

**Findings from *The Big Ask:*
Children in care**

January 2023

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1. Executive summary

This report presents new analysis of *The Big Ask*. 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 priorities, aspirations and worries for the future¹. *The Big Ask* ran for approximately 6 weeks and gathered more than 550,000 responses, making it the largest-ever survey of children.

This report aims to enrich the existing analysis of responses to *The Big Ask* from children in England by exploring the data in the free-text responses written by the 2,261 children in care who responded to the survey. The Children's Commissioner's Office (CCo), and Coram, a children's charity, worked together on this report.

This report analyses responses to *The Big Ask* from children in care, a sub-set of children aged 6 to 17 years old (n=2,261) classed as children in care based on them selecting that they lived with foster parents or in a children's home. The report only includes those who provided a written response to the free-text question in *The Big Ask*.

Data analysis and a literature review were conducted to contextualise children's responses, and at times *The Big Ask* responses were compared to a comparable survey of children known to be in care, carried out as part of Coram Voice and the Rees Centre, University of Oxford's Bright Spots programme, *Your Life, Your Care*², which collected nearly 9,500 responses between 2016-2021, making it the largest survey in England of children known to be in care.³

In *The Big Ask*, the happiness of children in care and children in general was largely similar. Unsurprisingly, the biggest difference was with family life, where 10% of 6 to 8 year olds in foster care were unhappy with family life, compared to 7% for all other children, and 88% of 9 to 17 year olds in foster care were happy, compared to 94% for all other children.

All children aged 6 to 17 who responded to *The Big Ask* were asked to select up to five worries. Children in foster care aged 9 to 17 were more worried about many aspects of their life than all other children, including having a good education (24% vs 18%), getting on well with their current family (18% vs 14%), and having a nice home to live in (28% vs 24%). However, 9 to 17 year olds in foster care were less worried than other children about some external issues: a healthy environment and planet (25% vs 39%) and everyone being treated fairly (23% vs 31%)⁴.

But we found more similarity than difference, with these macro-level issues the key theme among written comments of children in care. The Big Ask surveys included one free-text question about perceived barriers:

- 'If you could change anything to make your life better when you grow up what would it be?' (asked of 6 to 8 year olds)
- 'What do you think stops children in England achieving what they want to achieve when they grow up?' (asked of 9 to 17 year olds).

In *The Big Ask*, children aged 6 to 17 were also asked one free-text question about perceived barriers facing children in England, preventing them from achieving what they want to achieve in the future.

In response to these prompts, children in care most commonly cited macro-level barriers: high-level societal and cultural issues. Children acknowledged that these were issues facing children across the country. Many children also recognised that these barriers were inter-connected. Children frequently told us about Covid-19 and social restrictions and called for more health and wellbeing support. They mentioned jobs, financial limitations, a lack of support from school, and their online experiences. They discussed inequality, the environment, and government, law and crime.

Children also identified micro-level barriers, relating to their immediate environment: school, family life, friends and home and experiences of being in care. These are aspects of their life they directly interact with. Children told us about the importance of family life and relationships for their future. They also told us about the potential impact of a negative family life on other aspects of their life. Children often reflected on being in care as a barrier to achieving their goals in future. Some identified their current living situation as a barrier to them being able to do certain things.

The overall themes are not surprising or unusual, illustrating that children in care are children first and foremost, with the same concerns as found in comments written by all children. Although some literature suggests that children in care's experiences of abuse and neglect make them look inward, our evidence suggests this is not always the case: they look outward to macro-level barriers. The perceived barriers of children in care suggest that they share many of the macro, micro and personal concerns of their peers in the general population.

This report is the latest in a series of reports led by the Children's Commissioner's Office on the lives of children in care and care leavers⁵. The findings in this report reflect our ongoing

recommendations, that every professional that supports children in care and care leavers should have high aspirations for them and support them in every aspect of their lives. This report echoes our previous calls for schools and primary care networks to be better used to support Local Safeguarding Partnerships, and that all children in care should be entitled to advocacy services. Finally, the findings in this report highlight the importance of in-depth qualitative research in bringing children's voices to the forefront of policy development and evaluation. Children are the experts in their own life experiences, and they know best what needs to change to improve the lives of children in England.

