



THE
BIG
AMBITION

 **CHILDREN'S
COMMISSIONER**

AMBITIONS, FINDINGS AND SOLUTIONS

MARCH 2024

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



As Children's Commissioner it is my job to promote and protect the rights of children, and to make sure their voices are heard. 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. In the year of the General Election, I thought it was a critical moment to take children and young people's voices to policymakers, decision takers, parliamentarians, government, and all those working with and for children. And over 367,000 children and adults engaged with it. I was particularly pleased that this include 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.

When I first saw the results of *The Big Ambition* survey, one number stood out to me above all others. 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 hundreds of children I had spoken to, 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.

Four years ago, in the pandemic, children saw the power that the government has to change lives. They saw the government step in to protect children and adults against the threat of the pandemic, to support their families through the furlough scheme, and to rollout a nationwide vaccine drive. Children saw the Prime Minister making decisions in almost real time about whether they could go to school, or see their grandparents. This generation witnessed the power of government to affect radical change. This inspired a belief that governments can and should change policies and laws to make their lives better.

And they are right to believe this. I believe it too. From my years working in education, and from my time as Children's Commissioner, I have seen governments of different parties show that it is possible to commit to eradicating the harms of smoking, to radically reduce the number of children in Youth Offending Institutes, to narrow the education gap between rich and poor children, or tackle child poverty. What this takes is energy, political will and commitment.

I want this paper to serve as a call to action, for whoever forms the next government, to decide now that they will commit all their energy and effort to improving the lives of children.

The policies proposed in this paper draw directly on what children themselves told us. As such, they are ambitious. They would make the rights children are entitled to a reality. They are designed to be child-up, rather than system-down. They provide a positive vision for what childhood could be like if only it were reimagined through the eyes of children.

Children are ambitious. And they speak with a moral clarity that is deeply refreshing for those of us verging on cynicism, who are perhaps too used to talk of cost benefit ratios or return on investment when it comes to childhood. As one of my youth ambassadors put it, when talking about tech firms neglecting their duty to keep children safe online, *'it may be your livelihoods, but it's our childhoods'*.

Children don't feel the need to debate why it will be beneficial in the long term to ensure that every family has sufficient financial capacity to support their children. They simply state that no child should

go hungry, because it is wrong. They do not talk in the language of targets, and they do not set the bar at what is simply easy to achieve. They speak in terms of fairness. Children believe that true inclusion means that no child is left out. As such, our policies are designed to improve the lives of all children.

But this scale of ambition does not mean that children are purely idealists. Most of their ambitions are quietly pragmatic, and eminently reasonable. They want their local park to be a nicer place to spend time. They want to know they can have someone to talk to when they are sad. They want to stop worrying about the cost of living, and just enjoy their childhood. They want, in short, to be children and be allowed to be children.

They believe in the power of adults to transform their lives for the better. *The Big Ambition* results show how grateful children are for those adults who support them every single day. One of the most heartwarming findings from *The Big Ambition* was that young people from schools where the majority of children are eligible for free school meals were even more likely than their peers to agree that they had great teachers who supported them. Having dedicated my career to turning around the life chances of children in some of our country's toughest schools, this finding gives me hope. It proves that we can change children's lives, if we make their ambitions our priorities.

This paper sets out how, with a few clear ambitions, shared across government, both local and national, as well as everyone working with children, and underpinned by action that can be both radical and practical, the lives of children can be dramatically improved. This paper sets out a plan for making childhood not only safe and healthy, but joyful and ambitious.

So, I ask our political leaders now to address children's frustration at being overlooked, and to repay their faith in you. Please listen to what they have to say, and more importantly – act, and make the difference they believe you can.

Introduction

In March 2021, Dame Rachel de Souza was appointed Children's Commissioner for England. One of her first actions in post was to carry out a nationwide survey of children and young people known as *The Big Ask*. Over 500,000 children responded to *The Big Ask*, making it the largest survey of its kind. *The Big Ask* armed the office with insights into the experience of childhood in 2021: the survey captured children's hopes, dreams, and fears.

In 2023, the Children's Commissioner decided to run another nationwide survey to hear from children and young people ahead of the General Election. *The Big Ambition* was a survey carried out by the Children's Commissioner between September 2023 and January 2024. It asked children about their experiences, views and what they want government to do to improve their lives. The results from the survey have informed the Children's Commissioner's own priorities for the rest of her time in office, and the work she does to influence the government's plans.

The Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, has engaged with 367,000 children and adults through *The Big Ambition*. It received responses for around 39,500 children with a special educational need and/or disability, and almost 14,000 children with a social worker. Around 390 children who responded were living in secure settings and around 300 in mental health hospitals. There were responses from every local authority in England, and from children of all ages.

Taken together with the Children's Commissioner's *The Big Ask* survey in 2021 and other surveys, visits and focus groups conducted by the office, since taking up her post the Children's Commissioner has engaged with over a million children.

This paper sets out the key findings from *The Big Ambition* survey, both the percentages of children agreeing and disagreeing to different questions, and direct quotes from their response to the question 'what one thing could the government do to improve the lives of children?'.

This paper analyses the responses from children on different topics, and the ideas that they had for change. It is divided into chapters, covering the many aspects of children's lives. A full methodology is published separately.¹

It draws together the findings from the survey and investigates why some children were more likely to respond positively than others. It looks at the importance of relationships for children, whether that's friends, families, or the trusted adults that children depend on. It looks at why children with special educational needs and those with a social worker were less likely to be happy. It asks why children's happiness seems to weaken as they get older. It seeks to resolve these disparities and to set out a plan for a brighter future for all children.

It is vital to say though, that none of the reforms contained in each chapter will make as much difference in isolation as they can together. For example, some parents report that the one thing making family life hard for them is the lack of support for their teenager's mental health. Or some children living in care report that their home is loving and safe, and their only difficulty is the lack of an appropriate school place. Poverty (which is addressed in the 'Families' chapter) is a driving force behind inequalities in health, education and social care. The policy recommendations are therefore separated out for ease of reading, but it must be understood that the 'system' for children only really works if all of it works.

In addition, while these policy proposals are in themselves well-supported by evidence and expert input, it is obvious that there are deeper structural changes that will be needed to deliver them. In this paper the focus is on the changes which respond most directly to what children themselves asked for. It is perhaps not surprising that few children spoke about the need for improved data management and sharing systems, workforce and recruitment issues, or reformed accountability mechanisms. But these 'behind the scenes' changes will be the necessary underpinning for all the reforms detailed here.

The Children's Commissioner will shortly be publishing a more detailed paper about how to go about delivering these structural changes across the whole system, but in summary they will include:

¹ Children's Commissioner, *The Big Ambition: Research*, 2024, [Link](#).

