

The
Big Ask

September 2021

The Big Answer



Children's
COMMISSIONER

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Foreword by Dame Rachel de Souza DBE

‘Listen.’

The day I began my tenure as Children’s Commissioner for England, that was my first task. To listen to England’s children.

Throughout the pandemic, the nation has been speaking to itself, to find healing, solace, and hope for recovery. As we took our first steps out of lockdown, the national mood seemed receptive, but uncertain – in search of something. Suddenly, it seemed normal for the manager of the national football team to write an open letter to the country beginning ‘Dear England.’

He spoke about childhood, about dreams, memories, patriotism, our national mythology, and perhaps most of all about values.

But how can a nation ‘write back’?

In lots of ways, it turns out – mainly through its children. By letters of thanks, by outpourings of pride on social media, by a children’s vigil at a mural of their hero player to tell him how much they loved him.

A post-pandemic national identity seemed to be taking shape, with all those hoped-for values of citizenship, kinship, fellow-feeling. It was as good a response as any country could wish for.

In fact, for some months, England's children had already been composing a kind of national letter. In March, my office launched The Big Ask – a national survey of England's children. I wanted to capture their voices as quickly as I could, so we could truly know the state of the nation for them. Not as adults see them, but written in their own words. To be able to express their views on childhood freely is of course a fundamental right at the heart of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child.

We asked big questions. We wanted to hear their hopes, their fears, their dreams, their lockdown stories, their plans for tomorrow.

We did not know what to expect. We were still in the advanced stages of a rolling national crisis. However reassuring the promise of anonymity, to share the contents of your heart, even in an online form, is an act of trust, of courage, and of hope. A more cynical generation might have said no.

The results are clear. This is not a cynical generation – we received well over half a million responses – the largest survey response of its kind anywhere in the world.

Putting the contents to one side, the scale alone is stark – a landmark set of data. It is a record of an ambitious time and a historic moment. A reply commensurate with 'Dear England.'

It contains multitudes. But it is striking how often the data reveals that children's priorities across all groups – age, gender, ethnicity – are the same. A generation of children with a common voice.

The pandemic atomised us, but perhaps it has also been a shared experience. During lockdown, all of us have seen talk, expressions of love, learning, work, and play – all of reality – shrunk and flattened onto a screen.

Within the home, the dividing line between childhood and adulthood has been blurred – offices and schools and bedrooms all collapsing into one another. Children have seen the world of adult work come closer; adults, the world of school.

As we unlock, this has given us much to talk about. In the sheer volume of responses, we can see an ardent need for real communication. Between friends, between family, and – crucially – between generations.

If adults are to learn one thing from this report, it should be as follows. This is not a 'snowflake generation.' It is a heroic generation.

A generation of children who are veterans of a global crisis. They have seen how colossally frightening life can be, far too young, and have made a lot of sacrifices. But they have endured, and are emerging stronger and prematurely wise. Bruised, yes, and in many cases seriously vulnerable, but for the most part, happy, optimistic, and determined.

They are a survivor generation – a sleeves-up, pragmatic generation, with civic-minded aspirations.

They believe in family. Not just the nuclear family – families of all kinds. Simply, they want happy homes.

They want to be healthy – mentally and physically. They want to escape the digital labyrinth in which they have been trapped. This report tells you that they want to be outside – to be in open spaces, and play.

They want activities, sport. The oldest children in this report have seen England bid for the Olympics, stage them, and this summer, some of those children have taken part themselves. There is joy and pride in so much achievement, but the zest here is not for competition, it is for participation.

They want community. Denied friendship during the pandemic, this generation of children have thought hard about bonds beyond family. They want to improve their local area and make it safer. They think hard about regional inequality, about injustice, about prejudice, about British values, about the environment – they want to engage with these things and address them. They are patriotic. They want to vote. Isolated for so long, they want – yearn even – to be part of something bigger than themselves.

They *like school*. They see education as important in and of itself, but also as a pathway to opportunity. They are historians, spurred on by new national debates about our past. They are divergent thinkers, who can slip between boundaries of traditional subjects. They are apprentices who want to be trained in vocations and crafts, and have parity of esteem with undergraduates.

Children in care are no different. They share exactly the same hopes and aspirations, and are just as determined to make the most of their start in life. They want the care system to match these ambitions.

This generation wants to get on and do well. To do tough, worthwhile jobs, and have fulfilling careers. Many want to be teachers and nurses and paramedics and doctors. They have seen their parents and carers struggle and they want to help them.

We can encourage that spirit. But we simply cannot let children carry that burden unaided, weighed down as they already are by a sense of inherited problems. Climate crisis. Covid debt. Disadvantage.

What is so inspiring is that they see these challenges, and they want to reckon with them – a heroic impulse.

Bind all these hopes together, and we can see the birth of a coherent vision: a new England.

Our national story is a constant retelling of this dream. The first great epic written in English is a poem about a dragon-slayer, Beowulf, who by his heroism, strives to return a wounded community to safety and peace. From the national saint, to Blake's Jerusalem, to Tolkien's shires, to the reality of two world wars, the arc is the same: a progression through darkness to renewal. Re-watch our Olympic opening ceremony and you will see the same movement – from pasture, to 'dark Satanic mills', to utopian reinvention – the NHS, the internet.

Today, we hope we are at the part of the story when the dragon is gone, and we can remake our society. How we respond is a measure of our priorities. We need to look at two things: what children urgently need now, and what England's children need long-term.

In 1942, the Beveridge report created a blueprint for social service provision and eventually the NHS, the Education Act of 1944 extended the right to state-funded schooling to age 15, the establishment of UNESCO in 1945, the establishment of UNICEF in 1946, the 1948 Children Act that was the first legal statement of the Government's duty of care towards the nation's children.¹

In 2021, as in the year 1215, we can, in a truly English tradition of radical action, meet a historical moment with a historical document. The report you are reading is a mandate for an intergenerational promise – a new settlement for England's children – a grown-up, cross-party set of policy commitments that reward the nobility of their vision.

To follow the post-war generation and make historical change, the window of opportunity is brief. If we do not, and we let this moment pass, and all that attends it, then why ask in the first place? We simply go back to where we started. So let me end with my first word, and repeat it as a warning. The first word spoken by the narrator of Beowulf, who demands a heroic story is respected:

'Listen.'



Dame Rachel de Souza DBE

Children's Commissioner for England

Executive Summary

The Children's Commissioner's Big Ask set out to hear the voices of as many children in England as possible, to amplify them, and to deliver improved life chances for this generation and beyond. Over half a million responded – a record for a survey of its kind.

We can think of this report as The Big Answer. But more broadly, it is the first of many answers. The Big Ask tells us what children need urgently, as we recover from the pandemic, but also long-term. We have begun an ongoing intergenerational dialogue, in which adults take responsibility for finding those answers too, and for making them happen.

A striking aspect of the data is that across age, gender, ethnicity, family income levels, location, vulnerable groups, what children want is remarkably consistent: a good home life, a good education, a job, enough money, friends, to feel well, to be treated fairly and to look after the environment. In short – to do well and create a better world.

A Heroic Generation

Despite the variety of over half a million responses, a clear picture emerged. This generation have suffered during the pandemic – especially the vulnerable – and made many sacrifices. Learning time lost, cut off from friends and play, supporting struggling parents and siblings, enduring lockdown in homes that are not safe. When asked if there were spheres of life where they wanted to be happier, the main issues were remarkably consistent across all groups: things to do in their local area, experience of school, mental health. Growing up in a world worried about fairness, about the environment, about coronavirus, they are a generation that does feel burdened with a sense of inherited problems.

But they are determined to put the pandemic behind them, to recover well, to get back to school and make good lives for themselves. The majority of English children are in fact happy, optimistic, and outward-looking. After lockdown heightened our collective awareness of managing wellbeing, they are newly conscious of the components of being healthy and happy. They want to spend more time outside, and invest in and improve their local areas. They want to participate in more activities. They care not just about their own priorities, but about creating happier families, neighbourhoods, schools, and communities – both local and national. They are not a snowflake generation – they are a 'sleeves-up' heroic generation. They simply need adults to notice, and to help lift what burdens they can.

Overall, The Big Ask pointed to a vision of how to make the best possible version of England for children. We broke this down into six areas where we should focus our attention, each with a link to our most urgent policy recommendations. Children also told us an overarching message – they want a better world.

Families

Children told us how much they care about their family, whatever form the family unit takes. Across all identity groups and regions of England, the message was universal: family forms a fundamental pillar of children's lives, and of their happiness. As we emerge from the pandemic, this is now the moment to support families, especially those families where children are vulnerable.

Children and Community

This generation of children are civic-minded, social, and outward-looking. They want things to do – activities in their local area that are fun and sustaining. They want their lives to be made safer. They want to be treated fairly. They once again want to feel part of something larger than themselves – a caring, engaged community.

Health and Wellbeing

Children told us about how much they care about feeling happy and well. This is a generation newly conscious of the artificial dichotomy between mental and physical health. They want to be able to rely on the NHS to be there for them when they need it. Now, as we emerge from the pandemic and all the extra strain it placed on children's lives, there is an opportunity to make sure we are prioritising children's wellbeing in general, and, where it is needed most, the speed of their access to good healthcare outcomes.

Schools

Children in England care passionately about being able to go to school again, to recover from the pandemic. They find school challenging, but fulfilling. They do not expect rewards without hard work. However, they do expect to be truly supported, especially given the extent of the demands placed upon them. Vulnerable children are, as ever, in particular need of support.

Work

Children from all over the country told us how determined they are to get on and do well. This is an ambitious generation. They spoke in terms not just of jobs, but careers. Many responses, for example, spoke of apprenticeships and non-university training routes. They want to be able to afford a good adult life and be confident of getting there, whatever the pathway.

Children in Care

Children in care share the same hopes and aspirations as their peers. Children told us about the care they were grateful for, but also about the times they were let down. Children in care are not always confident the system will be there for them when they need it. Even when care is working well, there are bureaucratic processes that can be frustrating or alienating. The positive stories show us what the system can deliver: we must now make sure this is the experience of all children in the system.

A Better World

Overall, children described an ambitious, socially-conscious, reforming vision of the world they want to live in. Rather than being divided on these issues, across all identity groups, children were united – they want the same things. Simply, children value a society where all can succeed.

‘You can’t help what you are born. Everyone should be treated fairly’

Boy, 11.

They want to be able to get on, succeed and contribute to a world where they are not held back.

And, as you might expect, across all groups, children want to care for the world they are growing up in – to conserve it and protect it. When children were asked what they were most worried about, the environment was an overwhelming priority. They spoke of concern for animals, and the impact of waste created by humans on habitats around the world. Very simply, many felt the same as this 12-year-old, ‘If we don’t fix climate change, we won’t have a future,’ or this 15 year old, ‘the effects of it may be irreversible, and it is very daunting for young people to have the responsibility of dealing with its effects.’

These attitudes were universal. When thoughts turned to the idea of growing up in this world, achieving things, and making the most of opportunities, once again attitudes remained remarkably similar – children simply hope for a fair chance. In the words of one 11-year-old, ‘people not allowing you to be yourself and do what you want to do.’