2. Introduction

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 future⁶. The purpose was to:

- provide a 'state of the nation' assessment of the views of children on these issues,
- help inform the Commissioner's priorities and longer-term strategy for her term in office,
- ensure that children's needs and interests would be placed at the forefront of policy measures to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

The Children's Commissioner's Office (CCo), a public body sponsored by the Department for Education, and Coram, a children's charity, worked together on this report. Coram's contributions to this report were generously funded by The Hadley Trust.

The Big Ask gathered more than 550,000 responses, making it the largest-ever survey of children. Seven key themes emerged from *The Big Ask* when children were asked about perceived barriers preventing children in England achieving what they want to achieve in the future (see [Methodology](#) for more details). These themes form the core pillars of the Children's Commissioner's work: better world, children's social care, community, including children's online and offline worlds, family, health, jobs and skills, and school.

2.1. Project aims and objectives

This project aimed to further explore the responses to *The Big Ask* from children in England, to enrich analysis already published by the CCo and identify the salient issues from the perspective of children in care. Our research questions were:

- What themes can be identified in the comments written by the 2,261 children in foster care or a children's home who responded to the survey?
- How are the findings similar or different to the findings of the Bright Spots survey of children known to be in care (*Your Life, Your Care*) run by Coram Voice and the Rees Centre, University of Oxford (2022)⁷?

3. Methodology

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 Big Ask* was launched online on the CCo website and social media channels in April 2021. The CCo sent the survey link to every school and local authority in England, as well as to 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. The CCo produced an 'easy read' version of the survey for children with additional needs. Children responded to the survey from every local authority in England. In addition to the main survey, the CCo carried out focus groups and interviews with groups of children who are often under-represented, such as children in care, children with a social worker and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

There were 3 versions of the survey for children and young people aged 6+. The 6 to 8 and 9+ Big Ask surveys included one free-text question each. To ensure the survey was age-appropriate, the questions asked to the 6 to 8 age group and children aged 9+ were slightly different, though designed to have the same meaning.

- The 6 to 8 survey asked: 'If you could change anything to make your life better when you grow up, what would it be?'
- The 9 to 12 and 13 to 17 surveys asked: 'What do you think stops children/young people in England achieving the things they want to achieve when they grow up?'

This report presents analysis of responses to *The Big Ask* from a sub-set of children aged 6 to 17 years old (n=2,261). The legal status of respondents were not reported, but as a shorthand respondents included in this report are classed as 'children in care' based on their answers to the question; 'where do you live most of the time?'. Children in care were identified if respondents selected 'with my foster parent(s)', 'a children's home' or 'a secure children's home'. Within this cohort, responses to the question, 'who helps you or gives you support?' were also examined as a subgroup of respondents who selected 'a social worker'. England's 82,170 looked-after children⁸ represent 0.7% of the population of 11,774,602 children in England, based on the 2021 census. The 2,261 children we analyse in this report make up 0.4% of the 557,077 respondents to the Big Ask.

Data analysis of *The Big Ask* was conducted by the CCo in August and September 2022. All quantitative analysis was completed in R, as well as some qualitative analysis, including the

analysis of word frequencies and visualisations. Thematic analysis was conducted by two researchers in Excel. Initial code groups were quality assured and agreed by Coram and CCo analysts based on an initial review of 500 responses. The final codes were then created iteratively during the thematic analysis process.

A literature review was conducted to contextualise the responses, and at times answers from children in care in *The Big Ask* were compared to a comparable survey, *Your Life, Your Care*, the largest survey of children in care in England. This is carried out as part of the Bright Spots programme and was developed by Coram Voice and the Rees Centre at the University of Oxford. *Your Life, Your Care* uses 3 surveys for children in care: one for children aged 4 to 7, one for 8 to 10 year olds, and one for 11 to 18 year olds. Children are recruited through their local authority, providing a high level of confidence in respondents' legal status as looked-after. Using data gathered in the period 2016 to 2021 from 9,472 children⁹, we explore similarities and differences to help validate our findings. The survey uses different questions and age groupings to those used in *The Big Ask*.