- **A unique childhood identifier so that no child falls through the gaps in support.** The NHS number is the most appropriate identifier as it is assigned upon registration with the NHS, usually at birth, and remains with an individual throughout their life. Other identifiers, such as the Unique Pupil Number, only cover an individual for a limited age range and do not cover the early years, which is a crucial data gap. A unique identifier would help improve the ability to match children between different datasets. This would, for example, increase the ability to track children's development from the early years through to leaving school, or to understand which children are known to different services.
- **An outcomes framework, shared across government.** This should set out the top-level outcomes that all services should be working towards. Through extensive consultation in her independent *Family Review* the Children's Commissioner has developed a core set of high level outcomes which could be adopted. These are:
 1. **All children are safe**
 2. **All children are happy**
 3. **All children are healthy**
 4. **All children are learning**
 5. **All children are engaged in a community**

Each department should then develop detailed outcome measures for the children they are responsible for. For example, there must be a clear way of measuring whether child in need plans are achieving the goals set out within them.

- **Every child has a single 'Child's Plan' setting out what, if any, additional support they need.** For many children this would simply detail the school or early education provision they attend, and the routine health checks or immunisations they will need. For some children this may detail their education support, their health support, or their social care support, and for some a combination of two or three. This would give greater clarity to parents and practitioners about who is needed to support that child and could replace the existing system whereby some disabled children, for example, will have an Education Health and Care Plan as well as a separate Child in Need plan. All professionals would work from the same plan, and share information accordingly.
- **Every parent or carer can easily navigate the public services which exist to serve their children.** Navigating the bureaucracy of the state can be a challenge for all parents, so all parents should have access to a portal which details their 'Child's Plan' which provides all the information they need on education, health, and social care services. This would include deadlines for applying for early education funding, school places, or for upcoming health checks. It would link to national and local information relevant to their child's age and stage of development. This portal would be designed to be easy to use and accessible to all parents, regardless of their background.
- **There are clear, reliable, long-term funding streams for children, based on consistent measures of local need.** These should replace current systems where local areas have to bid in to central government 'pots' to access funding, for youth work for example, or where funding is not ring-fenced for children, for example in children's social care. Funding should be calculated based on long-term need. It should be easy for anyone to understand how much is being spent on children and how that money is being spent.
- **All services are held to a consistent standard and are directly accountable to the children, parents and carers that they serve.** Currently, Ofsted inspects each individual school, individual children's homes, and individual childminders. It inspects local authorities in relation to their children's social care duties, and SEND provision, but not their role in education. It inspects foster carers indirectly through local authority or agency inspections. Some services are uninspected –

such as childcare for children over 8, youth centres, and family hubs. Some settings are jointly inspected by the CQC and Ofsted – such as some residential special schools registered as children’s homes, or by the CQC and HM Inspectorate of Prisons – such as secure training centres. There needs to be a rationalised system of inspection, between different inspectorates, that provides a proportionate and consistent assessment of all services accessed by children. This rationalised system should be easy for all children, parents and carers to use to understand the quality of services in the area that they live in.

- **A joint children’s workforce strategy to ensure those working with children are caring, professional and equipped to do their jobs, and that there is a strong pipeline into senior leadership roles.** The people in the country who make the most difference to children’s lives, who keep them safe, who nurture them, and provide them with the stable loving relationships they need are not sufficiently valued. Across all sectors there are real challenges with both recruitment and retention. These challenges are better known when it comes to the teaching profession, but is just as true for the vital children’s homes staff, foster carers, social workers, health visitors, SENCOs, nursery staff, teaching assistants, carers for disabled children, and family key workers. We need to make these careers vocations once more. There are no jobs which are more rewarding. These are the professionals who will transform the lives of children. We need a workforce strategy which does not incentivise competition between different sectors but instead encourages more people to work with children. A cross-sector strategy, which acknowledges that often different sectors are looking for a workforce with similar strengths and motivations, is needed. This strategy must also consider routes into leadership roles, to ensure that there is a strong pipeline for the next generation of leaders. Directors of Children’s Services have perhaps the most important jobs in the country. It is vital that the current workforce challenges are addressed so that the next generation of leaders can be nurtured and developed.
- **The Department for Education has direct responsibility for the delivery of core services for children.** There will always be the need for responsibility for children to be distributed across government departments to a certain extent – no single department could deliver schools, and children’s cancer treatment, and child benefit. However, there are some programmes of work that are so intertwined with the work of children’s social care and education that it is anomalous

for them to sit in other departments. For example, the responsibility for the youth justice system and children in custody, for the placement of unaccompanied children seeking asylum via the National Transfer Scheme, for youth work provision, and for the reducing parental conflict programme should sit with the Department for Education.

Delivering *The Big Ambition*

How were children involved with *The Big Ambition*?

Through *The Big Ambition*, children demonstrated their desire to speak up and to share their views on what needs to change. Children wrote responses from every corner of England, whether at school, at home, or living away from home. The survey link was disseminated to all schools in England and a range of other organisations. Responses were gathered from every local authority in England and at least one response was gathered from over 10,000 schools, equating to 40% of all schools in England. This rich data on children's circumstances, as well as their ethnicity, age, and other characteristics, allows this report to provide breakdowns of responses for particular groups of children. The survey data has been weighted to better to better represent the population of children in England.

As part of *The Big Ambition*, the Children's Commissioner also visited children in every region of England, convening roundtables to hear directly from children about what the next prime minister should change.

We have heard from thousands of children whose voices are least often heard, whether it's children with special educational needs, those with a social worker, or those living in secure settings or mental health hospitals. The Children's Commissioner's team have conducted focus groups and interviews with children in these settings to ensure that their voices were heard.

To accompany the launch of *The Big Ambition*, the Children's Commissioner has also convened her first ever group of Youth Ambassadors. These young people have spoken powerfully on the behalf of children and young people across the country to the people in power.

To all the children involved in *The Big Ambition*, we want to say thank you. You have shown your drive and ambition. You have put your trust in us to listen to you. It is not enough to just listen. We will now take all that you told us and act. What you told us will underpin the next three years of the Children's Commissioner's work.

How were professionals involved with The Big Ambition?

A huge range of professionals working with children were instrumental in ensuring that children and parents across the country were able to participate in focus groups and interviews, or to complete the survey. The Children's Commissioner would like to thank all those teachers, nursery staff, social workers, youth custody staff, healthcare workers, youth workers and many others who took the time to share the survey with children and parents, supported them to complete it, and made sure that their voices were heard. All of these professionals already have full and busy workloads, so for them to make the effort to ensure that children had the chance to take part is deeply appreciated.

