or they might have an older sibling that are in gangs or have a family, they might have something like if their parents are not great they might have someone in their family might be, like start at top, a gang man, the whole family does it so they might think automatically they're always in it." (Primary school child, female)

> To obtain respect and agency against a backdrop of youth disempowerment and low self-esteem;

"I think because it's like they're in groups of friends it's sort of seen as, well I'm good because I've got a knife. Because I know a group who think because I've got a knife, it's like a badge of honour." (Older child with care experience, male)

"It [being involved in a gang] carries some weird sense of masculinity and pride for someone." (Older child with care experience, male)

> The feeling of belonging to a family of peers that you can relate to;
> For security and having a support network;

"So most of the young people, most of the things I got involved in weren't because necessarily that people scared me into doing it, peer pressured me. It was more the influence that they had over me, because I, I had identified with them individuals, so they looked like me, they talked like me, they had the same trainers I wore. And so I looked up to them and I aspired to be them. So that's the power that they had over me, as opposed to threatening me to do stuff because I didn't." (Older child with care experience, male)

> The lack of youth clubs and activities for children.

"The fact that we don't have as many youth clubs anymore has led to young people just - they're literally out on the streets, basically, they have nothing to do and then, for example I had this friend that, he is not gang affiliated or nothing, he was literally outside, and he got stabbed for, they got the wrong person, you can't even go outside and feel safe anymore." (Older child in college, male)

Children also spoke about how social media could exacerbate the conflicts and violence between different groups:

"I'm going to link it back to social media, because social media, and beef, as you say it, are the main sources of like gangs and knife crime. And like the whole reason why children are getting into fights, like one kid says something about something on social media, and suddenly there's two different gangs with a bunch of knives meeting somewhere after school and then getting stabbed." (Older child with care experience, male)

Terrorism

In discussing safety concerns, some children also spoke of their worry of possible terrorist attacks. The terrorist attack at the Ariana Grande concert was particularly referenced by one child whilst others talked more generally about being more aware when in public.

> *"When I found out about, so when the bombing attack happened, I was shocked and I didn't know actually that could happen…..I actually couldn't sleep because I was worried that I was not going to, I was not going to survive my whole life because I wanted to, and I was not going to, and I was going to die. So then I realised, so then I asked my mum, are we safe? And she said, yes, because we're in a small village. And then my mates, it doesn't make sense to me, in Manchester there's small villages there yet that's where the bombing was even though it's a small village where the arena was. So that wasn't what made sense to me." (Primary school child, female)*

> *"And also what always worries me when I'm walking or even with my parents is terrorist attacks because there's been a lot lately and I'm always worried that where I am, if something happens sometimes boom and then sometimes when I'm close to somewhere which it happened I'm really worried." (Primary school child, male)*

A specific concern for one disabled child was the thoughtless advice given to students in school about what to do when there is a terrorist attack. They felt no consideration had been given to what children with disabilities might be able to do in these situations.

> *"I don't think it's very disabled friendly either. So like the terrorist thing, when it's like hide, run…..it's not very like, it's planned out for regular people but it's not planned out for disabled people. Like, I'm going to get a bit personal, but in May last year I was at the Ariana Grande concert, and when you're in that scenario you don't think run, hide, whatever. And obviously I can't run, I'm stuck and I'm dependent on somebody else to get out of there. And it's like you've not adapted that so then what they're seeing can be worse because they can't get out there as quick. You know what I mean, it's not adapted and it needs to be." (Older disabled child, female)*

Relationship with the police

Whilst the children we spoke with had had both positive and negative experiences with the police, a consistent view that emerged from discussions was that there exists high levels of distrust between children and the 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. Children expressed a range of opinions to explain this:

> Police judge children on their age, ethnicity or even what they wear;
> Police do not treat children with respect;
> Police can often mistakenly punish the victim or target innocent children (particularly in relation to stop and search).

> *"They [police] do stuff to make themselves higher and you lower than them - make us feel inferior." (Older child in college, female)*

> *"I think, they're [young people] never going to really trust a police officer if they keep stopping and searching me every single time. You're going to start thinking, like I feel, they're not really who you thought they were because of stuff like that." (Older child in a secure children's home, male)*

"[Young people] feel more targeted than protected [by police]" (Older child in college, female)

"It's just how they speak with you, how they act with you, how they'll respect you… just feel like they can do anything, do what they want really. And really they can." (Older child in a secure children's home, male)

"I'd say another issue is the police as well, because the way they pick on youth, especially young black men as well." (Older child in College, female)

Some children said they were more likely to rely on themselves or turn to family when they did not feel safe, rather than turn to the police. Views on what police could do to address this were divided, ranging from thinking that nothing could be done, to suggesting that police could stop targeting young people, have more outreach workers or be seen to be protecting communities on the streets. Despite negative attitudes towards the police, children also acknowledged how their increased and visible presence in local areas would help them feel safer.

