



Business plan 2021-22

June 2021

Foreword by Dame Rachel de Souza, Children's Commissioner for England

As I take up my position as Children's Commissioner for England we are at a watershed moment for our country. The Covid pandemic has had a dramatic impact on all our lives, but especially for children who have spent so much time out of school, and missed out on many of the things we now take for granted about childhood, like birthday parties, school trips, and even playing football with their friends. In terms of economic, social and cultural shocks – in terms of deaths – this is a post-war generation in all but name. As we start to emerge from the pandemic, blinking into the light, we have a chance to reassess where we are going as a country and set out a new vision for our future.



It is at moments like this when children look to us as adults to provide the answers. As a teacher, then a headteacher and running a team of schools, I have always taken that responsibility extremely seriously. This job is no different.

But to provide the answers our children need as they ponder an uncertain future, we first need to listen to them. That's why I launched The Big Ask, the largest ever consultation with children in England. Over half a million children have taken part in our survey, sharing their views and opinions on what worries them most, their dreams for the future, and the barriers they feel are holding them back. I have travelled up and down the country, from Grimsby to Gateshead, from Bristol to Birmingham to talk to children about their lives today, their experiences of the pandemic, and what they need from us as adults to help them thrive. I've heard from children in custody, on mental health wards and in children's homes. We've held focus groups with parents of toddlers, and with children from a range of different backgrounds who often don't get their voices heard.

What is so clear to me from what I've heard is this is a passionate, and compassionate generation of children. They have strong views about protecting our environment and building a fairer society. Now I want to work with others to help children achieve their goals, by dismantling those barriers that are holding them back. This is the moment to bring together people working in all the different parts of the system to create a support structure that works for children and families. We need to harness the ambition of William Beveridge, when he published his landmark report in 1942. We need to listen to what children are telling us and create a national vision to make this country the best country in the world in which to grow up. The responses to The Big Ask will drive the next phase of work for my Childhood Commission which will propose big changes to the way in which we support children and families in this country. When I hand over this role to my successor, I want to look back at six years in which adults in power in this country have done even more for children than the post-war generation. I want to see not just a golden age of policy-making, but a golden age of delivery. As adults, that is our responsibility to the next generation.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading 'R. de Souza'.

Dame Rachel de Souza
Children's Commissioner for England

Our mission

The OCC exists to promote and protect the rights of children. We work with Government, Parliament and services to raise ambitions for children, highlight difficulties and propose solutions. With unique access to data relating to children, and the most comprehensive database of children's needs in England, we advise ministers, select committees, MPs, peers and local services about the state of childhood today, the strengths and weaknesses in systems around children, and where children are falling through gaps in provision. All of our work is underpinned by what children tell us. We have a particular focus on the rights, views and interests of children living away from home or receiving social care, including looked after children and those in the secure estate; our Help at Hand service exists to support and advise them, and intercede on their behalf. Uniquely among public bodies, we are able to visit and speak to any child living away from home and we undertake regular visits across the children's secure estate, and to hospitals and children's homes. Above all we advocate – in public and in private – for children's rights and interests; to policymakers, Parliament and providers of services. We represent 12 million children at the heart of Government.

Consultation with children

We consulted children comprehensively both to inform the Childhood Commission and this business plan. The Big Ask, launched by Dame Rachel de Souza soon after taking office, was the largest ever survey of children in England. Accompanied by a comprehensive programme of visits, interviews and focus groups with children in particular vulnerable groups, the survey forms the heart of The Childhood Commission, and we will report on its findings later in 2021. We asked children:

- > How the pandemic changed their lives, for better and for worse
- > What their aspirations are, and barriers to attaining them
- > How things are at home, and what would improve family relationships
- > How their local environment and communities could be improved
- > How they feel about the future and the challenges facing the world

557,077 children responded to the survey. We are currently undertaking detailed analysis of the responses alongside a corresponding evidence review and expert consultation. This will highlight children's top priorities for recovery after the pandemic and identify the barriers to providing the best possible futures.

We will also work to develop and fine tune a set of metrics by which we can measure progress in breaking down the barriers that stop children fulfilling their potential, and hold government and society to account on the things that matter most to children. Where the right data is not collected by Government we will use our data gathering powers to shine a light on children's experiences.

The Childhood Commission

The final report of the Childhood Commission will propose a series of structural and policy reforms and interventions to give effect to the best childhood, setting children on the firmest path to adulthood. The Commission aims to do for childhood what William Beveridge's report did for the welfare system 80 years ago.

The Covid-19 pandemic exposed social fault lines which had been hidden from the view of many and affect the wellbeing and prospects of the young. The Childhood Commission final report will address the policy shortfalls that have held back the lives of many children for decades. It will look at the ways in which society and political structures often short-change children. It will propose bold solutions with measurable impact on children's lives, and ambitious targets by which Government and local agencies can be held to account; a 10-year plan with annual metrics to monitor progress, across the sweep of childhood and the span of government.

