

Business Plan

2022-2023

Children's Commissioner's Office - Business Plan 2022-23

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza

My first and most important task as Children's Commissioner for England is to listen to the voices of children up and down the country, particularly those who don't always have their voices heard, to understand what matters most to them, and what help they need to have good childhoods and to grow up to be successful adults.

That's why last year I launched [The Big Ask](#), the largest ever survey of children. Over half a million children responded, filling out the survey and sending in their personal thoughts and ideas about their lives today and their aspirations and dreams for the future.

I now feel a responsibility to build on what children have told me. It is their right to be heard, and I have made it my priority to listen and then act. I have five more years in this role and The Big Ask provides me with a clear roadmap of what children want – and how to make this country the best place in the world to grow up.

Seven clear priority areas have emerged from The Big Ask. These are the things children value in our society: their family, their community, their health and wellbeing, their education, their future jobs and skills, and making a better world. I will also pay particular attention to children in the care of the state and those who have a social worker. These children have the same dreams and aspirations as their peers, but they often need additional and distinctive support to reach their goals. I want us to be as ambitious for these children as they are for themselves. I have also consulted widely with organisations working with children, which has helped to shape the office's strategic priorities. These seven priority areas will steer my time as Children's Commissioner.

Over the last year, following on from The Big Ask, I have already begun to focus on these areas, and as my one year in role [publication](#) demonstrates I am already delivering for children. I have also responded to live issues affecting children that they have raised with me directly or where their voices haven't been heard loudly enough, including the tragic deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson. I will continue to address emerging challenges children face over the coming year.

Key highlights from the last year include the Government commission where I was asked to suggest ways to make the online world a safer place for children. This work included hosting a roundtable with the Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary of State

for Culture, Media and Sport, and the major tech companies. I also hosted a roundtable with the adult companies and published my [guidance](#) for parents 'The Things I Wish My Parents Had Known'. As a result of this work, a lot of the office's asks have been adopted in the Online Safety Bill, such as securing full coverage of commercial pornography sites and a requirement on these platforms to age verify users. This year, I will continue to follow the Bill closely as it passes through Parliament and represent children's voices in it. I will also be working to hold social media companies to account on children's use of their platforms, hearing more from children and young people about their experiences of harm online, and pushing for stronger safeguards for children online ahead of the Bill.

I have also undertaken a major project into children's attendance at school. School is the best place for children to be, to receive an excellent education, take part in sporting and enrichment activities and to receive any additional support they might need. Some children, however, struggle to stay in school, and are either persistently absent or not in education altogether, often because of unmet mental health or special educational needs or because of bullying or problems at home or at school. This was the case before the pandemic, but the disruption of the last few years has exacerbated this problem. I have conducted a survey of all local authorities and deep dives into 10 areas to explore these issues in more detail, and to understand how these children can be identified, and how their needs can be better met. I have already published the interim findings of this work and will publish my full findings and recommendations in early summer.

As Children's Commissioner, I have a particular responsibility towards children who rely on the state for their safety or protection. Over the past year, my team and I have supported hundreds of children and families in the most complex and serious situations, through my Help at Hand service. This document sets out my ambition to make sure this service reaches even more children, at the moments when they do not have anyone else to help them and provides an accessible digital offer to demystify the care system. I have used the experiences children have shared with me to set out my vision paper for children's a social care system built around the core experiences every child deserves. This document sets out how my office will build on this vision, with practical work to support reform of

the system which delivers on children's aspirations for the care system they want to see.

A major piece of work that I am particularly excited about doing this year is the Family Review. The Government has asked me to conduct this work. In The Big Ask, children told me how much they care about family – families in all their forms. I will be exploring all aspects of modern family life, and how as a society we should be thinking about families and how they can best be supported, with a particular focus on children’s perspectives on family life. This major review, reporting in the autumn, will involve extensive qualitative and quantitative research, and build on the knowledge and expertise of key stakeholders and experts in family life.

Alongside these extensive projects my team will continue to conduct further analysis of the wealth of information about children’s views within The Big Ask and undertake a range of further research under seven priority areas. All this will help us work towards the Commissioner’s goal of placing children’s voices at the heart of public policy in this country. It is my responsibility to work on and address issues facing children across the whole of the United Kingdom. I will continue to convene and discuss things that matter to children with fellow BINOCC colleagues.

This Business Plan for the next year outlines the office’s priorities which are drawn from what children think, feel, and need as outlined in The Big Ask.

I have listened to children's voices to create my Business Plan

All the areas in the Business Plan have been set by what children told me is important to them, as the below quotes from The Big Ask demonstrate.