"[Who would children turn to if they did not feel safe] Family, not the police. I don't think a lot of kids go to the police. Or you look after yourself or something." (Older child in a secure children's home, female)

"There needs to be more [in the police] about working with children and there needs to be more to create trust between children and police – and having more outreach workers – make it less of an us and them situation." (Older child in youth group, female)

"I think there should be more community police officers walking around, on bikes because in cars you don't really hear anything." (Primary school child, male)

Older children with autism spoke about the lack of understanding amongst police on a range of disabilities – which could lead to police misunderstanding behaviour and mistreating children and young people. There was a general perception that higher quality training on disabilities could address this issue, not just for police but also for emergency services.

"They need to understand that people with disabilities might not be on show – it might be inside. I have been hearing a lot on the news at the moment that there is a lot of people being wrongly abused because the police don't know they have a disability." (Older child with autism, male)

"I think it's about educating them (police) – getting people to come in to the police and emergency services and do like workshops about people with disabilities and the effects of having disabilities. And then also maybe children form like an organisation like [youth group working with children with autism] visiting the police – talking about the range of disabilities but also how capable we still are with support." (Older child with autism, male)

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. Affordable or free activities that children would be interested in doing are not

available and those that are available costs money and can be too expensive. Facilities, such as playgrounds, sport pitches, or skate parks were in disrepair or had been torn down. Examples were even given of plans to erect or repair sport facilities in public parks being stopped by local communities who thought they would attract drug dealers.

> *"They [the government] can raise clubs, free clubs… Coming back from school I see lots of buildings but there's no one in there and it's shut down and stuff like that, they could make it into a centre, it could be free and then if they have a garden or something they could make it into a playground, a safer playground. And then, they could give out leaflets and stuff like that and more people would go there." (Primary school child, male)*

> *"The goal post in my area, not even working, and all the grass is like up to my knees. They were going to put a cage up, and then the people said no, a football cage, but with iron bars around it. Everyone was saying it was going to attract like drug dealers and things, so they didn't do anything." (Older child attending alternative provision, male)*

> *"There's nothing to do, and especially like it's so expensive, like you could go to the cinema but the cinema now is so expensive, there is nothing free even in town, what is there to do? Nothing." (Older child attending alternative provision, female)*

> *"And the only place that I go to normally is the one in [name of town], like a soft play centre but you have to pay for that." (Primary school child, male)*

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. They could provide spaces where older children could mentor younger children; give older children opportunities to gain experience that could help when looking for employment; and keep children safe and stop them from getting into trouble. The refugee and asylum seekers we spoke with talked about how youth clubs were a place where they could make friends, improve their English, and have a space where they could express themselves freely. The lack of youth clubs and activities for children to take part in meant many children felt they did not do anything in their lives outside of school. This could lead to feeling low, bored, getting addicted to video games, being unhealthy and overweight, taking drugs and hanging out in unsafe public areas. Youth clubs were described as a lifesaver for many children.

> *"If you stay at home all the time you are going to get depressed… you get headache and all the time you get angry." (Older refugee child, male)*

> *"There's not enough places for children to go, so that, well it's awful, you can have a youth club there in one area but some kids that, they'll fall out and they can't walk to a certain area because they have certain problems there. So I think that obviously just need more youth clubs and that around, so more stuff for children to do rather than just hang around in the street and that." (Older child in secure children's home, male)*

> *"Yeah, a youth club, it's better, so it basically just keeps you distracted, you know what I mean. It keeps you busy, keeps you active instead of being on the road and then you're not getting yourself into trouble because you're bored." (Older child in secure children's home, male)*

"The fact that we don't have as many youth clubs anymore has led to children just they're literally out on the streets, basically, they have nothing to do and then… for example I had this friend that he was not, he is not gang affiliated or nothing, he was literally outside, and he got stabbed, they got the wrong person, you can't even go outside and feel safe anymore, so yeah." (Older child in college, male)

"The fact that drugs are so accessible, knives are literally so accessible, guns are so accessible, why can't we shut down the nasty things and then kids wouldn't be in knife crime, in drug gangs, in all of this violence and then with shutting all the youth clubs as well it means that the kids are on the street, but then once they're on the streets they get involved with these things" (Older child with disabilities, male)

"So many youth clubs now have to support themselves, and they can't do that. With less activities for children to do, well they'll want to do something because you can't just go to school, go home, go to school, go home, and that's what makes them go outside, and sometimes join gangs and use drugs because it's something different for once. In fact that's a really big reason why children are getting more into drugs faster than older people and into alcohol because it's simply different, it's more fun than staying home. And the same goes for safety because these people go outside and they are more prone to get stabbed by other children who have nothing to do because they have nowhere to go… If they had more youth clubs that people could relate to and go to and have fun, you'll have quite a good drop on those safety issues. But I don't think they're going to do that soon, so yeah." (Older child in college, male)

Being more engaged in politics

Children we spoke with wanted more of a say in political issues and decisions that affected them the most. Current examples given included having more of a say in Brexit, changes to the school curriculum and exam system and environmental issues. Several reasons for why children should have more of a say were identified:

> Many political decisions impact children the most;
> Children felt they had a right to have a say on issues that affect their future;
> Children are the experts regarding their own experiences and needs and can offer valuable and informed insights into how things could be made better;
> Each generation faces new challenges and it is therefore difficult for adults to understand the experiences of children today simply by reflecting back on their own childhood;
> Children sometimes have a greater ability to be imaginative and innovative;
> Children felt involving them in political debates and decision-making will make children feel like they count and that their opinions are important.

