

Mean streets

November 2020



Contents

Foreword from the Children’s Commissioner for England.....	2
Introduction.....	4
What are children afraid of and why?.....	5
Serious violence and knife crime.....	5
Social media and news exacerbate children’s fears of serious violence.....	6
Harassment.....	7
Anti-social behaviour and public disorder.....	8
Fear caused by their environment	10
Where children feel safe	11
What is the impact on children?	12
Fear and anxiety about violence	12
Guilt or shame about harassment.....	13
Strategies to feel safer and deal with anxiety	14
What needs to change?.....	15
Better relationships between children and the police.....	15
Other adults helping children feel safe	19
Better design of public spaces.....	20
Conclusion and recommendations.....	21
Appendix.....	23

Author

Harriet Waldegrave

Contact: harriet.waldegrave@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the children and young people who spoke to us so openly and powerfully – this report could not have been written without them. We would also like to thank Dan White, Aaron Daniels and all the staff at Sheffield Futures and Sheffield Park Academy who helped to co-ordinate many of these groups.

Foreword from the Children’s Commissioner for England

We do not feel safe in our communities. That is the stark message from the children in this report. We worry about violence on the streets, where knife crime is at a record high. We face harassment from adults and other children when we venture out. We live in a state of high alert, constantly updated via social media to reports of crime and violence. And the streets we inhabit often seem almost designed to play on our fears – underlit, strewn with litter, and woefully lacking in safe spaces to meet and play.



These messages from children show that, as adults, we are failing in one of our key responsibilities – to protect children both from harm, and from the fear of harm.

The research for this report was carried out last year, before Covid-19 arrived and lockdowns were put in place. Since then, the world has changed for children. Many children have told us that they felt stressed being trapped at home and unable to go out with their friends during this time¹. But as this report shows, when things were ‘normal’, and children were free to go out and meet with friends, we were not doing enough to help children feel safe when they were out. The lockdown has meant more time inside, on social media and without the freedom to socialise easily. Now children are in school and have some more freedom to go out again by themselves than they did at the beginning of this crisis, this report highlights that there is so much still to do to help them feel safe enough to confidently take part in the world around them and develop their independence. As current lockdown rules mean children can only meet friends outside, safe and welcoming public spaces are even more important than before.

As Children’s Commissioner, listening to children is at the heart of what my role is for. What stands out, listening to the worries of these children, is that while only some of them have actually been a victim of crime, nearly all tell of the fear they *could* be. They might know friends or family who’ve been targeted, but more likely they’ve read frightening headlines about stabbings, seen stories of violence on social media or heard playground rumours and gossip of threats. Consequently, many children seem to live in a near-constant state of fear that they may be harassed, attacked or even kidnapped. Their fears are magnified through a complex cocktail of their own experiences, those of their friends and family, rumours that spread in the playground and online, and what they see on the news.

Learning to be independent is a vital life lesson for children. When they’re ready, I want children to be able to travel to school on their own; to visit the park with friends; or go to the shops without an adult. They need to be able to do so without fear of intimidation or attack. But the world these children describe does not feel like a safe one. Instead, there are dark and dirty streets, vandalised buildings, dangerous drivers and badly maintained public spaces. Adults are free to harass and shout at children, at girls in particular. There is a sense of social disorder and lawlessness. No wonder these kids do not feel secure.

These children, unfortunately, do not believe the police do enough to keep them safe. There are negative stereotypes on both sides – many think officers don’t care about them, whilst also feeling that “*police expect teenagers to be trouble*”. Children would like better back-up from the police – clearer guidance on reporting crime, and a more open and positive relationship between officers and young people. There is much more scope for the police to engage with children, and my team will support the National Police Chiefs’ Council to ensure it does this as it updates its strategy on child-centered policing.

¹<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/report/stress-among-children-in-england-during-the-coronavirus-lockdown/>

In the absence of other support, children tell me they've developed their own strategies to feel safe. They put their hoods up, get their phones out and stay in large groups. Ironically, these defensive measures can seem threatening to adults, a stereotype of anti-social teenage behaviour. But they feel it is the only means in their power to protect themselves. They told me there are other ways to make their communities feel safer, but it needs adult leadership. So, we must listen to their suggestions for better designed and maintained public spaces; tougher road safety measures; and more child-friendly places to go. Some children spoke highly of youth workers and teachers who make them feel secure. We can build on this by opening schools and public buildings in the evenings and weekends to provide adult-supported activities in a trusted environment. But there also needs to be lots of other safe places for kids outside.

It is of grave concern to me that our children feel unsafe in their communities. But as they are living with these fears on a daily basis, they also see the solutions. This gives me hope. It is now essential to listen and to act.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Anne Longfield." with a horizontal line underneath.

Anne Longfield OBE
Children's Commissioner for England

Introduction

Teenagers are consistently presented in the media as ‘trouble’, as perpetrators of crime and anti-social behaviour, alarming knife-wielding creatures lurking in groups in hoodies, mobile phones clamped to their ears. Some shopping centres even ban hoodies or use high-pitched ‘mosquito’ devices to prevent teens hanging around.

But we have become concerned at the level of fear we are picking up from children themselves, about their safety when out in public and a general sense of social disorder. Both of these have consistently been raised with us by children as major worries².

One mark of a child-friendly society is surely whether children feel safe and confident to play outdoors and enjoy public spaces independently. But over time children in England have become less likely to be able to go out independently – for example in 1971, 94% of children aged 7-11 in England were allowed to go out alone, whereas in 2010 that had shrunk to 33%³. While this downward trend has been observed in most European countries, other countries such as Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden and Denmark all still have higher levels of independence⁴. In Finland in 2011, for example, 87% of children aged 7-11 were allowed to go out by themselves⁵.

If we want to create a society where children feel safe to explore independently, we need to understand and address the fears that they have about doing so. For example, while we know that some children will have been victims of crime - the latest figures show that 4.3% of 10-15 year-olds were victims of violent crime in 2019⁶ - the majority have not, and yet these fears about going out in public are pervasive. It also seems that the data we have on crime does not tell the whole story about children’s fears; for example while very little crime against children took place in public spaces such as parks, children told us in a recent survey that one of the things they most wanted was to feel safe in their local parks and streets, suggesting that at present they do not⁷.