The desire to get on unhindered was true across all age groups, and across all regions – a feature of recent policy discussions around regional inequality. Children hope not to be held back by place of birth. Or by identity – girls were slightly more likely than boys to mention gender. As we have already argued, for example at the G7 Gender Equality Advisory Council earlier this year, all support for children needs to be delivered equitably, at targeted groups, so that the children who need it most will benefit. Children described the need for support for LGBTQ+ groups. Racism was also a common concern.

‘Nobody is less capable than anyone [...] if they have a different colour of skin [...] they should be treated fairly’

Boy, 10.

Children of Asian or black heritage, or children of mixed ethnicity were slightly more likely than white children to mention politics and society in their responses. But the overarching message was universal: a generation of ambitious, moral, socially-engaged children united by aspiration for their own lives, but also for English society, and the world.

Finally, a dynamic for adults to be aware of. Children’s answers also spoke of tension between generations – of being dismissed for expressing the legitimate view that the problems they are most concerned about – discrimination, socioeconomic inequality, and a damaged environment – are inherited problems.

No matter where they were from, children in England were distressed when their voices are invalidated. They care about being heard.

‘Older generations love to mock us for taking action against social issues by calling us, and I quote snowflakes. Yet they won’t. We are finally taking action on things’

Girl, 13.

If children want to make a better world, it will take a collective shift in adult attitudes to give young people the means to make it happen.

What’s Next?

Clearly, these headings represent pathways towards the fairer, greener society children are describing. In each area, we consider children’s responses in detail in the six dedicated chapters that follow. In each, there are urgent policies to consider, such as ‘catch-up’ funding that can make the recovery from the pandemic as painless as possible for children. Children also described longer-term projects that will improve the lives not only of this generation, but of those that follow. We consider that vision in our final conclusion.

How we spoke to children

The Big Ask is the biggest ever survey of children, with over half a million responses. The survey was open to any child in England aged 4–17 and was launched online between April and May 2021, running for six weeks. It was a publicly available survey and children’s participation was anonymous and voluntary, to ensure that as many children could be reached as possible, and they could feel comfortable speaking freely. Children were taught about the Big Ask in assemblies, and we worked with Votes for Schools to provide teaching materials, lessons plans, and activities packs on the Big Ask, so children could learn about it in class.²

This survey made sure the Children’s Commissioner fulfils their public duty to listen, represent, and consult with children, including the most disadvantaged and vulnerable. There is an important trade-off between scale and representativeness. Most national surveys specifically choose which individuals to speak to, and maintain a panel of respondents that they consider sufficiently representative. This approach of selecting respondents to get the right sample is only feasible in much smaller surveys – typically under 5,000, so a hundred times smaller than The Big Ask. These surveys can easily miss certain vulnerable groups: groups we have represented in this data.

The best way to ensure representativeness was to cast the net as far as possible. We did this by going to every single school and local authority (LA) in England.³ Alongside the main survey, we also carried out focus groups and interviews with specific groups of children who are harder to reach.⁴ We are confident the sample we achieved in The Big Ask is as representative as it can be, given the aim of engaging with children at a large scale and hearing as many of them as possible.

We are also confident that the findings we have obtained give genuine and reliable insights into the lives of children in England. We received responses from every LA and every parliamentary constituency and can split down the data by these areas. We have received responses from thousands of children in care or young carers, for example, as well as tens of thousands of children with additional educational needs. We have a good amount of data from every ethnic group, and the most deprived neighbourhoods as well as the most affluent. We have surveyed children's mental health hospitals, youth custody settings, children's homes, fostering organisations, children in care councils, young carer projects, groups working with disabled children, and other charities and community groups. An 'easy read' version of the survey has also been produced for children with additional reading needs.

We are able to break down the results by age, gender, ethnicity, school type, and local area characteristics. We can also present results for specific vulnerable groups, including children in care, children in need, young carers, and children with mental health needs. And, in line with existing survey design methodology, we have also used statistical methods to adjust our sample as far as possible to better match the national population – by reweighting the data by age, gender and local authority population.

The Big Ask

The Big Ask in numbers

The largest ever survey of children and young people anywhere in the world

557,077

responses from children
in England (aged 4–17)

Equivalent to nearly **6%** of the
whole population of this age group
in England, a hundred times larger
than comparable surveys

We received responses
from children in all of the
151 English local authorities

Unprecedented level of response from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups:

Over
5,900
children in care

13,000
children with a social worker

6,000
young carers

5,200
children attending special schools

Nearly
26,000
children receiving
mental health support

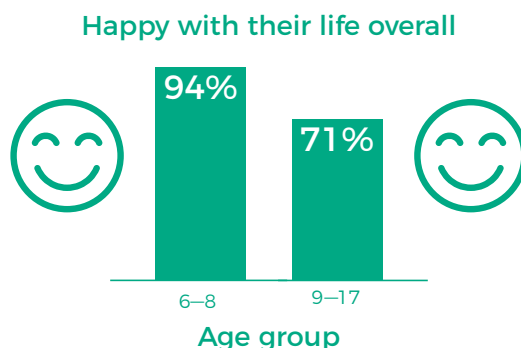
Over
97,000
children with an
additional learning need

2,300
children from a Gypsy or
Irish Traveller background

Over
2,200
supported by Youth
Offending Teams

Key results: overall

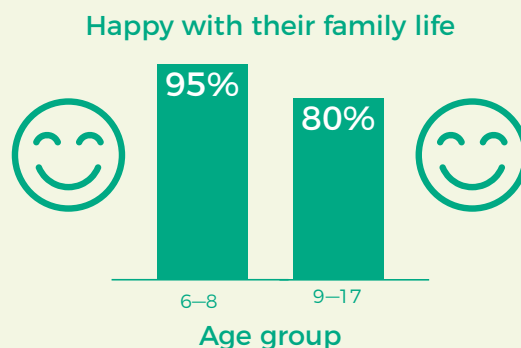
- > 7 out of 10 9–17-year-olds (71%) and 94% of 6–8-year-olds are happy with their life overall. 1 in 5 9–17-year-olds (20%) and 1 in 50 6–8-year-olds (2%) are fine with their life. 1 in 11 9–17-year-olds (9%) and 1 in 25 6–8-year-olds (4%) are unhappy.



- > Just over half of 9–17-year-olds (52%) think they are likely to have a better life than their parents when they grow up, while 1 in 11 (9%) think they are unlikely to do so.

Key results: family

- > 80% of 9–17-year-olds said they are happy with their family life, along with 95% of 6–8-year-olds. But where children were unhappy with their family life, they were 9 times more likely to be unhappy with their life overall, and 70% of them were unhappy with their mental health.

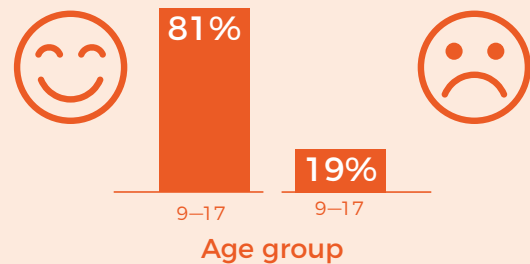


- > Children in care or with a social worker (aged 9–17) are twice as likely to be unhappy with family life, compared to other children – but 62.5% of this group were still happy with their family life.
- > Young carers (aged 9–17) are 70% more likely than other children to say they are unhappy with family life – but 57% of them were still happy with it.
- > 37% of 6–8-year-olds and 26% of 9–17-year-olds said that starting a family of their own was one their main aspirations when they grow up.

Key results: community

- > Just over half (52%) of children aged 9–17 are happy and around one third (29%) are fine with the choice of things to do in their local area, while 72% are happy with their access to somewhere outside to have fun. Among 6–8-year-olds, 93% said they were happy with the places they can go to have fun.
- > 19% of children aged 9–17 were unhappy with the choice of things to do in their local area – the second highest source of unhappiness (after their mental health).
- > 22% of children in the most deprived neighbourhoods were unhappy with the choice of things to do in their local area, compared to 15% of children in the least deprived neighbourhoods.

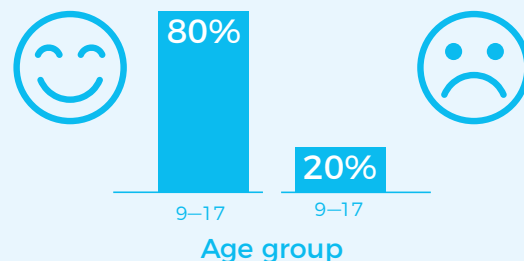
Happy or fine/unhappy with the choice of things to do in their area



Key results: wellbeing

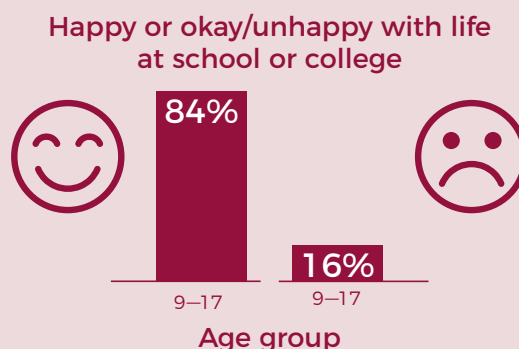
Happy/unhappy with their mental health

- > The majority of children aged 9–17 (80%) were happy or okay with their mental health. But 20% were unhappy, making it the top issue for children today.
- > Girls were nearly twice as likely as boys to be unhappy with their mental health (25% vs 13%). Older children were also more likely to be unhappy (32% of 16–17-year-olds, compared to 9% of 9–11-year-olds). In fact, 40% of girls aged 16–17 were unhappy with their mental health.
- > The majority of children aged 9–17 (89%) were happy or okay with their physical health, while 11% were unhappy. Older children, girls and children in more deprived areas were all more likely to be unhappy with their mental health, along with some vulnerable groups (e.g. children with a social worker or young carers).
- > Just over half (52%) of 9–17-year-olds said that having good mental health in future was one of their main aspirations. This was even higher among older children: 63% of 16–17-year-olds said this, compared with 43% of 9–11-year-olds.



Key results: schools

- > Just over half of 9–17-year-olds (52%) said that having a good education was one of their top future priorities. This was even higher among children from the most deprived areas, 57% of whom said this, compared to 49% of children in the most affluent areas) It was also higher among children from ethnic minority backgrounds (60% of whom said this, compared to 49% of white children).
- > Many vulnerable groups were also slightly more likely to say this – for example, 58% of children with SEND and 58% of young carers.
- > Just over half (84%) of 9–17-year-olds were happy or okay with life at school or college, while 16% were unhappy. 90% were happy with their progress in education, while 10% were unhappy with this.
- > Children living in more deprived areas or attending schools rated 'Inadequate' were more likely to be unhappy with life at school, compared to other children.