"There's no opinion and space for us. For example, let's think of the EU referendum, they didn't allow 16 year olds to vote or anything, yet again it's affecting our lives, they are the ones that are making decisions for us." (Older child in college, female)

"Like government, they think of the situations in their head, whereas we're actually going through them, so we know exactly how to deal with it." (Looked after child, male)

"I'd just speak to the children instead of the adults. Like the adults in our eyes, they only know what they've been told, whereas the kids actually know what's like going on." (Looked after child, male)

"[What is the most important thing for the children's commissioner to do?] Definitely listening to kids. Because even though we are small and we don't have a job, we still have rights. You can't vote, I get that, but we still should have rights and we still should be able to talk about what we want." (Primary school child, female)

"If I was the Prime Minister I will have a way for them [children] to speak to important people, because sometimes they could feel like they're not important, they don't matter in the world. But if they speak to important people they will be like, they will believe in themselves." (Primary school child, male)

"Because everyone just listening to the adult people and ignoring the opinions of young peoples and children. So, they don't, no one, a lot of people don't care about their [children's] feelings and their opinions, but maybe that's why they're neglected, and they have a rude behaviour with people, with teachers, with parents because of that. Because their point of view's not heard, I think that's important to hear everyone's point of view." (Older refugee child, male)

"Because they [children] have the more imagination and they can think. I think we can think of more things." (Primary school child, female)

Suggestions for how children could have more of a say included: more opinion polling of children; lowering the age that one is eligible to vote; creating more opportunities for children to speak before parliament; and MP's carrying out more engagement and consultation work in schools.

"I think children should get a vote for stuff because there's all these votes that adults do, that I think children should do them because it's about, they're the people that in the future are going to be affected." (Primary school child, female)

"But can I just quickly say one last thing? People, no one was allowed the women's vote but they won, but now they're allowed it, why can't the children have a vote?" (Primary school child, female)

A persistent argument was that for children to be able to participate meaningfully in political debates and decision-making, more has to be done to educate and equip them. Children we spoke to felt that schools needed to do more to encourage and raise the confidence of children to discuss and engage with politics. The media also needs to play a role in communicating the news (even the bad news) in a way that children can relate too and will understand. For example, suggestions were made about having a question time programme targeted at children, were all the guest speakers are children or young people.

"I also don't think it should only be happy news. Because there's First News, that newspaper that's meant to be for kids, it's all happy stuff. There's, you could imagine that the world is all going to go well and nothing is going to go wrong and the world is paralysed. But we need to actually know what the truth is." (Primary school child, male)

"The things that we understand we want to vote for but we can't because we're not over the age, so if you understand it I think you can vote for it but if you don't understand it then there's no point going to vote." (Primary school child, male)

"Question Time on BBC - there should be one for like younger kids or like up to 25. For like 13 to 25… they should have their say or just discuss and have it broadcasted sort of thing… with the broadcasting you can share it… if children were able to see on television for example children being involved – if you see other younger kids being aware then you're thinking, oh it's something I can be aware of. Because I'm not very politically aware, so when you see adults talking about it you kind of drown it out thinking, oh this is way too difficult, but when you see kids your age or even younger talk about it and on a more understanding level because they're around your age group I think it helps get people involved, yeah." (Older child in college, female)

Other issues

A number of other issues where raised during the consultation, sometimes only in discussions with one or two groups. However, we felt that due to the significance of what they had to say about these issues, it was important to mention them within the report.

The environment was only raised in one discussion group by a group of primary school children in however they were very clear about the environmental issues we face, the impact that would have on their generation, and the need for the government to act in response.

> *"The one [message] for the government is that we need to help the environment. If we're not going to do something soon it's going to die and there's going to be nothing left." (Primary school child, male)*

> *"A safer environment by banning plastic and stop, doing less deforestation and less pollution." (Primary school child, male)*

Health was another issue raised by primary school children. Their thoughts were based either on direct experience of knowing children in their school who had been unwell or general awareness of the challenges faced by children who are poorly. Children were aware of how limiting illness can be on day to day life, preventing access to certain activities and the need for this to be addressed so children who unwell are better supported.