The Children’s Commissioner’s Office therefore set out to understand more about when, where and why children feel unsafe, and what could be done to address these fears. This report is based on the findings from seven focus groups conducted with children aged 7 to 18 in Sheffield, chosen because it has average levels of crime, poverty and educational provision for England.

² Children’s Commissioner Business Plan consultation with children 2019-20 and 2020-21

³ http://www.psi.org.uk/docs/7350_PSI_Report_CIM_final.pdf

⁴ http://www.psi.org.uk/docs/7350_PSI_Report_CIM_final.pdf

⁵ http://www.psi.org.uk/cim/working_papers/Finland.pdf

⁶ Table A11a: Trends in CSEW prevalence rates experienced by children aged 10 to 15 - preferred measure, for year ending September 2019

⁷ Children’s Commissioner Business Plan consultation 2020-21

What are children afraid of and why?

Serious violence and knife crime

Unsurprisingly, knife crime and serious violence pervade children's thoughts. They are particularly worried when walking on their own at night:

'My friend hates walking to meet us at my house. And she, it's her number one fear, she feels like she's going to get stabbed or whatever.' (Teenage Girl, Youth Group A)

Or when they see larger groups of older children or young adults:

'If there's a big group of people, like wearing hoodies and things, you go to the other side of the road or, you just avoid them.' (Teenage girl, School Group)

Some children's fears are founded in their own, or their friends', negative experiences:

'I was walking home one time from school, and I got jumped by seven people, I got beat up by seven people and I was on my own. And they smashed my phone and everything, so I had no way to contact or anything. So that's what made me feel unsafe from walking home and that.'
(Teenage girl, Youth Group A)

We spoke to children from a variety of neighbourhoods, and they are very aware if their area is seen as dangerous:

'If I tried to get one of my friends to come up here now ... they probably wouldn't because they like, heard of people getting stabbed, people getting robbed, people getting shot' (Teenage Boy, Youth Group C)

Children living in areas deemed 'rough' often seem to have complicated relationships with their neighbourhood – wanting it to be safer, but also proud of their ability to negotiate their area and stay safe:

'If, say there's like a group of lads on I'd roughly know like half of them, so I could walk through they'd probably say all right to me. It basically it depends on if they see you as an insider'
(Teenage boy, Youth Group C)

On the other hand, children are afraid that a single incident will stigmatise their area:

'We don't want people telling us oh, that's a rough area, why do you want to live there for?'
(Teenage Boy, Youth Group A)

Social media and news exacerbate children's fears of serious violence

Children do not need to have experienced crime or harassment themselves in order to be afraid. Hearing stories about crime in the local area makes them more afraid of being out in public, their fear can be heightened by the pervasive influence of social media and online news. The stories come from various sources, including articles on Facebook, Snapchat stories and news coverage on television:

'With local youth crime and knife crime and stuff like that, especially if it's been broadcasted so much...it does come into your mind a lot more.' (Older teenage girl Youth Group G)

'It's on snapchat, people's stories and stuff.' (Primary aged boy, Youth Group B)

Children say they would instantly know about anything bad that had happened in their area:

'It honestly spreads like no one's business. Like wildfire. Like butter.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group C)

Children also often speak about hearing of 'friends' experiencing crime; but they are sometimes speaking about people that they only know online – an effect of having a far wider network of 'friends' or connections than in the pre-smartphone era. Something they hear from an online 'friend' can hold as much weight as something they hear from a friend in school.

They are also influenced by stories that have gone viral on the internet, for example, the 'clown epidemic' in 2016, when stories shared online told of killer clowns who would stab people⁸. The children we spoke to had heard about pranksters responding to these stories and dressing as clowns to scare people – 'apparently people got chased down the road by them' – and were worried it might happen to them. We cannot know how many instances of 'clown-chasing' actually took place, but the lurid images widely shared on social media magnified the impact.

For these networked children, the combination of personal experience of social disorder, with rumour and repetition surrounding more serious crime – even in places far away – leaves them worried about being out in public:

'Because I've...experienced harassment and people shouting things I'm then constantly aware that in other parts of England worse things have happened and do happen relatively regularly. So like the attack on the two women on a train in London, quite a lot of me and my friends are really shocked by that... So it's, even just reports of things happening at the other end of the country has a really big knock on effect.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group G)

Hence teenage fears today are based on a complex mixture of personal experience, the experiences of friends and family, online friends, rumour, social media and news coverage. This serves to heighten their fears as isolated incidents of crime are magnified and reality and rumour get blurred together.

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2016/oct/31/the-great-clown-panic-of-2016-a-volatile-mix-of-fear-and-contagion>

Harassment

Many children experience harassment, which can be related to gender, race or identity. Girls that we spoke to were more likely to feel intimidated and unsafe in public because they constantly worry about being harassed by men in the street. Research shows this is indeed a very common experience, with two-thirds of girls experiencing it⁹. Our previous consultations with children have highlighted this as an issue:

'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.' (Disabled teenage girl)¹⁰

In the focus groups girls described the kind of harassment they faced:

'We'll be walking home and cars will beep or stop, or shout things out the window... They [the people shouting] think it's good for us, but it isn't.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group A)

Unlike with serious violence or anti-social behaviour, children say that harassment tends to be perpetrated by adult men rather than other children:

'He shouted something at my other mate, calling her fat and everything, like saying things to her. And I'm like, you're meant to be 20, you've got a kid, do you know what I mean? Grow up. But obviously they don't.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group A)

'Everyone who's actually harassed me has been an adult of some kind, like 30 upwards. So, although I'm most intimidated by gangs, people running around in hoodies, shouting, most of the time they're just there to try and feel cool, they're not actually going to do anything' (Teenage boy, Youth Group G)