Better world

'If we don't fix climate change, we won't have a future' - *Gender not given, 12.*

'Nobody is less capable than anyone [...] if they have a different colour of skin [...] they should be treated fairly' - *Boy, 10.*

'The effects of it may be irreversible, and it is very daunting for young people to have the responsibility of dealing with its effects' - *Gender not given, 15.*

Community

'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.*

'Girls in uniform get catcalled by creeps. [...] We deserve better' - *Girl, 16.*

'I think there should be more clubs in my local area and interesting play areas' - *Boy, 14.*

Family

'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.*

'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.*

'I want to take care of people and my children and make them grow up healthy' - *Girl, 6.*

School

'I really want to learn even if it's hard because education is important to me' - *Girl, 11.*

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.*

'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.*

Care

'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.*

'I've been in the system for so long that getting let down has become normal' - *Girl living in a mental health ward, 17.*

'If a kid moves to a new care placement, what happens to their school, what happens to their friends?' - *Girl, 18.*

Health and wellbeing

'[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.*

'I think for some young people, the lack of confidence they have affects their overall wellbeing, particularly during the pandemic where it is difficult to interact' - *Boy, 13.*

'[Mental health] 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.*

Jobs and skills

'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.*

'If people actually had more opportunity and more choice, maybe they would be choosing the right path and actually find fulfilment within life' - *Girl, 17*.

Executive summary of the Business plan for 2022/23

This year's Business Plan outlines what the office will achieve for children. It will see the office continue many of the strands of work that they have already delivered against in the past year.

The first year in role saw [The Big Ask](#) take place, this was the largest ever survey of children in England. 557,077 children aged 4-17 responded from all 151 local authorities in England, and nearly 260,000 children responded to the free-text questions. The office received unprecedented levels of response from vulnerable and disadvantaged groups: over 5,900 children in care, over 97,000 children with an additional learning need, 2,300 children from a Gypsy or Irish Traveller background, and 6,000 young carers. This work saw the office publish a series of policy papers – and a number of the office's recommendations were included in the 2021 Spending Review.

The Big Ask helped the office set its plan of work that will shape the long-term agenda to deliver for children across the country. All the office's work from the first year has been outlined in the 'One Year as Children's Commissioner' publication.

The seven priority areas that were outlined in The Big Ask were:

1. A Better World: Putting children's voices at the heart of policy making, particularly on issues which children tell us they care the most about, including the environment and building a fairer society.
2. Community: Providing children with the time and space to play safely on - or offline, no matter where in the country they live. Ensuring that children are supported to feel safe in their communities, including women and girls.
3. Family: Thinking of children as part of a wider family unit, and highlighting the need to focus on families, and support for families right from the earliest years.
4. School: Helping all children to succeed in school, particularly those with additional needs. Ensuring the right provision for children with special educational needs and a

focus on support for those at risk of falling behind their peers, in the early years and throughout their time in school

5. Children in care: Raising the ambition we have as a society for children growing up in care. This means building on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care to set out a new approach, with a clearer outcomes framework, more support to help families stay together and a strong focus on improving stability for children in care, with more high quality foster and children's homes across the country.
6. Health and wellbeing: Prioritising children's health and wellbeing, including mental and physical health, with a focus on increasing access to the right care, in the right place, at the right time.
7. Jobs and skills: Adopting a cradle to career approach to education, including a stronger focus on vocational routes such as apprenticeships and better careers education, bringing schools and workplaces closer together, helping children achieve their ambition of a good job or career when they grow up.

These priorities are what children tell us they care about most. They will shape the work of this office in the months and years ahead and the office's success will be judged on its ability to make progress towards these goals. The office will continue to work with, and be held to account by, the Education Select Committee.

Most of the Business Plan document is structured around the priority areas children set out through The Big Ask. Yet an over-arching message received from children is that children do not experience issues, or access services, in isolation. Specifically, children told us that they want the support they receive to be integrated, cohesive and aligned to their needs. Accordingly, a priority for the office this year is to tackle the systemic issues which are preventing the cohesive response children are seeking.

This work is outlined below, including the work the office will deliver against each of The Big Ask pillars, its work on Public Service reform, and how research and children's voice will underpin all the work it does.

Pillar 1: Better world

'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*.

'We are all humans, and earth is our home. People forget that' - *Gender not given, 15*.

The Big Ask paints a picture of a passionate and compassionate generation. They are ambitious, forward looking, conscientious and kind. Children told us that they want to build a fairer society. They want all children to have happy lives, with access to all the things they need. They want all children to have the same opportunities as each other across the country. Most importantly, they have a lot to say about the world around them and they want to contribute to their communities and have their say on the issues that matter.

Last year, the office strived to make sure that children's voices are represented on their concerns for the future of the planet and environment by working with Generation Earthshot and with children at COP26. The office will continue to take children's message and thoughts on the environment to policy makers, parliamentarians and those who take decisions that affect children's futures.

This year, the office will build on the foundations of this work and what children told us in The Big Ask. It will do this by working with children and young people to bring their voices into the heart of Government and wider society, this will underpin all the work that it does. The office will continue to ask questions, listen to the answers, and then act on children's views.