It will set out the challenge to society to pay back to this generation of children and re-set their future; to put them at the heart of national recovery and levelling up.

We will work with Parliament and Government to embed this knowledge and understanding at the heart of policy-making and secure commitment to reform.

Particular vulnerable groups

There are children whose additional needs demand specific focus from the Children's Commissioner. While their broader ambitions – for a good education, a decent living, mental resilience and strong families – are no different to those of other children surveyed in The Big Ask, they also require specific policy work focused on their needs. As part of The Big Ask we conducted focus groups with these highly vulnerable children. We will continue to analyse the wealth of data we have captured about them, and in the immediate term will publish analysis of the needs of the following groups.

Children with special educational needs

Despite reforms to the SEND system introduced through the Children and Families Act 2014, services for children with SEND remain poor.

As illustrated by responses to The Big Ask, children across the country are waiting too long to access support and what they are offered is too often insufficient or inappropriate to their needs. At the same time, local authorities and schools are struggling with ever-increasing demand. For many families the situation was at breaking point even before the pandemic, but Covid has made them even worse and has had lasting impact: a survey conducted by the Disabled Children's Partnership in April 2021 found that almost half of families were still unable to access pre-pandemic levels of support for their disabled child at school or educational setting.¹

The Government is currently working on its own SEND Review and we will work with partners in the Department for Education, DHSC, the NHS and local councils to work to ensure that the solutions consulted on will improve outcomes and provision for children with SEND. We will ensure that children are engaged in the consultation process and their voices and experiences are front and centre.

¹ <https://disabledchildrenspartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/No-End-in-Sight.pdf>

Young carers

Estimates of the number of young carers vary from 800,000 to 1 million. Data is poor due to the difficulty of identifying young carers and reliance on Census estimates which are a decade out of date.

The pandemic had a significant impact on young carers with 6 in 10 spending more time caring than before the pandemic. 11% of young carers surveyed reported providing an additional 30 hours or more of care a week compared to pre-pandemic².

Around 6000 young carers responded to the The Big Ask. We will publish data and analysis from the survey, comparing aspirations, trajectories and barriers for young carers with the rest of the child population; and investigate what additional help could be provided.

Children with mental health needs

The pandemic has increased stress on this population of children, lengthened waiting times for mental health support³, and heightened concerns over the general emotional wellbeing of England's children. In our consultation with children for this Business Plan we heard from those who felt lockdown had affected their wellbeing:

“Lockdown has not helped with my mental health, it’s emotionally draining, like I’m always tired and I’ve got a constant headache. I don’t talk to anyone about my mental health and I struggle to open up about.”

Lucas, 17, South West

We will produce our 5th annual mental health briefing for Parliament, setting out the state of play of children's mental health services today.

As these briefings have shown, there remains a very large gap in services for children with mental health difficulties, or who have experienced trauma or adversity that could lead them to develop such difficulties. Some of these children are in need of NHS CAMHS services and are turned away:

“Tried to get counselling with CAMHS and they wouldn’t take me because I’m in that awkward age range where I’m almost 18.”

Shannon, 17, South West

Some are accepted but wait for months for treatment:

“My mum tried, but it took so, so, long to get me on there...about 2 years.”

Jonny, 13, Merseyside

Others need a lower level of intervention or support, within their school or community.

“We have good support at my new college... They have provisions in place, certain mental health provisions, counsellors there on hand if you felt like you were struggling and wanted to talk to someone ... It’s an open friendly space so you don’t have to feel alone.”

Ethan, 16, South Yorkshire

² Carers Trust survey of young carers aged 11-17: [Our survey on the impact of Coronavirus on young carers and young adult carers - Carers Trust](#)
³ [A time of reckoning for children and young people's mental health - NHS Providers](#)

Performance against the Government target for waiting times to access routine and urgent support for children with eating disorders has slipped to 82.7% of children seen within 4 weeks compared to a target of 95%: [NHS England » NHS Mental Health Dashboard](#)

However, mapping the spend or delivery of these lower-level support services, which are variously funded by CCGs, schools, LAs and charities, is very challenging. We will look at the wider issue of mental health support at this level throughout the Childhood Commission; and will work to ensure children's well-being forms an integral part of plans to support children after the pandemic.

Children who have experienced bereavement

"A year ago I lost my dad. It was the hardest thing I'm going through. Due to Covid, I only just got counselling now, 10/11 months ago I got put on the register to get counselling. It has helped a little but then I have trust issues have to build up trust with someone before I let anything go – it takes time."