3.1. Sample information

Of the 2,261 children who provided a full response to *The Big Ask*, 70% reported living in foster care or a children's home at the time of the survey. Among them, 33% reported receiving support from a social worker.

Overall, the distribution of children's reported ethnic background is broadly in line with the national picture for all children in care in England (Table 1). On 31 March 2022, 73% of children in care were White, 10% were from Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups, 7% were Black, African, Caribbean or Black British, 5% were Asian or Asian British, 4% were from other ethnicities, and ethnicity was not known or not yet recorded for 1%¹⁰. Girls in our sub-sample were overrepresented compared to boys (49% versus 43%), especially given the prevalence of boys among all looked-after children in England: 56% of all children in care were boys on 31 March 2022¹¹. There was a good spread of age groups, with 9 to 12 year olds most common in the sample.

Table 1. Demographics of analysed sample

Characteristic	Count	Percent (%)
<i>Age group</i>		
6 to 8	540	24
9 to 12	993	44

13 to 17	645	29
I don't want to say	83	4
Total	2,261	100
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	1,105	49
Male	978	43
Other (self-identified)	109	5
I don't want to say	69	3
Total	2,261	100
<i>Ethnic background</i>		
White background	1,636	72.4
Mixed or multiple ethnic background	165	7.3
Black background	101	4.5
Asian or British Asian background	137	6.1
Other ethnic group	118	5.2
I don't want to say	104	4.6
Total	2,261	100

4. Comparison of children in care to children in general

This section compares quantitative findings from *The Big Ask* survey of children who reported living in foster care to all other responses, and findings from the published report on the *Your Life, Your Care* survey of children known to be in care¹². Children in foster care represent 70% of all children in care in England^{13,14}.

The Big Ask found that 6 to 8 year olds in foster care were slightly less happy overall than all other 6 to 8 year olds (7% vs 4%). Children in foster care were also less happy than other children with their education (9% vs 4%), how much they could play (11% vs 6%), the places they could go to have fun (10% vs 6%), their family life (10% vs 3%), their family's health (8% vs 4%), and their friendships (6% vs 3%). However, while the differences are statistically significant, the percentage differences in unhappiness levels are small (3 to 7 percentage points different), and unhappiness levels were generally low.

However, the biggest difference in happiness in *The Big Ask* was with family life, where 10% of children aged 6 to 8 in foster care were unhappy compared to 7% of children not in foster care. *Your Life, Your Care* also found that small minorities of 4 to 7 year olds in care were unhappy yesterday (7%), did not like school (8%), did not get to have fun at the weekends (3%), did not feel settled at home (5%), did not trust the adults who were caring for them (3%), and did not have a really good friend (7%).

The Big Ask found that 9 to 17 year olds in foster care reported broadly similar levels of happiness and worries in comparison to all other 9 to 17 year olds. For example, 9 to 17 year olds in foster care were slightly less happy with their life overall than all other children aged 9 to 17 (87% vs 91%). *Your Life, Your Care* found 62% of 11 to 18 year olds in care had high or very high happiness yesterday. This suggests that overall happiness levels among young people in care and in foster care are lower than among young people in the general population. It also found that 9 to 17 year olds in foster care were more likely to report not being worried about anything than all other children (14% vs 11%).

Compared to all other children, *The Big Ask* found that 9 to 17 year olds in foster care were slightly less happy with their life at school (83% vs 85%) and were similarly happy with their progress in education (90% vs 89%). *Your Life, Your Care* found that 79% of 11 to 18 year olds in care liked school. This suggests children in care are broadly as happy with school as all other children.

The Big Ask found that 9 to 17 year olds in foster care were similarly happy with their access to somewhere outside (90% vs 89%) and choice of things to do in their local area (81% vs 81%) compared to all other children. This indicates that children in foster care are similarly happy with their access outside and things to do as all other children. *Your Life, Your Care* found that 68% of 11 to 18 year olds spent time outdoors more than once a week.

Compared to all other 9 to 17 year olds, *The Big Ask* found that those in foster care were less worried about their mental health (31% vs 35%) and their physical health (20% vs 22%). However, *Your Life, Your Care* found that more than half of 11 to 18 year olds in care worried about their feelings or behaviour (58%), so children and young people in care may be more worried than those in the general population. Further research is needed to explore these possibly contradictory findings.