> *"There's some children in our class who have medicine, three actually, who have medicine. I'd feel stressed about having medicine in school." (Primary school child, male)*

> *"Everyone would know that you've got like an illness and like, I know most of you won't but there's some people who possibly might take advantage of it and make fun of it." (Primary school child, male)*

> *"Because they're not really able, if, it depends on what they're sick of but some children aren't allowed to do stuff that other children can't do so they won't really have an experience, so the government might want to make a way for children to be able to do different things, different activities." (Primary school child, female)*

One group of primary school children talked about what **community** meant to them. In particular, they spoke about the value of living in diverse communities – offering them the opportunity to learn about different cultures, languages, customs and perspectives. They also mentioned the significance of having people outside of your own family who you can learn from and seek support from.

> *"I think it means lots of people but they aren't in your family so lots of different people and they have different stuff and they're different cultures and stuff. And because it'll be boring if everyone was just the same and they all just come from the same country, same names and stuff." (Primary school child, female)*

> *"The good thing about being in a community is that it's interesting about what people have, what their opinions are on different things." (Primary school child, female)*

"The positive thing about community is that everyone around you can support you." (Primary school child, female)

In talking about their worries and what causes them anxiety, children in primary schools spoke about their *family*. This related to general worries about their mum and dad working too hard as well as concerns that arguments at home will result in their parents getting divorced. Their knowing of others at school whose parents have split up and the distress this has sometime evidently caused, made them aware of the impact of family breakdown.

"I think some people worry about their parents because some of them go to work like from the morning all the way till late in the evening. So they worry about them if they're OK and if they're getting sleep." (Primary school child, female)

"I'm not going to mention any names but there's someone in Set C…, their parents are arguing a lot and like she doesn't see her dad much anyway… and the other day I saw her crying and talking to the teachers about it. And the teachers were giving her a hug and making sure she was OK, but I just thought I'm so grateful that I'm not going through that, my parents are fine. But like I just felt really sorry for her." (Primary school child, female)

Particular Groups

Children with care experience

We spoke with a group of looked after children and care leavers, aged 14-25, who also had experience of the criminal justice system. The issues raised were specific to both these experiences.

Professionals

Children with care experience spoke negatively about their contact with professionals, including their social workers. They felt very detached from the conversations they knew professionals were having about them and from the many decisions made that had a significant impact on their lives, such as placement moves.

"It's like I don't want to have to go, this is my home now, so you're going to remove me from here, where I've been for four or five years, to go and live with someone else who I don't know, and it kill, it kills you, do you know what I mean? That, that actually kills you." (Older child with care experience, male)

"Know that professionals sort of talk to each other, no one's talking to the child themselves and get their point of view as to why things have happened, it's professional to professional to professional." (Care leaver, female)

There was little opportunity to take part in review meetings and it was felt no consideration was given by professionals to the importance of hearing from them to inform their care plans.

"I've sat in reviews, and in fairness it is like ten years ago now, but they were talking about me. Ten people in a room, while I'm there, talking about me in third person, Luke's decided this and Luke has decided that, and that's massively impersonal. And it's like, it's almost like a package that's just being sent along." (Older child with care experience, male)

"I think that we've got a whole heap of professionals that are involved in young people's lives. But in the main they're sat behind computers doing assessments." (Older child with care experience, male)

The group also felt that looked after children should have their voices heard and their views should be used to inform policy and practice. Some of those attending the group had presented to heads of service in their Local Authority, challenging professionals on the way in which they support and work with looked after children. This opportunity was greatly welcomed, empowering them to raise and discuss issues of concern that they felt the Local Authority should be hear.

"And I think getting more people in that have those personal experiences that could possibly change policy and front line work, because they've been through it, because we know what works, what doesn't work, we're able to be part of a group where younger children in care are part of and be able to update our views…" (Care leaver, female)

Support

The group spoke about the lack of trust they had of professionals in their lives. This related to their experience of not being listened to and constantly feeling let down by services that they thought should be supporting them. For one care leaver, he spoke of learning to put a wall up as a way of dealing with his worries as he didn't feel he could rely on anyone to help him.

"Just from, from the amount of times where I've been let down and disappointed. You build your wall up and no one's coming through this wall, that's it, this is me, I'm on my own, no one's coming through here. And the only people that did come through were people in a likewise situation, who I lived with, who were going through the same run of the mill as I was at the time. If you, it were us and them, you know, massively. And I think even the staff were aware of that at times, that it were us and them." (Older child with care experience, male)

Whilst the significance of having a trusted adult to speak to and get support was acknowledged, many sought the support of other children in care. This had provided them with much needed space to speak about how they feel.

"They might need trust in adults because if their parents can't be trusted they really need someone else that they can trust." (Care leaver, female)

Others were seeking this kind of support but had failed to find it and felt there was a need for more support groups, with members being other children with similar life experiences.

I feel like there should be like more practical groups like this, for kids in and out of the care system, but for different reasons as well. Like this just focuses on care and criminal justice. But obviously being trans myself, and in the care system, I don't know a lot of support. And honestly you do feel really lonely and miserable a lot of the time. And I barely post stuff on social media any more, because all you see is troll, you're an illness, you should die, you're a freak, and like – (Transgender child with care experience)

Impact of being a looked after child

The children were very open about the impact of being a looked after child and in particular the impact of negative stereotypes associated with being a looked after child. The children and young people we spoke with found it incredibly challenging to be labelled by a range of professionals alongside facing low expectations about what they could achieve.

