

Business Plan

2024-25

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



I am now half-way through my term as Children's Commissioner, and this coming year will be a critical juncture for children's rights. There will be a general election, and a new government – whichever party or parties form it – will have a new mandate to set out an ambitious vision for what childhood can be, and for putting children's rights at the heart of government.

That's why in September 2023, I launched *The Big Ambition* to hear directly from children, young people, and parents across the country. I wanted to hear about what they wanted for the future, their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. Over 367,000 children and adults engaged with it. I was particularly pleased that this included so many children with social workers, living away from home, with additional needs, or missing education. A truly ambitious vision for childhood must have at its heart those children who are too often overlooked.

From *The Big Ambition*, *The Big Ask*, and all the focus groups and surveys I have conducted, I have now engaged with over a million children and adults. I have used this to build a plan, made up of 33 recommendations, building on what children told me they wanted government to do. As such, the recommendations are ambitious. Because children are ambitious, and now is not the time for incrementalism. These recommendations would make the rights children are entitled to a reality. They provide a positive vision for what childhood could be like if only it were reimagined through the eyes of children.

They cover the seven pillars of my work: Children's Social Care, Community, Education, Health, Family, Jobs and Skills, and a Better World. Across each pillar, it is the children to whom I have a particular duty – those with a social worker, living away from home or with care experience – whom I hold most in my mind. This plan can only work if it works for them.

I have also described a more radical overhaul of the way that government and civil society functions, that will be necessary to ensure that the individual changes children want to see, happen. We need to see a system that is shaped around some core outcomes for children, with funding following the child, clear central and local accountability, with a workforce that is valued and empowered, and data systems that make the state easier to navigate as a child, parent or professional.

The publication of the findings and recommendations from *The Big Ambition* are just the beginning. The voices of the million children will drive the rest of my time as Children's Commissioner, and I will commit to striving to make each of the recommendations a reality. That is why this Business Plan sets out what I will be doing in the coming year to drive forward the changes, in each of the areas, that children have told me they want to see. It sets out how I will use the powers available to me as Children's Commissioner to get data and information about children, and to go to all the places where children are living away from home.

But what will motivate me most throughout the year is the trust that children have placed in me. They have told me their ideas, frustrations and the changes they would like to see, and I want to repay that faith. When I first saw the results of *The Big Ambition* survey, one number stood out to me above all others - only 22% of children agreed that people who run the country listen to what they have to say. Initially this made me feel despondent. That this was a generation who had lost all faith in leaders and politicians. But as I read more and more of the responses to the survey and reflected on the words children used, I realised the message was in fact a very different one. This is not a generation who have become cynical, who believe that nothing will ever change. This is a generation who feel frustrated that they are not listened to, exactly because they have complete faith that if they were listened to, then politicians could and would transform their lives for the better.

They are right to believe this. I believe it too. I will dedicate my remaining time as Children's Commissioner to making sure that the hopes that a million children have entrusted to me are heard and acted upon.

Executive summary

The areas of focus for this year are centred on driving change to make children's lives better informed by over a million children, young people, parents and carers who have shared their views, concerns and ambitions with us. We have grouped our plan for this year into our thematic pillars: Better World, Children's Social Care, Community, Education, Health, Family and Jobs and Skills, as well as additional sections on Help at Hand, our advocacy service, and our brilliant participation groups that shape so much of our work.

Make sure every child feels listened to by the adults that make decisions about their lives

The Big Ambition showed that children express their perspectives openly, honestly and robustly. They have pragmatic but ambitious visions for what they want to achieve for themselves and for others and want to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives. Across the pillars in our Business Plan, we will be using their own words to shape our work and deliver their message on the changes they want to see. From ministerial departments and Parliament to local governments and frontline professionals, our Business Plan commitments are designed to increase knowledge and understanding on the issues that matter to children and their solutions to how their lives can be made better.

Each element of our plan will pay particular regard to championing the rights and voices of vulnerable children and those in care or involved with social care services. Our Help at Hand team's casework will continue to inform this as well as providing the highest standards of support and advocacy, so every child feels listened to.