In addition, the policy proposals in this paper, while based on what children want the government to do, have been developed with invaluable input from professionals and leaders across the system. The Children's Commissioner and her Youth Ambassadors have hosted roundtables on each of the policy areas. In early 2024, the Children's Commissioner hosted 15 roundtables with sector experts. We spoke to over 100 professionals working with children. The office met with Directors of Children's Services, headteachers, Governors, health leaders, tech firms, charities, rights groups, and many more. These roundtables were inspiring and ambitious, and provided an opportunity to refine improve, or add to the recommendations. Again, the Children's Commissioner and her team want to thank all those who attended these roundtables, who gave their time and expertise to help create an ambitious, hopeful, yet practical set of proposals.

The Big Ambition and Children's Rights

It is the Children's Commissioner's duty to promote and protect the rights of children, as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children's rights therefore run through each of these policy recommendations, which if adopted would go further to making those rights a reality. For clarity, the

recommendations are mapped against each of the UNCRC rights at the end of the paper. In order to ensure that the government is adhering to the UNCRC the Children's Commissioner recommends that:

- Governments always publish an action plan in response to the concluding observations, with a Cabinet Office board responsible for overseeing its delivery.
- Governments publish a Child Rights' Impact Assessment for any new legislation, regulations, or policy development. These are published on a publicly available database.

A note on language: Throughout this report references are made to 'government'. These references are to the UK government, as the role of the Children's Commissioner for England is to promote and protect the rights of children in England, and across the UK on reserved matters, where she is required to make sure views from other nations are represented. There are no direct recommendations to governments of other UK nations on devolved matters, but the office works closely with the Children's Commissioners for those nations.

The Ambitions

1. Every child grows up in a family who has what they need to support them and no child grows up in poverty.
2. Every child grows up in a loving and supportive family.
3. Every child has access to high quality support in the early years.
4. Every child grows up happy and healthy and where children need additional help it is provided as early as possible.
5. Every child has access to high-quality mental health and wellbeing support in their school and local community.
6. Every disabled child or child with special educational needs, and neurodiverse child receives excellent, joined up healthcare, social care and education.
7. Every child with the most acute health needs living away from home receives loving, caring support.
8. Every child has access to a brilliant education.
9. Every child attends and is engaged in school every day.
10. Every child who needs additional support to engage in education can access it easily.
11. Every child involved with children's social care is truly listened to, and their views are heard.
12. All families get consistent, effective help to improve children's welfare, and to stay together wherever it is in a child's best interests.
13. Every child in care has a loving stable home.

14. Every young person with care experience continues to receive care and support for as long as they need it.
 15. Every child who needs secure care receives it in an integrated, homely environment. All Young Offenders Institutions are closed.
 16. Every child seeking asylum has access to a stable and loving home.
 17. Every child seeking asylum is supported to thrive in education.
 18. Every unaccompanied child in need of care and protection is supported from the day they arrive.
 19. Every child has access to play and fun things to do, and places to spend time with their friends.
 20. Every child has access to high-quality youth provision in their local area.
 21. Every child is supported by services that work together with youth work, to prevent issues escalating.
 22. Every child is safe in their home, school, relationships and local area.
 23. Every child is prevented from being affected by violence and criminality.
 24. Every child who is a victim of crime receives specialist care and support.
 25. Every child is safer after an interaction with the police or youth justice system.
 26. Every child can play and learn online safely.
 27. Every child has the knowledge and support to be safe online.
 28. Every child is protected from online harms, and services can effectively safeguard and support them.
 29. Every child is taught about the life skills they will need as adults.
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30. Every child has access to high-quality careers advice, information, and guidance which is tailored to their interests.
31. Every child, no matter their background, is given the support they need to secure their dream job whether that is through further or higher education or an apprenticeship.
32. Every child feels empowered to enact change about issues that they care about.
33. Every child's thoughts, feelings, views, and ambitions are listened to.

The Big Ambition for Families

“To make children’s lives better they should make sure every child has a place to call home and parents who love and care for them” – Girl, 11.

- 86% of children agreed that their family has everything it needs to support them, although 80% of parents and other adults responding on children’s behalf agreed.
- 73% of children in Hartlepool agreed their family has everything it needs, compared to 86% of children in Hampshire.
- 73% of children with SEND, and adults responding on their behalf, agreed that their family has everything it needs, compared to 90% for children without SEND.
- 71% of responses by or on behalf of children with a social worker agreed, compared to 87% for children without a social worker.
- 83% of children agreed that their family gets to spend quality time together. Younger ages were more likely to agree – 91% of parents of under 6s agreed they get to spend quality time together, compared to 81% of responses by or on behalf of 12- to 18-year-olds.

“Make things cheaper so my parents don’t have to work so much and then we would have more time together as a family. Most of the time it is either my Mum or Dad at work and we don’t spend time together as a family. Also, they are always worried about the cost of things because everything is so expensive.” – Girl, 9.

The Big Ambition results show that most children and parents feel their families are able to do what families want to – 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 living in poverty and experiencing extreme financial hardship, and without the time to enjoy being a family, small challenges can grow into insurmountable problems.

It is clear that a rebalancing is needed, with all families strengthened so they can face the challenges life throws at them, and given the universal help and support they need to enjoy family life, so that fewer problems develop. If problems do still emerge, they still need to be picked up much earlier, and addressed in a non-stigmatising way.

What children and families have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

The Children's Commissioner has heard from a million children, parents and carers since taking up her post in 2021. She has explored in detail how children experience family life, and the challenges that families in England face.

The Big Ask survey of 557,000 children showed that the vast majority – 94% - of children were either happy or 'ok' with their family life. 97% were happy or 'ok' with their family's ability to buy the things they needed.² In the *Big Ambition*, fewer children – 86% - said that their family had everything they needed to support them. However, the 6% of children who were not happy with family life were 9 times more likely to be unhappy with their life overall. Family is central to a child's well-being. It is also central to their hopes and ambitions for the future.

In 2022 the Children's Commissioner carried out her independent Family Review.³⁴ This review was based on two nationally representative panel surveys of parents and children, 23 focus groups and 35 interviews.

This 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.

² Children's Commissioner, *The Big Answer*, 2021, [Link](#).

³ Children's Commissioner, *Family and its protective effect: Part 1 of the Independent Family Review*, 2022, [Link](#).

⁴ Children's Commissioner, *A positive approach to parenting: Part 2 of the Independent Family Review*, 2022, [Link](#).

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. And they 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.

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner set out the five over-arching outcomes that wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. To achieve that within support for families will mean achieving the following ambitions:

1. Every child grows up in a family who has what they need to support them and no child grows up in poverty.
2. Every child grows up in a loving and supportive family.
3. Every child has access to high quality support in the early years.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child grows up in a family who has what they need to support them and no child grows up in poverty.

“End child poverty and ensure all children have the same opportunities” – Boy, 15.

There are some families for whom the pressures of poverty can create such a strain, that it becomes much harder to manage any other difficulties life may present. Reducing poverty should be a focus of government not just because it will help to reduce costs to the state in the long-term, but because it is the right thing to do. No child should grow up in poverty, worrying about where their next meal is coming from or about whether they will have a place to go home to. The alleviation of poverty must therefore be seen as the first step in ‘early help’, which will reduce the need for children’s social care interventions as well as mental and physical healthcare.