> *"Half of us want to like go to education, but you just think, why on earth bother? Like you're not going to get these grades. Like as soon as you walk back into the classroom when you're put in care, all your teachers, like my physics teacher….went, you're not going to pass this. He told me from day one, beginning of the year, you're not going to pass this. I was like all right, see you, I didn't go back to that classroom for about six months. Like I didn't quit school, but I didn't go to physics for six months, I just copied out of textbooks, because you just think, what the hell's the point?" (Older child with care experience, male)*

> *"Like all your life you just want to be accepted by somebody, whether that's your friends, whether that's in a classroom with peers, whether that's by parents. And when you've been through the care system, sort of as many times as you may have been, or your own circumstances, you sort of sometimes don't feel accepted or wanted." (Care leaver, female)*

The day to day life of looked after children was seen to be very different from a child who lives with their family. The main issue raised was the response they faced from their social worker and Local Authorities if they did something wrong compared to how a family would have respond to a child not in care. They gave the example of being caught smoking cannabis and the likely reaction parents would give compared to a looked after child where a range of professionals would be notified, and the incidence would be recorded on their case files.

> *"I think that people, particularly children in care, a lot more information is held about them than a child who's not in care, so whenever a risk might be identified, action is taken immediately towards that risk. Whereas a child who's not under local authority care may have a little bit more room to get away with things." (Older child with care experience, male)*

Refugee and Asylum seekers

Concern about the treatment and wellbeing of children here in England that come from other countries was a key theme to emerge from the focus groups we ran. In particular, children were worried about the impact that the current political climate, including Brexit, was having on how foreign national children from all over the world are being treated here.

> *"I think young children… from places that have a lot of refugees… like Syria, they need that extra support because a lot of people in Britain, and I hate to say this, but I know quite a few people who voted for Brexit just because they think that it will get those people out and because they think that those people are undeserving of a home here." (Older child with a disability, female)*

We also ran several focus groups with refugee and asylum seeking children here in England. Their experiences of education, accommodation and support were mixed, but a consistent theme was the perception that there were real differences in the quality of support you would receive across different local authorities – a postcode lottery.

> *"When I live now in [current local authority) my life is bad, really really bad… my life is shit. When I live in [previous local authority] my life was amazing." (Older refugee child, male)*

Six broad issues around some of the difficulties they face were identified:

> Bullying or abuse can be a common experience: they wanted to know how to respond when they faced abuse, particularly out in public, in a way that would deescalate the situation and keep them safe.

   o *"There are people in the street that come to you and say you are not good, you are ugly. Yeah [they say] horrible things." (Older refugee child, male)*

> Dealing with being judged or stereotyped was a frustrating experience: those we spoke to felt that both the government and the media could sometimes portray all refugee and asylum seekers in a negative light, particularly if one individual who happens to be a refugee or asylum seeker does something bad.

   o *"When a refugee doing something wrong, we say, oh all the community is like this. All the people is different. We not belongs to him, everybody have different ideas. The one thing should not tag to all other people too." (Older refugee child, male)*

> Not getting enough support to learn English when they first arrive to this country: they shared their experiences of being sent into large classrooms and intimidating social situations at school before having a good grasp of the English language. This could lead to bullying or not being able to learn effectively.

   o *"I think that's the right support, first you have to do an English course for, I think minimum for six months because you have learnt the one language for whole of your life and then you are switching into English. So, you have to minimum take six month, so then you have to go for the course. " (Older refugee child, female)*

> Being placed in inadequate accommodation: shocking experiences were shared with us - such as being locked in for hours, having cockroaches in the fridge, being placed in shared accommodation with older adults who drink and smoke and do drugs, or accommodation being so cold it was not possible to sleep.

> Criticism over the support they received included: not knowing who turn too; not feeling listened too; waiting months to receive a response to a question or request; and having to deal with several professionals rather than having one key worker.

   o *"You don't know who you talk to, who is here to help you." (Older refugee child, female)*

> Reasons given for why making a complaint could be a very difficult experience included: not knowing who to turn to when making a complaint; not being listened to or believed; or facing threats of being reported to the home office from foster carers or professionals.

   o *"Every one of us, we have problem but we don't have any place we're aware of making complaint." (Older refugee child, male)*

   o *"Another thing what's happened also just recently, we sit in the house when the cold is there, you, when we lay on the bed you feel so cold you are hurting. So when [I] saying*

that [I will tell] the social worker, she [foster carer] gotten angry, say, no it is lie… So she said, what I did in this country is not allowed. She can even report me to the police what I did. Or she can even contact Home Office, tell the Home Office, that what I did, it is not allowed in this country." (Older refugee child, female)

Several challenges around turning 18 were also highlighted, with several references being made to the cliff-edge nature of this transition. The refugee and asylum seekers we spoke with said want they wanted most was the opportunity to get a good education so they could get a good job and contribute to society and the economy. However, they often struggle to finish their education because when they turn over 18 the government will sometimes no longer fund their places in college (depending on their status). This can be an issue because many refugee and asylum seekers have not had enough time to learn English and receive an adequate education by the time they turn 18. The difference in the support they receive from their local authorities once they turn 18 is also problematic, with some describing it as suddenly feeling all alone and having no one to seek support from. This is particularly difficult for those who are here alone without any family.