Children's fears can be related to their gender. Girls are more afraid of sexual violence and rape, while boys speak about being afraid of being beaten up:

'At night I normally don't get scared if I see any woman just because, I don't know, I feel like just a bit more safe, but if I see a man, I get so scared. Because I always think the worst.' (Teenage girl, School Group)

'It's like if a boy was to walk home alone, maybe he might get beat up or something but if you're, it wouldn't be as bad as if a girl was to walk home alone, just because of how society is.' (Teenage girl, School Group)

Children are sometimes afraid of going outside their communities, because they worry that people might be racist towards them, and they can end up getting the blame:

'An old man said a racist comment and then we react to it and then they're coming for us.' (Primary age boy, Youth Group B)

⁹ <https://plan-uk.org/street-harassment/its-not-ok>

¹⁰ Children's Commissioner Business Plan consultation with children 2019-20

Children identifying as LGBTQ talk about bullying and harassment which makes them worry about being out in public. One child said:

'Being out in town with my boyfriend I've had people driving past shout slurs at me... these two guys came up and started asking us questions and harassing us, both of which made me really scared to go back into town just in general.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group G)

Experiencing discrimination in the past heightens the expectation that it will happen again:

'People just giving dirty looks, it's an automatic thing to them, they probably don't know they're doing it, but you really feel that you're looking out for them, and you feel really self-conscious...because you've experienced harassment and people shouting things.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group G)

Anti-social behaviour and public disorder

Children express deep fears about anti-social behaviour – people using drugs, driving dangerously, vandalising buildings, littering, or behaving in other intimidating ways.

Part of this concern is practical, such as the risk of getting hurt if motorists are speeding or driving where they shouldn't:

'They don't put barriers for the motorbikes so the motorbikes go there, and they could injure a kid because there's playing areas for kids and then there's no cameras or anything like that.' (Teenage girl, School Group)

But it's not just the fear of being injured. Children are also anxious about general low-level disorder and people 'breaking the rules', like littering, vandalism and driving where "cars are not even meant to go". When we consulted with children on the office's business plan for the coming year, littering was a common concern which they raised¹¹. These lower-level infringements make them feel uncomfortable, as if they feel that if nobody is enforcing these laws then they cannot be confident that more serious crimes will be addressed.

This concern is consistent with the 'Broken Windows' theory of policing, which suggested that low level disorder and general states of disrepair can make an area less safe because 'one unrepaired broken window is a signal that no one cares'¹². Although the application of this theory in policing has been criticised¹³, it still presents an important idea in terms of community ethos – and these kinds of environments certainly made children *feel* less safe.

Children are not just worried for themselves: one group expressed worries for elderly people, and parents with small children in their local areas. They recognise that these issues could be especially intimidating for older people:

'[We] don't want to be scared of going down to our own shop. But I feel more sorry for older people, because obviously if we feel like this, what do they feel like?' (Teenage girl, Youth Group A)

Younger children say they are reassured when they see other children out in public:

'I feel safer when I see other kids around.' (Primary school girl, Youth Group F)

¹¹ Children's Commissioner Business Plan consultation with children 2020-21

¹² <http://illinois-online.org/krassa/ps410/Readings/Wilson%20and%20Kelling%20Broken%20Windows.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-problem-with-broken-windows-policing/>

But older children become afraid of other teenagers, and uneasy when other groups of children are hanging around in public spaces:

'This seems really stereotypical of me, but I feel safe depending on who's on the transport that I'm on, so if it's young people my age they really intimidate me.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group G)
'...I don't like going down to the shop on my own. Because I, it's not that I'm not, I'm not scared of them, they'll not do anything to me, it's just the fear of walking down there and being face to face with them.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group A)

Although children also are clear that it was not all other children that are intimidating:

'...it's these like, these particularly people that do drugs and that do bad stuff.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group A)

Children are also afraid of being intimidated into 'bad' behaviour themselves:

'[They] might turn around and try and peer pressure you to...do it [break into a playground] as well.' (Primary aged girl, Youth Group F)
'And there's one kid who'll have a smoke around school and like try and get others to smoke.' (Teenage Boy, Youth Group B)

In spite of this nervousness about harassment from other children, many feel that kids are unfairly stereotyped by adults when out in public, particularly when it comes to knife crime or drug dealing:

'People can really quickly jump to the conclusion that, oh right, all young people carry a knife, if they've got a hood up, cross the road sort of thing.' (Teenage Boy, Youth Group G)

Children see this as unfair as they think adults are more likely to be responsible for crime:

'And it's, but it's not always us, it's quite a lot of the time it's people in mid 20s, 30s and stuff like that and it's not fair that we're getting stereotyped for these things when it's not always us' (Teenage Girl, Youth Group G)
'A lot of young people are involved in it, it's often because they've been groomed by much older people into them situations.' (Teenage Girl, Youth Group G)
'They're putting them there and then making them do that and then it's ultimately the, it's the kids who are getting killed in the street for some 40 year old dealer' (Teenage Girl, Youth Group G)

Children told us that they can feel when adults are suspicious of them and when adults think children should not be out in public, with security guards paying them undue attention for example:

'He followed us from the top of the stairs, blatantly like, not even trying to make it discreet, just physically following and staring at us' (Teenage Boy, Youth Group C)

Other evidence that some adults can have this attitude towards children comes from the Crime Survey for England and Wales for 2019. It shows that 13% of adults consider 'teenagers hanging around in the street' – regardless of what they are doing – to constitute anti-social behaviour¹⁴. It is as likely to be deemed anti-social behaviour as people being drunk or rowdy in public.

¹⁴ Table S34: Trends in the anti-social behaviour indicators, year ending March 2019 CSEW

Fear caused by their environment

Children say they often feel scared when out in public spaces in the dark, when they feel isolated and alone, and when public spaces are badly maintained.

