



# The environment findings from The Big Ask

---

November 2021

## The Environment – Findings from The Big Ask

### Introduction

‘We are all humans, and earth is our home. People forget that.’ – *Gender not given, 15*

In April 2021, the Children’s Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, launched The Big Ask: a national consultation exercise with children in England to ask them about their lives and their priorities, aspirations and worries for the future. The purpose was not only to provide a large-scale ‘state of the nation’ assessment of the views of children on these issues, but also to help inform the Commissioner’s priorities and longer-term strategy for her term in office, and to help ensure that children’s needs and interests could be placed at the forefront of policy measures to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

The Big Ask ran for approximately 6 weeks and gathered more than 550,000 responses, making it the largest ever survey of children anywhere in the world, to our knowledge.

The 6-8 and 9+ ‘Big Ask’ surveys included one qualitative question each. To ensure the survey was age-appropriate, the questions asked to the 6-8 age group and children aged 9+ were slightly different, though designed to capture the same theme and underlying issues.

The 9-12 and 13-17 surveys asked:

- ‘What do you think stops children/young people in England achieving the things they want to achieve when they grow up?’

The 6-8 survey asked:

- ‘If you could change anything to make your life better when you grow up, what would it be?’

As part of ‘COP-26’ the Children’s Commissioner’s Office has conducted in-depth analysis into what children had to say about the environment in their response to the ‘Big Ask’. We received just under 13,000 responses which referenced the environment. Responses were identified through mentions of words related to the environment and environmental issues: ‘climate’, ‘environment’, ‘global warming’, ‘pollution’, ‘planet’, ‘litter’, ‘animal’, ‘plastic’, ‘earth’, ‘nature’, ‘rubbish’, ‘eco friendly’ and ‘trees’.

The complete methodology for how the free-text responses to the ‘Big Ask’ were analysed is available [here](#).

### **Quantitative findings relating to the environment**

Children aged 9-17 were asked the following question about future priorities: ‘When you grow up, which things, if any, do you think will be the most important for you to have a good life? Choose up to 5 things from the list below’.

Just over 1 in 5 children (22%) chose ‘a healthy environment and planet’ as one of their top 5 priorities. Children who selected this were 90% more likely to also choose ‘everyone being treated fairly’ and 30% more likely to also choose ‘being part of a good local community’.

There was little variation by age for children who chose ‘a healthy environment and planet’, 23% of 9-11 year olds, 21% of 12-15 year olds and 24% of 16-17 year olds selected this.

Girls and children who chose to self-identify their gender were more likely than boys to consider the environment as a future priority (25% and 25% compared to 19% respectively).

Children in the most affluent 10% of areas were 52% more likely than children in the most deprived 10% of areas to choose 'a healthy environment and planet' as one of their future priorities (27% compared to 17%).

Children were then given the same list of options and asked: 'When you grow up which of these, if any, are you most worried that you won't have? Choose up to 5 things.'

'A healthy environment and planet' was the second most commonly selected option with just under 2 in 5 children selecting this (39%). Children who chose this option were more likely to also choose 'everyone being treated fairly', 'being part of a good local community' and 'living in a nice area with things to do'.

Older children were more worried about not having a healthy environment and planet compared to younger children. 16-17 year olds were 30% more likely to choose this than those aged 9-11 (44% compared to 33%). Girls were more worried than boys and children who chose to self-identify their gender about this (42% compared to 37% and 26% respectively).

Compared to children living in the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods, children living in the most affluent 10% of areas were slightly more likely to choose 'a healthy environment and planet' (45% compared to 34%).