In line with the younger children, the biggest difference between 9 to 17 year olds in foster care and all other children was with happiness with family life – 94% compared to 88% in foster care. Children in foster care therefore appear to be less happy with their family life, which will have involved at least some disruption and loss. *Your Life, Your Care* found most 11 to 18 year olds in care felt settled in their home (75%) and trusted the adults they lived with (77%). However, 74% of 11 to 18 year olds who responded to the *Your Life, Your Care* survey felt they saw their father too much, too little or did not/could not see them, 61% in relation to their mother, and 56% in relation to their siblings.

The Big Ask found that 9 to 17 year olds in foster care were slightly more worried about having good friends (28% vs 25%). *Your Life, Your Care* found that nearly all 11 to 15 year olds in care had a really good friend (93%), but compared to a benchmark, a higher proportion of 10 to 15 year olds in the general population had a really good friend (97.5%)¹⁵. However, 9 to 17 year olds in foster care who responded to *The Big Ask* were less worried than all other 9 to 17 year olds about certain external issues: a healthy environment and planet (25% vs 39%), and everyone being treated fairly (23% vs 31%). *The Big Ask* found that 9 to 17 year olds in foster care, and 9 to 17 year olds overall were similarly worried about having a good job (36% vs 37%) and having enough money (43% vs 41%). Yet they were almost equally worried about being part of a good community (12% vs 14%).

5. Who supports children in care?

All children aged 6 to 17 who responded to *The Big Ask* were asked, 'Who helps you or gives you support? Select all that apply: Support could be practical advice, emotional or mental health support or help for a physical illness'. Children in care were most likely to select their foster parents or carers (51%) or a teacher (40%). Children on average selected two sources of support each.

Table 2. From whom children in care (n=2,261) said they receive support.

Support	Count	Percent (%)
My foster parent(s)	1,145	51
A teacher	897	40
A social worker	763	34
My relative(s) e.g., grandparents, aunt, uncle	578	26
A teaching assistant or SENCO at school	451	20
A counsellor, therapist or other healthcare worker	290	13
A youth group	169	8
A young carer's project	84	4
A youth offending team	44	2
I don't want to say	80	4

Of the children who did not select receiving support from a social worker (n=1,498, 66%), these children were most likely to be helped or given support by their foster parents (38%) or a teacher (29%) (see table 3).

Table 3. Where children in care received support, if they did not receive support from a social worker (n=1,498)

Support	Count	Percent (%)
My foster parents/carers	563	38
A teacher	431	29
My relative(s) e.g., grandparents, aunt, uncle	345	23
A teaching assistant or SENCO at school	178	12
A counsellor, therapist or other healthcare worker	115	8
A youth group	88	6
A young carer's project	37	2
I don't want to say	80	5

Note: Some answer categories removed due to a small number of responses.

6. What do children in care consider barriers to achieving their goals?

Children aged 6 to 17 who responded to *The Big Ask* were asked what they think stops children in England achieving what they want to achieve when they grow up.¹⁶

Children's responses to the questions 'If you could change anything to make your life better when you grow up what would it be?' (asked of 6 to 8 year olds) and 'What do you think stops children in England achieving what they want to achieve when they grow up?' (asked of 9 to 17 year olds) were read and categorised. Their answers provide insight into the concerns and barriers perceived by children in care. Responses were coded into 18 groups, then categorised into 3 higher-level codes: the macro (the world), the micro (school, family and friends), and the personal. There were also 2 codes that cut across all three of these and these are discussed separately. Nested within the 'Health and Covid-19' theme, 4 further sub-themes were explored; 'mental health', 'Covid-19, pandemic & lockdown', 'drugs, alcohol & smoking' and 'physical health & disability'.

Table 4. Barriers to children in England achieving what they want when they grow up as seen by children in care.