What is needed to get there:

- **The government sets out a clear plan to ensure that no child grows up in poverty.** The government should pull together a cross-government taskforce to deliver this plan and to ensure that poverty reduction informs all policy decisions the government makes.
- **All eligible children are auto-enrolled in free school meals, to avoid any entitled children missing out.** Additionally, because Reception, year 1 and year 2 school meals are free, parents often do not apply until children enter Key Stage 2, meaning the school misses out on pupil premium for those years. The real terms value of free school meals must also be increased in line with inflation, as it has lost 16% of its value in real terms since 2014, which some children report leaves them with more limited options. A unique childhood identifier could assist with the sharing of information about entitlement. The current threshold for free school meals must be reviewed and updated with inflation annually to ensure that it reaches all the children who are most in need, and includes those children in early education.

“Everyone should have free school meals” – Boy, 11.

- **Every school offers breakfast club provision for children who need it, free of charge to parents.** These breakfast clubs will be offered to children of all ages who would otherwise start the day hungry.

“The government should run more breakfast clubs for kids to have breakfast before school” – Girl, 12.

- **Universal credit better reflects the additional costs of having children.** This would include reviewing the existing base rate, committing to a ‘triple-lock’ for uprating all child related benefits, to ensure that they can consistently keep up with increases in the cost of living. The two-child limit on child elements of benefits means that children in larger families are much more likely to experience financial difficulties. Children should not be penalised or plunged into poverty because of the choices of their parents. In 2021-22, 55% of UK children living in families with 3 or more children were in relative poverty after housing costs, compared to 34% of children living in families with 2 children and 17% of children living in families with 1 child.

“Give people that are living on benefits more money to help pay their bills and support their children” – Boy, 15.

“Abolish the 2 child rule so bigger families are better supported financially” – Child, 11.

- **No child, whether with their family or aged 16 or 17, is homeless, including those living in temporary accommodation.** No child or family should be housed in B&B type accommodation for over six weeks, including in council-owned B&Bs. There should be additional protections for families with children when it comes to being evicted.

“Homeless children should have a family and a home.” – Boy, 8.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Reduced demand for free school meals.
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- Every child has the essentials they need – for food, clothing, warmth and shelter is measured in annual statistics on child poverty, material deprivation and household food security.

Ambition 2: Every child grows up in a loving and supportive family, with close and loving relationships.

“Make sure everyone has a good life, house and someone who loves them” – Girl, 10.

What is needed to get there:

- **A Family Hub in every area, building upon existing children’s centres and Family Hubs.** Currently these are rolling out to 75 local authorities, but there needs to be universal coverage. They must have a specific offering for children and families throughout childhood, including being linked to Early Support Hubs, and have a specific remit to support disabled children and their families. These new hubs could be built on existing community and voluntary sector provision or public services, such as schools and nurseries, with some services delivered directly through those settings. This will require long-term investment to make it happen, with funding following the child and family. The aim is that Family Hubs are the delivery model for existing services and utilises these funding streams.

“More community groups and buildings instead having to travel far to overcrowded groups and family hubs.” – Parent of boy, 3.

- **A ‘Family Framework’ for assessing policy and commissioning decisions is developed,** so that the impact of policy and commissioning decisions on families can be assessed.

“Put children first.” – Girl, 11.

- **A public information campaign, that opens up a conversation about the challenges of parenting** and normalises the seeking of help and accessing information or parenting courses. There is a single dedicated website for families to access about information and advice about parenting from antenatal to 18, with links to local Family Information Services. This would build

on successful, existing resources such as the Start for Life website which provides parenting information for the early years.

“Help for parents around understanding and supporting child development both physically and emotionally.” – Parent of girl, 4

- **Every parent can access parenting courses on an open-access basis.** They will be offered this antenatally, as well as at key transition points throughout a child’s life, including if parents separate.

“More of a culture shift to encouraging all parents/carers to do funded (or subsidised) decent parenting courses whatever your background, not just the minority of people.” – Parent of girl, 5.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Number of policies and commissioning decisions that have a full Family Framework test applied.
- Number of families accessing family hubs for support.
- Number of parents completing parenting courses and achieving a positive outcome.

Ambition 3: Every child has access to high quality support in the early years.

“More support for parents would be welcome. For example, how to deal with sibling tantrums, stages of development and associated needs. Like the support we could access when children were under 5 at children’s centres.” – Parent.

- **Every child can access high quality free early education from the end of parental leave until school starting age.** The capacity of the sector will need to be boosted by increasing the use of school premises, particularly in areas where the school roll is falling. Schools and trusts could be incentivised to make use of school premises to set up nurseries, and to develop standalone nursery trusts in collaboration with the not-for-profit sector where appropriate.
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“Ensure early years childcare and wrap around care is affordable and accessible.” – Parent of boy, 5.

- **Paternity leave is increased to a minimum of six weeks with pay of 90% of income, in line with maternity leave.** This would allow parents to make decisions that are not influenced by financial pressure, rather than what is best for their family.

“Better paternity leave so fathers can take more of an active role in children’s lives.” – Parent of boy, 2.

- **Additional health visitors are recruited so that all babies and children receive their checks in person, regardless of where they live, and can access the ongoing support they need.** Health visitors will be based in Family Hubs so that parents can access an integrated offer of support, and children can transition seamlessly from health visitor support to school nurse support.

“Health visitors are a life line for support and guidance and can pick up on concerns very early. Parents have nowhere to go now and you don’t even get to see a health visitor face to face.” – Parent of girl, 9.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Proportion of children accessing high-quality, affordable childcare if wanted.
- Number of health visitor checks completed face to face, and by the same health visitor.
- Number of fathers taking up paternity leave.
- School readiness and attendance in reception.

The Big Ambition for Health

“All children need access to free healthcare, not just mental health, and I think this is the biggest thing the government can work on to help us.” – Girl, 17.

- 84% of children agreed that they can access good healthcare when they need it, compared to 74% of adults responding on behalf of children.
- Children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) were less likely to agree – 68% of children with SEND, and adults on their behalf, agreed they can access good healthcare, compared to 84% for children without SEND.
- 71% of children agreed they have a healthy diet, compared to 83% of adults responding on behalf of children. 86% of responses on behalf of children under the age of 6 agreed they had a healthy diet, declining to 65% of responses from or about 17-year-olds.
- Only 49% of children agreed they feel happy with the way they look. 60% of boys agreed, compared to 40% of girls. This was the biggest difference between girls and boys of any question.
- 81% of children agreed they have someone supportive to talk to about how they feel. 6- to 11-year-olds were more likely to agree (89%) compared to 77% of 12 to 18 year olds. 67% of children with social workers agreed, compared to 75% of children without a social worker.
- Around 300 children living in mental health settings appeared to face some of the most significant challenges. On average they answered every question more negatively than all children. The biggest percentage point difference was for whether ‘Their thoughts about the future are listened to’, which 70% of all adults responding for children agreed with, but only 11% of responses on behalf of children living in a mental health hospital.