The Big Ask highlighted children's passion to be involved in decisions that affect their futures and their desire to understand why decisions are made. That's why the office will set up a Children's Advisory Board and Care Experienced Advisory Board to involve young people in its work, both of which will be co-developed with them to ensure meaningful benefits. The office will undertake two projects which will be led by its Care Experienced Advisory Board. First, a focus for children the office has spoken to this year has been the

transition into care and the first 100 days in care. The office will undertake some child-led work to better understand this experience and provide practical materials for children and professionals to support and empower children during this process. Secondly, the office's long-term aspiration is to see children in care empowered to shape long-term care plans that set out a vision for when children want to get to and the care they need to achieve this. This year the office will commence work to understand what children want to be included in their care plans, how they want to be involved and best practice for child-centric care planning.

One group of children emerged from The Big Ask as much more likely to say they were unhappy with their lives and that was children from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller background. The office will conduct further analysis of responses from this group of children along with wider research on their outcomes and experiences this year.

Importantly, the Better World pillar of The Big Ask showed us that children are largely united amongst their wants, needs, and desires. They want to be heard and for someone to listen – the office will be listening to children and will make sure all work is delivering for them. In particular, the office will continue to look at where disparities in opportunities and outcomes exist and make sure that systemic barriers are addressed as well as more practical obstacles removed, so that children can feel confident that they are growing up in a world that feels fair.

Pillar 2: Community

'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.

In The Big Ask the office heard from many girls describing their experiences of abuse and harassment, online and in real life. The Everyone's Invited campaign has shone a light on this issue and brought much needed attention from schools and policymakers on children's experiences of abuse. The Children's Commissioner sat on the Ofsted Review into sexual harassment and abuse in schools and on the Prime Minister's G7 Advisory Council on Gender Equality.

As a result of this the Children's Commissioner was commissioned by Government to look at how children's views can be reflected in the Online Safety Bill. Part of this was looking at how children can be better protected online before the Bill comes into effect. Alongside roundtables with the Secretary of State for Education and the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, tech companies, and the adult industries, the office has also used its convening power to gather leading charities and online harms organisations. To support parents, the office produced a [guide for parents](#) on talking to children about online sexual harassment. After [the final recommendations](#) to the Government Commission, the Commissioner was pleased to see many of her recommendations adopted in the Online Safety Bill. These included the full coverage of commercial pornography sites, specific references to the role of age assurance in platforms' responsibilities to children, and a duty on platforms to detect and report child sexual abuse material (CSAM).

To take forward this work the office will continue to campaign for a strong Online Safety Bill which reflects children's needs and experiences of harm online. This includes making sure that all commercial pornography sites are required to age verify users and other platforms ensure that users meet the minimum age in terms of service. The commission response showed that underage use of social networking platforms is widespread and normalised. There is also an issue around harmful content, the office found that this is not

adequately addressed by platforms' moderation policies, and it will be requesting greater clarity from tech firms on both of these issues.

The office will supplement the information which companies provide with more quantitative and qualitative work with children and parents. And will use this research to inform its work on the Online Safety Bill where it will continue to represent children's voices as part of the passage of the legislation.

The office's research so far has also uncovered a serious issue around children's exposure to pornography and the causal effect that this has in cases of peer-on-peer abuse. The office will continue work on this issue by conducting research with Sexual Abuse Referral Clinics (SARCs) around data collection and talking to young people who have been referred for experiences of peer-on-peer abuse.

In The Big Ask, children told us how much they value knowing they can get help from adults when they don't feel safe, and so this year, the office will look at how all children are heard when they need help, particularly by the police. In light of the Local Child Safeguarding Practice Review into Child Q, the office will work with the National Police Chiefs Council, the Metropolitan Police and other agencies to make sure children's views and voices are reflected in their work.

Pillar 3: Family

'A loving family is worth more than money and will give you guidance support and love and advice' – *Boy, 11.*

'My foster carers work hard to help me and promote my relationship with my birth parents. Because of that I feel like I have more love than a normal child. It makes me feel stronger. [...] I love my foster carers, they treat me like their own but still support me loving and accepting my parents' – *Girl, 14, living in foster care.*

The Big Ask showed how important families are to children. Children explained how having a supportive family has a positive impact on their lives – from receiving emotional support, to being able to talk with family members about their worries and aspirations for the future.

These findings shone a light on how important families are and how important it is for services to see families as a whole not a collection of individuals. That's why family has formed a core pillar of the office's work and now the Children's Commissioner has been commissioned by the Government to undertake an independent review into contemporary family life in Britain. This Review was a recommendation of the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities, which found evidence that family life is a key factor in many of the disparities in children's outcomes.