Code group	Theme	Mentions
Cross-cutting	Being underestimated	225
	Overcoming barriers	22
Macro-level (the world)	Health and Covid-19	394
	Mental health	176
	Covid-19, pandemic & lockdown	172
	Drugs, alcohol & smoking	46
	Physical health & disability	46
	Jobs and money	270
	The curriculum and education system	168
	Inequality	126
	Government, law and crime	126
	Online experiences, gaming and social media	63
	The environment	47
Micro-level (school, family and friends)	School/ exams	340
	Family life	293
	Friends & other children	200

	Home and experiences of being in care	143
Personal level	Aspirations	271
	Feelings and personal attributes	192
	Lack of care & support	128
	Feelings (e.g., worry)	124
	Past experiences	46

Being underestimated

Cutting across the micro, macro and personal levels was a sense of children being underestimated or judged, particularly by adults, friends, and members of the community, based on their current situation. Children in care said they had been told that they couldn't achieve or that they weren't good enough to succeed or follow their dreams later in life. Many children in this sample attributed this to their current living or financial situation, as it was different from many other children they knew. For example, one child said: *'I think one thing that stops children from achieving what they want is them being told they won't be able to based on their current situation financially and within the community'* – Girl, 15, in foster care. Another girl told us: *'Low confidence, anxiety, feeling of worthlessness, feeling of not being good enough other people putting them down, no encouragement from family and friends...'* – Girl, 14, in foster care.

Overcoming barriers

A relatively small group of children in care felt that there were no barriers preventing them from achieving what they wanted to achieve in the future or that they were able to overcome any barrier, particularly if they were supported. As one child said: *'Young people in the 21st century can achieve anything they put their minds to as there are plenty roads and opportunity for them to do so they can also get the support that they need to get where they want to be'* – Girl, 16, living in a children's home.

Macro-level

Macro-level themes included high-level, societal, and cultural issues mentioned by children in care, such as inequality, healthcare, government, and financial issues. Many children wrote about these issues as a barrier for themselves and also recognised that these are widespread issues facing children across the country. Many of the quotes highlighted below span across multiple codes, as many children acknowledged the inter-connectedness of these barriers.

Health and Covid-19

As fieldwork for *The Big Ask* ran from April to May 2021, the majority of responses that referred to health were focussed on Covid-19, lockdowns, and social restrictions. Many children also linked mental health to family and school life. One girl in foster care told us: *'Most likely their own stress and self-doubt also having a good mental health whilst keeping up with everyday things like school home etc. I personally think young people are much more stressed than previous generations.'* – Girl, 14, in foster care.

Children also called for more support with their health and mental wellbeing and called out the stigma that surrounded this topic: *'I believe in England there isn't enough support for young people in matters like crime and mental health there is a huge stigma around mental health and if England had more funding the support could be more available'* – Boy, 17, living in a children's home.

Jobs and money

Children in care frequently mentioned the importance of getting a job and achieving financial stability and highlighted these as key limitations preventing them achieving their goals for the future. As one boy told us: *'There are many factors that limits the youth of today and the younger people of society such as friendship groups, peer pressure, education type ... also, I believe poverty and the financial aspect to progressing and the limitations that come with financial instability'* – Boy, 17, living in a children's home.

Jobs and money were often linked to the importance of education and any barriers that they had experienced at school, including falling in with the wrong crowd. Jobs were often also mentioned as an aspiration (see also 'aspirations' below).

The curriculum and education system

Children wrote about a lack of overarching support from the school system, particularly for children in care and for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). This theme is distinct from children mentioning barriers or limitations they had experienced at their local school (see 'school/ exams' below). As one child said: *'Schools not supporting kids with learning disabilities like autism, dyslexia'* – Boy, 10, in foster care.

Children in care also linked the school system to financial issues and mentioned the importance of school lunches for families experiencing poverty. For example, one boy told us: *'Maybe there family mite not treat them well and they mite not get good numbers in tests and*

having a bad life mite impact there menal health and school and soome times some childrens family mite not afford food so some school lunches are a lot of money so if I was some to help a childs life I would help them by giving food' – Boy, 9, living in a children's home.

Inequality

Children in care, especially those aged over 10 years old, frequently noted systemic inequalities such as sexism, racism, classism and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, looks and disability as barriers facing not only themselves, but children across the country.