The Big Ambition results show that most children agree they are able to access good healthcare, but there are particular barriers for some groups of children. It was concerning that in some focus groups children suggested that you needed to pay to see a GP, perhaps reflecting worries or narratives they have heard about challenges accessing healthcare.

Similarly, most children feel they have someone supportive to talk to, which is a vital safeguard for mental wellbeing, but this was lower for older children.

The most concerning findings are perhaps how many children, especially girls, are not happy with the way they look.

What children and families have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

The Children's Commissioner has heard from hundreds of thousands of children, parents and carers since taking up her post in 2021. Against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic, children's health and wellbeing has been an issue which has cut across the work of the Commissioner – from supporting children to get back to school, to understanding the new ways children are using technology.

In the Commissioner's *The Big Ask* survey of 577,000 children, it was clear that good health is one of children's most important future aspirations. *The Big Ask* showed that children do not see a dichotomy between physical and mental health, instead they speak about these things in relation to each other. This is a younger generation who are uniquely health conscious.

Good physical health is important to children, with younger children in particular wanting to live healthy lifestyles. While most children in *The Big Ask* told us they were happy, 1 in 5 children said that they are not happy with their mental health. This concerning figure is even higher among particular groups of children, such as older teenage girls and children in care.

There are some groups of children who face particular challenges and barriers. The Children's Commissioner's *Disabled Children's Vision for Change* report drew on consultation with 100 children and parents, the review of 743 cases from the Help at Hand team and the 51,000 children identified with

having special educational needs and disabilities who responded to *The Big Ask*. It highlighted how this group of children need much more holistic support that involves their families, so that they are able to fulfil their potential.

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner has five overarching outcomes she wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. This will mean achieving the following ambitions:

1. Every child grows up happy and healthy and where children need additional help it is provided as early as possible.
2. Every child has access to high-quality mental health and wellbeing support in their school and local community.
3. Every disabled child or child with special educational needs, and neurodiverse child receives excellent, joined up healthcare, social care and education.
4. Every child with the most acute health needs living away from home receives loving, caring support.

Many of the recommendations set out in other chapters are fundamental for promoting a holistic and preventative approach to children's health and wellbeing, from tackling child poverty to ensuring every child grows up in a safe and loving home.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child grows up happy and healthy and where children need additional help it is provided as early as possible.

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

What is needed to get there:

- **A unique childhood identifier is developed so that no child falls through the gaps in the healthcare system.** Having a single unique identifier would better enable services to share information on a child, identify where they need help.

“Link all the schools and clubs together so that they all talk to each other properly and can help young people better.” – Parent of boy, 4.

- **Every child to receive, in addition to the current checks in place before the age of two and a half, an annual health review by a health visitor or school nurse** to ensure their health needs are identified at the earliest opportunity.

“The Government needs to fix or scrap the NHS. Coming from another country I am used to yearly checkups, dental checkups every 6 months, shot plan, access to doctors, a diagnosis (if you were feeling sick you go to the doctor get diagnosed and get medication is necessary) , and medical care on short notice.” – Boy, 14.

- **Additional health visitors are recruited so that all babies and children receive their checks in person, regardless of where they live, and can access the ongoing support they need.** Health visitors will be based in Family Hubs so that parents can access an integrated offer of support, and children can transition seamlessly from health visitor support to school nurse support.

“Health visitors are a life line for support and guidance and can pick up on concerns very early. Parents have nowhere to go now and you don’t even get to see a health visitor face to face.” – Parent of girl, 9.

- **A school nurse in every school** who can work with youth workers, paediatricians, public health leaders and other partners in a local Integrated Care System to identify and support children who are particularly at risk of poor health – including children with experiences of poverty, violence and abuse, difficult home lives, and exclusion from education.

“A school nurse could come and ask if you want to talk about home life school life or if you just want to talk.” – Girl, 11.

- **Swift, multidisciplinary, assessments in nursery and school for children who present with additional needs, behavioural difficulties and neurodiversity which may require additional support.** Children can currently wait significant periods of time for diagnostic assessments, by which point many have already begun to face challenges in school. With earlier identification, support can be put in place more rapidly to help them to enjoy and achieve in school, and to determine if a diagnostic pathway is needed by the child.

“The waiting times for neurological diagnoses in the UK is too long and leaves many children without access to the support they need.” – Boy, 16.

- **High-quality Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education (PSHE) and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE)** which is taught in an age-appropriate way from primary school and regularly updated, informed by children and young people, inspected and reviewed by Ofsted – and given parity of esteem with other subjects.

“More education in sexual health and economics outside of only a GCSE option.” – Boy, 14.

- **Introduce new restrictions on vape flavours, descriptions and packaging** so that these highly addictive products cannot be intentionally marketed to children. Vapes to also be kept behind the counter, with mandatory age-of-sale signage – as is currently the law for tobacco products. Vaping is highly addictive and considered a gateway to children smoking tobacco products.

“Make shops not sell vapes and cigs to little children.” – Boy, 10.

- **A joined-up public health approach to promote healthy attitudes to food, diet and exercise. This must tackle the distinct drivers and risk factors associated with eating disorders and obesity in children,** without inadvertently worsening or stigmatising either issue. In England, the number of children and young people starting treatment for eating disorders has more than doubled between 2016-17 and 2022-23, and over 1 in 5 (22.7%) children in Year 6 are living with obesity. This joined up approach should focus in particular on how poverty, gender, ethnicity and disability is linked to health inequalities among children.

“Help us make better choices or help us to get a healthy lifestyle.” – Girl, 9.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Every school-aged child, both those in and out of school, is assigned a school nurse.
- Children who are present with additional needs receive an early, multi-disciplinary needs assessment in school, and are only referred on for further assessment or diagnosis where needed.
- Early Support Hubs open in 50% of local areas by the end of 2026.
- More children retain knowledge from PSHE/RSE lessons.
- Fewer children are diagnosed with Sexually Transmitted Infections (STIs).

Ambition 2: Every child has access to high-quality mental health and wellbeing support in their school and local community.

“They should give us more support with our mental health and wellbeing as at the moment there is not enough help for students or their families to support them.” – Girl, 15.

What is needed to get there:

- **Collocate mental health services in every school** so that every child can be supported throughout education, as part of a Whole School Approach to good mental health. Schools are well-placed to be the place where children can access support, from a range of professionals and services. Mental health services in school can provide earlier support for children without the need for them to be referred to a separate service.