"Sometimes when the people turn 18, everything becomes harder. So, if you call your key worker your key worker will say, oh you're 18 you have to do everything by yourself. So how are you going to do everything by yourself? In one day, just turns like this." (Older refugee child, female)

"Before I had social worker, but when I go 18 social worker is leaving. Yeah, no one, I don't have no one to ask questions, like to get help." (Older refugee child, male)

"I am wanting to go for college for A levels, all of them are refusing me because of my age because no one can pay me money to go to school… Because the thing is not about money, not about giving house, like if you give me house and money I will never be success, but most refugee people they want to study, and at the end of the day if they study and be in university, it's for this country benefit… I could have be a doctor or be engineer or a teacher, it's going to benefit this country." (Older refugee child, male)

"A school provides the courses I want. I went there and they were super happy with my marks, my behaviour but when they see that you are like 19, then we are sorry, without discussion." (Older refugee child, male)

A very specific issue to arise from the focus groups was that asylum seekers were not able to work, receive benefits or receive higher education –and only receive a subsistence of £35 a week. This was not enough to cover their needs (e.g. food, toiletries, clothes, travel) – and we heard stories or having to choose on any given day between eating and going to an internet café to contact family or taking public transport to go anywhere. Those we spoke with said they really wanted the opportunity to work, and compared their current situation to feeling like they were in prison.

"You feel like you are in a prison. £35 for what? You can't have an oyster [travel card], you need shampoo, you need clothes, you need food - with £35? For me, I feel like in a prison, but prison is better, you can learn something." (Older asylum seeking child, male)

Young carers

Children we spoke with discussed the impact that being a young carer can have on child. It can impact on their mental health and wellbeing, due to worry about loved ones, stress and relentless hard work. It can impact upon children's social lives – as often it can mean not being able to hang out with friends or being able to take part in fun activities. Frequently having to say no to friends when they ask to hang out can also place a strain on a friendship. It can also impact on school life, with caring responsibilities sometimes making children late for school or causing them to get behind in their schoolwork.

> *"Children that have disabled or sick family members - they can't do things, let's just say, I don't know, maybe your brother's disabled and you need to look after him because your parents are busy. So then, well your friends, if they want you to come out with them then you say oh no, I can't because I have to look after my family member and that stuff." (Primary school child, female)*

> *"There is a lot about carers being late for school and being behind in school work – because they have to much stuff to do and teacher not being understanding, because they don't understand what it means to be a young carer." (Older child in youth group, male)*

Children thought that school staff needed to be more understanding of the impact that being a young carer can have on a child – and be more accommodating in regards to school attendance and homework. Professionals are not identifying many young carers– nor are many children identifying themselves as carers – and consequently they are not accessing the support they need. Children we spoke with suggested that more could be done in schools to educate children and professionals about what being a young carer is and the possible impacts and support needed. The importance of respite for young carers was also emphasised.

> *"You don't hear much after young carers in school. There was never anything in primary and secondary school – I never knew what a young carer was – hadn't gone through my stream of thought – having that knowledge around it and to spread it around children is important." (Older child in youth group, male)*

> *"I think sometimes they should have a little break from it and so they can go with their friends and be a bit free. So if maybe they can, with their brothers or sisters, go out if someone is there to help them out." (Primary school child, female)*

Children with autism

The specific experiences of children with autism were raised, particularly where schools could be better in supporting autistic children. Older children spoke of the need for teachers to be better trained in understanding different disabilities and autism and how to tailor services and resources accordingly, such as behaviour policies and lesson structures.

> *"Teachers need to be trained too – to look for out for whoever has got a disability – and the way they can teach them." (Older child with autism, male)*

> *"I think my school should have had more rewards, it felt like you were being punished all the time….you'd get punished, and of course people with disabilities have short attention spans so if your doing a task and you lose attention for five minutes then they're just like you are off task,*

that's bad – but they should try and engage you more – not just be like you're off task." (Older child with autism, male)

Good practice of how to support children with autism was identified, with specific examples given. Older children spoke about the impact of calm, safe spaces on their behaviour – helping them deal with frustrations and anger outside of the classroom.

"We actually have a quiet room at school – so we had bubbles and sofa's - the room was away from the main school. It was time for you….it calms you down and then you don't have to sit in the classroom – you go away and read a book or something and reset yourself." (Older child with autism, male)

Criminal justice system

We spoke with children about their experience of being in contact with the criminal justice system. They were critical about the lack of time given by professionals, such as the police or teachers, to understanding why they or other children offend. Professionals acknowledgment of the factors that result in a child's involvement in the criminal justice system were seen as important to preventing further offending and or such behaviour taking place in the first place.