'I hate being on my own in the dark... you don't know who is lurking there.' (Primary age boy, Youth Group B)

'But as soon as it gets dark or at night-time I really don't feel safe at all, I just do not feel safe.' (Teenage Boy, Youth Group G)

Children describe places with poor visibility, like tunnels and alleyways, as particularly scary places which they avoid:

'And then sometimes I go out with my friends down there and then you have to walk through it, but because you can't see on the other end, you don't know if someone's there.' (Teenage girl, school group)

One group of children said they are frightened of using a tunnel on their way to school and will often add ten minutes to their journey to avoid it.

They speak about the signs that are commonly put up saying 'no ball games' and how there is nowhere for them to play. One group mentioned that other children would even break into the school playground after school and during the holidays in order to have somewhere to play:

'On the holidays they are allowing people to just climb over the gates, and also at night they mess around.' (Primary aged girl, Youth Group F)

Children also say poorly maintained areas – such as those strewn with litter, with chipped paint, no signage, broken windows or broken playground equipment – make them feel less safe.


Where children feel safe


In the focus groups we asked children to label maps of their local area with specific locations where they felt safe, less safe and unsafe. This picture is a stylised map which we have created based on specific things children said – while it is not a 'real' map, the quotes are genuine.

Key

Areas where children we spoke to felt;

 Safe

 Less safe

 Unsafe

Local high street

"But they [a group of teenagers] will stand there, and then some will sit on the stairs by the shops, there's not really any cameras there."

"So I don't like going down to the shop on my own. I'm not scared of [older children], it's just the fear of walking down there and being face to face them."



My street

"We feel safe around the houses because we know the neighbourhood and where we're going. We grew up around here."



Crossing the road

"Where people park the cars, obviously there's a bend where we live, and obviously cars park on it. So if you're trying to cross the road and all you can see is a car parked, you can't see what's coming round the corner."

"You could cross and the next minute a car could come straight away, so I think more traffic lights should be put on."

School



"The reason why I don't feel safe, because there's fights, there's people bringing in weapons, all that stuff."



"If somebody threatened you in school, you could just go to a teacher and then they'd probably sort it out."



"We feel safe at [our secondary school], which is our school, and where we live."

Park

"Say it's late and you're on your own, then you wouldn't feel safe. There's literally like no lights at all."

"I don't like going when it's wintertime, because it gets dark easily."

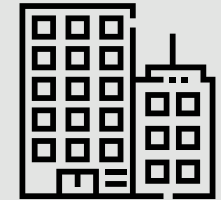


Neglected area

"I got told to stay clear of it. So, it's a red place for me."

"There's loads of things have happened, and the thing is that the police don't do anything about it."

"There's a block of flats, everyone calls it the prison block. People are always just on the stairs, smoking and stuff."



Youth club

"Youth workers, like ours, we go to, and with them there already it feels 100 times more safe."

"There's staff that can protect you, and they let you talk to them, like you could tell them anything."



Alleyway

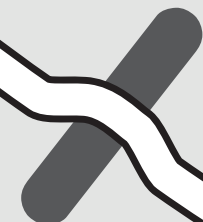
"They don't put bars for the motorbikes so the motorbikes go there, and they could injure a kid because there's playing areas for kids and then there's no cameras or anything like that."

"Anyone, day or night, could be there attacked. There's a lot of rubbish, and it's a really long alley. It does make you feel uncomfortable."



Supermarket

"There's no robberies or anything and there's security and stuff. There's lots of people as well, so if something did happen, there'd be lots of people to help you. I think a lot more people go to buy necessities rather than, I don't know, stab each other or something."



Tunnel under the road

"You have no clue who's waiting for you with a bat or something round the corner."

What is the impact on children?

The impact of crime and serious violence on children seems all too clear from newspaper headlines about children becoming involved in gangs or being victims of knife crime. However, we found that these direct victims are just the tip of the iceberg – all children who are anxious and afraid because of knife crime are also, in an indirect way, its victims.

Fear and anxiety about violence

Most children we spoke to had not been a direct victim of violent crime, yet were afraid or anxious about becoming a victim. They say they regularly feel anxious and paranoid when in public, and that they need to be on constant high alert.

'Being watched. I could literally be walking down road someone just looking at me I'm just like ... I don't know, I just feel like they're going to like, kidnap me or something.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group C)

'I don't know it's like, do you know when you're like walking down road and you get the occasional person who's looking at you, it's like, I'm always scared, I'll be walking down road or something and someone drives past in a car and I'm just like, they'd look at me like, you know if driver looks curious, it's like please don't put me into your car.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group C)

'Or when there's two cars beside each other, I'm always thinking are they going to kidnap me or are they going to leave me go, because there's obviously going to be more than one of them over there.' (Teenage boy, school group)

Children's fears and anxieties can affect their daily lives and their ability to take part in normal activities. One group told us that they won't walk to the local shop because they are so afraid of another group of young people:

'...it's just the fear of when someone asks you to go to the shop, oh I don't want to go down because they'll be there all. I say it all the time, if my mate asks me to go I'm like no, because they'll be down there.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group A)

This experience, common to teenagers in gang-affected neighbourhoods where certain streets or postcodes are simply out of bounds to them, is affecting wider groups of kids who have nothing to do with gang or turf wars. As a result, when children do feel able to go out alone, they will still limit themselves by staying very close to home or in areas that they know well.

Guilt or shame about harassment

Harassment when out in public affects children deeply:

'It can ruin your entire day, wherever you're going if someone shouts something.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group G)

In addition to being generally upsetting, harassment could induce feelings of shame and guilt. It appears to shape how girls and children who identify as LGBTQ feel about themselves and their right to be in public. For example, after a news item about a lesbian couple being attacked went viral, one boy told us:

'... quite a lot of me and my friends were really shocked by that and completely stripped down the amount of our identity we are showing off, like any badges we'd take them off in case people noticed or that sort of thing happened.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group G)

Research has found that the blame for harassment often falls on the victim and their behaviour, rather than sitting with the perpetrator¹⁵. While girls say they know they are not really to blame, they still experience guilt and shame, and take it upon themselves to change their behaviour and dress:

'If I'm walking home in the dark alone, I tend to put my hood up or something. Just because like if they see that you're a girl and that you're wearing makeup or something like that they'll, I think they'll be more, like they want to do something more just because you're a teenager and you're a girl and stuff.' (Teenage girl, School group)

For this girl, the stereotype of a 'teenage hoodie', often viewed as a nuisance, is a way of hiding herself so as not to be sexually harassed.