Through the Review the office will use quantitative and qualitative research to understand more about children and parents' perspectives about contemporary family life and about the support they are offered by public and voluntary services. The office will also explore whether public services understand the needs of families as a unit, rather than as a collection of individuals. This includes looking at what makes the perfect Family Hub and how the network should operate. The office has already discussed the terms of reference with key stakeholders and looks forward to working in partnership with others

with expertise on families and family life through the course of this Review. The office will look at the pressures facing families today and explore the perspectives of children and carers in the many different kinds of families in England, including separated families, adopted children, kinship carers and foster families.

The Children's Commissioner will travel the country to hear from all families, from every area and every background. The office will aim to capture the voice of the child, parents, carers, local services, and communities within this research. The Review is a chance to really understand what family means to the nation, what children and carers feel about family, what support is already in place and what more we can do. By doing this we can do more to create an environment to help all families and communities thrive.

Pillar 4: School

‘People don’t realise how much education is important for life in general. [...] if they don’t learn in school, they might not be able to enjoy life to the fullest’ – *Girl, 14.*

In The Big Ask, children told us that they like school, and its absence from their lives during lockdown crystalised this. They told us about how much they love their teachers, and the vast majority find schools nurturing and supportive. Where children require additional support, and they receive it in school, they are happier than the overall cohort. Vulnerable children, such as those with Special Education Needs and Disabilities or in receipt of the pupil premium, were even more likely than their peers to say education was important to their future plans.

The office’s ambition for education is rooted in children’s ambitions for themselves. Children want to make progress in education, and every child deserves a school that matches their ambition and provides them with the best possible education. That means every child starting school ready to learn and then being able to read and write when they leave primary school and obtain a Level-2 qualification by the end of secondary school. The Commissioner wants all children to be attending excellent schools and all schools to have the capacity to provide an offer to children which extends from an enriching curriculum to additional support, including pastoral, and for schools to be equal safeguarding partners.

This starts with children regularly attending school. This year the office will complete its Attendance Audit as part of the Government’s Attendance Action Alliance. The office has been commissioned to bring children’s voices and experiences of school attendance to the Alliance and identify the opportunities for providing the support children and families seek to enable them to get to school. The office has already published its [survey of local authorities](#) to better understand where children are. Following this, the office will complete a deep dive of 10 local authorities, this includes focus groups with children who are not attending school and interviews with local leaders responsible for safeguarding and education. This will inform a report which identifies the barriers to children attending school regularly and the best practice for supporting them. For the third phase of the research, the office will collect attendance data for the autumn 2021 term from three Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) to analyse patterns of attendance throughout the term.

Ahead of the 2022-2023 school year, the office will research the best practice for supporting students in returning to school and publish guidance for families and professionals ahead of the start of the new term to ensure there is a plan for every child to be in school, ready to learn, every day.

A strong message the office hears from children, both through The Big Ask and its wider work with children with additional needs, is that children want school to be the locus of any support they might need. This further confirms the need for every child that can be in school, to attend regularly. Children say they want to be able to access mental health support in school, children in care say the school pastoral lead is where they turn to for advice with their care package. There are lots of examples of schools working effectively with families to improve both attendance and attainment. Many schools are already expanding the range of support they offer to children and families and positioning themselves to be the central access point for multiple services. As the Schools White Paper sets out a transition to a system for all schools to be in families of schools, the office will explore the possibilities this presents to expand schools' capacity to operate as this nexus of support and look at the reforms necessary to empower schools to take a more active role in designing local systems.

In The Big Ask, children said that they don't always get the opportunity to learn about 'real life' subjects such as how to keep healthy. Building on this finding, this year the office will explore how the PSHE curriculum is meeting the needs of children by gathering insights into children's views of PSHE and how to support effective teaching in schools.

Following the publication of the SEND Green Paper and [the office's research into Education Health and Care Plans \(EHCPs\)](#), the office will carry out focus groups with children with SEND, to put their voices at the heart of the SEND reforms. The office will also reflect the experiences of children with SEND who have engaged with Help at Hand in the Commissioner's response to the SEND Review Green Paper alongside a report presenting the thoughts and voices of children with SEND across England, gathered through a wide-scale nationally representative survey of over 3,000 children in March 2021.

To ensure children have the opportunity to do well in education, they need to arrive in

school ready to learn. The office's work on system-wide outcomes will seek to focus on the children who arrive at school significantly behind their expected development levels, as well as the importance of consistent and engaged school attendance. The office will follow-on from this by looking at the opportunities to identify, intervene and support children before school, so that all children can begin education ready and able to engage.

The Commissioner wants to make sure [all children leave school being able to read and write](#) – the office will work with schools, parents and civil society to encourage and promote a love of reading from an early age.