"if they would have sat me down, with my parents and, I don't know, maybe even school and said why, why are you doing this? What was the point of it? Was it just for two cans of Red Bull, or what's the influence? Was someone daring you to do, why was you involved in that offence?" (Older child with care experience, male)

"A lot of people end up at the moment because of money, because they want money, because they want different opportunity, because they want to do something that they can't do by not getting the help from others." (Older child in a secure children's home, female)

Children considered the label often given by police and other professionals to children once they have committed an offence to be a contributing factor to a child's ongoing involvement in crime. Children also felt their behaviour defined them, with professionals looking at them differently as a result of their criminal record compared to how another child who has not committed an offence would be viewed.

"I think once they have a criminal record I think they're looked at differently." (Older child in a secure children's home, male)

"You've been told that you're bad from day one you're just going to go bad and get into prison." (Older child at college, female)

Methodology

To inform the CCO's Business Plan 2019/20 the CCO consulted with children across England between October 2018 and January2019. The consultation heard from a wide range of children, many of whom tend not to be heard, including disabled children, children with autism, children with care experience, children who have been excluded from mainstream school, and refugee and asylum seeking children.

The views of children were gathered by holding focus group discussions and by adding a couple of questions to an existing omnibus survey. We held 13 focus groups with children across England in different settings and reached 1000 children through a survey.

The two questions about what they worry about and what they think could make life better for children in England were placed in an existing Internet omnibus survey run by Kids Bus. A sample of 1000 children aged 7 – 16 took part in the online self-completion survey between the 8th and 12th of November 2018.

The focus groups used a topic guide that included a short number of questions in order to gather their views on:
> What we should focus on in the coming year;

> What they thought the most important issues were today for children and young people;

> What needed to change in order to improve the lives of children and young people.

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

Number of focus groups	Setting
2	Secondary schools and colleges
3	Primary schools
1	Alternative Provision
1	Secure Children's Home
6	Particular youth groups or forums

Every focus group was recorded and transcribed. A thematic analysis of the transcripts was undertaken using Nvivo.

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 2019/20 Business Plan. The information sheets also provided information about consent, confidentiality, data security and safeguarding. Discussions at the beginning of each focus group further explored these areas and provided children with the opportunity to ask any questions and talk about 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. For children under the age of 16, consent was also sought from a parent, carer or guardian. 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 responses.

We included two questions on market research firms Kantar Public's children's internet KidsBus omnibus survey. From 8th to 12th November 2018 1,000 children across England aged 7-16 responded to two questions:

> *'How much, if at all, do you worry about the following things?'*
>   o Respondents were given a list which included: Feeling safe; Mental health; Stress; Feeling happy; Social media; Pressure of school; Future; Health; Money; Violence and knife crime; Racism and/or religious discrimination; Bullying; Sexism;   Sexual Harassment; What's going on at home; Not having enough food; and Peer pressure (from friends to do things you do not want to do).
> *'Please read the list carefully and then tick the things that you think are the most important to make things better for children/teenagers in England. You can choose up to five things.'*
>   o Respondents were given a list which included: Less stressful exam system; Safer places for children/teenagers to hang out; Teachers to listen more to children/teenagers; Better access to free local activities such as sports and arts; Parents spending more time with their children/teenagers; Helping children/teenagers stay safe online; Taking better care of the environment; More holiday activity clubs; Helping children/teenagers understand how what they do online affects how they feel and their future; and Better understanding of mental health difficulties by children/teenagers.

The sample was then weighted to represent the population in England of 7-16 year olds in terms of gender, region and age. Where unweighted base figures are less than 100, data should be treated cautiously, as large margins of error are possible.

Annex A

Childhood Worry KidsBus Survey

Summary table: How much, if at all, do you worry about the following things?