Empower children to have their say

What sets the Children's Commissioner apart is our commitment to accountability. We are held to task by the children and young people that we interact with, in representing their interests and amplifying their voice in the world. In *The Big Ambition*, only 22% of children and young people agreed that people who run the country listened to what they had to say. This was the most negatively answered question in the survey. This year we will encourage leaders across political parties to address this and make commitments to engaging with their youngest constituents. Our work under our Better World pillar will be integral to this as well as developing new and innovative ways in which we can share the actions we

are taking to act on what they have told us and encourage more children and young people to share their views and ideas.

Improve the design and delivery of children's policy and services

Our work over the past three years has shown that too often, services are working in siloes, working to different objectives based on their work with an individual, rather than the child's interactions with services as a whole. This can mean too many families and children fall through the gaps in provision and struggle to support each other effectively. In each part of our Business Plan this year, our work is designed to explore the barriers and most importantly the enablers that can improve the consistency and delivery in service provision to ensure no matter where a child lives or which setting, an integrated system will provide the highest standards of safety, care and where no child's needs are overlooked or marginalised. Appendix A on page 28 sets out how our objectives for this plan will work across pillars and policy areas.

Drive change that keeps children safe and able to thrive

We know that understanding children's needs and journeys are essential to delivering a system that focuses on ensuring their safety and supporting their ambitions. Children, and particularly those in care or involved with social care services, have told us about the bureaucratic processes they found frustrating or alienating where they repeatedly have to explain their needs to different services and agencies. Across our Education, Health, and Children's Social Care pillars this year, our work will drive change to address this including building the case for enhanced data collection and sharing processes, and a unique child identifier. We will be using our powers to convene, engage and influence to drive this change to protect and support children and their families from their earliest years.

Working internationally

The Children's Commissioner for England also assumes the role of Children's Commissioner for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland on any matter where the UK Government is responsible for non-devolved policy. This year we will be continuing to regularly convene with the offices of the Children's Commissioner of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and will proactively share research with our

British and Irish Network of Ombudsman and Children's Commissioners (BINOCC) on matters that affect children across the UK.

In line with our statutory duty to protect and promote the rights and needs of children and young people, all our work has been mapped against the United Nations Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (see Appendix B).



Better World

“All young people should be more empowered to have their voices heard and acted upon” – Girl, 18.

Our ambition

Every child is treated fairly irrespective of where they live, who they live with or their background in all aspects of their life. All children feel empowered to speak out about issues that they care about and have their thoughts, feelings, views, and ambitions not only listened to but translated into meaningful change.

How we will deliver for children this year

Ensuring children feel that their thoughts, feelings, views, and ambitions are listened to

The Big Ambition was launched in September 2023 to give children and young people the opportunity to have their say in the run-up to the next general election. It was clear from the results that children understand the world and care about it, and they want to engage with it, holding leaders to account for the decisions that affect their futures.

This year we will be championing this message to ensure children’s voices are heard. We will be sharing what children have told us they want from their governments at both a national and local level and encouraging leaders across political parties and constituencies to make commitments to listening and acting on priorities for children in their manifestos. This will include a series of events and roadshows to show how their voices have made a difference.

Engaging with young people and ensuring their participation in our work

The Children’s Commissioner will continue to hear from children and young people directly through her advisory boards and her Youth Ambassadors. The Care Experienced Advisory Board represents the

voices of care experienced young people across England, feeding back on the office's ongoing work to ensure that every child involved with children's social care is safe and listened to.

The Children's Commissioner's Youth Ambassadors will continue to represent the voices of children across England, and work to ensure that politicians listen and act upon what children and young people spoke about in *The Big Ambition*.

Digital post-box

The Children's Commissioner's office is committed to promoting non-discrimination, equality, equity and inclusion which includes reducing barriers to listening to children, respecting their rights and interests, and ensuring that the voices of children we hear are used to make a positive difference. This includes thinking about how to reach children who are less often heard.

This year we will be identifying new tools to increase our visibility and hear from children in increasingly innovative ways. We will be creating accessible versions of our products that explain how their feedback and voices drive change and an open opportunity on our website for children to share their views and ideas with us anonymously and at any time.