## **Qualitative analysis**

### **Statistical overview of children who mentioned the environment in their response**

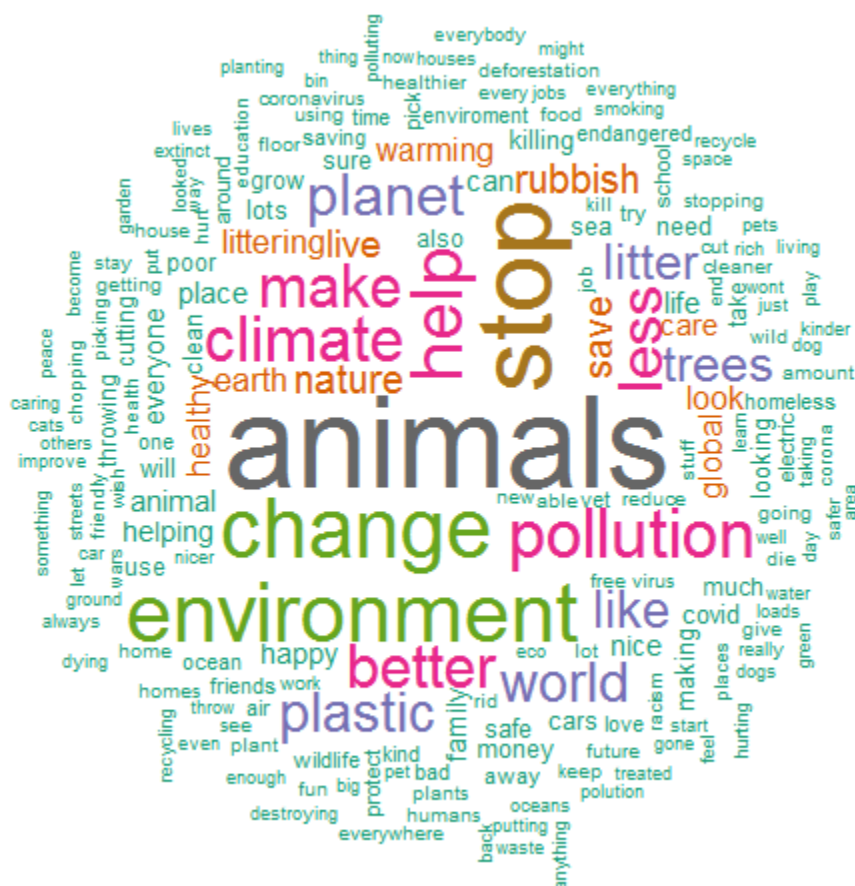
*Table 1 - Percentage of children whose response referenced the environment, by demographic characteristics*

Characteristic	Percentage of children whose response referenced the environment
<b>Age</b>	
6-8	10%
9-11	5%
12-15	4%
16-17	5%
<b>Gender</b>	
Male	5%
Female	5%
Self-identified gender	5%
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Asian	4%
Black	4%
Mixed	5%
Other	4%
White	5%
Ethnicity not given	5%
<b>Urban or rural geography</b>	
Urban	5%
Rural	5%

Children aged 6-8 were the most likely to refer to the environment in their response to what they would change to improve their own lives in the future (10% mentioned this). There were no differences by gender or ethnicity. Interestingly, whether a child lived in an urban or rural environment did not change the likelihood of raising the environment as an issue.

### What 6-8 year olds would change about the environment

Figure 1 - Top 200 most frequently mentioned by children aged 6-8 whose response was categorised under 'the environment'



As Figure 1 shows children aged 6-8 were concerned about animals, climate change, pollution, the use of plastics, littering and rubbish. We also see the use of the word 'better', children talked about wanting a 'better' world to grow up in:

'A better earth without plastic pollution. Looking after our wildlife better.' – *Girl, 8*

'A better environment and cleaner air. [...] no cutting down trees and forests and woods for firewood.' – *Boy, 8*

'A better environment by people picking up their own litter.' – *Girl, 7*

Young children also talked about their ideas to help improve the environment and what they will do to help the environment:

'I will change the world to have no litter.' – *Girl, 6*

'To lead campaigns to stop global warming!' – *Girl, 7*

'Be more kind to nature and look after our environment that we live in.' – *Girl, 8*

'Being healthy, being kind and help the environment (don't throw plastic and rubbish on the road)' – *Boy, 8*

'I would like to stop pollution because it is bad for the planet and [...] when I grow up I don't want to live in a world like that. I just wish I could change that.' *Girl, 8*

When it came to helping the environment, young children talked about their plans to create new technologies to help tackle the problems:

'I wish to invent machines to make the world a better place like machines with sensors to spot and stop people from littering our beautiful earth' – *Girl, 8*

'[I would] build a machine to clean the air for a cleaner environment.' – *Girl, 8*

'Inventing an environmentally friendly car.' – *Girl, 7*

'I want to invent things that will help animals that are in danger. That will help me because they are part of my eco system.' – *Boy, 6*

'I'd make a device that covers the trees that need to be protected' – *Boy, 7*

### Children are concerned about the scale of environmental challenges

Children in England are very aware of environmental issues such as climate change, pollution and the risks of using plastics, as one 12-year-old child said: 'there is no planet B'. They are passionate about the environment but are concerned that not enough has been done globally to tackle it, meaning that the responsibility for addressing the issues will fall on their generation.