	Feeling safe	Mental health	Stress	Feeling happy	Social media	Pressure of school	Future	Health	Money	Violence and knife crime	Racism and/or religious discrimination	Bullying	Sexism	Sexual Harassment	What's going on at home	Not having enough food	Peer pressure (from friends to do things you do not want to do)
Unweighted Base	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	732	414	1000	414	414	1000	1000	1000
Weighted Base	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	1000	684	391	1000	391	391	1000	1000	1000
Always	100	58	74	112	58	112	93	82	69	48	9	79	8	10	55	31	62
	10%	6%	7%	11%	6%	11%	9%	8%	7%	7%	2%	8%	2%	3%	5%	3%	6%
Often	137	94	146	175	102	231	179	102	127	96	23	136	20	15	102	53	136
	14%	9%	15%	18%	10%	23%	18%	10%	13%	14%	6%	14%	5%	4%	10%	5%	14%
Sometimes	330	193	298	327	237	405	378	306	262	221	85	337	79	64	319	96	369
	33%	19%	30%	33%	24%	41%	38%	31%	26%	32%	22%	34%	20%	16%	32%	10%	37%
Rarely	261	247	228	196	226	147	196	279	256	168	142	261	140	133	284	228	257
	26%	25%	23%	20%	23%	15%	20%	28%	26%	25%	36%	26%	36%	34%	28%	23%	26%
Never	172	408	254	189	376	105	154	232	285	151	132	187	144	168	241	592	175
	17%	41%	25%	19%	38%	11%	15%	23%	29%	22%	34%	19%	37%	43%	24%	59%	18%
NET : Always / Often	237	152	220	287	160	342	272	184	196	144	32	215	28	25	157	84	199
	24%	15%	22%	29%	16%	34%	27%	18%	20%	21%	8%	21%	7%	6%	16%	8%	20%
NET : Sometime / Rarely	591	440	526	523	463	552	574	584	518	389	227	598	219	197	603	324	626
	59%	44%	53%	52%	46%	55%	57%	58%	52%	57%	58%	60%	56%	50%	60%	32%	63%

Base: Children aged 7-16 in England, 1000 weighted to be representative of children in England

Summary table: What do you think are the most important to make things better for children/teenagers in England?

Question: Please read the list carefully and then tick the things that you think are the most important to make things better for children/teenagers in England. You can choose up to five things.

Base: Children aged 7-16 in England

	Total	GENDER		AGE		AGE AND GENDER			
		Boy	Girl	age 7-11	age 12-16	Boy 7-11	Boy 12 - 16	Girl 7-11	Girl 12-16
Unweighted Base	**1000**	**501**	**499**			**241**	**260**	**239**	**260**
Weighted Base	**1000**	**492**	**508**	**513**	**488**	**253**	**239**	**260**	**248**
Less stressful exam system	**401**	205	196	158	242	89	115	68	128
	40%	42%	39%	31%	50%	35%	48%	26%	51%
Safer places for children/teenagers to hang out	**398**	186	211	191	207	90	97	101	110
	40%	38%	42%	37%	42%	35%	40%	39%	44%
Teachers to listen more to children/teenagers	**335**	152	184	170	165	79	73	91	92
	34%	31%	36%	33%	34%	31%	30%	35%	37%
Better access to free local activities such as sports and arts	**302**	153	150	169	135	84	69	83	66
	30%	31%	29%	33%	28%	33%	29%	32%	27%
Parents spending more time with their children/teenagers	**290**	138	152	188	103	92	46	95	57
	29%	28%	30%	37%	21%	37%	19%	37%	23%
Helping children/teenagers stay safe online	**287**	131	155	138	148	66	65	72	84
	29%	27%	31%	27%	30%	26%	27%	28%	34%
Taking better care of the environment	**279**	139	139	162	117	82	58	80	59
	28%	28%	27%	32%	24%	32%	24%	31%	24%
More holiday activity clubs	**231**	126	105	148	83	80	46	68	37
	23%	26%	21%	29%	17%	32%	19%	26%	15%
Helping children/teenagers understand how what they do online affects how they feel and their future	**222**	108	114	94	128	46	62	48	66
	22%	22%	22%	18%	26%	18%	26%	18%	27%
Better understanding of mental health difficulties by children/teenagers	**211**	81	130	65	146	23	58	42	88
	21%	17%	26%	13%	30%	9%	24%	16%	36%
More support for children/teenagers whose parents aren't able to look after them	**189**	96	92	84	105	45	39	52	53
	19%	19%	19%	17%	21%	18%	16%	20%	21%
More information on how to keep yourself healthy (such as exercise and getting enough sleep)	**188**	111	77	89	99	46	43	64	34
	19%	22%	16%	18%	19%	18%	18%	25%	14%
Teaching parents how to understand and talk to their children/ teenagers	**185**	91	94	88	97	44	44	47	50
	18%	18%	19%	18%	19%	17%	18%	18%	20%
More help for children/teenagers with additional needs such as dyslexia, autism or ADHD at school	**182**	90	91	95	87	47	48	43	44
	18%	18%	19%	19%	17%	18%	20%	17%	18%
Better access to mental health services	**164**	61	103	72	92	29	44	32	59

16%	12%	21%	15%	18%	11%	18%	13%	24%
Helping children/teenagers have more say about the area they live in								
156	72	84	69	88	27	42	45	43
16%	14%	17%	14%	17%	11%	17%	17%	17%
More help for families living in uncomfortable or crowded housing								
135	74	62	67	68	33	34	40	28
14%	14%	13%	14%	13%	13%	14%	15%	11%
Not being allowed to use mobile phones at school								
119	62	55	56	63	30	26	33	30
12%	12%	11%	11%	12%	12%	11%	13%	12%
None of the above								
21	12	9	13	7	7	6	5	3
2%	2%	2%	3%	1%	3%	2%	2%	1%

Base: Children aged 7-16 in England, 1000 weighted to be representative of children in England