But children also spoke about how they knew that making these changes would not actually make a difference, as the harassment happens regardless of what they do:

'Even though it's not about what you're wearing. You could be wearing a hoodie. The fact that it makes you think, oh am I wearing something? That's horrible.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group G)

Sometimes this pressure to change behaviour came from parents. One girl spoke about the 'lecture' she got from her mother before leaving the house, including the instruction to not draw attention to herself, which she found impossible to obey as:

'Apparently walking does that.' (Teenage girl, school group)

¹⁵ <https://plan-uk.org/file/plan-uk-street-harassment-reportpdf/download?token=CyKwYGSJ>

Strategies to feel safer and deal with anxiety

The children we spoke to often used certain strategies when they felt unsafe, such as going out in groups rather than alone, and avoiding areas which felt particularly unsafe. These strategies show how nervous children are about strangers:

'If I'm walking home from one of my friends or something ...[if] a car pulls up it, I don't know what they're doing, I pretend I'm going into another house.' (Primary aged girl, Youth Group F)

Even from a young age, they often feel the need to be ready to defend themselves or escape:

'I normally put my keys [in between my fingers] ... I put them here in case anything happens.'
(Teenage girl, school group)

'I would run from, like I said, cars stopping or, or if someone's behind you and then they keep following you.' (Primary aged girl, Youth Group F)

Lots of children say being on their phones helps them feel safer – for example one girl had installed an 'SOS shortcut' to call for help on her phone:

'I just have to quickly press my button three times because my phone will be in my hand because I like to have my phone out in case anything happens when I'm walking alone.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group G)

She spoke about the frustration of the stereotype of children being hooked on their phones and constantly on social media, whereas for her it was a way to feel safe. Some say they call or even pretend to call family members while out and about so they feel less alone, or at least appear to be.

Other children say they plan their routes home from school to avoid dark or badly maintained areas, or try to avoid certain groups:

'Sometimes I know, like if I'm walking home on my own and there's a big group of people, I hate walking past, I have to find another way home.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group A)

Children feel that many of the stereotypes of 'anti-social' teenage behaviour – wearing hoodies, hanging out in groups, being on their phone all the time – are in fact ways of making them feel safer.

'Because we're a big group ourselves, it's like other people might find us intimidating.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group A)

What needs to change?

Better relationships between children and the police

Many children say they feel safer when police are around:

'Because if anything did happen, they could obviously see it then do stuff about it' (Teenage boy, Youth Group A)

But it does depend on the attitude and behaviour of the officers.

'I think the most important thing is that police officers need to care, they need to do their job properly because they don't.' (Teenage girl, School group)

'I don't think anybody could, to be honest, because police, they know about it. They haven't moved them, they haven't said they, well I know they can't say you can't go there, but they're, they're not doing anything.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group A)

The children we spoke to often feel that police do not care about them, believe negative stereotypes about them or treat them as if they are the problem:

'If you're out in town as a teenager they [the police] expect you to cause some sort of trouble' (Teenage boy, Youth Group G)

For some children this comes from their direct interactions with police, while others appear to be influenced by peers' views and interactions. For older children in particular, their views of police are also informed by news stories about police:

'I don't know, and I think a lot of people have lost trust with the police as well, with all the reporting over them not taking rape seriously, not reported it.' (Teenage Girl, Youth Group G)

While the Crime Survey for England and Wales shows that the majority of children (62%) have a positive view of the police, this confidence falls with age: 71% of 10-12 year-olds had a positive view, compared with 53% of 13-15 year-olds¹⁶. It also varies by ethnicity: 77% of Black and Minority Ethnic children believe that the police treat children fairly regardless of the colour of their skin, compared to 87% of White British children.

Children, just like adults, have different views about the role of the police – some want armed police on the streets, while others want police to carry out undercover operations. Children tell us that getting to know a police officer makes a difference:

'Yeah ... if you get to know them properly, if you get to know one of them you feel safe around most of them because like, you can vouch for them. So, if he could be like, we're not all like bad and intimidating, we'd actually listen to you like, it's just knowing that there's some out there that like actually aren't quite right.' (Teenage boy, Youth group C)

Schools are seen as an obvious place for these relationships to be established:

'They had a pop-up police station at the car park [at school] so like police could talk to us. I reckon they should do that more, if they could.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group C)

Children also feel police could help educate them about the dangers of carrying a knife, and how it could make them less safe:

'I think [kids need to hear] the education that carrying a knife is worse than not carrying a knife in terms of safety because you're more likely to get stabbed by it yourself.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group G)

¹⁶ Analysis of CSEW 10-15 by the Office of the Children's Commissioner

Police training on children's rights

Newcastle is one of several Local Authorities that is working with Unicef to become a 'child friendly city'. One of the city's aims is to make the city 'Safe and Secure' for children. Police officers from Newcastle we spoke to for this report discussed how training on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child had helped them to dispel stereotypical views they had about teenagers, and improve their interactions with children. They also said that they were trying to visit schools to break down barriers between police and children, but there was less resource to do so in the face of budget cuts. They emphasised the importance of tying their work in across the curriculum, such as in PSHE lessons on hate crime, and using innovative and engaging ways to work with children, such as using virtual reality technology to explore different scenarios.