Pillar 5: Children's Social Care

'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.*

'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.*

In The Big Ask, children in care said that they share the same hopes and aspirations as their peers. Children said about the care they were grateful for, but also about the bureaucratic processes which they found frustrating and sometimes alienating. There were too many stories of fighting for basics, being let down at crucial moments and placement or school instability.

In response, in January 2022 the office published a [vision paper](#) for the children's social care system. This paper was grounded in the experiences children had shared and set-out an ambition for a system built around the core elements of good care all children and families should expect: to be listened to and responded to; to have relationships that are trusting and stable; to feel loved, supported and stable and to be able to access practical help and support. The Commissioner's commitment to seeing a reformed system, that consistency delivers these elements, remains. The priority this year will be using the opportunity presented by the publication of the Social Care Review to further this end.

The office's work over the next year will combine a commitment to the over-arching reform with what children say they want, with responses to the specific issues children are encountering in the system today. The specific issues will continue to be informed by the issues children raise through Help at Hand, the office's advocacy service for children in care.

The Commissioner wants all children in the care system to be listened to and empowered. The office will review its own service for children in care and social care, so it reaches more children, more effectively. The office has a unique peer-led digital offer for children in care and care leavers, IMO, that sits separately to the Children's Commissioner's digital offer. The office will improve its digital offer by integrating peer-led and professional

support so that it is there for children when they want to hear from other children in a similar situation, or, when they need to challenge decisions made about them. The office will also be working to improve the quality and accessibility of local advocacy services through an advocacy audit.

The office will focus on the children who fall between social care and mental health. An increasing number of children needing support get bounced between hospitals and children's homes, and this is reflected in the experiences of children who seek support through Help at Hand. These children should experience stability and care in a holistic and therapeutic package. The office wants to improve co-operation around children where there is a lack of professional agreement.

The Commissioner wants all children to feel loved, supported, and stable and so to help achieve this, the office will commence a detailed look at where children in care live and call home. This will help to understand how to improve stability, support, and love. The office will examine support for specialist fostering as an alternative to children's homes to give more children an opportunity to grow up in a family rather than an institution, including for Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children.

The office wants all children and families to be able to access practical help and support when in care or receiving social care. This year they will commence an examination of Child in Need plans to see how many contain practical and evidenced based support packages, with a particular focus on the contribution of the NHS and schools.

Pillar 6: Health

'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.*

'There needs to be more of a push towards physical fitness as it's a real motivation booster' - *Boy, 16.*

It was clear from The Big Ask that children today value their mental and physical wellbeing and recognise how important good mental and physical health is as part of a good childhood and a successful adulthood. Mental health was one of the biggest worries for children, especially for teenage girls. The office [published its annual briefing](#) on children's mental health earlier this year, and will do the same again next year to track progress and make sure children's experiences of the mental health system are improving.

Another strong theme from The Big Ask was that children recognised the importance of living healthy lives as one of the key elements of a successful adulthood. The office heard from many children, frustrated by the restrictions of successive lockdowns, who wanted to get back to the sports and activities they loved.

That's why this year the office will look at children and young people's physical and mental health. A significant proportion of children said in The Big Ask that they were unhappy or worried about their mental health. The office will work with children and young people to understand in more detail how they would like to receive support, feeding into the Government's forthcoming mental health strategy. It is clear how much children who have access to mental health support in schools value it, including through mental health support teams (MHSTs) and virtual counselling. The office will work to make sure that all children have access to both of those things, and push for the roll out of MHSTs to be in all schools by 2025.

Children also said that they see mental and physical health as closely linked, so the office will work with them to better understand what support they need to have healthy as well as happy lives. The office will undertake a project to better understand the barriers

that children face in being able to access the sports and activities they love. It will bring together experts and listen to children to understand what more can be done to help children get involved in sport and to tackle childhood obesity. This will focus on better understanding how to support healthy habits that last into adulthood. The Commissioner will also take a delegation of children to the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham this summer. Children are also looking forward to supporting England in this year's World Cup and so the office will bring together sporting role models to inspire the next generation of sport stars.

Children's healthcare is largely based on community services, such as health visiting, school nursing and community health clinics. The way in which these services are organised leads to a high degree of complexity and a lack of transparency on access to early diagnosis and treatment. The reforms under the current Health Bill provide an opportunity to think afresh about how healthcare for children can be provided in a more joined up way as part of Integrated Care Systems. This will require a concerted effort, prioritising the needs of children as part of health reforms and ensuring that these changes work in tandem with reforms to the social care and special educational needs systems. The fact that major reforms are in train across all these systems provides an opportunity to start from first principles about how health and care can work for children. The Commissioner will continue to make the case for this integrated reform and use the convening power of the office to bring together policy makers and practitioners across the fields of health, care, and education to encourage more joined-up thinking.