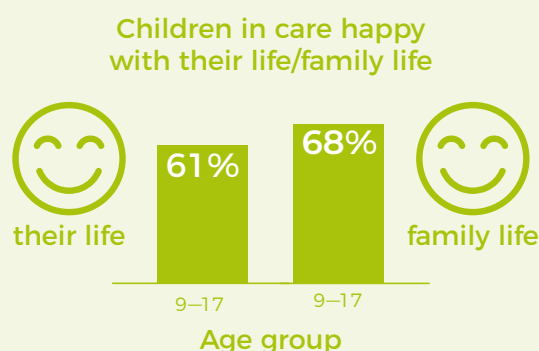


Key results: work

- > Nearly 7 in 10 9–17-year-olds (69%) said that having a good job or career was one of their main priorities when they grow up – the most common answer for this age group. This is even higher among ethnic minority children and those from a deprived background.
 - 75% of Asian children and 76% of black children said this was one of their top future priorities, compared with 68% of white children.
 - 72% of children in the most deprived neighbourhoods said this, compared with 68% of children in the most affluent neighbourhoods.
- > This was also the top future aspiration among many vulnerable groups, including children in care, children with social worker, children with SEND, and young carers.
- > But many children worry about whether they will end up in a good job. 37% of children aged 9–17 said that this was one of their main worries about the future – the third most common answer.

Key results: children in care

- > The majority of children in care aged 9–17 (63%) are happy with their life, while 68% are happy with their family life.
- > In common with other children, the top three issues that children in care (aged 9–17) were most likely to say they were unhappy with were their mental health (23% unhappy), the choice of things to do in their local area (20% unhappy), and life at school or college (19% unhappy).
- > But, children in care (aged 9–17) were twice as likely than other children to be unhappy with their family life: 14% of children in care were unhappy with this, compared to 6% of other children.
- > The top three future aspirations among children in care (aged 9–17) were a good job (66%), enough money to buy the things they need (60%), and a good education (57%).
- > Children in care (aged 9–17) were more likely than other children to say that having a nice home in future is one of their main aspirations (43% vs. 36.5%). Conversely, they were less likely than other children to say that a healthy environment and planet is important for their future (14% vs. 22%).



Key results: a better world

- > 39% of children (aged 9–17) said that the environment was one of their main worries about the future, making it the second most common answer, while 31% said that fairness in society was one of their main worries about the future.
 - Girls were more likely than boys to say this, as were children from more affluent areas, most vulnerable groups were generally less likely to say this.

Family

Children told us how much they care about their families, and how much they value seeing them. Where children do not live with immediate family, they care about having a happy home. Whatever form home life takes, it is a fundamental pillar of children's lives, and supports their happiness. Where children were unhappy at home, they were far more likely to be unhappy in general. As we emerge from the pandemic this is now the moment to support the family for all children, especially the most vulnerable.

What children told us about family in The Big Ask

The Big Ask underlines the critical importance of family support in a year where the pandemic has made each household a miniature of all human life. Homes have increasingly become offices, schools, gyms, sites of medical care. This has been nurturing for some, but challenging for those where home is not the sanctuary it should be, those who are vulnerable, and those for whom other pressures – like poverty – make family life challenging.

It was abundantly clear in the data that the vast majority of children – 4 in 5 – are happy with their family lives. Many described a supportive environment at home.

‘My mum is amazing I’m so grateful for her [...] I love my family they love me I don’t have any problems’

Girl, 11.

There was huge appreciation for all that the family unit can provide, for the loving, unstinting work of parents and carers, who have performed miracles in a difficult time.

‘A loving family is worth more than money and will give you guidance support and love and advice’

Boy, 11.

Many children want to spend more time with their family, and spoke with feeling about being well provided for.

‘I have been very lucky to have grown up with a very supportive and stable family environment with fantastic role models in my parents’

Boy 17.

Even young children were able to articulate with great sensitivity the importance of the love and support of the family unit; how this is a critical part of children's happiness and ability to deal with the challenge of growing up.

‘Support, I know that not all kids are as lucky as me. I have very supportive parents who are always there for me. I can’t imagine going through school without them’

Boy, 11.

Many responses spoke of having families of their own.

‘I want to take care of people and my baby children and make them grow up healthy’

Girl, 6.

This simple aspiration captures a priority repeated time and again. Throughout the responses, children named the same hope: ‘making a life or family of my own,’ or, ‘making a family of my own, having a good job.’ Some might have expected a wide range of disparate priorities. In reality, children – especially vulnerable children – see the fundamental pillars of human happiness as a happy home and a good job.

‘I love to go to work with either my mum or dad [...] and so that gives me the inspiration of those kind of jobs!’

Girl, 11.

We saw children beginning to fulfil a variety of family roles during lockdown. We see parental habits of thinking: children putting aside their own needs, making others safe. A picture starts to emerge of children seeing behind the curtain of adulthood, growing up, but absorbing the stresses and strains of their parents, siblings, and carers – all coping together, shielded but constrained. It is an image of the home as a refuge, but also as a crucible – both formative and taxing – a context that has arrested some childhood development, but in other ways, accelerated it.

In extremis, during a pandemic, we do our best to acknowledge, thank, and reward children for this level of sacrifice. But as we return to a 'peacetime' society, we need to look again at where these burdens can be returned to adults, without forgetting those that cannot.

'My current status as an official young carer gives me more stress when this affects my time at school. And since this may carry on when I grow up, it may affect my future job'

Girl, 14, young carer.

While this report cannot capture the words of the youngest, clearly the lives of children in early years fall within the remit of this office. In their absence, we captured parental testimony that echoed that of the children:

'My parenting has definitely been affected by this lockdown. I snap a lot quicker, I shout a lot more. I've been so overwhelmed by everything that's been expected of me. I've had no break. [...] If I'm not working I've got the children'

Mother of four children, aged between 2 and 9.

This is where The Big Ask points to the urgent need for family support. Where children were unhappy at home, they were 9 times more likely to be unhappy in general, and describe their family as an obstacle.

'I think children like me are distracted from reaching their goals [...] as they worry about their family or if their family can afford to have a house'

Boy, 12.

As children reach their later teens, they begin to articulate how alert they are to the causes and consequences of family difficulties, how impermeable some patterns are to change.

'When children have a poor family life, their education suffers and the cycle of deprivation continues for their children'

Boy, 17.

But also, as is typical of this impressive generation of children, how difficult obstacles can be overcome.

'[My parents] have shown me ambition and the importance of hard work and perseverance. My mum grew up in quite a deprived area as a child with very little opportunity and poor education but her parents encouraged her to work hard and build a better life for herself'

Boy, 17.

What children said about family: the data

- > **Most children are happy with their families.** Even after splitting the data by age gender, ethnicity, and deprivation this was the case. From the responses – 80% of 9–17-year-olds reported being happy with their families, while 14% responded neutrally and 6% said they were unhappy. For younger children (aged 6–8), 95% said they are happy with it, 2% are fine, while only 3% said they are unhappy. Overall, family life was one of the things that children were most likely say they are happy with.
- > **Children told us how important they saw the family being.** Over a quarter of children (29%) believed getting along with their family was very important to their lives.
- > **Most children are happy with their family's health.** Among 9–17-year-olds, 94% said they were happy or fine with their family's health while 6% said they were unhappy. Nearly 9 in 10 children (89%) said they were happy with their family's ability to buy the things they need, 8% responded neutrally and only 3% said they were unhappy with this.
- > **When children are unhappy at home, they said it had a huge impact on every area of their lives.** Those unhappy with their family life were 11 times more likely to state that they were unhappy with their family's health and ability to buy the things they need. Children (aged 9–17) who were unhappy with their family life were 9 times more likely to be unhappy with their life overall. 70% of them were unhappy with their mental health.
- > **Children from vulnerable groups are notably more likely to be unhappy with life at home, though the majority are still happy overall.** Children in care or with a social worker (aged 9–17) are twice as likely to say they are unhappy with family life, compared to other children. But more than 60% of this group are still happy with their family life. Young carers (aged 9–17) are 70% more likely to say they are unhappy with family life, and more than twice as likely to say they are unhappy with their family's health. 57% of this group are happy with their family life, and 50% are happy with their family's health.
- > **Young people aspire to have their own family and a nice home.** From respondents, 37% of 6–8-year-olds and 26% of 9–17-year-olds said that starting a family of their own was one their most important aspirations when they grow up. Furthermore, 49% of 6–8-year-olds and 37% of 9–17-year-olds said that having a nice home to live in was one their most important aspirations when they grow up. There was little variation by demographics, deprivation, and vulnerability.

Commissioner's Response: what this means for the family as we emerge from the pandemic

Children have reminded us how deeply their lives and experiences are rooted in their families – in whatever form. This is good news for the vast majority of England's children, who feel supported and optimistic.

We know also that, through no fault of their own, children feel the pressure exerted on parents, whether through a change of circumstances through health or in the workplace or unemployment. The challenge is to lift some of that burden from England's children and free-up children to focus on being children, playing, and studying.

The short-term policy implications are clear. We are publishing papers on how support for families could be enhanced through Family Hubs, the Supporting Families programme, and a package of measures to reduce familial poverty and boost the educational attainment of children in low-income families. For early years, an increased commitment to health visiting and support for the family as they navigate being parents is outlined in the Leadsom Review.⁵ If we take action on these points, we would directly address the concerns children have raised about the support – practical, financial, emotional – that their families need.

In the long-term, there is the space to think more radically. The renewed sense of the importance of family that has emerged during the pandemic is an unquestionable asset – it is worth thinking about how we can use this moment to channel policy towards households that need more support. The message we hear from a minority of children is that they really need it.

At the heart of this is children's social care, a public service that is sometimes overlooked in debate, or not simply spoken of. No one wants to be in a family which needs a social worker. But the truth is millions of children in England have needed a social worker at some point in the past few years. Removing any stigma here would open up the discussion about family support. Just as popular discourse has begun to break down the old stigma around help for mental health, so we should address other forms of help families might need.

If we can bring these issues out into the open, we make it easier to weave better support back into the fabric of our communities. Some families will need a social worker, others a keyworker, more still will need help with mental health, housing, or finances. Other families, such as those caring for the disabled, simply need greater support for respite. Children are attuned to the needs of their families. They know what they need, but sometimes they cannot see a way of seeking this help. This needs to change.

The challenge for the recently launched independent Care Review is to think how we can move to a more consensual and collaborative system of support without compromising the vital safeguarding function social workers provide. Part of this answer is to return to the idea that it takes a community to raise a child – because it is not just the job of children's social care to support families;

the NHS, schools, the DWP and the voluntary sector all have a pivotal role. That is why the Children's Commissioner has championed Family Hubs as a mechanism for bringing them together, and why we have committed to further work to consider the outcome measures which can unite different parts of the system in a common framework.

While championing family, we must not forget those children for whom home is not just unstable, but unsafe. Children who experience abuse, violence, and trauma in the home, or from within their own relationships. Some of these children will need the care system, which we discuss later on in this report, but many will stay at home but need specialist care and support. This will come from dedicated children's professionals, but also needs a broader approach to understanding how children are made vulnerable due to the vulnerability of their parents. A recent positive step has been the acknowledgement in the Domestic Abuse bill that children who experience the abuse of a parent are victims in their own right. It is essential that this translates into victim support services being offered to them. It also forces us to ask how those children living with parents are suffering in other ways, such as from substance misuse, are identified and supported. And compels us to take a closer look at specialist support for parents on these issues. There is also draft statutory guidance alongside the bill which recognises that children under 16, while not legally recognised as experiencing domestic abuse, can experience 'Teenage Relationship Abuse,'⁶ with police reports rising sharply. This needs wider recognition and more specialist support.