Being a global citizen

Children are passionate about having their voices heard not just on issues related to childhood, but on global and intergenerational issues too. For example, 39% of 550,00 children surveyed in *The Big Ask* said that a healthy environment was among their biggest worries for the future, and they want their views on this to be heard. These global challenges such as climate change, environmental degradation, poverty and inequality impact on children's lives in different ways particularly where perceptions can increasingly be determined by information received through social media and the internet.

This year we will be exploring what being a global citizen means to children, where and how they build knowledge and understanding of global issues and how they can be part of positive change.



Children's Social Care

“You should be with someone who takes good care of you [...] somewhere you are safe and being treated well” – Child, 9.

Our ambition

Every child involved with children's social care is truly listened to; has a loving and stable home; and access to a safety net of support that continues beyond 18. Any child who needs secure care receives it in an integrated, homely environment.

How we will deliver for children this year

Consistent support for those at risk and those in need

Referrals to children's social care and their outcomes can follow a range of different journeys. For some children no further action will be taken, while others will be assessed and receive support through child in need or child protection plans. A large group of children who receive support from children's social care are those on child in need plans, yet this is an invisible group of children compared to children on child protection plans or those who are looked after. This year we will be continuing to better understand the support children are offered under child in need plans. The office will seek to understand the factors that affect the journeys of different children, as well as shining a light on the consistency and quality of planning and support for these vulnerable children including how children at risk are prevented from coming into care.

This year we will also be looking into statistics and trends in the deaths of children, and in particular whether children in need are being protected from deaths due to abuse and neglect. While the deaths of children and young people are mercifully rare, each death of a child is a tragedy, and we will be undertaking new analysis of mortality statistics to understand and identify where lessons can be learnt.

Last year we carried out a consultation to ask care experienced people whether they thought care experience should become a protected characteristic. This year we will publish the results of this.

Rising cost but not rising care

We want to see children living in families, whether that be birth families, kinship arrangements, foster or adoption. But when a child does have to live in an institution, it should be of the highest standard. There are children's homes that provide exceptional care. Some are privately run, some run by councils, some run by charities. However, these experiences are not universal. The shortage of appropriate places for looked-after children has led to many far too many cases where children are not getting the care they need, being placed far from schools and friends, or separated from their siblings, and an increasing problem of private providers profiteering.

This year, we will be conducting our own audit of the services children use, looking into how much is budgeted and spent and examining the relationship between funding and outcomes for children.

A place to call home

The Big Ambition results show that while the overwhelming majority of children feel safe, loved and secure at home, sadly this is not the case for all children. Children with a social worker are less likely to feel they have a place to call home, and to feel loved by those they live with.

Children with social workers and those in care deserve to have lives that are as fulfilling, rounded and happy as any other child. This year, we will be exploring what a consistent and familial home looks like for the most vulnerable children in care. We will be following children's journeys through the care system and their outcomes.

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum

Unaccompanied children arriving in the UK are acutely vulnerable and are in need of our care and protection. Some children have travelled for long periods, often up to a year by the time they arrive in the UK, with little control over where they end up either. As well as being some of the most vulnerable, these are also children whose voices often go unheard. This year, we will continue to provide direct advocacy and support to these children through our Help at Hand service; using our entry powers when

needed to visit unaccompanied children where they are accommodated and ensure they receive care and appropriate advocacy from the day they arrive in accordance with the Children Act 1989.



Community

“They should make our neighbourhoods safer for us to feel less anxious about going out and doing fun activities” – Girl, 15.

Our ambition

Every child feels safe in their home, school, relationships and local area and is prevented from being affected by violence and criminality. Child victims of crime receive specialist care and support and feel safer after an interaction with the justice system.

How we will deliver for children this year

Implementing the Online Safety Act

A core priority for the Children’s Commissioner since taking office has been ensuring children can play safely online and offline. Over the past three years we have worked towards achieving this goal through the Government commission on online safety and by shaping the passage of the Online Safety Act to ensure it was informed by children’s voices and needs. This was recognised with the Children’s Commissioner becoming a statutory consultee on the Codes of Practice, which will be integral to the online safety regime.

The findings from *The Big Ambition* demonstrated that children’s behaviour and perceptions of online safety vary by age and other characteristics. This translates to different solutions to improve online safety, from parental controls to robust age assurance and to safer design by social media companies. This year as a statutory consultee we will be working with Ofcom to ensure the Codes of Practice reflect these variations and ensures online safety regulation protects children of all ages for years to come.