Stacey, 15, South West

We will also have a particular focus on services for children who have experienced bereavement. Being bereaved of a close family member or friend can increase children's risk of poor outcomes in life; children who have experienced bereavement are overrepresented in the criminal justice system and the care system, and many come to our Help at Hand service for help and advice. Yet very little data is gathered to identify bereaved children and the support available to them is known to be patchy. Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, we will find out more about the experiences of bereaved children – how they were affected, what help they received and from whom. We will explore how local services and central government could use data to transform the support they receive, and set out a series of actions that can be taken to make these children's lives easier and help them to thrive.

Children who need help from social care

The Government's Social Care Review has promised a once in a generation opportunity to improve the way we support children and their families. This is no small number of children: every year about 100,000 will spend some time in care and there are more than a million children who have needed statutory social care in the past 3 years. Some children we speak to have good experiences of care:

"I am being fostered now, I have been there 6 years, it's changed my lifestyle, it's opened new routes, it's made it better for me."

Leo, 17, Merseyside

However, many care experienced children tell us that too often they are let down by a system that should be caring for them:

"I've heard people paired with awful carers, the exact wrong match. Like being matched by a robot."

Child with care experience responding to online consultation

While the social care system in England includes thousands of committed individual foster carers, social workers and other staff, too rarely does the care children and their families receive feel consistent, holistic and supportive. In short, the system at present is less than the sum of its parts. The result is that children in care, or families receiving support, often experience a system where things are done to them, not with them, and there is little clarity about how we understand the best interests of the child, the one principle meant to underpin the whole system.

"When I went into care I was 10 and I got split up from my 2 younger brothers at the time. They were 6 and 4 and it has ruined our lives."

Young person in care, 17

The Children's Commissioner is determined that the promise of the Social Care Review will be fulfilled and that requires a system which is better attuned to the needs of children and provides them with stability, support, autonomy and love.

"Kids from care don't have love, when in care they don't get love."

Ben, 14, Sunderland

To this end, the Children's Commissioner will remain an open and fearless advocate for all children within the bounds of care and social care. This means ensuring that the care review leads to real positive change for children with a clear timetable for delivery.

This year, through The Big Ask, we have gained a unique and unprecedented insight into the lives, worries and priorities of all children – including those in care. 17,000 children in care or supported by a social worker responded to the survey. This year we will carry out in-depth analysis on these children's aspirations, what they feel would make a difference, and the barriers that are holding them back. We will continue to hear from the children no one else listens to, by using our statutory powers of entry to visit unregulated placements, children in prison, and in children's homes where they are often living far from home.

I am delighted that the Department for Education has agreed to take over this office's pioneering work on the Stability Index, which provides local and national insights into the levels of stability children in care have at home, at school and in their professional support. This year my office will work with the Department to support them in taking on this work and ensure that the Stability Index continues to have impact.

"People leave, like my social worker, and new ones don't listen to us. I have to tell every new social worker what I want and they still don't listen."

Evie, 7, North West

Alongside this will be a new focus on the reforms we want to see in the system. We want to do more than show how the system lets children down. There are many principles that are widely espoused in children's social care – better integration, more family support, long-term stability, greater emphasis on the voice of the child – yet the system has consistently failed to achieve these changes. This year we will be looking at alternative ways of delivering services which can genuinely deliver the things children in the system want to see.

Help at Hand

Help at Hand provided advice, help and/or representation to just under a thousand⁴ children and care leavers in the last year.

The pandemic had a significant impact on children and families in England and calls to Help at Hand reflected this. Following the start of the national lockdown on 23rd March 2020, three distinct issues emerged through the Help at Hand advice line: children and families in distress because they were suddenly unable to see each other, as virtual family visits instead of face-to-face visits became the norm for children in care; strain on families who were coping without the SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) support their children would usually have; and uncertainty and isolation among care leavers, whose support network fell away.

In the next year we plan to improve the service in the following ways: by providing an improved website presence, piloting a Live Chat service, and introducing a systematic approach to obtaining feedback from children, young people and professionals who use the service, in order to drive further improvement. We will continue to enhance the links between Help at Hand and the wider policy work of the Children's Commissioner's Office to drive systemic change.

IMO

IMO – In My Opinion – is our digital offering for children in care. A unique peer-led website which serves as a meeting point for children in the care system and care leavers, somewhere they share stories, experiences and achievements, get and give advice, and gain access to career advice, training opportunities and competition prizes. Launched in 2018, the project includes the website which receives 50,000 unique page views annually, social media channels with a combined following of 3,500, and an award-winning podcast series which has been listened to over 5,600 times. During 2021/22 we will expand on the targeted age range, to include younger children in care with a separate page dedicated to them, with promotion on social media. We will develop another two series of our podcasts to challenge negative perceptions of those in the care system and new perspectives from them. These will focus on “hidden experiences”. We will grow the audience with an “introduce a friend” campaign, develop a youth panel to advise on content expansion, and widen the scope of content to include topics of interest to children generally, including those who also happen to be in care. We will organise a series of digital events that bring together the IMO audience and cover a range of issues and themselves deliver content for the site. We will also develop some external marketing of the site, so that people in the sector are more aware of the offer from IMO and to expand its reach.