Now, as we begin to recover from the pandemic, we must make sure we continue to look after the most disadvantaged children and their families. In the end, if children's voices are heard, our hope is that the national story of England's children is one in which the protagonists are no longer called upon to be heroic, because the support around them means they do not have to be.

Policy recommendations for children and the family

- > An expansion of the Family Hubs network to provide an access point in local communities to provide help for families who need it.
- > Using Family Hubs as a catalyst to make existing public services more accessible, integrated, and efficient – reverse the trend away from investing in early intervention.
- > Doubling the Supporting Families Programme to provide more families facing multiple disadvantages with a keyworker.
- > A package of measures to reduce child and family poverty, and in doing so support the educational attainment of the most disadvantaged children.

Children and Community

This generation of children are civic-minded, social, and outward-looking. They care about improving their neighbourhoods. They want things to do: activities that are affordable, fun, and sustaining. They want their lives outside of home and school – and online – to be made safer. They want to be treated fairly. After a long period of isolation, they once again want to feel part of something larger than themselves: a caring community.

What children told us about community in The Big Ask

We have broken down community-focused responses into three areas – being safe outside, being protected from online harm, and life in the community.

The Big Ask is clear. This generation want to be outside, in the real world. The digital world of the pandemic has been a blessing and a curse. Now, they want to be free of the constraints of lockdown. But more than that, responses showed children thinking expansively in their dreams about what kind of spaces they emerge into.

They have thought hard about their neighbourhoods, about the built environment, and shared detailed hopes for regeneration. Their answers created images of open spaces, parks, places to swim, games to play, and new, affordable, communal experiences: fun. Indeed, one of the most frequently used words in The Big Ask was ‘play.’

Children value outside spaces to play in their local communities. The United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises ‘the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.’ 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.

‘Youth clubs could help as it’s a place to go if we don’t want to go home’

Girl, 13.

‘I think there should be more clubs in my local area and more interesting play areas’

Boy, 14.

But play is not just about immediate enjoyment. Communities are the spaces in which children pursue their interests and develop their sense of who they are and what they want to be. What begins as make-believe games or a kickabout in the park can kickstart the careers of playwrights and Olympians. Children want ‘places for kids to play and have fun things to do’ – Girl, age not given, and to have ‘youth clubs and community-based projects’ – Boy, 8.

Throughout children’s responses in The Big Ask, emphasis was consistently placed upon the world beyond their front door. Besides their immediate households, children have been starved of real-life, meaningful company during the pandemic. Social media, while a valuable outlet during the pandemic, was also described as an unsatisfying substitute for the real-world society of other people.

Children told us how they want to feel safe online. They want to be able to have the same protections in a virtual world and navigate social media in a way that did not make them feel vulnerable for their safety or conscious of their own image. Children were also asking for more support in this space: ‘I don’t feel I was informed of my online safety from a young age and that it was considered a priority. Technology and social media are constantly developing so why aren’t our laws and protections for children on these platforms updating with it?’ – Girl, 14.

Children also wanted to feel safe outside of the home. There were some references to gangs, county lines, assault, and violence – in general, but especially against women, girls, the vulnerable, and minority groups.

Girls were more likely to be concerned with their personal safety than boys. Some girls told us how they wanted to feel safer: ‘girls in uniform get catcalled by creeps. [...] We deserve better’ – Girl, 16.

Finally, children were also capable of painting a picture of a society that does more than simply keep them safe. They spoke about fairness, about caring for people who might suffer from prejudice, about equality across racial, sexual, and gender-identities.

Taken together, we begin to see England’s children express a collective need, something larger than themselves: after an atomised existence, a vision of true community.

What children said about their community: the data

- > **Just over half of children aged 9–17 (52%) are happy with the choice of things to do in their local area, one third (29%) are fine, while 1 in 5 (19%) are unhappy.** 90% are happy or fine with their access to somewhere outside to have fun, while 10% are unhappy with this. Among 6–8-year-olds, 94% said they were happy or okay with the places they can go to have fun, while 6% were unhappy with this.
- > **While most children appear to be happy with their local area, this was one of the more common issues that children raised.** Among 9–17-year-olds, the choice of things to do in their local area was the second highest source of unhappiness (after their mental health). This remains one of the most common complaints even after splitting the data by age, gender, ethnicity, deprivation level – and even when looking at vulnerable groups such as children in care, children with a social worker, and young carers.
- > **Children living in deprived areas were more likely to be unhappy with their local area than children living in more affluent areas.** 22% of children in the most deprived tenth of neighbourhoods were unhappy with the choice of things to do in their local area, compared to 15% of children in the least deprived tenth of neighbourhoods.
- > **Most children feel safe, but some children are worried about their personal safety.** The clear majority (80%) of 9–17-year-olds said they are happy with their personal safety, 16% responded neutrally, while only 4% said they were unhappy. But, and perhaps unsurprisingly, children living in neighbourhoods with the highest crime rates or the highest levels of deprivation were more likely to be unhappy with their personal safety, compared to children in areas with the lowest crime rates or levels of deprivation. The age group most concerned with their safety are 16–17-year-olds, with 7% of them reporting concerns.
- > **Children are conscious of fairness and protecting their peer group.** 1 in 5 children selected ‘everyone being treated fairly’ as one of their most important priorities to have a good life when they grow up.
- > **Happiness with online communities also seems to be higher.** 74% of 9–17-year-olds said they are happy with their experiences online, 21% said they were fine, while only 5% said they were unhappy with these.

Commissioner's Response: what this means for children and community as we emerge from the pandemic

Life in their community

Once again, we see this generation of children asking for something fair. They are making reasonable requests. Some space to play in and to feel safe while doing so. Somewhere to see their friends. Things to do. The opportunity to participate in community activities and develop their interests, whether this be Brownies, Scouts, or CCF (cadets); gymnastics, dance, or DJing.

Where opportunities for children are available, uptake is extremely high – despite the supposed ‘digital age,’ attendance at Scouts has risen every year for nearly a decade. A new ‘Onside’ youth zone can expect to attract hundreds if not thousands of children a week. Sports coaches, drama teachers, and scout leaders nurture young people and help them into confident young adults, with broadened horizons and renewed confidence. These volunteers are the unsung heroes of national community work, but their contribution is not unnoticed by England’s children.

It is also crucial that outdoor space and indoor spaces are made available so that sports clubs, charities, youth, and faith groups can flourish. We have already seen a lot done in this area with local initiatives already making a difference for children.⁷

Being safe outside

A minority of children find that the outside world can be frightening, especially vulnerable children. They worry about gangs, violence, and bullying.

There has been a significant focus on women and girls’ safety over the past year. As we saw from the ‘Everyone’s Invited’ movement, children – in particular, girls – are drawing more attention to their own safety, and asking for support. Ofsted suggested in their rapid review ways for schools to address harassment and violence.⁸ We have also seen increased attention shown to protecting girls’ safety.⁹ The recent Violence against Women and Girls Strategy acknowledges the frequency of harassment, abuse, and violence which women and girls face.¹⁰ Importantly, there is a commitment to look at a communications strategy which will challenge harassment and to explore whether laws which protect children in this area are enacted effectively. The Safer Streets Fund most recent round of funding call for bids which look at the safety of women and girls.¹¹ Much of this has focused on the night-time economy such as pubs and bars; it will also be important to think about use of public spaces more generally, and focus on specific ways to improve safety.

The Home Office, NHS, the Mayor's Office for Policing and Crime, and the Department for Education 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 children may need to interact with. Guidance on how this model can support children can be shared, and implementation rolled out where possible.¹²

There has rightly been pressure to understand why so few rape cases end up in prosecutions – resulting in the End-to-End Rape Review.¹³ This highlighted a range of failings at each stage of the criminal justice process, and included recommendations for a 'scorecard' to hold the police and Crown Prosecution Service to account for improving this, with a target to increase prosecutions. However, this only looked at cases of those aged 16 and over. We need the Child Sexual Abuse Strategy to learn from the End-to-End Rape Review to implement similar ambitions for improving the response to children's cases.¹⁴

Over the past decade, there has been an increased understanding that children who become involved in criminality and gangs are themselves vulnerable, and often the victims of exploitation – as set out in guidance on County Lines which explores child criminal exploitation.¹⁵ The focus on diverting children away from criminal activity rather than punitive responses, such as the Violence Reduction Units, which operate in eighteen areas across the country are a vital approach.¹⁶ Alongside this the Youth Investment Fund can be used to help provide more youth services children were asking for.¹⁷ The National Police Chiefs Council have now launched their revised policy on child-centred policing, a very welcome commitment to placing children's rights at the heart of police work, and to understanding that children may be behaving as they are due to trauma or difficulties at home which they need help with.¹⁸

Being safe online

Protecting children in both the analogue and online world is something that is identified as a clear need in The Big Ask. It is not just children's safety in the community we need to protect, we also need to offer them protection from a range of harmful content online. It is not just inappropriate sexual material that we want to protect children from online, but wider harmful content such as pro-anorexia material or addictive gambling sites.

Now, there is recognition of the urgent need to tackle children's experiences of harm online. The Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture Media and Sports tasked the Children's Commissioner's Office to make sure all was being done prior to the Online Safety Bill to protect children online and also to make sure children's voices are represented in the legislation.¹⁹ We welcome emerging regulation, with the implementation of the ICO's Age Appropriate Design Code (AADC) and Ofcom's regulation of Video Sharing Platforms (VSPs).²⁰

In all of these spaces, what children want is the opportunity to be themselves and feel safe. This generation of children has withstood the horrors of a pandemic, and told us they are now determined to step out into the world, brave their fears, and make the most of their lives – and the places they live in. This is an attitude that deserves to be met squarely, with the same ambition.

Policy recommendations for the community and children

- > A package of measures to improve children's online experiences and ensure that social media companies live up to their responsibilities to young users. Our paper outlines what we would like to see in the Online Safety Bill.
- > A package of measures we would like to see from local and national Government to maximise the community offer available to children, including how best to utilise the Youth Investment Fund.
- > An offline safety paper which outlines measures to improve the safety of children in public spaces and improve our response to those who are the victims of violent and sexual crimes.

Health and Wellbeing

Children told us about how much they care about feeling happy and well. Following the lessons of the pandemic, and the toll it took on young people's wellbeing, this is a generation newly conscious of the artificial dichotomy between mental and physical health. Now, as we emerge from this period, there is an opportunity to make sure we are prioritising children's wellbeing in general, and, where it is needed most, the speed of their access to good healthcare.

What children told us about health and wellbeing in The Big Ask

The Big Ask has given us insights about wellbeing in a number of categories. Most children are well. A minority suffer from chronic, life-altering conditions and need constant care and support. All children were affected directly or indirectly by the pandemic.