Children also talk about the importance of a getting a positive response from police:

'I'm pretty sure I've phoned the police twice in my life and it's been the most scariest experience I've ever done in my life. The second time it was all right because the woman that are on other end of phone she are like, she helped, told me to calm down and everything and it are like all right, but the first time it were like, I'm scared.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group C)

'When I had to do a statement for something, she started shouting at me and I didn't like it, because I was trying to remember what happened but because it happened so fast, she was having a go at me like, you need to remember every single detail.' (Teenage girl, School group)

Many children don't know when or how to report lower level crime. In two groups there was discussion of which number to call, with some children unaware of the 101 service, and others talking about how they could never get through, or the fact that it was not a freephone number (the Government announced in May 2019 that it would become freephone from April 2020). One group of children said they would like to be able to alert police to an incident anonymously, and hadn't been able to do so online or through 101. There was particular discussion in one group about being unsure about whether to report street harassment:

'Well it's not a physical attack, if it's just verbal, they've not robbed me or anything like that, it's like do you report a hate crime?' (Teenage Girl, Youth Group G)

Some children feel guilty about potentially wasting police time, particularly in cases that are not an emergency:

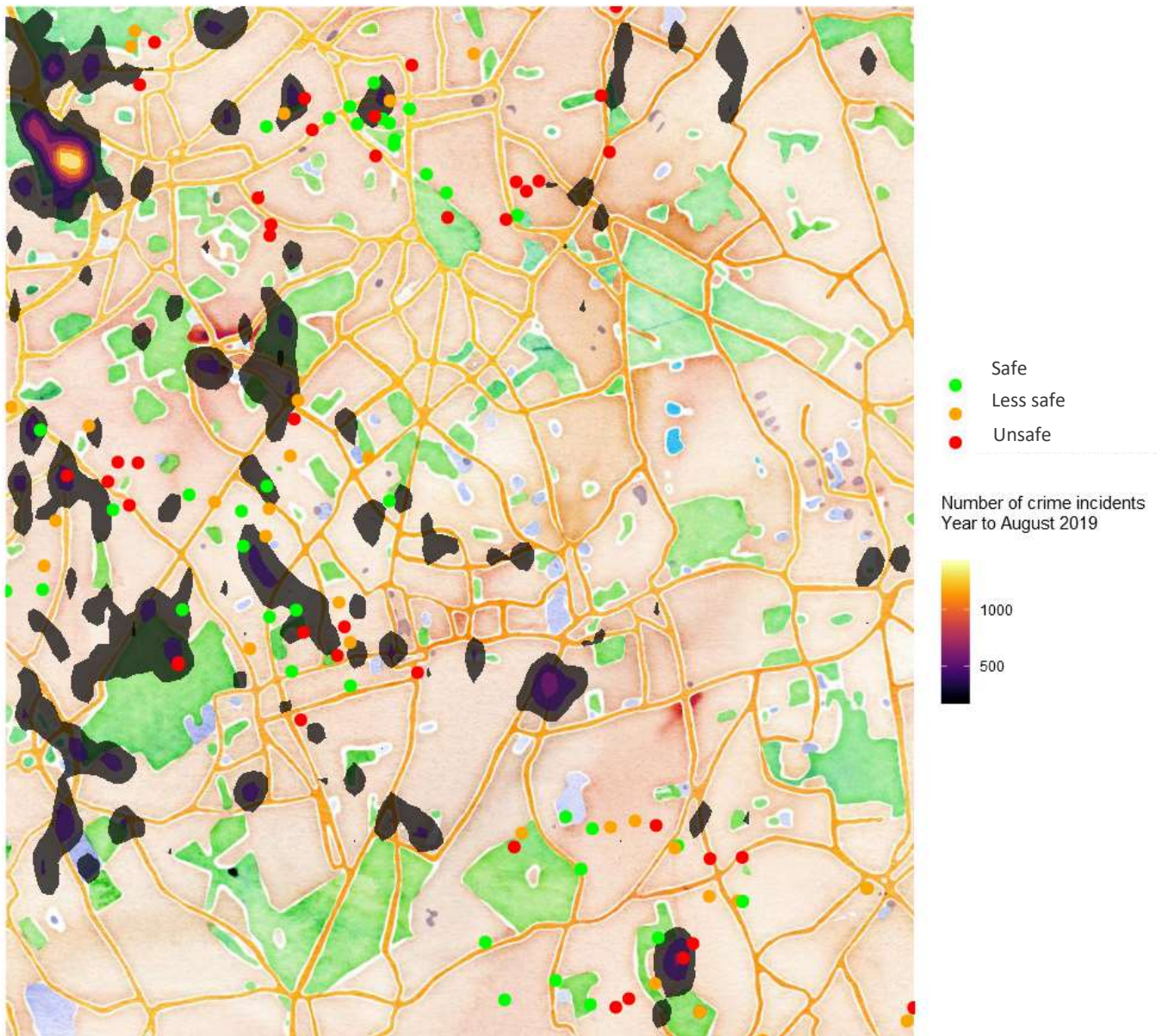
'I think there's a lot of cuts going into public services so you don't want to feel a burden a lot of the time. Because even though it is terrifying to you personally I always feel yeah, but someone could be in a worse situation than me... it's like when you don't want to go to the doctors because you feel bad for wasting their time even though you're really poorly.' (Teenage girl, Youth Group G)

'Because there could be a murder case going on somewhere else and there might be another police car they need to take there, but we're just not, we're not as informed on what we should do. I feel there should be more education involved, preferably implemented in schools' (Teenage boy, Youth Group G)

'I feel bad for like, I'm ringing 999 because some little youth's going on a motorbike up and down road and someone could be genuinely getting murdered or something and I'd just feel bad.' (Teenage boy, Youth group C)

This fear or lack of understanding about how to report a crime also means that children feel their information is ignored, even though it could help police better understand places that are hot-spots of

crime or anti-social behaviour. This is worrying, given that research has shown that children’s different perspective on their local communities can provide helpful insights about patterns of crime¹⁷. In each of our focus groups we asked children to identify areas on maps that felt ‘safe’, ‘less safe’ or ‘unsafe’. The map below overlays these markers with crime survey data for the same area, and shows that while some of the hot-spots children identified match up with those in the crime data, they are also identifying areas that police do not seem to be as aware of.