"In my opinion mental health is as important as education." – Boy, 11.

- **An Early Support Hub** in every local areas that acts as a 'one stop shop' to support young people with their mental health and wellbeing, sexual healthcare, and other challenges they may be facing. These hubs should work closely with Family Hubs so that children, young people and their parents are supported through a whole family approach.

"The Government should help more on wellbeing and wellness." – Girl, 11.

- **Ensure every child has a positive body image** – eliminate harmful eating disorder content online and other harmful content promoting unrealistic and unhealthy body types to children. Promoting children's self-esteem to be at the heart of Whole School Approaches to mental health and PSHE/RSE curriculums.

"I think more work should be done to promote a healthy body image and mental health." – Girl, 14.

- **No child is turned away from mental health support, or is left waiting more than four weeks for an initial assessment of their mental health needs, and four weeks for treatment to begin** in Children and Young People Mental Health Services (CYPMHS).

"The government should improve the NHS mental health system (CAMHS) The waiting lists are currently far too long leaving struggling children and teens unsupported for long periods of time. This only worsens the difficulties they are facing, and early support is key when needing help with mental health." – Girl, 16.

- **Intensive community support for children with high levels of needs who could be at risk of being institutionalised.** The responsibility for these services needs to be shared across health and social care partners.

“The government needs to make sure there’s enough funding for children suffering from mental health issues at home so they don’t need to go into hospital.” – Boy, 16.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Mental Health Support Teams in every school by 2026, supported by a pastoral team and strong school policies which promote children’s good mental health.
- Year-on-year decrease in waiting times for CAMHS in parallel with a continued decrease in the number of children’s referrals that are closed before treatment.
- Increase in joint funding and commissioning of children’s community-based mental health services by Integrated Care Boards, local policing bodies and local authorities which are responsive to local need and demographics.
- Year-on-year decrease in children and young people under 25 needing eating disorder treatment, including hospital treatment.
- More children report liking the way that they look.
- Reduce crisis waiting times.

Ambition 3: Every disabled child or child with special educational needs, and neurodiverse child receives excellent, joined up healthcare, social care and education.

“Mental healthcare and support for people with disabilities needs to be improved so disabled children can have decent lives and childhoods with the opportunity to have a proper education.” – Boy, 17.

What is needed to get there:

- **Train teachers throughout their career to identify children who require special educational needs support** and ensure the resource and cross-system support is available to make reasonable adjustments.

“I was not diagnosed autistic until age 14, by this time I was not able to attend school at all. [...] All children should be screened for neurodiversity in early years.” – Child, 17.

- **Make SEND support in schools statutory**, with additional funding that sits separately from a school’s SEND budget and the High Needs Budget. Health specialists to be based in schools and have their time protected to focus on early intervention for children in receipt of SEN Support. All support should be digitised and should be accessible using children’s unique ID.

“Support (especially mental health and SEND support) should be far more easy to access for children. Children shouldn’t have to be on the verge of breakdowns before they get noticed for exam access arrangements, breaks etc.” – Child, 16.

- **No child waits longer than one school term to have their needs assessed by their local authority, and an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or reformed ‘Child’s Plan’ to be issued where needed.** Local authorities to be given the resources they need to make assessments and to make suitable educational provision. The government to introduce a new target of a maximum of one school term for local authorities to assess children’s special

educational needs. Where local authorities take longer, they must write to the government to say how they will improve waiting times. Where a majority of a local authority's decisions on EHCPs are overturned at tribunal in a year, this should trigger a joint inspection by the Care Quality Commission and Ofsted.

"When I got my EHCP for special needs it was meant to take 6 weeks to be completed, however it took over 30 weeks. If I had not got the EHCP, I would most likely be out of education as I would have found a mainstream school too stressful as they would be unable to provide to my needs." – Boy, 11.

- **Every child has a single 'Child's Plan' setting out what, if any, additional support they need.** For some children this may detail their education support, for some health support, and for some care support, and for some a combination of two or three. This would give greater clarity to parents and practitioners about who is needed to support that child and could replace the existing system whereby some disabled children, for example, will have an Education Health and Care Plan as well as a separate Child in Need plan.

"They should think about what children actually want not what they want children to have." – Boy, 11.

"There should be more of a child centred approach with joined up services all trying to help that child reach their full potential." – Parent of boy, 8.

- **Improve pathways of support for children with autism, ADHD and neurodiversity**, so that no child waits longer than 3 months to start an assessment, and children and families receive excellent pre-diagnosis support. To do this we need to create transparent national and local data on how many children are waiting for neurodiversity assessment and support in any publicly funded health service.

"I am waiting for an autism assessment. The waiting lists are very long. I can't go to school as I feel so scared to go. My school do not understand me so I am now home educated." – Girl, 13.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Decrease in waiting times for Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) assessment, and 90% of EHCPs issued within one school term.
- Fewer disabled children and children with special educational needs not in education.
- Decrease in waiting times for children's neurodiversity assessment and support in health services, and decrease in waiting times for neurodiverse children accessing children's mental health services.

Ambition 4: Every child with the most acute health needs living away from home receives loving, caring support.

"Reform Mental Health Act 1983, mental health institutions are at a breaking point and patients within them are not given adequate support or medication specific to their conditions." – Girl, 17.

What is needed to get there:

- **The Department for Education, NHS England and the Ministry of Justice must establish a model of care for all children at risk of needing secure care.** This includes a model for joint ways of working so that services can co-commission services, to provide intensive crisis and community support to avoid a secure placement, and to co-commission integrated, therapeutic secure placements. This should be funded jointly by NHS, local authorities and the Ministry of Justice, through pooled budgets. This should include step-down services for when children are ready to move on from secure provision, into gradually more open settings.

"The government should improve the care system to try to make sure that children are in the best place they can possibly be." – Girl, 15.

- **Reform the Mental Health Act 1983** so that it is fit for the 21st century, and accelerates the decrease in the number of children being inappropriately detained and restrained in mental health hospitals – and the shift towards supporting children at home or in the community.

“Reform the mental health act and give a lot more funding to mental health support.” – Girl, 15.

- **Ensure that all care that disabled children receive is regulated.** There are some care settings that are not regulated or inspected, such as childcare for children aged over 8. It is essential that any paid for care for disabled children is in regulated provision, and loopholes are addressed.

“Put more safeguarding procedures in place to ensure every child is safe.” – Girl, 17.

- **Every child who is entitled to advocacy must be offered it on a proactive, opt-out basis.** Too many children who are entitled to advocacy are still not receiving it, even though it can play a vital role in safeguarding their rights. This would mean children would not have to seek out advocacy themselves, but instead services would proactively offer it. This must cover all children who have a statutory entitlement to advocacy, including appropriate advocacy for children with special educational needs and disabilities. It must also be extended to children who are informally detained under the Mental Health Act. There needs to be an independent body for advocacy to oversee this, which would act as a broker between local authorities and external advocacy providers to ensure the needs of children and young people are met across local authorities and independence is maintained. Training and qualification standards should be introduced for advocates, including non-instructed advocates who support children who cannot express their own views

“I had my fair share of social workers and most of the time there not much help until you get an advocate involved.” – Girl, 15.

