

Children's Commissioner's Proposals to Support Creating Safer Communities

The Children's Commissioner's Office (CCO) proposals to create safer and more enriching local communities for children.

What children told us

A strong theme to come out of the Big Ask was the desire to feel safe and confident in public spaces. One of the most frequently used words in The Big Ask was 'play.' Children told us they wanted 'places for kids to play and have fun things to do' – *Girl, 6*. They want to 'go to the park or trampoline parks or skate parks stuff like that and clay sculpture places and clubs for kids like karate, football, gymnastics, knitting, dance, singing, piano classes, basketball and more stuff like that' – *Girl, 10*.

Yet some children wrote spoke about safety. 'I occasionally get worried people might want to hurt me when I go home and it is a bit dark' *Girl, 14*.

In particular, teenage girls also wrote powerfully about their experiences of being harassed. Girls reported sexual harassment being a significant issue for them, affecting their confidence and happiness, and many spoke about the mental health impact of fearing sexual violence. As one child said: 'Girls in uniform get catcalled by creeps [...] We deserve better' – *Girl, 16*. And another: 'I have been a victim of catcalling and it is not nice. I am 13. A minor and I am being cat called by middle aged men. No. That is not right' - *Girl, 13*.

What this means for policy now as we come out of lockdown

All children should have ready access to safe spaces, and support in the event that they are victim to violence and abuse. Our recommendations for this chapter focus on:

- 1) **A renewed focus on community youth services** – to improve children's wellbeing after lockdown.
- 2) **Continued creation of safe public spaces** – to enable children to have more freedom to play outside and prevent child criminal exploitation.
- 3) **Support services for child victims of abuse** – to reduce the trauma for those children who are victims of abuse.

The policies we think will benefit children now:

- 1) **A renewed focus on community youth services – to improve children's wellbeing after lockdown.** This can be done by:
 - a. **Allocating the already committed funding from the Youth Investment Fund to effective youth services.** We welcome a renewed focus on youth services over recent years, in particular a commitment that £500 million will be invested in capital projects to support community youth infrastructure through the Youth Investment Fund.¹
 - b. **Updating the statutory duty on local authorities to ensure a minimum level of youth provision.** Local authorities do not need to provide the youth offer themselves but ensure that there is a minimum level of provision available. The statutory duty should ensure that councils work with existing providers and support their activities. It should also guarantee a minimum level of provision for children in all areas of the country. Local authorities can support the community and voluntary sector in a number of ways, including: training and advice on safeguarding, access to council owned facilities, and professional support with fundraising and governance.²
 - c. **Considering a broader duty on public bodies to make their spaces available to charities working with children at cost.** Lots of sports facilities, green spaces and

¹ Chancellor Announces Support for Post-Brexit future, *HM Treasury*, 30th September 2019, [link](#).

² Review launched into statutory guidance for Local Authorities on providing youth services, *DCMS*, 10th July 2019, [link](#)

indoor spaces are publicly owned and making these more widely accessible will help support England's existing network of charities and voluntary providers.

- 2) **Continued creation of safe public spaces for children.** There have been several significant commitments around children's safety in recent years, such as the recruitment of 20,000 additional police officers, and the introduction of a duty on all public bodies to prevent serious violence and to do so by working in partnership.³ Alongside this, there has been the creation of eighteen Violence Reduction Units to bring together different organisations across the state and voluntary sector, led by the police, to tackle serious violence.⁴ All of these are positive developments, but, as always, local implementation will be key. We would like to see local prioritisation of resources based on the feedback of children. Some children were clear to us that there were local areas they did not feel safe, or where they knew gangs operated. As we have seen, local policing places a vital role in making areas safe, and especially effective when it works with children in doing so. Joint work between local safeguarding boards, Community Safety Partnership and VRUs is key to identifying these areas, but children need to be listened to.
- 3) **Tackling Public Sexual Harassment.** It is clear from the Big Ask that sexualised catcalling at girls is still a common occurrence. The CCO is clear it constitutes sexual harassment of children and is never acceptable. We would like to see a shift in attitudes across society to recognise this behaviour for what it is, and for the harm it causes. In the Tackling Violence against Women and Girls Strategy there is a commitment to a communications strategy which will challenge harassment, and to exploring whether existing laws which cover some forms of harassment are sufficient or if there are any gaps. We support this review, as some of the forms of harassment girls experience – such as one-off catcalls from strangers – appear to fall between the gaps of existing laws. In addition, we believe there should be a targeted campaign to address public harassment of girls in particular – including information about the damaging effect it has on girls, that it is never acceptable or 'a compliment', what bystanders and passers-by can do to help, and reassuring girls that it is not their fault.
- 4) **Supporting children experiencing abusive relationships.** When children have become victims of sexual violence or peer abuse, they need the problem to be identified and understood by the state, they need access to the right services, and they need cases to proceed swiftly through the criminal justice system. This can be done by:
 - a. **Identification.** Children under 16 who experience abuse in their own relationship are not legally recognised as experiencing domestic abuse, but new guidance acknowledges that they can experience 'Teenage Relationship Abuse'. This should result in increased identification and understanding. There also needs to be standalone guidance on peer relationship abuse, as there is for Child Sexual Exploitation.
 - b. **Services.** Children told us how important it was to get the appropriate support from services if they did experience sexual violence. The Home Office, NHS, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime and the DfE currently fund a centre called the Lighthouse in Camden, for children who experience sexual assault. This is based on the 'Barnahus' model which originated in Iceland and brings together therapeutic services, police, children's social care and all other professionals that children may need to interact with. We would like to see a roll-out of this model across the country.
 - c. **Criminal Justice.** The Rape Review undertook a 'root and branch' investigation of the criminal justice system to understand why so few cases of rape and sexual abuse

³ National campaign to recruit 20,000 police officers launches today, *Home Office*, 5th September 2019, [link](#). Serious Violence Strategy, *Home Office*, April 2018, [link](#).

⁴ Funding for violence reduction units announced, *Home Office*, 12th August 2019, [link](#).

of adults end in conviction.⁵ This highlighted some failings at each stage of the criminal justice process, and included recommendations for a ‘scorecard’ to hold the police and CPS to account for improving this, with a target to increase prosecutions. However, this only looked at cases of those aged 16 and over, while the problems for children who experience rape and sexual abuse are just as severe. The Child Sexual Abuse Strategy is looking at how learnings from the end-to-end review into the criminal justice response to rape can also be used to achieve a better respond to child sexual abuse. We would like to see a similar review process for children’s cases, with similar ambitions for improving the response from police and the CPS.

⁵ Review into the Criminal Justice system response to adult rape and serious sexual offences across England and Wales, *Home Office and Ministry of Justice*, June 2021, [link](#).