Children locked up

“When there's not enough staff that does make it quite difficult for us... You can't even go to the workshop and do some colouring in and that 'cos there's not enough staff. You can't go outside.” Emma, 15, Secure Children's Home

As part of our statutory remit to focus on children accommodated or otherwise cared for by the state, we will be continuing our work on children being deprived of their liberty in all settings, including the youth custody estate, secure children's homes and in-patient mental health hospitals. We will publish the third of our annual reports about these children, a unique analysis of the experiences of children locked up in all settings across the country, including those who do not appear in any official datasets. These reports have been frequently cited in High Court judgments to highlight concerns about the appropriateness of placements for some of the most vulnerable children in the country, and were the basis of our

⁴ 988 children

intervention in the Supreme Court case in the matter of T (C Child) (Appellant), in which a judgement is due this year. We will focus this year on collecting data which is not publicly available about where children are being deprived of liberty, and the legal basis for that deprivation of liberty.

Work with Government

The Children's Commissioner's office is engaged in a programme of work inside government, to advise ministers on issues ranging from lost learning recovery to age verification online, sexual abuse in schools, the measurement of children's well-being and adequacy of mental health services. We are particularly focused on children who have fallen through gaps in provision during Covid, especially those children, for instance with SEND, who have had least access to school during lockdown or the tens of thousands who have abandoned education altogether. We are encouraging ministers to collect better data on children's needs, interventions and outcomes.

Bespoke pieces of work commissioned from OCC by the Government include:

Sexual harassment online

"There's not a lot of information, children shouldn't be using those social media... but obviously a lot of them do and we need to tell them how to change settings. Just making sure they are aware that they can do that and direct them to help and support."

Scarlett, 17, North East

The stories that emerged earlier this year of sexual harassment in schools were shocking in their volume, violence and shared experience. They highlight just how frequently girls endure sexual harassment by their peers – some before they even reach secondary school – and how often it is not taken seriously by professionals. Sexual harassment and violence is often facilitated by online channels. Girls frequently receive sexualised comments from their peers on social media and can be victims of non-consensual sharing of intimate images. Online pornography, which is frequently violent and demeaning, has been shown to warp boys' understanding of what healthy relationships look like and reinforce damaging gender norms.

The Children's Commissioner's Office has been asked by the Government to provide advice on how to tackle these issues, through greater cooperation from tech companies as well as better support for families, schools and children themselves. We will follow the progress of the Online Safety Bill to ensure it has children's interests at its heart. Furthermore, we will work with young adults to provide guidance on how children can be supported to manage their online lives.

"I think it could be down to the app ...to do something about privacy and make it easier for young people to know about the privacy settings."

Fern, 16, North East

G7

The Children's Commissioner has been appointed to the Gender Equality Advisory Council for the G7. The UK Government's priorities for action on gender equality are on ending violence against women and girls, empowering women, and improving education for girls – with a particular focus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths subjects. The Children's Commissioner will be working with other members of the GEAC throughout the year to produce a final set of recommendations ahead of the G7 summit in September. Our particular focus is on girls' participation in STEM subjects, and tackling harm the online world can cause to girls.

Work with Parliament

The Children's Commissioner reports to Parliament. The Office regularly provides expert support and evidence to select committees, and briefings to MPs and peers.

Childhood data

The Children's Commissioner's database on childhood vulnerability, [CHLDRN](#), provides the single best and most comprehensive source of information on risks and vulnerabilities facing children across the country. It has provided Whitehall, Parliament, local authorities and other service providers with the information they need to understand levels of need in a particular local area as well as in England as a whole. Other interested parties can use CHLDRN to conduct their own research, breaking down data by local area, type of child and family need, and age; and comparing across areas including Parliamentary constituencies. [View a user guide for CHLDRN](#).

This year we will continue to update CHLDRN with the latest data and estimates throughout the year on all of the vulnerable groups that are included. We will also add local area data from The Big Ask so that schools, local authorities, parliamentarians, researchers and the public can all understand what children in their local area have said about their priorities and concerns for the future.

Background

This Business Plan covers the period from when Dame Rachel de Souza took up office on the 1st March 2021 and will cover a twelfth month period after publication. The Office of the Children's Commissioner budget for 2021-22 is £2,544,000, amounting to 21.2 pence per child in England.



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