Social media and violence: when virtual becomes reality

A strong theme to come out of *The Big Ask* in 2021 was the desire to feel safe and confident in public spaces. Among 9- to 17-year-old *The Big Ask* respondents, 80% were happy with 'my personal safety' and 96% were happy or OK with this. Yet some girls reported sexual harassment being a significant issue for them, affecting their confidence and happiness, and many spoke about the mental health impact of fearing sexual violence.

Last year the office carried out unique analysis of hundreds of documents relating to the investigation of sexual violence between children and in some cases found direct links being made between incidents of abuse and the abuser's exposure to pornography. This research built a compelling case that what was being viewed online was impacting children's and young people's behaviour and perceptions in the offline world.

This year, we will further investigate this by looking at the impact of social media and violent content, and violence and bullying are affecting children in their offline lives. We will seek to understand how violent content can affect children and young people's feelings of safety online and offline, and what this means for keeping them safe.

Interactions with the criminal justice system: building trust

The Big Ambition results showed that many children and parents feel safe in their local area and are confident that they can engage in their local communities, play, and learn. However, this is sadly not the case for all children. Too many children do not feel safe and, compared to *The Big Ask* in 2021, this perception seems to be getting worse.

All children and young people should be able to trust the services that are there to keep them safe. While the vast majority of children will not interact with a police officer during the exercising of police powers, our analysis into the use of strip searching by police in England and Wales last year revealed systemic problems with transparency, scrutiny and compliance to the policing guidelines in the treatment of children.

To keep children safe, it is important that they have confidence in the services there to protect them, and that those services are able to transparently show how policy or procedure has changed. In line with

one of our key recommendations from last year's report – that data should be collected annually on the number and appropriateness of strip searches of children conducted by police forces in England and Wales – this year we will be publishing the latest statistics on strip searches of children from all police force areas in England and Wales.

A key strand of our work since the publication of the *Family Review* has been looking at safety and conditions for children in custody. The *Family Review revealed* children in youth custody are exceedingly vulnerable and the great majority present with complex and interrelated needs that existed before their detention. Of pupils who have received a custodial sentence the Review found that 93% have received support for special educational needs and 91% have been persistently absent from school. This year, we will be looking into this area in further, exploring the educational histories, including attendance, of children in the secure estate.

Interactions with the criminal justice system: improving support for victims

Ensuring that children are protected from violence and harm, but also that they feel safe and confident as they go about their lives, should be fundamental measures of success for any government. More is needed to ensure that children feel safe, that child victims receive the real and specialist support they need to heal, and that children are safer for having come into contact with the justice system.

The refreshed Victims Code of Practice needs to ensure that every child victim of crime is entitled to support from specialist services. This year we will be highlighting the barriers and challenges children face in navigating the criminal justice system, and their experiences of support. We will use this to make recommendations for how these systems and services can work in a much more child-centred way.



Education

*“An education. It all starts with education. That's how people get far in life” –
Girl, 11.*

Our ambition

Every child is able to access a brilliant education and attend a school every day. When children need additional support to engage in education, it is easy to access with children with special educational needs receiving excellent, joined up healthcare, social care and education.

How we will deliver for children this year

Understanding absence

Children want to be in school yet many also face difficulties in accessing education. Through the Attendance Audit, the office spoke to over 300 children who are most often missing from research - those who are not attending school. We found that children are not absent from school because they do not want to learn. On the contrary, they are desperate to learn but everyday thousands of children find themselves without the support that they need to engage in education and attend school.

There are lots of children who are not in school because they are either not attending regularly, they are in unregulated provision where the quality of their education is not clear, or they are in home education, but it is important that their voices are heard, and their experiences understood to address the challenges to attending school where we can. Over this year, we will continue to shine a light on these children, using their testimonies to better understand absence and inform our work as part of the Attendance Action Alliance to ensure every child is able to access a brilliant education.