Children in care also wrote about bullying in relation to these inequalities and being underestimated by those around them. Many also talked of these inequalities impacting on children's mental health and confidence to advocate for themselves and achieve their goals. One girl told us: *'I feel like the way different genders are treated I want to be a footballer however I feel like I can't because I won't be treated like I can do it'* – Girl, 10, in foster care.

Government, law and crime

Often related to inequality were mentions of the government, laws, and crime. When crime was mentioned, many children in care also talked about gangs, the local area and personal safety. For example, one boy said: *'Knife crime, drugs, growing up in rough areas'* – Boy, 13, living in a children's home.

Online experiences, gaming and social media

Some children in care told us that gaming, social media and other aspects of the online world were barriers to children achieving what they want to in the future. These responses often fell into two key themes; gaming and online activities took up a lot of their time, or that they provided too much of a distraction from other aspects of their life. For example, one boy told us: *'Getting distracted by technology and other things'* – Boy, 14, in foster care.

Many children mentioned the negativity of the people or content they had seen online. Children of all ages said that online content had made them feel bad about themselves, for example: *'I think what's stopping young people achieve what they want to do is mostly social media people put up photos and videos and young kids or older kids judge them make fun of them'* – Girl, 13, in foster care.

The environment

Concerns about the environment was also considered a barrier, both for children in care and for the wider sample of children that responded to *The Big Ask*. Within this code, children

mentioned climate change, global warming and as barriers to achieving their goals for the future. One girl said: *'Environment, because there is a lot of things going on the world right now and a lot of climate change as we are the future people need to make a change now for us to have a safe environment when we grow up'* – Girl, 12, in foster care.

Micro-level

Micro-level themes described here directly affect the respondents' day to day lives, or aspects of life they directly interact with, such as their school, family and friends. These issues can be complex and difficult for children in care, who may or may not see their birth family. Children often related these codes back to themselves and their effects on their own thoughts, feelings, and aspirations, and also often considered these themes at the macro-level. For example, children in care wrote about their own living situation and experiences of being in care and related these to wider issues around the social care system and government.

Family life

Many children in care told us about the importance of family and family relationships for their future life, and the potential impact that a negative family life can have on other aspects of life, including their outcomes at school. As one girl in told us: *'[Young people] need love stability and time with a loving family they also need to give it their all at school if they would like a good job because you need the qualifications'* – Girl, 15, in foster care.

Home and experiences of being in care

Children in care often reflected on their own experiences of being in care as a barrier to achieving their goals when they grow up. Some children told us how their current living situation was a barrier to them being able to do certain things, such as see their biological family. Sometimes children felt the barrier was directly acting upon them, for example, one boy said: *'Social services because I feel like they stopped from making choices when they were involved with my family when I was younger they stopped me helping my dad fix cars which I really enjoyed'* – Boy, 10, living in a children's home.

Sometimes children in care wanted foster carers to have more autonomy to give them permission to take part in activities without children's services approval. One boy mentioned: *'...there is a barrier in which foster carers are allowed to permit their children to participate in activities as they have to refer to the child's social services for permission to allow them to do anything'* – Boy, 16, in foster care.

Children's thoughts on the source of the barrier also varied. Some children felt that the barrier stemmed from local authority children's services or decision makers, while some children felt the barrier was systemic and affected all children in care. One girl told us: *The stereotypes that are put on young people especially in foster care as the majority are seen as naughty or incapable that is my opinion also a low self-esteem stops them as they don't believe in themselves, so they just give up trying* – Girl, 17, in foster care.

Personal level

At the personal level, children in care mentioned their feelings, personal attributes and past experiences as barriers to achieving in the future. Conversely, children in care also talked about their dreams and aspirations that they were aiming for and that the barriers may be preventing.

Aspirations

When thinking about the barriers preventing them from achieving what they would like to, children in care often wrote about their aspirations that they were aiming for. Younger children were more likely to tell us about their hopes for a certain career, including wanting *'to be a vet with a garden'* (Girl, 7, living in a children's home) and *'I would like to be a footballer'* (Boy, 8, living in a children's home), which could be attributed to the wording of the question for this age group¹⁷. As one girl told us: *'...I want to be a vet when I am older and I think what stops me is covid because it might not go away for years because it has been here for a year already and also courage because I am very nervous, but I don't have to worry yet because I'm only 9'* – Girl, 9, in foster care.