“There also needs to be more support for the children of SEN children someone that can advocate for them and help them along the journey as it is a very lonely stressful journey which impacts on the parents health and relationship which can then affect the child.” – Parent of boy, 13.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Fewer children are detained in any setting – including mental health settings, custody, and secure welfare provision.
- Every child who is entitled to advocacy has an allocated advocate.

The Big Ambition for Education

“Invest more in schools.” – Girl, 11.

- In *The Big Ambition* 60% of children agreed they enjoyed school or college.
- Secondary-aged children were the least likely to agree that they enjoy school. Responses on behalf of 4-year-olds were the most likely to be agree (93%), while 13-year-olds and adults responding on their behalf were the least likely (44%).
- Children with SEND were less likely to say they enjoy school (56%) than children without (69%), however, children in state-funded special schools were more likely to agree (76%).
- 75% of children agreed they had great teachers who supported them.
- Children in schools rated ‘Outstanding’ were more likely (79%) to agree that they had great teachers who supported them than those in schools rated ‘Inadequate’ (72%).
- Children in schools where the majority of pupils were eligible for free school meals were also more likely to agree (83%) than children in schools where a minority of pupils were eligible for free school meals (77%).

The Big Ambition results show that children deeply value their education. They see the importance of going to school or college and understand that working hard now will help to set them up for success in later life. The majority of children enjoy being in school or college, they find learning fun, and take great pride in their schoolwork. Children are grateful for the brilliant teachers in their schools and colleges. Nearly three quarters of children said that they had great teachers who supported them. Children in schools with high levels of free school meals eligibility were even more likely to agree with this statement.

These results pay testament to the hard work of teachers and school and college staff across the country. However, for a large minority of children, this not the case. The results from *The Big Ambition* show that the proportion of children who enjoy going to school falls as children get older and that children with SEND are less likely to say they enjoy school. These children do not always enjoy going to school and often struggle to access the additional support they need to engage in education.

What children and families have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

The Children's Commissioner has engaged with hundreds of thousands of children, parents, and carers since assuming her role in 2021. She has heard from thousands of children and young people about their experiences of school and the barriers that sometimes prevent them from accessing education.

In *The Big Ask* children expressed the importance they place on going to school. After a period where schools were closed for most children, children and young people spoke of their desire to return to the classroom, to be reunited with friends and teachers. They wanted to go back to school and to reengage in education.

This generation prizes education. They see it as important in and of itself, but also as a pathway to opportunity.

The Children's Commissioner has conducted major research on children's experiences of the education system. Her Attendance Audit provided in-depth insights about the barriers faced by children who are not in school.

Children want to be in school yet many also shared the difficulties they faced accessing education. Through the Attendance Audit, the Children's Commissioner's office spoke to over 300 children who are most often missing from research, those who are not attending school.

The Commissioner has found that children aren't absent from school because they don't 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. They have told the office about

the barriers they face to accessing the support they need in school and about the reforms they want to see to make schools better.

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner set out the five over-arching outcomes that wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. She believes that there are four over-arching principles that the Government should prioritise in their education reforms. These are:

1. Every child has access to a brilliant education.
2. Every child attends and is engaged in school every day.
3. Every child who needs additional support to engage in education can access it easily.
4. Every disabled child or child with special educational needs, and neurodiverse child receives excellent, joined up healthcare, social care and education.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child has access to a brilliant education

"I think school is a great place for us to go everyday and we learn new things, which I will forever be grateful for." – Girl, 14.

What is needed to get there:

- **A unique childhood identifier is developed so that no child falls through the gaps in education.** This would enable local authorities to better track children who move around the system. Having a single unique identifier would better enable services to share information on a child, identify where they need help, and allow services to support them back into school.
-

“Link all the schools and clubs together so that they all talk to each other properly and can help young people better.” – Parent of boy, 4.

- **Every child can access high quality free early education from the end of parental leave until school starting age.** The capacity of the sector will need to be boosted by increasing the use of school premises, particularly in areas where the school roll is falling. Schools and trusts could be incentivised to make use of school premises to set up nurseries, and to develop standalone nursery trusts in collaboration with the not-for-profit sector where appropriate.

“Ensure early years childcare and wrap around care is affordable and accessible.” – Parent of boy, 5.

- **Local authorities become the admissions authority for all schools and be given backstop powers to direct admissions.** This will simplify the process for children and parents, and support consistency and fairness across a single area. It also enables us to ensure a consistent admissions priority across the country. Within this, the Children’s Commissioner would emphasise the importance of prioritising the children known to social care or with special educational needs.

“Make sure there is a school placement for all children.” – Boy, 10.

- **Schools and local authorities are held to account for the extent to which they are inclusive and for the outcomes of children who leave their school rolls.** The Ofsted inspection framework is reformed to further focus on schools’ use of alternative provision and the extent to which schools admit children with additional needs. Schools implement a right to return period for children who leave to home education. Schools and multi-academy trusts are held accountable for the outcomes of children they exclude, manage move, or place in alternative provision.

“Mainstream schools need more support and funding for inclusion work for students that find a school environment difficult.” – Parent of boy, 15.

- **The government introduces a children not in school register.** The children not in school register captures information on children who are missing education, educated otherwise than at school, or in home education.

“Understand SEND and hold local authorities to account when they let us down, I am unable to go to school due to needs. I have physical where after 5 mins I am unable to walk and my social anxiety but they took my funding away and said school or home ed only.” – Boy, 16.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- The number of children meeting the Early Learning Goals.
- The number of children who are not in school.
- The number of children who become a child missing education.
- The length of time that children are waiting for school placements.
- The number of children who are excluded from school more than once.
- The local authority attendance rates.
- Every school is rated ‘Good’ or ‘Outstanding’.
- Children report that they are happy in school and that this correlates with the Ofsted rating of their school.

Ambition 2: Every child attends and is engaged in school every day

“Each child needs an education and teachers that help them achieve any dreams and goals they have, a teacher you feel safe with.” – Girl, 12.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every child has access to an expanded out of school offer.** This includes more trips and enrichment opportunities for children and young people. Where families would be unable to pay the cost of trips or enrichment opportunities, schools draw upon funding to provide them free of charge.

“Invest more money into school trips.” – Girl, 13.

- **Every school offers breakfast club provision for children who need it, free of charge to parents.** These breakfast clubs are offered to children of all ages.

“The government should run more breakfast clubs for kids to have breakfast before school.” – Girl, 12.