Despite this upheaval, it is important to remember that responses did demonstrate that the majority of this generation are happy. Encouragingly, huge numbers of children said that wellbeing would be a priority in their future lives. After lockdown heightened our collective awareness of managing wellbeing, children are newly conscious of the components of feeling good. Children want to be able to look after their physical health and see mental and physical health as interlinked.

Children who think good mental health is important for their future are 2.3 times more likely to also say the same about good physical health. Children recognise the importance of both 'physical and mental health, there needs to be more of a push towards physical fitness as it's a real motivation booster' – Boy, 16.

When asked what they were worried about, children often used the words 'mental health': '[If I could change anything] I would change my mental health because I can get quite sad and it doesn't feel quite right and it gets annoying' – Girl, 8.

It is important here to acknowledge that 'mental health' is an umbrella phrase covering everything from temporary emotional states to much more persistent problems. Children's understanding of this is developing. They have suggested improved wellbeing support on a day-to-day basis in school. Perhaps it is this newly-informed attitude that elicited some sharp assessments of where they feel some solutions to children's mental health problems may be more rhetorical than practical: 'despite constant mental health assemblies, the reality is that schools pressure their students immensely' – Girl, 16.

Children also want the NHS to be there when things are more serious. The United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child lays out 'the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health and to facilities for the treatment of illness and rehabilitation of health.' Some children's experiences failed to live up to this principle and a lack of mental health support is impeding children's wider development: 'The lack of help with mental health has been the biggest thing that has stopped me and my friends from achieving what we want. It is difficult to access as we are not taken seriously, and when we are, waiting lists are so long' – Girl, 17. The Big Ask told us it is teenage girls who seem to struggle more. This increases with age: as many as 2 in 5 girls aged 16–17 were unhappy with their mental health.

In the past, when our understanding of mental health was less sophisticated, it might have been normal to meet complexities with outmoded ideas – the 'pull yourself together' response. Even now, children spoke about there still being a taboo around openly talking about issues. As one girl said, it is 'such a taboo subject, I [...] don't know how to get help, simply because it's so hard to bring up. I've spoken to other people in person and online about this, and a lot of them feel the same way' – Girl, 14.

If we cannot even begin to talk about a problem, because it is taboo, it is harder to solve. Especially where possible solutions rest on the act of talking itself, and where the pandemic has affected communication. 'I think that for some young people, the lack of confidence that they have affects their overall wellbeing, particularly during the pandemic where it is difficult to interact with people' – Boy, 13.

Children were clear about how the time away from school, their classmates, their friends, and the transition into a largely online world affected them: 'I think that we all spend so much time on social media, worrying about how many followers we have, that we don't get enough time to just stop and do nothing, or go outside or spend more time with our families' – Girl, 12.

As we emerge from the pandemic, we might be a step closer to a more balanced approach to wellbeing. Together, adults and children in England have undergone a collective reckoning with the self over the past year. We now know how much it helps to talk, to be active, to invest in our own wellbeing, and that of others. We now need to focus on policy answers which make these things as easy as possible.

What children said about health and wellbeing: the data

- > **Over half children of children reported being happy with their mental health.** From the responses, 57% of children aged 9–17 said they are happy with their mental wellbeing and 23% reported being okay. But 20% were unhappy with this, making it the top issue they were unhappy with.
- > **Girls were nearly twice as likely as boys to say they were unhappy with their mental health, while older children and teenagers were also more likely to do so.** 40% of girls aged 16–17 said they were unhappy with their mental health.
- > **Some ethnic groups were in fact less likely to say they were unhappy with their mental health (e.g. 16% of Asian children compared to 21% of White children).** There was little variation by deprivation, but children from a vulnerable background were slightly more likely to be unhappy with their mental health – around a quarter of children with a social worker and a quarter of young carers said this.
- > **Children see mental and physical health as interlinked.** Children who think good mental health is important for their future are more than 2 times more likely to also say the same about physical health and children who said they were unhappy with their mental health were 7 times more likely to say they were unhappy with their physical health.
- > **Most children aged 9–17 (68%) said they were happy with their physical health, 21% responded neutrally, while 11% said they were unhappy with it.** Older children, girls and children in more deprived areas were all more likely to be unhappy with their mental health, along with some vulnerable groups (e.g. children with a social worker or young carers).
- > **Children want to have good wellbeing in the future, not just now.** Among 9–17-year-olds, just over half (52%) said that having good mental health was one of their most important future aspirations, while 31% said that good physical health was one of their most important future aspirations. Again, there is a correlation here: children (aged 9–17-year-olds) who chose mental health as one of their future aspirations were twice likely to choose good physical health as well.
- > **As children get older, they are more likely to emphasise the importance of good mental health.** Of responses, 63% of 16–17-year-olds said this was important for their future, compared with 43% of 9–11-year-olds.
- > **Among 9–17-year-olds, children living in the most affluent areas were slightly more likely to say that good mental health and good physical health were important future priorities for them, compared to children in the most deprived areas.** Vulnerable groups were generally less likely to say this.

Commissioner's Response: what this means for children's health and wellbeing as we emerge from the pandemic

As we have seen with this impressive generation already in this report, the answers might be closer than they first appear. Children are talking about their mental and physical health. That is a step forward – a significant one. They are talking about health at a time when many adults are also starting to realise that there is merit in trying to objectively understand their current state of mind, and how that might be positively addressed. That means two broad cohorts – the young and the old – are in step with one another: the beginnings of a population acutely attuned to the components of wellbeing. Lockdown forced many of us to realise how we feel if we do not take exercise, if we do not address obesity, if we become too turned in on ourselves, if we are denied enough human contact. If policy can coalesce around this shared experience, this could usher in a moment of transformation – a time when intergenerational dialogue about suffering opened out, and became more comfortable, or at least less awkward.

There are still some obstacles to get over. In The Big Ask, children sought to address adult accusations of sensitivity: 'we are told that our generation are lazy and snowflakes, that we have never suffered like generations before us' – Girl, 16. This argument is certainly harder to make now. Children's descriptions of strain over the past year were common in The Big Ask: isolation, uncertainty around schooling, exams or assessment-related stress, constant frightening stories on news, absorption of parental anxiety, estrangement from wider family, social media addiction, anorexia, self-harm, thoughts of suicide, early bereavement and grief. For those children already suffering from severe illness such as cancer when the pandemic started, it is important to remember how much more challenging their already perilous lives have become. All these responses are corroborated by clear clinical studies which shows that rates of significant mental health problems have increased significantly during the pandemic.²¹

In some cases, we now know how much it helps to talk, to be active, to invest in our own wellbeing, and that of others. But in other cases, talking, discussing, opening-up only gets us so far. Diagnosed mental health conditions require treatment as well as acknowledgement. When children have mental health problems, they need the NHS to be there for them – ideally on the terms which work best for the child, operating in collaboration with schools, charities, digital support, youth groups. In other words, a network of support with clinical underpinnings and the NHS at its core.

Mental Health Support Teams – which aim to bring together CAMHS and schools within a local area – are the right approach. They will be in just 30% of areas by 2023.²² Meanwhile their absence is being felt keenly by today's young people. Experience of in-school support is variable, and access to CAMHS too often a battle. Even when child have not sought help for themselves, they are conscious of the struggles of others, and this gives a pervasive sense that the NHS will not be there for them when they need it.

The NHS has promised to address this. The Long-Term Plan says that by 2028 ‘the goal is to ensure that 100% of children and young people who need specialist care can access it.’²³ This is welcome, but it is also stating an aspiration to achieve something – treating all children who need it – that children should have been able to take for granted. Given that, even prior to an increase in conditions during lockdown, the NHS was only treating 1 in 3 children who needed help, there is still a very long way to go.²⁴ Children deserve a clear roadmap to get to a situation where they can rely on the NHS to be there for them when they most need it. This is particularly so for children with acute illness, long-term conditions, or certain disabilities.²⁵ For these children their relationship with the NHS is likely to determine the quality of their life, their ability to participate in education, and their long-term prospects.

For this to succeed, the NHS needs to be woven into the fabric of their lives, such that their care, education, and healthcare are working in partnership and striving for the same goals. For some children this is already their experience. But much more often we hear of a situation whereby NHS services act in isolation, or are hard to access, meaning that even when CAMHS services or early-development support are critical to life chances, the right support is not there. Integrated Care Systems have the opportunity to address this.²⁶ If they can deliver – for children as well as adults – they can reset the relationship between children and the NHS, ensuring that healthcare is provided when and where children need it. This is their promise, but children must be put at the centre of their planning to achieve it.

Policy recommendations for children’s health

Our immediate policy recommendations focus on urgent steps we would like to see taken to expand the mental health offer to young people. This includes:

- > A more rapid expansion of Mental Health Support Teams, achieved by better utilisation of the voluntary and charitable sectors.
- > A more consistent approach to digital counselling provision across England. It emerged during the pandemic that many children preferred digital counselling.
- > Community mental health hubs to provide children with an open-access point for NHS services, for both advice and treatment.
- > An action plan to deliver on the goal of 100% of children accessing support when they need it, including the right support in place when children reach crisis point.

Schools

After so much online learning, children in England – vulnerable children, especially – care passionately about being able to go to school again. They find school challenging, but fulfilling, and hope, in the end, for good, rewarding jobs. They do not expect to be given opportunities without hard work. However, they do expect to be truly supported, especially given the extent of the demands placed upon them. The new academic year is a huge opportunity to get behind them.

What children told us about school in The Big Ask

This generation like school.

Pupils clearly love their teachers, and the vast majority find schools nurturing and supportive. Children do not want a culture of spoon-feeding or ‘learned helplessness,’ in which they do not have to think. In fact, a reflective, philosophical attitude begins to emerge in the responses. This is a generation that understands that school will always be challenging in some way, but still prizes education as a life priority: ‘I really want to learn even if it’s hard because education is important to me’ – Girl, 11, ‘Bad education stops some children from being able to achieve something great in life but I am lucky because I have a great education’ – Boy, 12.

Vulnerable children, such as those with SEND or awarded the pupil premium, were even more likely than their peers to say education was important to their future plans. Schools should be rightly heartened by this.

Children thought hard about education during lockdown. They missed their friends, they missed their teachers, they missed activities, and they missed real classroom learning: ‘Lockdown really stops children because they can’t do that much stuff we love and it makes them go all shaky like they can’t study the normal day and if they need to achieve a job they want to do it will be hard for them to pass the exams’ – Girl, 9.

Teachers and schools have achieved truly miraculous things with online schooling. But, as they acknowledge, even the best virtual environment is a shadow of the real thing. The whole familiar architecture of learning, intricately designed to help children understand things, was all reduced to long,

sometimes demoralising days at a screen, cameras off, a webchat instead of a classroom. So the return to school is a relief – a moment of celebration.

For some children though, lockdown provided a break from a difficult situation at school, such as bullying or extreme anxiety. As we return, The Big Ask revealed unsurprising anxieties about attendance, routine, and acclimatising again to the demands of school. Vulnerable pupils spoke of how much they needed high quality support: ‘My reading and spelling is not very good. All the words get muddled up and I need more help in class but I can’t always have it’ – Boy, 10.

Children also articulated striking conclusions about the distinctive nature of academic demands, and how those demands play out. A theme developed on the importance of less academic, more pragmatic experiences.