Pillar 7: Jobs and skills

'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 think that the stigma in girls in science and maths is very toxic. From very young, as a girl I didn't see any girls taking on that career path and just thought that girls couldn't do this. I now know that I want to go into the chemistry field and ... overall people have told me and every other girl that we can't do this and it is a boys thing to do' - *Girl, 14.*

In The Big Ask children said they want to work hard and do well in life. They are ambitious and spoke in terms not just of jobs, but careers. A good job or career was the most common priority for 9–17-year-olds when they grow up. 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, 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. Children want more opportunities after school than just university and the office shared more detail around responses about apprenticeships in The Big Ask in a report and blog post coinciding with National Apprenticeships Week.

Jobs and skills will be a focus of the Children's Advisory Board and Care Experienced Advisory Board to investigate the important areas and develop resources to be shared with children and young people across the country. The office will also be offering training and development opportunities as part of the Advisory Boards programmes. As well as utilising the queries received from children in care and care leavers by the Help at Hand service to help steer the offer.

In The Big Ask children shared a recognition of the opportunities that science, technology, engineering, and maths (STEM) can provide and that they felt this is an area that is not emphasised enough. Girls highlighted the need for female role models within

these subjects and careers. This was to help them see a future for themselves. So, to help connect the maths curriculum with careers, skills and everyday life, the office is developing a resource for children that will share career profiles of people who use maths in their jobs and how maths has helped them in their careers and lives. These 'role models' aren't necessarily in a maths specific career, but more generally make use of maths or maths-related skills like problem solving, creativity and analytical thinking in their working life.

Throughout the next year, the office wants to help children link their education to potential careers, encourage their ambition and mediate the concerns they may have around this.

Innovation work: Improving Public Services for children

Through The Big Ask, Help at Hand, and projects conducted over the last year, the office has identified some recurring themes that cut across multiple services and areas of Public Service delivery. The office will take a child-centred approach to solving these issues so that those who most need support is able to access it in a way that is designed around them – making sure that everyone working with children and young people understand their needs, are working towards common and shared outcomes, with systems and structures to make that as easy as possible.

Outcomes

Children repeatedly say that they want the services they access to share their ambitions and to be striving for the same ends. Yet at present different services working with children tend to have misaligned and disparate ends. To address this, the office will commence a programme of work that seeks to build consensus around a set of common system-wide outcomes which can bring together all the different services working with children to agree on common goals.

In the first part of this work, the office will seek to engage across all the agencies working with children to create practical proposals for a set of uniform outcomes measures which represent tangible improvements in children's experience or opportunities; will drive system cohesion and hold all parts of the system accountable for the benefit they are making to children's lives.

In the second part of this project, the office will seek to explore more effective ways of utilising children's experiences to gather meaningful insight on issues such as well-being, safety, access to activities and family cohesion. These are the things children say are important to them, The Big Ask demonstrates that it is practical and meaningful to ask children about this at scale, the office will explore how this could be rolled-out to gather insights that can inform local and national planning.

Data-sharing

A repeated frustration the office hears from children is that decisions are made about them without professionals knowing the relevant information, or vulnerable children having to repeatedly tell different professional uncomfortable and private details about their lives. A frequent issue the office encounters in its research work is a misalignment

between need and provision, where the most in need miss out on support because they are effectively invisible to services at crucial points.

Digitalised systems offer the opportunity to address many of these issues, at the same time minimising unnecessary data sharing (for instance, by sharing key facets of information rather than full, personal, case files). But this needs effective systems and empowered by professionals, underpinned by a clear understanding of the different legal frameworks, and the benefit to children.

This year the office will work with the Information Commissioner's Office to bring together professionals working in all different spheres to think about how to promote the best interests of children, share data-proportionally and utilise the benefits of digitalised system is delivering more responsive and efficient services for children.

Unique Child Identifier

As part of the office's work on data sharing, the office will work with the Department for Education, the Information Commissioner's Office and other interested stakeholders across social care, education, and health to strongly promote the development and use of a single unique child identifier. This is a key enabler to effective data sharing across multiple services at a local, operational level. The office supports that this identifier should be assigned to a child from birth to not only identify children of school age missing from education, but also to look at outcomes and wider safeguarding for children in their early years and onwards.

This year the office will support and feed into work of the development of a unique child identifier being led by Government - providing evidence as business cases informed by the work in social care, health and education and will promote this at every opportunity.

Defining Disadvantage

The Children's Commissioner stands up for the rights of the most vulnerable children in England. The office always captures their voices, carrying out both qualitative and quantitative research to have robust evidence on their behalf to inform policy solutions on service design and implementation. In The Big Ask the office heard from Children in Care, Children with a Social Worker, Young Carers, Children receiving Mental Health Support, Children with Special Educational Needs and Children supported by Youth Offending teams.