'I would ask the grown-ups who are in charge now to start looking after our planet properly and not just talk about it and do nothing, so when I'm old it's still a nice place to love [live].' - *Boy, 8*

'Younger people are going to have to take most of, if not all, the burden from the climate change and global warming the older generations caused and didn't take responsibility for.' - *Boy, 13*

'The constant worry of inheriting a planet with very little time left due to climate change. It seems unfair that we are left a world with very little time left to save.' – *Girl, 16*

'Our generation has practically been given the responsibility of keeping our planet healthy when nothing significant will happen unless a major corporation or country leaders do something.' – *Non-binary, 13*

For some children, these worries for the future are impacting their motivation and dreams now.

'Climate change is a huge uncertainty for children and young people. Personally, I feel less motivated and unsure about my future, as I don't even know if I'll have one.' – *Girl, 16*

'Mainly the irreversible nature of climate change and pollution, in that there will be very little left of the earth by the time the new generation will be able to inherit it leads to much smaller hopes and dreams.' – *Girl, 14*

## Children want to get involved

When it comes to both local and global environmental issues, children and young people across England want to get involved and work collaboratively with adults, governments and their communities to solve these challenges.

'Environmental problems, we all want to help and are told that this generation will be responsible for "saving the planet" but we aren't allowed to help.' – *Girl, 14*

'Climate change and the fact that the environment could affect our future [...] we all need to take responsibility in order to save the future of children.' – *Girl, 14*

'We [children] realise that the society we build right now will help build a society and living environment for our children when we grow up, and we want our children to have the best possible society to grow up and live in.' – *Girl, 14*

'Climate change. We are the generation to stop this, but we are not the only people who need to change it. [...] adults have more power than children, and therefore can help us to achieve the great.' – *Girl, 13*

Children shared their ideas for what could be done to help address environmental issues, which became more complex as they got older.

'Poor environment, we need to save the planet and protect wildlife. More green jobs, homes are needed. [...] everything is for now not the next generation.' – *Boy, 9*

'We need to focus more on being innovative to first of solve the problems that we have (global warming, world hunger, food and water scarcity, animals going to extinction, etc) [...] help us build a better future because when your gone your gone and we are the ones who have to stay in this world and I do not want to teach the next generation the same things we have learnt.' – *Girl, 15*

Some children explained how they have changed their own lifestyles and shared their ideas for what could be done to support the environment.

'I've taken action to reduce my carbon footprint and lessen my negative impact on the earth. I'm vegan, I take public transport, I rarely travel anywhere by car or plane, I reduced my single use plastic usage, I eat more locally produced food, I don't use the thermostat often, if at all. [...] I just want to know if I have a chance at a safe and certain future; it doesn't feel like it right now.' – *Girl, 17*

'I think I speak for many young people here when I say that our local and wider community could do so much more to help preserve biodiversity in big communities or small, whether that's setting up a few more garden bird feeders or inserting more electronic car chargers in town centres or garages.' – *Girl, 13*

However, they also felt that there were limited platforms for them to speak from or they lacked opportunities to get involved in bigger change beyond their own lifestyles. Children were clear that they would value the opportunity to 'speak up' and 'have their voice heard' on climate issues. As one 15-year-old girl said: 'We simply wish to be a part of the conversations [...] we get that we still have a lot to learn, but we also have a lot to bring to the table.'

'Restricting efforts of young people, including myself, from being able to help the planet (my main goal for now and when I grow up).' – *Girl, 15*

'Adults often don't listen to what we really want. We don't want paper straws, we want actual government action against climate change.' – *Girl, 14*

'When we try to have an impact on our country we are ignored which has led to many not having any other choice but to protest (e.g. about climate change [...]) to get our voices heard, even then we are never listened to.' – *Boy, 15*

'Children not having a voice in government. [...] I want less pollution, more electric cars, stop global warming,' – *Girl, 9*

'I think in England we need to be able to work together and help the planet. If other countries aren't going to start working hard for a better life we should take the first step. [...] children have so much to say about what is happening [...] we don't get the opportunity to speak up!' – *Girl, 12*

# Children's COMMISSIONER

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

Tel: 020 7783 8330

Email: [info.request@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](mailto:info.request@childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)

Visit: [www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk)

Twitter: @ChildrensComm