‘I was very keen on starting business studies at my school but they took down the subject just before I started year 9.’

Girl, 15.

‘Promote more vocational jobs in school’

Boy, 17.

Rebalancing the education system to make it as fair and nurturing as possible was a clear priority in every facet of school life. This included assessment – exam stress was a common concern – and a number of other issues:

SEND: ‘it takes a long time to be diagnosed so you just feel stupid for a long time which makes you unhappy’

Boy, 12.

Curriculum: ‘Minorities barely have any representation, so how can we achieve things that we have never even seen before?’

Girl, 17.

Regional inequality: ‘The inability to push any further than the class that we were born into due to it being created by the area we live in and funding for education in those areas being low and lack of opportunity in those areas being high’

Boy, 17.

Schools will need to strike a balance between acknowledging the need for extra support, and burdening young people with unhelpful pandemic-related labels. Note the sensitivity to language about loss, recovery and high stakes assessment: ‘we still have to do exams [...] after the big section of education that was lost because of lockdown [...] even though we are back [...] we can’t fully catch up on what we have missed making it hard and stressful for both students and teachers’ – Girl, 15.

This is a complex picture, but one that points towards huge opportunities if we are to seize a historic moment in the evolution of school design in England. It is a cohort of children – and parents – that had school snatched away from them and do not want to let it go again. Now it’s back, they – we – want to make it even better.

What children said about schools: the data

- > **Most children want to leave school with a good education.** Just over half of 9–17-year-olds (52%) said that a good education was one of their most important future priorities. This was even higher among children from the most deprived areas (57%, compared to 49% of children in the most affluent areas) or from an ethnic minority background (60%, compared to 49% of White children). Many vulnerable groups were also slightly more likely to say this – for example, 58% of children with SEND and 58% of young carers.
- > **The majority of 9–17-year-olds said they were currently happy with their school or college life.** 16% said they were unhappy with this. 90% are happy or okay with their progress in education while 10% said they were unhappy. Among 6–8-year-olds, 96% said they were happy or fine with their education while 4% said they were unhappy with it.
- > **Among 9–17-year-olds, older children and girls were more likely to say that they were unhappy with school, although the majority of them were still happy.** There was little variation by ethnicity, except that Asian children were slightly less likely to be unhappy with life at school or college (13%, compared to 16% of White children).
- > **Children in schools rated Inadequate by Ofsted were slightly more likely to be unhappy with school.** For example, 18% said they were unhappy with life at school or college, compared with 15% of children in schools rated Good or Outstanding.
- > **Similarly, children living the deprived areas were slightly more likely to be unhappy with school.** 17% of children in the most deprived tenth of neighbourhoods said they were unhappy with life at school or college, compared with 13% of children in the least deprived neighbourhoods.

Commissioner's response: what this means for schools as we emerge from the pandemic

As we recover from the pandemic, this is an urgent moment in the evolution of education in England and we need to seize it. After so much scrutiny of schooling and assessment during lockdown, debates swirl about the best way to go next. The risk is that we repeat the mistakes of the past and divide into binary camps – more status quo or faster reform – and miss the moment. To capitalise on children's new-found appreciation of schools, we should do both – keep the best of the status quo, and, in the light of The Big Ask, do something radical in our offer of support to children.

The first priority is to bolster catch-up funding for schools; we should then use this effort to embed high-quality, early-intervention support in the long-term – both pastorally and academically. Very simply, if we keep expectations high – as we must – we must also give students the support they need to be able to reach those standards, especially the disadvantaged and the vulnerable. If we do not, the system rests on an internal and unjustifiable contradiction.

Support can mean a number of different things. Before we set out urgent and long-term recommendations, first, let's look at forms of support which build on what we are already doing well. During the last ten years of reform, we have seen lots of positive change. Aided by insights provided by research evidence, cognitive science, and curriculum theory, we have made progress in teacher development, and good work continues. The evidence-based curriculum revolution has transformed what we thought possible for teaching in England. Pedagogy is increasingly sophisticated. We now have much better online resources than we have ever had before. As we recover from the pandemic, we need to make sure that all children can truly access the curriculum and make progress. That means being able to understand the curriculum, remember it and apply it; being able to see themselves in the curriculum and – through the curriculum – see beyond their experiences. Most importantly, all children need to be able to experience success within the curriculum, especially in its core components. None of this has to mean a concession in standards: it does mean careful curriculum design, early intervention and responsive teaching, all of which are much easier to do if your school has the right support. That will often mean being part of a network – a high-functioning family of schools – whatever form that may take. In a culture of rapid reform, these are hard balances to strike, but the balance is key.

We have developed school systems and routines which increase learning time and set high expectations of behaviour. As we recover from the pandemic, returning to school will be particularly hard for some children, so the 'scaffolding' of expected behaviour will have to be sensitive and inclusive, to make all children feel welcome. In time, we will also need to be able to remove that scaffolding, so that children can prepare for the independence of adulthood. But for now, the emphasis needs to be on support.

Beyond that, in terms of short term 'catch-up' policies, we support targeted intervention measures for the most disadvantaged. These children are far more likely to leave school without basic qualifications in English and Maths, and, if we do not act, that proportion is going to get larger. The current efforts to provide more 1:1 tutors will help. Good work must continue on Early Years, the SEND review, alternative provision, SAFE taskforces, increased support for children on free school meals, pupil premium increases, voluntary extension to the school day, breadth of enrichment activities, and strengthening of pastoral support and mental health services. There has been much discussion of assessment reform, but this kind of structural work takes time.

In the long-term, The Big Ask suggests we could consider stronger support for meaningful vocational training routes so that there is more than one pathway to affording a secure adulthood after secondary school. This should not have to mean a trade-off with academic standards. But it does mean looking at what we currently offer young people trying to reach a level 3 qualification, in terms of information, contact time and level of funding. Separately, we should embark on a multi-year project to design higher-quality support as part of our basic offer to children, so that fewer fall behind, and there are fewer exclusions – a robust safety net in English education.

What we are describing here is a system in which we make the following commitments to children:

- > We have high expectations, and we believe you can get there.
- > We will give you every chance of meeting expectations, and we will not let you fall behind. This offer is both pastoral and academic.
- > If there are barriers to your success in education, you will be given the support you need.
- > 'High expectations' and 'success' do not necessarily have to mean A-levels and university.
- > If the best route to a career means a different form of training or employment – an apprenticeship, an entry-level job – you should be given the information and the support to make a success of that.

These commitments could be misread as an impracticable guarantee of success for all children. Rather, these commitments guarantee a fair chance to all pupils, whatever their circumstances. We have seen some bold steps in the right direction such as a 'cradle-to-career' approach,²⁷ which aims to develop 'beyond-school' capacity, a wrap-around community support approach to give pupils the best possible start in life. For schemes like this to be delivered at a national scale will mean giving more schools the means to make this happen where it is needed most.

For now, we simply argue for the greatest investment possible in a package of support that addresses the consequences of the last year in all their complexity. For the moment, the gates have reopened. We hope they remain so, until a new summer arrives, and the cycle begins again. We have our chance now. Let's not stand still.

Policy recommendations for schools

- > An urgent comprehensive 'catch-up' package.
- > An urgent focus on improved services to children struggling with attendance, emotional problems, and other common consequences of the pandemic.
- > All children to be offered voluntary sessions during in the school week, for academic catch-up support and a richer set of extra-curricular activities.
- > Prioritise implementation of tutoring support, and for schools where that is not possible, consider a direct grant to school in lieu.
- > A cradle-to-career approach to securing viable pathways for all school leavers.

Work

Children told us they want to get on and do well. They want to work hard, and spoke in terms not just of jobs, but careers – often civic-minded careers. They want to be able to afford a good adulthood, though they are not always confident of getting there, other than via university, which transfers pressure to their experience of school.

What children told us about work

This generation value hard work and ambition. They are clear in their minds about the need for good, fulfilling work: 69% said they saw a good job as the bedrock of their future happiness.

Throughout the answers, we saw the same qualities of wanting to do well, make their lives happy, fulfilling, and secure. They spoke of working not just for themselves, but for others too: ‘a good career to earn some good money for my family and friends to share and get a nice house and give money to the homeless and try hard’ – Girl, 8.

‘I want to be given the same opportunity to change the world as my male peers’

Girl, 16.

Their ambitions were often in professions with social and moral duties: ‘I will work hard to be a vet’ – Boy, 7.

Some younger children spoke of being millionaires and footballers. Children also spoke of being nurses, doctors, teachers – careers in public service:

‘I want to be a teacher and help people’

Boy, 8.

‘I want to be a nurse because I want to help people’

Girl, 9.

‘I want to be a police officer to make things better’

Boy, 6.

‘I would like to help out for charity to help people who need something’

Boy, 11.

‘I want to be a brain surgeon and help people!! If not that I just want a job to help the community’

Girl, 11.

‘I want to be police dog handler when I am older’

Girl, 10.

Echoing answers in other sections, children dreamt of careers dedicated to protecting the world around them:

‘I would work with the animals and I would still help with the environment’

Girl, 8.

‘I want to be a marine biologist to save and explore sea life’

Girl, 11.

‘Become [...] a wildlife conservationist’

Boy, 11.

Many answers showed vision, and resolve to do great things in later life: ‘I am going to have a good career because I have been determined of that from when I was 5 years old. The job I have wanted to do hasn’t changed in the whole of my life. I am going to be a surgeon’ – Girl, 13.

In cases where plans were unclear, children showed the same resolve to tackle an ambitious challenge head-on: ‘I don’t really know what I want to be but what I do know is that I want to go to university as none of my family members have yet to do it’ – Boy, 8.

University stood out as the goal for many children, though some ambitions pointed at vocational pathways which do not necessarily require graduate training in ‘traditional subjects’:

‘I want to be a make-up artist’

Girl, 12.

‘I want to be a wedding planner’

Girl, 10.

‘I want to be a bricklayer’

Boy, 15.

There was clearly an awareness that the world of work evolves – they mentioned new industries and emerging possibilities, the growth of automation. They are well-apprieved of the discourse around the competitiveness of the job market. Where pathways were not clear at school or in the local area, children spoke up:

‘If people actually had more opportunity and more choice, maybe they would be choosing the right path and actually find fulfilment within life. But no [...] supermarket [job] here I come’

Girl, 17.

This encapsulates a number of responses that spoke about cycles or loops with no progression – an area where we saw the interplay between responses about school and work. There was evidence of a pervasive attitude that academic achievement is the only truly successful outcome from school. This is hugely influential in shaping the emotional and behavioural reality of childhood in England:

‘In school, we are programmed to believe we have to get good a level grades and go to university if we want to have a good future and be happy in life’

Girl, 16.

‘I feel like [...] we think that exams, if you fail, it’s the end of your life and you won’t get to do what you want to do in the future’

Girl, 15.

Responses showed an interest in good careers information – which is a basic right stipulated in the United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child – and opportunities for non-university routes:

‘Apprenticeships are a good route for those wanting to leave formal education post 16 and I feel there needs to be more workplaces offering this’

Girl, 15.