Getting the right support: Schools

To attend school every day means not only addressing the barriers but also understanding what makes a school a great place where children want to be. We know that for many children, even having fantastic teachers won't be enough to overcome the additional challenges in their life and they will need additional support to be able to learn and thrive. This year, the office will be exploring this further looking at what constitutes a strong pastoral offer in schools. We will be using our data collection powers to survey England's schools to find out the support in place for children and families.

Getting the right support: Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

The results from *The Big Ambition* show that the proportion of children who enjoy going to school falls as children get older. It also shows that children with SEND are less likely than other children to say they enjoy school, and often struggle to access the additional support they need to engage in education.

Every child with SEND should be having their needs met in a formalised way. This year we will examine the support available for children with special educational needs and sketch out our ambitions for children with SEND based on the findings from *The Big Ambition*.



Family

“All people should have a warm house and a caring family” – Boy, 13.

Our ambition

Every child grows up in a loving and supportive family, who has what they need to support them, including high quality support in the early years. No child grows up in poverty.

How we will deliver for children this year

Housing as foundation to safety, health and happiness

Last year, the office used its statutory powers to understand the numbers of homeless young people and were concerned to find that around 6,500 16- and 17-year-olds presented as homeless in 2023-23. No child, whether with their family or aged 16 or 17, should be homeless or living in temporary accommodation.

This year we will be exploring the impact that homelessness and low-quality housing is having on families and the power of family’s ‘protective effect’. We will be drawing on existing research and *The Big Ambition* to reveal new insights into how important a safe place having to call home is for children and how it can affect their outcomes.

Rethinking how we support families: no child growing up in poverty

The Big Ambition results show that most children and parents feel their families are able to do what families should – provide for their members, enjoy time together, and give children the stable and loving start they need. However, this is sadly not the case for all families. When families are faced with having to work two or three jobs, mounting debt, food or housing instability, and without the time to enjoy being a family, small challenges can grow into insurmountable problems. For some families poverty is the main barrier to them thriving.

This year, we will be looking at the prevalence and effects of poverty on children told through their own words. We will be analysing what children have told us about the essentials they need and what this tells us about child poverty, material deprivation and household food security.

Rethinking how we support families: Implementing the Family Review

In 2022 the Children's Commissioner carried out her independent Family Review. This Review was based on two nationally representative panel surveys of parents and children, 23 focus groups and 35 interviews.

The Review identified that family casts a protective net around its members, with those who have a strong family doing better on a range of different measures. It showed that families want to turn to their extended family network for support and argued that this should be supported and encouraged. Parents and carers spoke about how parenting could be deeply challenging, as well as joyful, and that there needed to be non-stigmatising, universal support to help them do the best possible job they could. They also needed relief from the many pressures on family life – particularly balancing work and childcare.

Children and families also spoke about how sometimes things could get too much to deal with, and that they needed more intensive support from services. But too often they felt these weren't designed for families, but for individuals who exist in isolation. They wanted services to understand their complex family dynamics, to be non-judgemental, flexible and there for the long term.

This year, we will be continuing to work to ensure the wide-ranging recommendations arising from the Family Review are implemented by government, including pressing for greater local integration, improved data collection and sharing, and for a shared child and family outcomes framework.



Health

"Focus a lot more on preventative measures in relation to healthcare this will take strain off NHS and be much cheaper." - Boy, 15

Our ambition

Children's ill-health is prevented, and additional help is provided as early as possible. This includes high-quality mental health support in schools and communities and excellent, joined up healthcare, social care and education for disabled children and children with special educational needs. Children with the most acute needs living away from home receive loving and caring support.

How we will deliver for children this year

Access to Healthcare: Mental Health and Wellbeing

The Children's Commissioner's ambition is for every child to get the right support with their mental health in the community, so that no child needs to be admitted to an institution. To understand children's access to community support, this year we will continue to track how well and how quickly mental health services are meeting the needs of children and young people, publishing spending, waiting times and other key metrics in Children and Young People's Mental Health Services. Through this work we will highlight good practice and explore the sources of and reasons for referrals of children to services.

We will also extend our research this year to looking at acute health needs. Sadly, all too often our Help at Hand service receive calls from children that have tell us about the abuse or neglect they have suffered living in hospital or away from home. This year we will be speaking to children and young people who are being deprived of their liberty in other settings, to better understand how we can prevent children from reaching crisis – and what a good, joined up model of care between health and social care looks like for this group.

