



# The Childhood Commission

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A commission to re-set the social contract  
between the generations

March 2021

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## Foreword from Children's Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza

The Covid pandemic has shone a spotlight on some of the major structural barriers that exist today which hold our children back. In the wake of this crisis, we have reached a pivotal moment when as a country we can take stock of where we are now, understand the impact of the pandemic on children's lives and build a consensus around the vision and ambition needed to ensure children in England have a good childhood and reach their full potential.



Now is the time to come together and to build back better for our children. That's why today I am launching the Childhood Commission.

The prospects and welfare of children must be put at the heart of our economic recovery and the Commission will show the way to do this. I want it to have the spirit and the ambition of the Beveridge Report – something that leads to long term changes that improve the chances of every single child, whatever their early standing in life and wherever they are in England. We will re-cast Beveridge's 'five giants' for children today, identifying the barriers which prevent them having the best childhoods, the best preparation for successful futures, and a better life than their parents. It will not focus only on the problems that have been highlighted and amplified by the Covid pandemic but will also address the policy shortfalls that have held back the lives of many children for decades. It will propose bold and radical solutions with measurable impact on children's lives, and ambitious targets by which Government and local agencies can be held to account for progress.

And at the heart of this we must listen to children. 'The Big Ask' will be the largest ever consultation with children in this country. We want to hear from children from every background about how the pandemic has affected them, their hopes and ambitions for the future, and to hear what is holding them back. We will put children's voices at the centre of the Commission. Their views and experiences and ideas will help shape the way we deliver better outcomes not just for them, but for all our children in the decade ahead.

**Dame Rachel de Souza**

Children's Commissioner for England

## Purpose of the project

1. To identify the barriers preventing children in England from reaching their full potential
2. To propose policy and services solutions
3. To develop targets and metrics by which improvements can be monitored over 10 years

## Introduction

Eighty years ago William Beveridge created a vision for a new welfare system, one based on contribution and return. The welfare state and its partner, the National Health Service, have served the generation which created them well. Every generation born during and after the Second World War saw their wages and wealth grow compared to the previous generation, but this process has stalled – and in some cases reversed – for generations born since 1980.<sup>1</sup> An ageing Baby Boomer generation and associated costs of health and social care mean that today’s children and young people will pay more into the same system of social insurance for less. Estimates suggest the Baby Boomer generation will receive a net ‘welfare dividend’ of £291,000 over the course of their lives, compared to £132,000 for those born in 1996.<sup>2</sup> Rebuilding an economy and parts of society razed by the Covid-19 pandemic confronts us with a challenge comparable to the post-war situation. The pandemic exposed social fault lines which had been hidden from the view of many:

- > Today’s generation of young people is the first generation since World War II that is overall less well off than their parents.<sup>3</sup>
- > During the crisis, the gap has widened between pensioners who on average reported becoming financially better off and young people, who have seen the highest levels of job and income loss.<sup>4</sup>
- > There is a gulf between rich and poor which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Many high-income households reduced their spending in lockdown, with 34% of these significantly boosting their savings. In contrast, low-income households were 50% more likely to be saving less than usual.<sup>5</sup>
- > The Covid mortality rate has varied significantly by ethnicity; among some black groups, the rate has been more than twice that of white British people.<sup>6</sup> This has been fuelled by pre-existing inequalities. People of BAME backgrounds are more likely to be engaged in frontline jobs and are twice as likely to be in poverty compared to white groups.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/publications/an-intergenerational-audit-for-the-uk/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/press-releases/young-millennials-are-being-short-changed-by-the-state/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/14508>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/the-ifs-deaton-review-of-inequalities-a-new-years-message/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/press-releases/pandemic-is-seeing-lower-income-households-turn-to-borrowing-while-higher-income-households-increase-their-savings/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/the-ifs-deaton-review-of-inequalities-a-new-years-message/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://equityhealth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12939-020-01307-z>

- > The UK is one of the most geographically unequal countries in the developed world.<sup>8</sup> There are areas with low levels of pay, employment and formal education which have been “left behind”, typically concentrated in the North of England and West Midlands. Some of these, such as Liverpool, are facing a “double whammy” of being both left behind and vulnerable to the immediate economic fallout from the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>
- > There is a gap between those in traditional employment, and the self-employed and insecure workers. Ten years on from the financial crisis, the earnings of the self-employed had still not recovered to pre-2008 levels.<sup>10</sup> Self-employed people and those in insecure work have been further hit by the pandemic: in the first lockdown, agency workers and people on zero hours contracts were three times as likely to have missed a bill payment than other workers.<sup>11</sup>

Above all, the pandemic and its aftermath have attacked the wellbeing and prospects of the young. In order to protect the elderly and the physically vulnerable – which was the right objective for the Government in the moment – the young were cast aside: schools shut, services closed, rights reduced and freedoms removed. For example:

- > By March 8<sup>th</sup> 2021, 840 million days of in-person schooling had been lost since schools closed at the start of the pandemic, equal to around 19 weeks per pupil.<sup>12</sup>
- > In autumn 2020, children in primary schools were nearly two months behind in reading, and three in maths. Schools with high rates of disadvantage experienced higher levels of learning loss, particularly among secondary schools.<sup>13</sup>
- > Attendance rates in nurseries are only at 43% of normal levels (as of 25<sup>th</sup> February 2021), despite early years settings having been open to all children since September. Average attendance in early years settings since the start of the pandemic has been only 39%.<sup>14</sup>
- > During the first lockdown the proportion of children and young people doing at least an hour a day of physical activity fell from 47% to 19%.<sup>15</sup> Over a million children in England do not have access to a private garden, including 1 in 3 children in London.<sup>16</sup>
- > By the summer of 2020, children who had not been eligible to return to school in some form saw a 27% increase in rates of emotional and behavioural difficulties compared to pre-pandemic levels.<sup>17</sup>
- > During the first lockdown, only 11% of parents of children under two reported that they had seen a