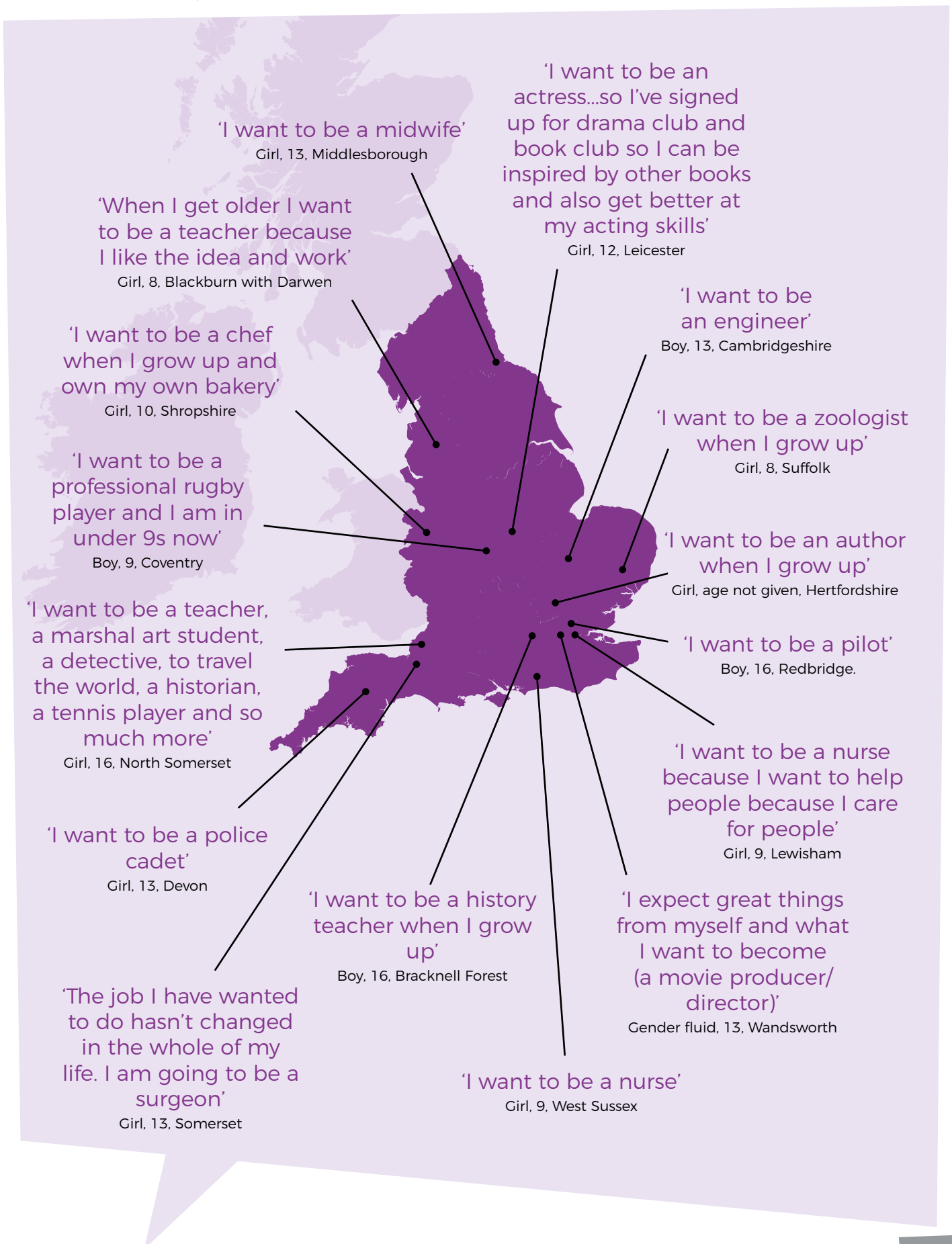
‘I also think that more apprenticeships or workshops with people in our desired careers would be extremely helpful’

Girl, 14.

As a whole, these responses point towards a space in which several policy areas overlap – schools, vocational training, and industrial strategy – specifically where there might be regional inequality. It is this space that this report hopes to address, first in the short-term, but also for generations that follow. There is long-term, difficult work ahead, but the only way is through.

What children said about work: the data

No matter where they are from or what their gender is children want a good job in the future.



Most children want a good job when they grow up. In fact, this was the top future priority among 9–17-year-olds. Just over half of 6–8-year-olds (56%) also said that this was one of their top future priorities. This is even higher among ethnic minority children and those from a deprived background:

- 75% of Asian children and 76% of Black children said this was one of their top future priorities, compared with 68% of White children.
 - 72% of children in the most deprived neighbourhoods said this, compared with 68% of children in the most affluent neighbourhoods.
- > Among every vulnerable group in our data, roughly 65–68% of children said that having a good job was one of their top future priorities.
- > But at the same time, many children worry about whether they will end up in a good job when they grow up. 37% of children aged 9–17 said that this was one of their most important worries about the future – the third most common worry. Girls and older children were slightly more likely to be worried about this:
- 40% of girls said this was one of their top future worries, compared to 35% of boys.
 - 44% of 16–17-year-olds said this was one of their top future worries, compared to 33% of 9–11-year-olds.
- > But elsewhere this was remarkably consistent across deprivation and vulnerability. There was little notable variation by ethnicity – in fact, children from Asian and black backgrounds were actually very slightly less likely to say that this was one of their most important future worries.

Commissioner's Response: what this means for children and the world of work as we emerge from the pandemic

This is a sleeves-up generation, who are ambitious and perceptive about the benefits and challenges of building a career, and the consequences of not doing so.

There are some fears about the complex landscape of the workplace, which some children feel anxious about navigating. For some, fears will give way to feelings of greater security over time. Children in England are growing up in one of the richer economies in the world, and arguably the world's best university sector. Young people have told us that they are emerging from the pandemic looking to the future and with a real drive to do well and succeed. What we need to ensure now, is that *all* children, especially the disadvantaged, have the means to make that success happen.

There has been recent progress to support young people as they emerge into the workplace or further education. The Skills for Jobs White Paper sets out ambitions for further education reform.²⁸ This included encouraging apprenticeships, particularly in Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), continuing the roll-out of T-Levels, reforming technical education (levels 4 and 5), and committing to the extended rollout of careers infrastructure including extended coverage of careers hubs, as recommended by the Augar report.²⁹

Importantly, it does more to encourage apprenticeship starts, particularly in SMEs.³⁰ Reforming the funding mechanisms to make it easier for employers to hire more apprentices. Children and young people have told us how they want to enter apprenticeships for them to have the opportunity to enter the workplace and fulfil the ambitions they have told us they want to achieve.

The White Paper also announced the appointment of a Strategic Advisor on Careers Guidance, to advise on the alignment between The Careers and Enterprise Company (delivery partner for young people's careers advice) and the National Careers Service (government funded careers information, advice, and guidance for adults). This provides an opportunity for making sure careers advice delivers what children and young people want to know about their future career – a balanced discussion between academic and vocational routes and showing viable routes to meet their ambitions.

The Kickstart scheme will help.³¹ Kickstart has given young people the opportunity to enter training placements, to help them access the workplace, and prevent them from falling out of employment or education. Allowing more children and young people to pursue vocational routes will give them the opportunity to fulfil their ambitions they have told us they want to achieve.

The more we can create parity of esteem for non-university routes, the greater the share of aspirational job opportunities for England's children, the greater the self-esteem in each child who might not be able to access university, and the greater the sense that local economies can provide fulfilment, purpose, and a sustaining culture – as attractive as the life choice of moving to, say, a larger economic centre.

To make sure that any optimism stands on solid ground, we need to focus all our efforts on this policy open goal emerging at the heart of England's future.

Policy recommendations for jobs and skills

- > Extending the Kickstart programme for at least six months into 2022 would allow for more placements to be established, given the disruption to the scheme caused by this year's lockdown.
- > An extension should also ensure that the scheme is integrated more fully with long-term strategies to help young people into work, such as traineeships.
- > We are calling for a specific strategy to improve the quality and quantity of apprenticeships with a new commitment to creating 50,000 new apprenticeship starts to be available to young people at a range of levels and in a wider range of sectors.
- > We are also calling for further reform of the careers delivery infrastructure as part of the Sir John Holman review so that every child can access high quality careers advice in school with good information about non-academic career routes including into sectors that enable career progression such as STEM industries, especially for girls.
- > The Children's Commissioner is calling for increased funding for supported internships so that they are paid opportunities, to ensure young people of all socioeconomic backgrounds can participate.

Life in care

Children in care share the same hopes and aspirations as their peers. Children told us about the care they were grateful for, but also about the bureaucratic processes which they found frustrating or alienating. We heard stories of fighting for basics, or being let down at crucial moments. The positive stories of care show us what the system can deliver, and we must seize the opportunity provided by the Government's Care Review to ensure this is the experience of all children in the system.

What children told us about life in care

The Big Ask presented a unique opportunity to ask a huge number of children in care about all aspects of their lives – about their hopes and aspirations, the importance of community, family, and career. Children in care should not be thought of as different: they share the hopes and aspirations of their peers – the same levels of ambition, the same desire to succeed in education, the same value placed on friends and family. For looked after children, the pathway to securing these things is the care system. In the responses, a theme emerges – a desire for normal life, unmediated through bureaucracy. The result is that the most pressing concerns for children in care are often the things that most other children take for granted: a stable and nurturing home, loving relationships, and being able to make and maintain friendships.

'If a kid moves to a new care placement, what happens to their school, what happens to their friends?'

Girl, 18.

'It was a whole load of different people of different ages thrown into a house. Even though there's people with you that can be so isolating. You're young and living with literal strangers and there was nothing to bring us together'

Girl, 16, reflecting on unregulated accommodation.

For many children, care has given them the loving and supportive basis which enables them to focus on their future aspirations. The most positive descriptions of care often described it as an extension of the relationships they had with parts of their family.

‘My parents always said to me that I’ve got an opportunity to have a 20 times better future than they ever had and that’s what making them happy right now. They know that I’ve got a chance to achieve my potential as an engineer’

Boy, 17.

There was frequent strong appreciation for the efforts of individual foster carers, social workers, and carers.

“They took me into their family home and were like we’re going to treat you as a normal kid, so you don’t need to kick off. It’s a normal family home, I don’t see it as my foster home. I see it as my home, my parents’

Girl, age not given.

We also heard about the times the system was the source of difficulty: ‘I wasn’t so concerned about the pandemic itself, I was more concerned about social services trying to bring me back into care’ – Boy, 17.

Children didn’t always have the confidence that the system would be there for them:

‘I’ve been in the system for so long that getting let down has become normal’

Girl living in mental health ward, 17.

We heard from children who had been moved around the country, and with little say in when or where they were going. We also heard from children who were having to fight the system to enjoy the basic privileges: to get social workers to sign-off a school trip, being told that friends’ family members needed to get CRB checks before a sleepover, a negative attitude to going on holiday with foster families. The issues children raised were sometimes minor, sometimes more serious, but all capable of affecting children’s ability to lead a normal life or plan for the future. What The Big Ask reveals is just how much difference the system makes when it works.