Access to Healthcare: Neurodiversity and additional needs

Too often children with impairments, neurodivergence or additional needs are split between systems and services that work in silo. This even happens within health services, meaning some of the most vulnerable children wait the longest for assessment, treatment or support. When left unsupported while they are waiting, children's needs can escalate – and increase their risk of being inappropriately institutionalised. This year we will publish analysis of how long children with suspected neurodevelopmental conditions like Autism or ADHD wait for support from community health and mental health services. We also explore what good early intervention looks like, and how children who may not require a diagnostic pathway can be better supported.

Early intervention and prevention

Good physical health is important to children, with younger children in particular wanting to live healthy lifestyles. We know that there are some conditions children are presenting with that can be prevented through focusing attention and resources on the wider determinants of health and wellbeing. This year we will be exploring these factors from the importance of family and early years support to how online exposure can affect children's health and wellbeing. We will look at how health, children's services and education can better work together to support children and their families, including preventing children from contracting sexually transmitted diseases, and other viruses and diseases that can easily be avoided through vaccination.

Children facing complex and serious illnesses

For children facing complex and serious illnesses and conditions, hospitals are often a mainstay for their young lives. For families this means coordinating appointments and repeating information to a range of different services and professionals and being available around the clock. It is therefore imperative that children's palliative care services are properly planned, funded and delivered. This year we will exploring what support is needed to provide a loving and caring environment away from home at the most difficult times for children and their families.



Jobs and Skills

“Give us more information about future careers and potential opportunities for careers at this age” – Boy, 13.

Our ambition

Every young person, no matter their background, is equipped with the life skills they will need as adults and given the support they need to secure their dream job through access to high-quality careers advice, information, and guidance which is tailored to their interests.

How we will deliver for children this year

Access to opportunities

Young people have told us that they want support to learn about a wide range of careers and to choose the path which is right for them after education. This includes those children with additional needs. *The Big Ambition* showed that while these children share the level of ambition as other children, sometimes they feel like they do not receive the extra support they need to achieve their goals. They want greater access to programmes which will allow them to secure a brilliant job in the future.

This year we will be exploring this area further, revealing new insights into what children, particularly those with a special educational need or disability have told us about their experiences with accessing skills and development opportunities and how they can be better supported towards achieving their dream careers.

We will also be working with our Care-Experienced Advisory Board to explore this area with regards to support for care leavers in higher education with the aim of creating of a care leavers higher education handbook which sets a minimum standard that all higher education providers should be offering to support care leavers who attend their institutions.

Jobs and skills pathways

Children want to pursue a brilliant range of career paths, from vocational routes through to academic. In *The Big Ambition* children remarked that they want better access to vocational career routes, whether through vocational qualifications or apprenticeships.

This year, we will be looking into jobs and skills pathways - what children and young people want for their futures and how can they get there. We will be looking into different types of careers and will create practical resources on paths to a variety of jobs including those across education, social care and in communities working with children.

Relationships, Sex and Health Education/PSHE

In addition to support to learn about a wide range of careers and to choose the path which is right for them, *The Big Ambition* also revealed that many children were desperate to learn about the life skills they will need as adults but they did not feel like schools and colleges were currently set up to provide them with these life lessons.

This year, we will be drawing on our research into the effects pornography and other graphic content are having on young people's relationships and the role education can play in preventing and mitigating these misconceptions. We will draw on findings from *The Big Ambition* to report on what children want from this part of the curriculum.



Help at Hand

“I would just like to say thank you for all your help and support in resolving this matter, there is no doubt that this outcome was only achieved because of your assistance so thank you once again”. – advocate – stopping an unwanted placement move

Our Help at Hand team not only helps the individual children who need it most, but also ensures that their experiences are used to inform the office’s research and policy work at a national level. The team are integral to the office’s advocating for the rights of vulnerable children and young people, and making sure their voices and the challenges they face get heard.

In 2023 Help at Hand received 1,032 inquiries. In more than half the cases where Help at Hand made representations for a child, the issue they raised was fully resolved. In 81% of such cases the issue was partially resolved.