¹⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016718503000034>

Older children say they want to know their rights if they happen to have a bad interaction with the police, and to better understand what police are and are not allowed to do:

'I think it's important for young people especially to know what their rights are in terms of stuff like that. It's do you have the right... you can't say that to me, you can't do that to me' (Teenage girl, Youth Group G)

The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) is updating their strategy on child-centred policing, which has the potential to inform how all police forces work with children. **The NPCC must ensure that their child-centred policing strategy addresses the concerns children raised in this report; the Office of the Children's Commissioner is working with the NPCC to deliver this.**

There is limited research about what works for police education in schools, but there are signs that when it is done effectively it can improve trust between children and police¹⁸. More children could benefit from this, especially if police officers engage with all children in the school rather than just those most at risk of entering the criminal justice system. This should include: working to improve relationships between local police and children in the school; providing information on how to report crimes (including anonymously via social media for low-level concerns) and explaining to children what their rights are when dealing with the police. They should also find out what children are concerned about in the local area, and report back to them on how it is being dealt with. In order to avoid the risk of police presence in schools criminalising children, this work must be done collaboratively by trained officers. **Every school should have an allocated, named police officer who visits regularly. The Government is recruiting 20,000 more police officers who can undertake this work. These officers need to be able to work well with children, with the right training.**

The high level of street harassment experienced in particular by young girls suggests that more needs to be done by police to address this kind of behaviour. **Police forces should adopt strategies like the British Transport Police's 'Report it to Stop it' campaign to tackle street harassment, as well as other ways to make reporting easier. Consideration must be given to ways to improve the response to harassment, including whether additional legislation or the introduction of fines, as in France, is needed. The Law Commission's recommendations on the addition of gender or sex-based protections in hate crime law should give specific consideration to the impact of public sexual harassment on girls.**

Community Safety Partnerships are made up of representatives from Local Authorities, Police, Probation Services, Fire Services and Clinical Commissioning Groups. They have a statutory responsibility for reducing crime and disorder in their local areas, and work with Police and Crime Commissioners to achieve this. **The government has promised to amend the Crime and Disorder Act which set up Community Safety Partnerships to ensure they make serious violence a priority¹⁹. The Act should also be amended to ensure that the needs of children – particularly for safe play space - are explicitly identified in priorities and strategic plans, and evidence how children have been consulted in the creation of those plans.**

¹⁸ www.pshe-association.org.uk/policing

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-public-health-duty-to-tackle-serious-violence>

Other adults helping children feel safe

Most children feel safe with their family and at home - although one child pointed out that home was not always a safe place as, in her experience, this was where she had been least safe.

Children who use youth clubs say youth workers make them feel safer, and more able to make use of community spaces:

'Youth workers, like with them there already it feels 100 times more safe' (Teenage boy, Youth Group A)

'I know this sounds weird yeah but I reckon I felt safer playing football with you [youth worker] than I do when I play football on that field with him [young person]' (Teenage boy, Youth Group C)

Some children say teachers make them feel safe in school and that security staff can help in public places:

'Because there's no robberies or anything and there's security and stuff.' (Teenage girl, School group)

Children feel more confident in places where adults are around:

'If it's quiet and something happens, there'll be no one there to help you, plus if there's more people there, if something was to happen, you'll have someone to help you or see what happened.' (Teenage girl, school group)

'I think another reason is because there's lots of people as well, so if something did happen, there'd be lots of people to help you.' (Teenage girl, school group)

'There's local pubs round there, and if you don't feel really safe you can just go into a pub and ask for help, really' (Teenage boy, Youth Group A)

And one child spoke about how small every-day positive interactions with an adult could make a real difference to how confident they felt, describing that there was one person on their road:

'Who always will be like, oh good morning, and it's just, that's nice, that's brightened up my day' (Teenage girl, School group)

They also prefer places like shopping centres where they feel they are less likely to be a victim of crime:

'I think a lot more people go to buy necessities rather than, I don't know, stab each other or something.' (Teenage girl, School group)

Safe Places and Safe Havens

Many Local Authorities participate in the 'Safe Places' scheme where shops, cafes or public services are advertised as places which any vulnerable person can go to and know that they will be safe and supported. They are originally targeted towards adults with learning disabilities, but some areas are now expanding them to include children as well. There is a national body to support local strategies²⁰, which was previously funded by National Lottery.

A similar programme of 'Safe Havens' was set up in Lewisham, in memory of Jimmy Mizen – a teenage boy who was murdered - which encourages shops to advertise themselves as places children and young people can go if they feel unsafe.

²⁰ <https://www.safeplaces.org.uk/>

Children say they want all adults to play a more active role in helping them to feel safe, perhaps by directly intervening:

'If someone is harassing [a child], someone going up and telling them, that's not OK, this [child's] obviously looking very uncomfortable and it's not acceptable, or...calling the police or alerting law enforcement of some kind.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group G)

They say even small actions in the immediate aftermath of something difficult or traumatic, like seeing if they are ok, could make a big difference.

Better design of public spaces

Research suggests that children's perceptions of the safety of their environments could be changed through greenery and lighting²¹, and that improved street design could also encourage children to walk to school²². Children tell us they want more road safety measures, such as zebra crossings and speed limits. They say more mirrors, and fewer fences or barriers (which blocked their sight) are needed to make tunnels and alleyways safer. They want places to feel tidy, brighter and more interestingly designed:

'Repaint walls, because where ...all paint's chipped off and there's cobwebs it's just weird.'
(Teenage girl, school group)

'And more nicely decorated because seeing the same thing and rubbish everywhere is just not very [nice].' (Teenage girl, school group)

They also say they want more places to go and things to do in their area, in particular youth clubs:

'There is really nothing for people around here to do' (Teenage boy, Youth Group A)

Children want to be listened to in the design of public spaces. For example, one child voiced frustration about being unable to ask the council to put up a safety barrier near her home to stop mopeds driving through an area that children played in. But, crucially, children find it irritating to be consulted and then see no action taken:

'Yeah, we took our own time to come down there to [be asked] about what we want, what we want to change and that. We've seen nothing's been changed.' (Teenage boy, Youth Group A)