Many other children also wrote more generally about their hopes for different aspects of their lives to improve: *'I've been told I make the changes, its myself that can change and be who I am and achieve what I want. If you don't want to be happy then go, life's worth living now we have to make the most of what we have got family, friends, most important education. If you want a job then focus. I get told that everyday'* – Girl, 14, in foster care.

Feelings and personal attributes

Children in care often mentioned their personal feelings in relation to their future achievements and the barriers facing them. Fear, worry and uncertainty were the most commonly mentioned feelings regarding the future, which often linked to money and future careers, including university, school and exams. For example, one girl said: *'I think money is the biggest issue because many students might not have the money to go to university. Family life*

too as our families might encourage us to have a certain job but actually it's something we don't want to do. Fear of having to give up or fear of it being too stressful and hard to achieve'
– Girl, 14, in foster care.

Some children also told us that they did not believe in themselves or were not confident enough, which they considered barriers to their future, as one girl mentioned: *'I think that children in England are too doubtful, and they need to believe in themselves more. I think that they also they need to take risks and not just stay on the safe side'* – Girl, 12, in foster care.

However, some children told us they were happy or hoped to be happier in the future, for example: *'My life is happy and good'* – Boy, 8, living in a children's home.

7. Discussion

This report analyses responses to *The Big Ask* gathered in 2021 from a sample of 2,261 children aged 6 to 17. This sample includes only responses categorised as 'children in care' based on self-reported living circumstances: in foster care or a children's home. The survey included questions about barriers to achievement and aspects of life that could be changed to make the future better. Where possible these findings are cross-referenced against 9,472 responses in 2016-2021 to the largest survey in England of children known to be in care, *Your Life, Your Care*¹⁸.

Children in care most frequently reported that they received help and support from their foster carers, teachers and social workers. Responses were coded and into 3 main analytical themes – the macro (the world), the micro (school, family and friends) and the personal level. Most codes related to the macro level and children frequently described systemic and structural barriers they faced in their lives. The seven themes developed on this macro level were:

1. Health (including Covid-19 and mental wellbeing)
2. Jobs and money
3. The curriculum and education system
4. Inequality
5. Government, law and crime
6. Online experiences, gaming and social media
7. The environment (including climate change and global warming)

It is perhaps surprising that macro level barriers concerning children's wider worlds were the key theme given research by Wijedasa (2017)¹⁹ which found that young people in foster care were more likely to agree that 'people like me don't have much of a chance in life,' that 'how well you get on in this world is mostly a matter of luck,' and that 'even if I do well at school, I'll have a hard time getting the right kind of job' than the general population and adopted young people (although 'disadvantaged' young people were the most likely to agree with one of these statements). Wijedasa concluded that fostered young people were more likely than others to hold external locus of control beliefs. In our sample children and young people did not frequently identify barriers related to luck. However, the structural barriers commonly reported by children and young people in care, such as those relating to government, law and crime, may be related to an external locus of control if they feel that these barriers cannot be changed or overcome.

The most commonly occurring themes – health and jobs and money – were also identified as important to children in the general population in *The Big Answer*²⁰. Children and young people in care and all other children were comparably worried about their health and future careers in the quantitative responses. Their identification of health and jobs as barriers highlights that children in care and children in general are similarly ambitious and attentive to their wellbeing.

The focus of children in care on these macro level barriers is in line with *The Big Answer* finding that children are ‘civic-minded, social and outward-looking’²¹. Children in foster care were less worried about the environment and everyone being treated fairly than other respondents. However, children in foster care were almost equally worried about being part of a good community. Systemic barriers, such as inequality, frequently identified by children in care, and their recognition that these are issues facing other children, suggests that they share the community focus and outward orientation of peers in the general population.

Two themes were developed relating to the micro level:

1. Family life
2. Home and experience of being in care

The Big Answer identified family as fundamental to children’s lives and happiness. It found that children who were unhappy with their family were 9 times more likely to be unhappy with life in general²². The quantitative responses also showed that children in foster care were less happy with family life than children in general. It is therefore unsurprising that family and home life were perceived to present barriers for some children in care, particularly as they may not have experienced stability, security or safety in their family life.