‘I know where I want to be in life, I know what I want to do, I know my aims, I know my dreams. I think ‘cos I’ve got that support around me, I am able to fulfil my dreams and what I want to achieve’

Girl, age not given.

What children said about life in care: the data

- > **The children in care who responded to The Big Ask are generally happy.** Among those aged 9–17, the majority (63%) said they are happy with their life, and 68% said they are happy with their family life. They were less likely to be happy with life at school or college, their mental health, and the choice of things to do in their local area – but, still just over half said they were happy with each of these.
- > **The top three issues that children in care (aged 9–17) were most likely to say they were unhappy with were their mental health (23% unhappy); the choice of things to do in their local area (20% unhappy); life at school at college (19%).** This is remarkably similar to the top three issues that other children aged 9–17 – not in care – are unhappy with.
- > **However there are also some issues where children in care (aged 9–17) are significantly more likely than other children to be unhappy:**
 - Their family life (14% of children in care are unhappy, compared to 6% of other children).
 - Their family's ability to buy the things they need (9% of children in care are unhappy, compared to 3% of other children).
 - Their friendships (11% of children in care are unhappy, compared to 5% of other children).
- > **Children in care generally have similar future aspirations to other children, namely to get on in life.** The top three aspirations among children in care (aged 9–17) were a good job or career (chosen by 66%), enough money to buy the things they need (chosen by 60%), and a good education (chosen by 57%).
- > **However, children in care (aged 9–17) were more likely than other children to say that having a nice home is an important future aspiration.** Conversely, they were less likely than other children to say that a healthy environment and planet is important for their future (14% vs. 22%).
- > **Children in care's worries about the future are more likely to be closer to home, compared to other children (aged 9–17).** Their top five future worries are around having enough money (43%), having a good job (37%), having good mental health (31%), having good friends (30%) and having a nice home to live in (28%). They were considerably less likely than other children to say that the environment (23% vs. 39%), or fairness in society (22% vs. 31%) were one of their main future priorities.

Commissioner's Response: what this means for children in care as we emerge from the pandemic

Every year about 100,000 children will be in care at some point, yet no two journeys into care are the same. The population of children in care includes those who spend a short time in care, those who grow up in care, those who come into care as refugees or unaccompanied children, as asylum seekers and those who go into care because of mental health or disability. Every child in care will have different circumstances, different relations with their birth family and different needs.

But all of these children in care have the same basic rights: a loving and stable home, the ability to make friends and pursue their own interests, the right to go to a good school and the right to get the healthcare they need, especially to recover from past trauma. The care system cannot provide this on its own – schools, the NHS, and others – all have a vital role to play. But the care system needs to provide the stable, loving base which enables these things to happen. The Big Ask, along with other testimony from those in the care system, speaks of a system not providing the consistency and stability that enable children to have confidence that the system will be there for them when they need it.

There are thousands of people working in England's care system striving to achieve these things. But too often this is in spite of a bureaucratic system which frustrates efforts to ensure children always receive the best care. More than anything, the system needs the capacity to respond to children's needs, on their terms, and as these needs change. This would enable the best interests of children – in the short and long-term – to always be the overriding principle in guiding everyday decisions. Children need to be given genuine agency over their own lives and decisions that affect them, backed up by the confidence that the support they need will be there for them. That they can rely on relationships they have developed and that they can plan for the future. This means support up to, and beyond, 18.

These are big questions for the independent Care Review to address. The Children's Commissioner will be involved in this and arguing for these principles to be front and centre of the final report. Once these recommendations are made, we will be focusing on how these changes can be applied across the care system.

In the short-term there are a number of things the government can do to improve provision for children in care.

Policy recommendations for children in care

- > Immediate investment in better residential children's homes for children. This would enable more children to get a good-quality home, near to their original home and with high-quality therapeutic provision provided.
- > Measures that could be taken to improve children in care's access to mental health support and better in-school help. This includes greater more mental health professionals working within the care system and wider use of trauma informed practice.
- > Immediate improvements to care-leavers support, including reforms to Universal Credit.

Conclusion

When we think of the Children's Commissioner speaking on behalf of young people, there might be a tendency to think of children as one amorphous agglomeration of wants and needs – passive and helpless. In the strength and individuality of children's responses, The Big Ask shows us that this is not true.

But if we can crudely assemble their characteristics, this generation is distinctive for a number of reasons: their resilience during the hardships of the past year, their precocious shouldering of responsibility, their ambition for themselves and others, their moral courage in standing up for the change they want to see in the world often in the face of scepticism from adults, and the record-breaking volume of what they have said in their response to our questions.

We see dots joining between other chapters in this report to create a whole – a unifying vision. If we act on what children have said about family and health, we are also investing in their vision of community, of school life, of opportunity. Ultimately the 'big answers' suggested here are not just policies. They represent acts of healing and acts of love, after a great deficit during the pandemic. How much better to meet this moment, not with distance, but with a national embrace.

The quotations used are of course not just data. They are the words of real boys and real girls living in real towns in England. The vision of community children have described is possible. It is something that they were looking for, perhaps while staring out of a window, wondering if lockdown would ever end, and what the world could look like if it did.

It did end. We are back in schools. Good things are happening. We anticipate proper 'catch-up' funding. So far, so good.

But taking the long-view, are we being ambitious enough? It may be that even better answers lie beyond the range of policy options currently on the table. The Big Ask is only the beginning of an ongoing dialogue, the scope of which should reach far into the future. So we set out here some ambitious thinking about how to make England the best country in the world to grow up in.

Now we have been reminded how important a happy home is during the pandemic, could we look again at how families are supported in England? Could we see past a culture in which interventions are sometimes intrusive, and 'done to' families, and look towards a destigmatised, more consensual community-based system which works *with* families to strengthen and support them?

Can we guarantee all children at least one open, clean, safe place to play outside? Guarantee a safe online space by taking tougher action on harmful websites? Guarantee the availability of at least one activity each child can get involved in their community, subsidised if necessary, and only charged on a means-tested basis, whether this is gymnastics, dance or DJing?

Can we design health support for children to the extent that the care system, the NHS, schools, CAMHS all work together in an Integrated Care System which puts children at the centre? This could mean the difference between a child moving into care or staying with their family, moving to a special school, or staying in mainstream education.

Schools work so hard for their children. Naturally, in an ambitious system, schools also work to out-do one another. Does this dynamic support every pupil, as schools must, or inadvertently prioritise some? Certainly, it is working in many places. But in every region? Are these gains sustained, or short-term? Do all schools have the network of support they need to deliver? A thought experiment – if England reaches 100% academisation, then what is next? How can we continue to create sustainably successful schools?

In principle, should performance in academic subjects be as influential a determinant of future earning potential as they currently are? The ‘marginal gains’ approach to squeezing as many as possible through the bottleneck of university entrance inevitably excludes some children, despite their best efforts. Meaningful vocational training might meet their needs, and dovetail with the government’s new industrial strategy for addressing regional inequality, provided the right planning is in place. The goal: parity of esteem for all school leavers.

In the world of work, beyond the life-span of this parliament, could we aim higher still? We could acknowledge that children in this generation and the ones that follow face greater challenges than adults already of age in England. This generation of adults *could* make a collective decision to build a pathway infrastructure many times better than that which went before it. A guarantee to school leavers of one of the following, as a minimum: an apprenticeship, a degree, an entry-level job, access to a civic national service programme providing services to the local community or beyond. Or, very simply, a living wage job.

This vision is large. A new deal for England’s children. It would mean a huge investment, and could not be passed without a great national conversation. But out of great hardship, England has a history of emerging stronger than it was before. Some argued that we could not afford the NHS in 1945. It has now lasted for over 70 years, and we cannot imagine life without it.

Given we have such a politically-engaged generation of children, who have described such a clear vision for a better, greener world, is it time to address their claims of disenfranchisement more directly?

‘Not having a voice in society, adults choosing what young people should do without our opinion. Not being able to vote’

Girl, 16.

In any event, we need to redouble our efforts to make sure children's views on the environment are heard by global leaders. But given the unique scale of inherited problems, highly-specific to this generation of children, opening a dialogue on voting age might show young people that adults are taking them seriously. They have seen behind the curtain of adulthood in lockdown, and dealt with it heroically. Perhaps this is one responsibility 16-year-olds in England can carry themselves.

A final word on the idea of a heroic generation of children. Here are some famous lines at the end of The Great War, just over a century ago:

**'Everyone suddenly burst out singing;
And I was filled with such delight
As prisoned birds must find in freedom,
Winging wildly across the white
Orchards and dark-green fields; on - on - and out of sight.'**

It is easy to see ourselves at that moment, post-pandemic. But it is also easy to see how quickly we can be so drunk on success we follow victory with loss. How easy it would be to fail to create a redemptive post-pandemic settlement, and pass the burden of one generation on to the next, wholesale.

To call children heroic cannot be the end of the story – heroism is not a solution. Heroes suffer and tire and die, and redemption is not always secure. In the end, if children's voices are heard, our hope is that the national story of England's children is one in which the protagonists are never called upon to be heroic, because the support around them means they do not have to be. How much better to build a national community – one body – a sustainable thing where burdens are shared.

This report is an appeal directly to the Government, to the Treasury, to put children at the heart of the recovery. Will this investment show up in GDP next year? No. By the end of this parliament? Perhaps not. But the life of a parliament can mean successive periods of short-term policy-making and generations of children, who cannot vote, are rooted at the bottom of the spending priorities list. Apart from anything else, ensuring secure pathways for young people does make long-term economic sense. Remember that, in a functioning system, each pound invested in securing happy, productive futures for children is repaid tenfold.

Capturing this opportunity with urgency would seal a pact between old and young in this country, between innocence and experience. To return to William Blake, in his Songs of Innocence and Experience, there is a prophetic image in his illustration of his famous poem, 'London,' written at the cusp of the industrial revolution: a man in a city street, ageing and careworn, and a young child in ardent green. The path is narrow, the air thick. A door stands ajar. They seem to move together towards a shaft of brightness. Hand outstretched, it is clear that one figure guides them both forward.

When we asked children what was holding them back in England in 2021, a 16-year-old boy told us something sad: 'The social stigma of children from lower class backgrounds trying to achieve something bigger than themselves.' Read it again. *Children from lower class backgrounds trying to achieve something bigger than themselves.* We should tell him of course that there is nothing bigger than the lives of children. So – not to scorn ambition – we could try to build something equal to it. Take these prophecies and dreams, these arrows of desire, sent out of sight, and somewhere, make them real.

Appendix – The survey questions we asked children

We asked children questions on the following themes.

1. How happy children are with a list of different aspects of their lives at the moment.
2. The most important things for them to have a good life in the future.
3. What they are most worried about in the future.
4. Whether they think will have a better life than their parents when they grow up.
5. What they think needs to change to make their lives better in future.

These questions were tested with children before the survey was launched. Older children (those aged 9 or above) were asked the full set of questions, while younger children completed a simpler version with fewer and shorter questions.³²

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Children's Commissioner for England

Sanctuary Buildings
20 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

Tel: 020 7783 8330

Email: info.request@childrenscommissioner.gsi.gov.uk

Visit: www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

Twitter: @ChildrensComm