This year Help at Hand will be maintaining this high-quality service to children and care leavers through their advice line and casework and raising the profile, accessibility, and impact of the service.

Improving outreach and visibility

In 2022 the Children’s Commissioner’s office undertook a review of the Help at Hand service that included a consultation with children and young people in the service’s remit. The review made several recommendations regarding raising the accessibility of the service. Many of these recommendations have been implemented for example commissioning a video and easy read materials to make the service more accessible to children with disabilities, and by undertaking regular visits to reception centres and Home Office accommodation to work with unaccompanied children seeking asylum.

This year Help at Hand will continue to increase their visibility and outreach to children in need of representation, advice and support through the Help at Hand rebrand. This will include the launch of a

new website page with accessible resources for children with special educational needs and disabilities and the distribution of Help at Hand promotional materials to children's settings across the country. This will also include increasing visibility within schools through engagement with designated safeguarding leads and the office's programme of visits.

Working with others to improve impact

Help at Hand uses its unique position to have impact for children when no one else can help and is often an escalation point where a child falls between a number of services and legal frameworks. This year Help at Hand will continue to build on their relationships with Ofsted, the CQC, the Department for Education, local authorities and others to get the best results for children. and will assist in training professionals working with children with a social worker, children living away from home and care leavers on child rights issues. Help at Hand have already offered free workshops to children's home staff and advocates. Help at Hand will be looking at extending this offer this year.

Help at Hand will also be exploring what happens with safeguarding concerns when they do not meet the threshold for criminal prosecutions, in particular the role of the Designated Officer and internal investigations done by the provider that is subject to concerns. The provider maybe a children's home or a school for example. This has come up on several Help at Hand cases and indicates there is a gap in the safeguarding system. Help at Hand will look at these cases in more detail and engage the expertise of the office and stakeholders to identify the issues and propose solutions.

Increasing access to advocacy

In April 2023, the Children's Commissioner office entered into an agreement with Ofsted whereby the office is notified immediately when children's homes receive a provisional rating of inadequate by Ofsted. The Help at Hand Team then requests that the local authority that has placed the child there give a reassurance that the children have access to advocacy. This work will continue this year as part of the office's broader work to ensure every child in care has access to advocacy and feels listened to by the adults that care for them.



Participation

Our Business Plan has been informed by the more than a million children, young people, parents, carers and professionals we have heard from in surveys, focus groups, visits and interviews and through the children and young people we engage with every day through our participation groups. Participation is central to delivery of every aspect of the plan in gaining a deeper understanding of the issues children and young people care about and ensuring their input and perspectives on our work are not only listened to but understood.

The Children's Commissioner's Ambassadors

The Children's Commissioner's Ambassadors programme was launched in December 2023 as part of our *The Big Ambition* campaign to give young people the chance to represent the views of their peers and children and young people across the country to Government and decision-makers. It is a 1-year programme involving 16 Ambassadors aged 16 and 17 who have been chosen for their interest and passion to try to change issues that affect children and young people. They have already made a tremendous impact on our work including promoting *The Big Ambition* survey in their schools and communities, writing blogs, and co-hosting and participating in the policy expert roundtables.

This year the office will be supporting the Ambassadors to:

- Share their views and the views of young people today on a national level platform
- Engage with parliamentarians and sector experts that are involved in the issues they care about
- Create digital content that sparks debate and influences policy
- Take part of roundtables and meetings with ministers and government departments
- Attend and speak at events about their work
- Work with other youth boards and participation groups

- Feedback to the office on the issues that are important to young people in their area
- Create resources to share their knowledge and inspire others
- Take *The Big Ambition* findings to the Political Party Conference Youth Zone
- Promote and advocate for children's rights








The Ambassador programme will continue into the next business year with a new cohort of Ambassadors to begin their tenure in December 2024. Building on these programmes, we will codify our approach to participation and support others to listen and act on children's views.

















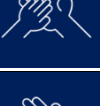
















Care Experienced Advisory Board































































The Care Experienced Advisory Board made up of 18 to 25-year-olds (care leavers), was launched in March 2023 with their first board meeting looking at what can make the children's social care system better for children in England. The Board has since discussed and shaped the office's thinking on the Independent Review of Children's Social Care's recommendation to make 'care experience a protected characteristic', reforms to the education system, support for the transition to living independently, and access to mental health services.