Two themes were created at the personal level: aspirations, and feelings and personal attributes. Research has found that children and young people may feel responsible for the abuse they suffered²³ and/or their entry to care^{24,25}, particularly if the reason for being in care has not been fully explained²⁶. Children may blame themselves for their situation due to a belief that there is something wrong with them²⁷. A study of adoption breakdown also found that some young people felt blamed when things went wrong, and some mentioned their own behaviour as a reason for the placement being disrupted²⁸. The self-blame identified in the literature suggests that children in care, may consider personal barriers to be the most restrictive. It is therefore interesting that these barriers were least frequently mentioned in this study, and instead macro and micro level barriers were focused on more. Global factors, such as the Covid-19 pandemic since 2020 which had a far reaching impact, may have influenced how young people viewed opportunities and barriers. However, the personal level barriers that

were identified, particularly feelings and personal attributes, may suggest some children in care are inward-looking as literature elsewhere indicates.

Being underestimated and overcoming barriers were two themes that cross-cut the three levels. Being underestimated links to the stigma that children in care report. *Your Life, Your Care* found that 13% of 11 to 18 year olds felt that adults had done things to make them feel embarrassed about being in care. Another Bright Spots survey, *Your Life Beyond Care*, found that 10% of care leavers felt that they had been treated worse than other young people²⁹.

8. Next steps

The themes described in this report are not surprising or unusual, illustrating that children in care are children first and foremost. This supports *The Big Ask* finding that what children wanted was consistent across different population groups and backgrounds: 'to do well and create a better world'.³⁰ Below are a set of recommendations to improve the experiences of children involved with social care.

1. Children in care are children first

This research further illustrates that children in care are children first and foremost, with the same concerns as found in comments written by all children across England in *The Big Answer*³¹. The evidence presented in this report suggests that children in care are similarly likely to look outward towards macro-level barriers. As well as recognising micro and personal level barriers that are presented to them. Yet, many children in care who responded to *The Big Ask* also said that they are often underestimated by those around them, sometimes based on their current circumstances.

As such, every professional that supports children in care and care leavers should have high aspirations for them and support them in every aspect of their lives to pursue their ambitions.

2. Teachers and school staff as source of support

The responses to *The Big Ask* included in this report highlight the importance of positive relationships with school staff for all children and particularly for those children in care, who may not have a stable network of family or friends to rely on when needed.

Schools should continue to be recognised as a key source of stability and support for children, highlighting the need to help children to stay in school and attend regularly. The CCo has also called for schools and primary care networks to be better utilised in supporting Local Safeguarding Partnerships, following the 2017 Children and Social Work Act which gave these partnerships a new statutory framework for using and sharing data in the best interests of children.

All children in care should be entitled to advocacy services as standard on an opt-out, rather than an opt-in, basis. Services such as the CCo's Help at Hand service are essential to provide independent advice, assistance and representation support for vulnerable children and advice

to tackle the challenges they may be facing. Proposals should be considered in the Government's implementation plan for the Care Review.

3. Emphasis on children's voice in research and evaluation

The findings in this report highlight the importance of in-depth qualitative research in bringing children's voices to the forefront of policy development and evaluation.

Qualitative research such as interviews, focus groups or more creative engagement work in partnership with or led by young people themselves is essential to convey the lived experiences, ideas and perceptions of children in their own words. It also can create more equitable research. Children are the experts in their own life experiences, and they know best what needs to change in order to improve the lives of children in England. In large-scale surveys such as *The Big Ask* and *Your Life, Your Care* the option for free-text responses is a particularly valuable resource to achieve this. Surveys with large sample sizes also allow for in-depth analysis of responses from smaller, less represented groups of children and young people.

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- ¹⁶ The wording of this question varied between age groups. Full transcripts of all questionnaires for The Big Ask can be accessed via www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/the-big-answer/evidence/
- ¹⁷ For the 6 to 8-year-olds survey this question was worded 'If you could change anything to make your life better when you grow up, what would it be?'
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³¹ Children's Commissioner's Office, 2021. The Big Answer. [Link](#).