Over the next year the office will look again at how disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of children are defined by gathering data and carrying out analysis looking at the children who have the poorest outcomes in education, health, care and jobs and skills. The office will particularly look at children who might be seen as having multiple vulnerabilities. The office will also consult with external expert stakeholders who have a strong interest in this area. Building on previous work, the office will publish analysis and datasets so that they are available to all. This analysis and data will be promoted externally so that the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children are always considered in policy and service development for children and families.

Research and listening to children will underpin all the work the office does

To further the national understanding of the issues impacting children and young people in England under each of these strands, high quality, impactful research will underpin all the work that the office does.

The Children's Commissioner has a unique power granted by Section 2F of the Children Act 2004 to compel any person exercising functions of a public nature to supply information to the Commissioner where that data relates to the functions of the Commissioner and her remit to represent the rights and interests of children in England. Under all strands of work, the research team will identify where data can be collected to curate novel datasets and information resources to further its understanding of the issues.

The voice of children will be central to all projects the office undertakes. To build on the themes and issues identified by children and young people through The Big Ask the research team will co-ordinate qualitative engagement with children, and their families, across the country, to ensure that projects are reflecting children's lived experience and their voices remain at the heart of its work. The office will reach children where they are and ensure opportunities are created for children, particularly for those who are the most vulnerable.

The office will commission nationally representative surveys to provide bespoke quantitative and qualitative data to complement the information collected from other organisations and fill gaps in the evidence base.

The research team will build on its existing statistical, data science and social research capabilities to carry out analysis across the range of data resources. This will provide new insights and opportunities for intervention and where support for children and families can have the most impact. The office's analysis will bring together multiple data sources, bridging the gaps between departments areas of responsibilities to create holistic views of children that enable us to get to the real root of the issues they experience.

The office will also consult and collaborate with departments who are conducting

research regarding children and their families, using its expertise and knowledge of children and young people's priorities to shape research to reflect the needs of children. The office will continue to provide advice and challenge across Government, to ensure that data collections, surveys and research programmes are inclusive of disadvantaged groups and accessible to children with additional needs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this year's Business Plan is driven by what children have said they want and need, in the largest ever survey of children The Big Ask. These findings have helped decide the seven key priorities areas where children said change would make the most difference to their lives.

This year the office will place a particular focus on support for those who need additional help to attend and be engaged in school, on family life, and on children's health. In subsequent years the office will delve deeper into some of the other strategic priorities which were outlined in The Big Ask.

In everything the office does it will speak to and consult children, parents, stakeholders, and other thought leaders. This will allow the office to make sure what is most important to children is constantly reflected and prioritised in its work so that their needs can be responded to. The office will remain flexible and agile in responding to new and emerging issues that children face, or where they tell they would like focus to be given.

The office will continue to put a spotlight on children who face additional challenges in their lives – children who need more than just a teacher at school and families who need extra support. This will be aided by direct work with children through Help at Hand and the IMO hub. This work is intended to add real value to what is already known about the challenges facing children and to develop ambitious yet practical solutions both at a national policy level and for frontline practitioners. Every element of this plan is designed to contribute to the overall mission – to deliver for children.

This year is a moment to drive real change for children, to make sure that every child across the UK knows that the Children's Commissioner is listening to them, and representing their rights and needs.

Appendix: How the work in the Business Plan will map against the UNCRC priorities

This year, alongside the other UK Children’s Commissioners, the office will report to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child as they conduct their 5 yearly review of the UK’s progress on implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The office has already reported to the UN on the key issues that should be explored as part of the review. This year the office will provide its response to the UK Government’s assessment of progress against these issues. The UN Committee will then conduct its own assessment and will report on their concluding observations in 2023. The office will ensure that the voices of children are at the heart of its contributions to this process.

Below the Business Plan is mapped against the relevant articles in the UNCRC.

Office’s work 2022 - 23	Article of UNCRC
Pillar 1: Better world	
The office will build on the foundations of The Big Ask by working with children and young people to bring their voices into the heart of Government and our wider society.	4, 12
The office will establish a Children’s Advisory Board and Care Experienced Advisory Board to involve young people in our work. They will lead projects on the first 100 days in care and care plans.	12
The experiences of children from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller backgrounds will be analysed further through their responses to the Big Ask and wider research on their outcomes and experiences.	2, 30
The office will continue to look at where disparities in opportunities and outcomes exist for children and make sure that systemic barriers are addressed, as well as more practical obstacles removed.	2, 3, 27
Pillar 2: Community	
The office will continue to campaign for a strong Online Safety Bill which reflects children’s needs and experiences of harm online.	3, 4, 16, 17, 34
Where harmful content is not adequately addressed by tech firms, the	3, 34