This year the Board will be informing our work across all pillars; ensuring our policy recommendations give all children equal opportunity to succeed. This will include looking at support for care leavers in higher education with the aim of creating of a care leavers higher education handbook which aims to set a minimum standard that all higher education providers should be offering to support care leavers who attend their institutions.

Appendix A: Working across pillars












Key						
						
Better world	Children's Social Care	Community	Education	Family	Health	Jobs & Skills















Work Stream	Principal Pillar	Supporting Pillars
Ensuring children feel that their thoughts, feelings, views, and ambitions are listened to		   
Engaging with young people and ensuring their participation in our work		   
Digital post-box		 
Being a global citizen		 
Consistent support for those at risk and those in need		  
Rising cost but not rising care		 
A place to call home		 
Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum		  
Implementing the Online Safety Act		 




Social media and violence: when does virtual become reality		  	
Interactions with the criminal justice system: building trust		 	
Interactions with the criminal justice system: improving support for victims		 	
Understanding absence		    	
Getting the right support: Schools		    	
Getting the right support: Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)		    	
Housing as foundation to safety, health and happiness		   	
Rethinking how we support families: no child growing up in poverty		   	
Rethinking how we support families: implementing the Family Review		   	
Access to Healthcare: Mental Health and Wellbeing		   	
Access to Healthcare: Neurodiversity and additional needs		   	
Early intervention and prevention		   	
Children facing serious and complex illnesses		  	

Access to opportunities		  	
Jobs and skills pathways		  	
Relationships, Sex and Health Education/PSHE		 	

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

Work Stream	Principal Pillar	Article of UNCRC
Better World		2, 3, 12, 13, 20
Ensuring children feel that their thoughts, feelings, views, and ambitions are listened to		3, 12, 13
Engaging with young people and ensuring their participation in our work		12, 13, 20
Digital post-box		12, 13, 2
Being a global citizen		12, 13
Children's Social Care		3, 6, 18, 19, 20, 22, 25, 35, 37, 38, 39
Consistent support for those at risk and those in need		3, 6, 18, 19
Rising cost but not rising care		3, 19, 20, 25, 39
A place to call home		3, 19, 20, 25
Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum		2, 19, 20, 22, 35, 37, 38, 39
Community		3, 17, 19, 34, 37, 39, 40

Implementing the Online Safety Act		3, 17, 36
Social media and violence: when does virtual become reality		3, 17, 19, 34
Interactions with the criminal justice system: building trust		3, 19, 37, 40
Interactions with the criminal justice system: improving support for victims		3, 19, 34, 39
Education		2, 3, 18, 23, 28, 29
Understanding absence		3, 28, 29
Getting the right support: schools		3, 18, 28, 29
Getting the right support: Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND)		2, 3, 23, 28, 29
Family		3, 5, 18, 24, 26, 27
Housing as foundation to safety, health and happiness		3, 24, 26, 27
Rethinking how we support families: no child growing up in poverty		3, 24, 26, 27
Rethinking how we support families: implementing the Family Review		3, 5, 18, 27
Health		3, 5, 6, 18, 23, 24, 25, 27, 39
Access to Healthcare: Mental Health and Wellbeing		3, 6, 23, 24, 25, 39

Access to Healthcare: Neurodiversity and additional needs		3, 18, 23, 24
Early intervention and prevention		3, 5, 6, 18, 27
Children facing complex and serious illnesses		3, 6, 23, 24, 25
Jobs and Skills		2, 3, 23, 28, 29, 34
Access to opportunities		2, 3, 23, 28, 29
Jobs and skills pathways		28, 29
Relationships, Sex and Health Education/PSHE		3, 28, 29, 34
Help at Hand		2, 3, 12, 19, 20, 22, 23, 42
Improving outreach and visibility		2, 3, 12, 22, 23
Working with others to improve impact		2, 3, 12, 19, 20, 23
Increasing access to advocacy		2, 3, 12, 20, 22, 23, 42
Participation		12, 13, 20
The Children's Commissioner's Ambassadors		3, 12, 13
Care Experienced Advisory Board		2, 3, 12, 13, 20



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