Children feel very strongly that those in positions of power need to hear their voices and respond to their problems:

'The Government...need to know just because they've got comfy chairs and they've got a big house, doesn't mean that everyone else has. So, [Government should] make sure that everyone else is happy and safe.' (Teenage girl, school group)

'If, since we've been doing this, and you're going to be scattering it all over the news, the radio, we want to hear that so we know that something's going to change' (Teenage Boy, Youth Group A)

²¹ Côté-Lussier, C. et al (2015). "A Child's View: Social and Physical Environmental Features Differentially Predict Parent and Child Perceived Neighborhood Safety". *J Urban Health*, 92(1): 10–23

²² https://www.livingstreets.org.uk/media/3618/ls_school_run_report_web.pdf

Conclusion and recommendations

There is an impression in the media and society that children spend too much time cooped up at home, and should be allowed to play outside freely²³. However, the way society treats children when they are *actually* out in public does not always reflect that.

Too often, children feel anxious and paranoid, which stops them spending time in their local communities. Girls and children who identify as LGBTQ seem to be particularly affected, as they are more likely to be subject to routine harassment from men.

Children are all too aware of adults' stereotypes about them – always on their phones, dressed in hoodies, hanging out in groups. Yet the children we spoke to said that they often do these things to feel safer, rather than to intimidate others.

Children can identify many things that make them feel safer. They want better and more trusting relationships with local police, who will advise them on staying safe as well as listen to them and take action to address crime and anti-social behaviour such as littering, vandalism and dangerous driving. They also want to live in communities designed with children in mind. This means more activities in youth clubs or extended schools, but also better lit, better designed and better maintained public spaces. Children want their needs for the spaces they make use of – which adults might not – to be given more attention.

Perhaps most importantly, children say that adults can help them feel safe – anything from simply being polite, to offering help if it looks like they are in distress, to not accepting the harassment levelled by other adults. Yet children too often say that when they are outside, they are made to feel unwelcome by adults.

If we truly want to create a child friendly society, where children enjoy playing and spending time in public spaces, then it is incumbent on all of us to change our attitudes when they do.

²³ <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2019/may/21/how-can-we-get-our-children-playing-outside-again>

Recommendations

1. Planning guidance should be amended to include children's specific need for access to safe open spaces and play opportunities to promote their health and well-being.
2. Local Authorities should be required to consult with children when determining their spending on public spaces and ensure public space is child-friendly. They should learn from UNICEF child-friendly cities, such as Leeds, who have consulted extensively with children on what they want to see in their local areas, as well as areas which have implemented Play Streets.
3. The Government should launch a campaign to make public spaces more child friendly. This should include messages to dispel the negative stereotypes held about children in public space and information to by-standers about how to intervene and help if a child appears upset.
4. Local Authorities should be supported to pilot schemes that create safe places for children to go to when needed - such as Safe Places or Safe Havens - with the necessary funding for training staff in those places.
5. All schools should be funded to stay open after lessons have finished, with extended services provided by voluntary and private sector organisations. We have previously estimated it would need up to £1.8 billion per year to adequately fund this²⁴.
6. Funding for youth services fell from £1.4 billion in 2009/10 to £0.5 billion in 2016/17. We welcome the announcement of an additional £500 million for the Youth Investment Fund to build and refurbish youth clubs around the country. But this must be accompanied by sufficient funding for high quality youth workers to staff these centres around the country.
7. The NPCC must ensure that its child-centred policing strategy addresses the concerns children raised in this report; the Office of the Children's Commissioner is working with the NPCC to deliver this.
8. Every school should have an allocated, named police officer who visits regularly. The Government is recruiting 20,000 more police officers who can undertake this work. These officers need to be able to work well with children, with the right training.
9. Police forces should adopt strategies like the British Transport Police's 'Report it to Stop it' campaign to tackle street harassment, as well as other ways to make reporting easier. Consideration must be given to ways to improve the response to harassment, including whether additional legislation or the introduction of fines, as in France, is needed. The Law Commission's recommendations on the addition of gender or sex-based protections in hate crime law should give specific consideration to the impact of public sexual harassment on girls.
10. The Government has promised to amend the Crime and Disorder Act which set up Community Safety Partnerships to ensure they make serious violence a priority²⁵; they should also amend the Act to ensure that the needs of children are explicitly identified in priorities and strategic plans, and that children are consulted in the creation of those plans.

²⁴ Children's Commissioner Manifesto for Children

²⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-public-health-duty-to-tackle-serious-violence>

Appendix

Methodology – Who did we speak to?

We spoke to 66 children in seven focus groups in September 2019. We conducted the groups in Sheffield, an area with average levels of crime, poverty and educational provision. In the main, we conducted the groups in youth clubs, but we also spoke to children in one school. We spoke to two teachers and a number of youth workers who worked with the young people, in order to contextualise the children's experiences.

We asked the children open questions about what safety means to them; what makes them feel safe; where they feel safe; how adults could support them; and how they would like to see their environments being designed to improve their feelings of safety. Children were encouraged to raise any issues that felt important to them, regardless of whether or not they related explicitly to questions we had asked.

We also provided the children with maps of their local areas and asked them to mark with green, orange and red stickers where they would feel safe (green), not so safe but they would still go there (orange) and where they avoid going (red). These maps helped spark conversation about specific landmarks in their area and helped us better understand their ideas for specific improvements in the built environment which might make them feel safer.

	Number of participants	Male	Female	Age	Setting
Group 1	6	1	5	15 to 16	Youth Group A
Group 2	8	8	0	9 to 18	Youth Group B
Group 3	15	7	8	11 to 17	Youth Group C
Group 4	6	1	5	12 to 14	School, D
Group 5	13	13	0	7 to 18	Youth Group E
Group 6	5	2	3	10 to 12	Youth Group F
Group 7	13	3	10	16 to 18	Youth Group G

Children's COMMISSIONER

Children's Commissioner for England
Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

Tel: 020 7783 8330
Email: info.request@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk
Visit: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk
Twitter: @ChildrensComm