office will request greater clarity.	
The office will pursue work on the link between exposure to pornography and peer on peer abuse, through conducting research with Sexual Abuse Referral Clinics (SARCs) and talking to young people who have experienced peer on-peer abuse.	34
Work will be undertaken by the office with the National Police Chiefs Council, the Metropolitan Police and other agencies to make sure children's views and voices are reflected in their practice.	3, 12, 19
Pillar 3: Family	
Through the Family Review, the office will use quantitative and qualitative research to understand more about children and parents' perspectives on contemporary family life and the support they are offered by public and voluntary services.	5, 12, 18
The office will look at the pressures facing families today and explore the perspectives of children and carers in the different kinds of families in England, including separated families, adopted children, kinship carers and foster families.	2, 3, 18, 19, 20, 27
Pillar 4: School	
Through the Government's Attendance Action Alliance, the office will highlight children's voices and experiences of school attendance and identify opportunities for providing effective support.	3, 28
Attendance research will continue with a deep dive of 10 local authorities and analysis of data from three Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). Research on best practice will inform the office's guidance for families and professionals supporting students to return to school for the 2022-2023 school year.	28
The office will explore the possibilities the Schools White Paper presents to expand schools' capacity to operate as a nexus of support.	29, 18
Building on the Big Ask findings, the office will gather children's views of PSHE and how to support effective teaching in schools.	12, 34
The office will put children's voices at the heart of the SEND reforms by carrying out focus groups with children with SEND, reviewing cases involving children with SEND received through the Help at Hand service, and publishing a report presenting the voices of children with SEND	2, 23, 28, 29

across England.	
Work on system - wide outcomes will focus on the children who arrive at school significantly behind their expected development levels and look at opportunities to identify, intervene and support these children.	3, 18, 23, 28
The office will work with schools, parents and civil society to encourage and promote a love of reading from an early age.	18, 29
Pillar 5: Children's Social Care	
Building on the vision paper for the children's social care system and the opportunity presented by the review of children's social care, the office will pursue its commitment to a reformed system built around the core elements of good care that all children and families should expect.	3, 5, 19, 20, 23, 25, 27
The office will respond to the issues children are encountering in the system today, including those raised through the Help at Hand service.	3, 12, 19
The office will review our service to reach more children, more effectively, and improve our digital offer by integrating peer-led and professional support.	2, 3
Work will be undertaken to improve the quality and accessibility of local advocacy services through an advocacy audit.	2, 3, 12
There will be a specific focus on the children who fall between social care and mental health, to improve co-operation around children.	3, 6, 19, 24
The office will commence a detailed look at where children in care live and examine support for specialist fostering as an alternative to children's homes, to give more children an opportunity to grow up in a family, including Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children.	2, 3, 20, 22
Work will be undertaken on an examination of Child in Need plans to see how many contain practical and evidence - based support packages.	3, 5, 19, 23, 27
Pillar 6: Health	
The second annual briefing by the office on children's mental health will track progress and make sure children's experiences of the mental health system are improving.	3, 6, 24, 25
The office will work with children and young people to understand how they would like to receive support, feeding into the Government's forthcoming mental health strategy. There will be a focus making sure	12

that all children have access to support through mental health support teams (MHSTs) and virtual counselling, pushing for the roll out of MHSTs in all schools by 2025.	
Work will be undertaken to bring together experts and listen to children to understand what more can be done to help them get involved in sport and to tackle childhood obesity. The office will take a delegation of children to the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham this summer and, as the World Cup approaches, bring together sporting role models to inspire the next generation of sport stars.	24, 31
The office will continue to make the case for integrated reform of health and care to work better for children.	3, 6, 23, 24, 25
Pillar 7: Jobs and skills	
Jobs and skills will be a focus of Children's Advisory Board and Care Experienced Advisory Board, who will investigate important areas and develop resources to be shared with children and young people across the country. The office will also be offering training and development opportunities as part of the Advisory Boards programmes.	28, 29
The office will build on the Big Ask findings around the importance of STEM subjects and female role models, developing a resource for children that will share career profiles of people who use maths in their jobs and help children link their education to potential careers.	2, 28, 29
Innovation work: Improving Public Services for children	
The office will seek to build consensus around a set of common system-wide outcomes which can bring together all the different services working with children.	3
The focus will be on exploring more effective ways of utilising children's experiences to gather meaningful insight on issues such as well-being, safety, access to activities and family cohesion.	3, 12, 31
Work will be carried out with the Information Commissioner's Office and professionals in different spheres on using digitalisation and proportionate data-sharing to deliver better services for children, including the development and use of a single unique child identifier	3
The office will look at how we define disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of children by gathering data and carrying out analysis. This will	2, 3, 23

be promoted externally so that these children are always considered in policy and service development.	
Children's Voice	
The office will carry out qualitative engagement with children, and their families, across the country, to ensure that projects reflect their lived experiences, and their voices remain at the heart of the office's work.	3, 5, 12
The office will continue to put a spotlight on children who face additional challenges in their lives, aided by direct work with children through the Help at Hand service and IMO hub.	2, 3, 19, 20



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