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15055>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15055>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/inequality/the-ifs-deaton-review-of-inequalities-a-new-years-message/>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/about-us1/media/press-releases/millions-facing-financial-cliff-edge-when-coronavirus-protections-end2/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>

<sup>13</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/962330/Learning\\_Loss\\_Report\\_1A\\_FINAL.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/962330/Learning_Loss_Report_1A_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak#dataBlock-8c342faa-4d28-4914-5044-08d8d73a7829-charts>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.thinkactive.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Sport-England-Childrens-experience-of-physical-activity.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/2020/08/22/how-lockdown-has-affected-childrens-lives-at-home/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/news/new-evidence-shows-how-school-closures-hit-childrens-mental-health-hard>

health visitor face-to-face during the pandemic.<sup>18</sup>

- > In autumn 2020 the number of young people (aged 16-24) not in education, employment or training (NEET) saw the largest quarterly increase in a decade.<sup>19</sup> The UK was already reported to be facing the highest levels of youth unemployment in four decades.<sup>20</sup>
- > The number of children with probable mental health problems rose from one in nine children in 2017 to one in six in July 2020. As in 2017, during the pandemic young women had the highest prevalence of probable mental health problems (27%).<sup>21</sup>
- > During the first lockdown the number of A&E attendances by children and young people fell by 62%,<sup>22</sup> while data suggests that the number of GP visits fell by 11% for children aged 4 or under, and by 21% for children aged 5-15.<sup>23</sup> Increased cancellations of surgical operations for children and young people have also been reported.<sup>24</sup>
- > The numbers of babies and infants taking up their routine vaccinations has also fallen during the pandemic, compared to 2019 levels.<sup>25</sup>

The IFS has calculated that 6 months of missed schooling will reduce someone's lifetime earnings by around £40,000.<sup>26</sup> Multiplied across all of the 8.7 million school children in the UK, this would amount to £350 billion over their lifetimes. At the same time, they will bear the long-term cost of the pandemic. The full impact of the crisis across all areas of children's lives will only be known in years to come.

Covid has taught us two important lessons. First, it has laid bare and in some cases accelerated the way in which society and political structures short-change children. As a result of the pandemic, the need to review and strengthen the nation's covenant to its children is even more urgent. Second, the pandemic has given the state licence to think bigger than ever about solutions and not be constrained by what was previously thought possible. The government has repeatedly shown it can move mountains to help the nation's adults, for instance through the Nightingale hospitals, the furlough scheme, and the swift vaccine rollout.

This spirit should and can be harnessed to improve children's futures. It is more important than ever that we take a fresh look at how to ensure today's children go on to have a better life than their parents did; what it would take; and how the state can help to deliver or facilitate it.

This Commission will argue that the prospects and welfare of children must be put at the heart of our economic recovery; and show the way to do it. It will identify the barriers which prevent them having the best childhoods, the best preparation for successful futures, and a better life than their parents. With the largest ever consultation with children in England at its heart, it will propose a 10-year plan with annual metrics to monitor progress, across the sweep of childhood and the span of government.

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<sup>18</sup> <https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/our-work/campaigning/babies-in-lockdown/#fullreport>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/youth-unemployment-numbers-coronavirus-b1812559.html>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/press-releases/one-in-five-young-people-and-over-one-in-five-bame-workers-who-were-furloughed-during-lockdown-have-since-lost-their-jobs/>

<sup>21</sup> [https://files.digital.nhs.uk/CB/C41981/mhcyp\\_2020\\_rep.pdf](https://files.digital.nhs.uk/CB/C41981/mhcyp_2020_rep.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/charts-and-infographics/how-has-children-and-young-peoples-usage-of-AE-been-impacted-by-lockdown-and-social-distancing>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.health.org.uk/news-and-comment/charts-and-infographics/how-has-covid-19-affected-service-delivery-in-gp-practices>

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.hsi.co.uk/specialist-care/exclusive-urgent-childrens-ops-routinely-cancelled-due-to-covid-pressure/7029391.article>

<sup>25</sup> [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/933545/hpr2120\\_chldhd-vc\\_wk43.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/933545/hpr2120_chldhd-vc_wk43.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.ifs.org.uk/publications/15291>

## The Big Ask

The project will be shaped by [‘The Big Ask’](#): the largest consultation ever held with children in England. We will ask children:

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

This consultation will take place in April. An online survey will be distributed to all schools, posted on the Oak National Academy, and advertised via social media, child-facing charities and other communications channels. In total we will be reaching out to several million children. In order to reach children outside mainstream settings, it will be sent directly to youth custody organisations, CAMHS inpatient units and children’s homes, as well as youth groups. Face-to-face interviews and focus groups will be conducted with children who are under-represented and harder to reach.

The consultation will drive the subsequent phases of the Commission. An interim report before the summer will set out children’s expectations and aspirations, and the barriers to attaining them, informed by the results of the consultation, an evidence review and data analysis. A subsequent full report will propose solutions, investment, metrics, and set out the challenge to society to pay back to this generation of children, and re-set their future.

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