- **Every school can access attendance mentors who can support children to return to school.** Attendance mentors work across multi-academy trusts and local authorities and provide whole family support to address any barriers to attendance.

“Help for children with attendance and behaviour problems.” – Boy, 12.

- **Schools and colleges become full statutory members of local safeguarding partnerships alongside the local authority, police and the NHS.** Doing this gives schools a seat at the table designing and implementing safeguarding systems and policies to protect children and promote their welfare. It also provides a statutory framework for a more open exchange of data between schools and partners.

“I think the government should check that schools are handling safeguarding issues correctly and they are putting rules in place and reacting appropriately to such issues without children fearing for their safety.” – Girl, 15.

- **Local authorities run multi-agency forums to create local authority wide plans for school attendance.** Local leaders convene multi-agency forums to discuss the specific local drivers leading to heightened levels of school absences and the role different agencies play in improving school attendance. These forums should bring together professionals from education, health, social care, housing, youth justice, and youth work.

“Solving root causes of school attendance issues (mental health, discrimination, lack of facilities/ adjustments made at school for children who don’t fit).” – Girl, 16.

- **Local authorities and schools are held to account for improving school attendance and engaging children in education.** Ofsted has access to the live data on school attendance rates, considers the extent to which schools improve children’s attendance and speaks to children who have struggled to attend school regularly. Ofsted revises their SEND and social care inspection frameworks to include attendance as an evaluation criterion in every inspection. Ofsted also conducts a thematic deep dive into school attendance in the worst performing local authorities.

“Better support for individuals who are not attending school at an adequate level.” – Girl, 17.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- The school attendance rates.
- The academic attainment of children in schools.
- The number of children who are persistently or severely absent, including the number of children with additional needs who are persistently or severely absent.
- The number of children whose attendance improves.
- The number of children who report that they enjoy going to school.

Ambition 3: Every child who needs additional support to engage in education can access it easily.

"[schools] should have accessible counselling services, mental health education, supportive environments, and accessible resources." – Boy, 16.

What is needed to get there:

- **Schools develop strong pastoral policies and wraparound support for all children who need additional help to engage with and thrive in education.** When children need support, they want to access the right support in a setting familiar to them. Schools are positioned and equipped to provide this nexus of support.

"Pupils in secondary schools should have a person they can trust and go to whenever they are having a hard time." – Boy, 10.

- **Collocate mental health services in every school** so that every child can be supported throughout education, as part of a Whole School Approach to good mental health. Schools are well-placed to be the place where children can access support, from a range of professionals and services. Mental health services in school can provide earlier support for children without the need for them to be referred to a separate service.

"In my opinion mental health is as important as education." – Boy, 11.

- **Children's support services are delivered on school sites to provide the targeted early help that young people need.** This would include educational psychologists, speech and language therapists, Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service practitioners, social workers, youth workers, and family liaison officers. Where possible, Family Hubs are co-located on school sites.

"Faster access to support services. Educational psychologist, autism assessments, speech and language reviews etc. healthcare is at a standstill and children's lives are being wasted without help. Extra TAs staff aware of neurodivergence." – Parent of boy, 6.

- **A school nurse in every school** who can work with youth workers, paediatricians, public health leaders and other partners in a local Integrated Care System to identify and support children who are particularly at risk of poor health - including children with experiences of poverty, violence and abuse, difficult home lives, and exclusion from education.

“A school nurse could come and ask if you want to talk about home life school life or if you just want to talk.” – Girl, 11.

- **Alternative provision is used as an outreach intervention** and delivered through a family of schools. Schools remain accountable for any child for whom they commission alternative provision. Children who are ready to reintegrate into mainstream are given the support they need to return.

“More needs to be done to support and provide an alternative provision for children that need it.” – Parent of girl, 13.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- The proportion of children reporting that they can access the help they need in school.
- The educational outcomes of children with additional needs, such as young carers, children known to social services, and children with identified SEND.
- The number of children supported by mental health support teams.
- The number of children placed in alternative provision long-term.

Ambition 4: Every disabled child or child with special educational needs, and neurodiverse child receives excellent, joined up healthcare, social care and education.

“Teachers need to be taught about neurodivergence and that some things can be overwhelming to people that might not be overwhelming to them. School needs to be fun not a source of panic and stress.” – Boy, 12.

What is needed to get there:

- **Train teachers and the early years workforce to identify children who need special educational needs support.** Early years staff are trained to identify special educational needs before children enter formal education. Training on special educational needs is integrated into the Early Careers Framework for teachers. SENCOs have access to high quality CPD and mainstream schools are given the resources they need to support children with SEND.

“I was not diagnosed autistic until age 14, by this time I was not able to attend school at all. [...] All children should be screened for neurodiversity in early years.” – Child, 17.

- **No child waits longer than one school term to have their needs assessed by their local authority, and an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or reformed single child’s plan to be issued where needed.** Local authorities are given the resources they need to make assessments and to make suitable educational provision. The government introduces a new target of a maximum of one school term for local authorities to assess children’s special educational needs. Where local authorities take longer, they have to write to the government to say how they will improve waiting times. Where a majority of a local authority’s decisions on EHCPs are overturned at tribunal in a year, this triggers a joint inspection by the Care Quality Commission and Ofsted.

“When I got my EHCP for special needs it was meant to take 6 weeks to be completed, however it took over 30 weeks. If I had not got the EHCP, I would most likely be out of education as I

would have found a mainstream school to stressful as they would be unable to provide to my needs.” – Boy, 11.

- **Make SEND support in schools statutory**, with additional funding that sits separately from a school’s SEND budget. Health specialists to be based in schools and have their time protected to focus on early intervention for children in receipt of SEN Support.

“Support (especially mental health and SEND support) should be far more easy to access for children. Children shouldn’t have to be on the verge of breakdowns before they get noticed for exam access arrangements, breaks etc.” - Child, 16.

- **Every child has a single plan setting out what, if any, additional support they need.** For some children this may detail their education support, for some health support, and for some care support, and for some a combination of two or three. This would give greater clarity to parents and practitioners about who is needed to support that child and could replace the existing system whereby some disabled children, for example, will have an Education Health and Care Plan as well as a separate Child in Need plan.

“They should think about what children actually want not what they want children to have.” – Boy, 11.

There should be more of a child centred approach with joined up services all trying to help that child reach their full potential.” – Parent of boy, 8.

- **The government adopts a joint health, education and care workforce strategy for disabled children and children with special educational needs**, which ensures that in every local area there are sufficient and appropriate levels of trained and qualified carers, personal assistants, nurses, SENCOs, nursery and school staff, and other key professionals needed to provide early help and ongoing support to children and their families.

“There needs to be more support for children with SEND. So other children are not left without any education or support like me and my family.” – Girl, 15.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Fall in the number of children with special educational needs and/or disabilities who report that they enjoy education.
- Average waiting time for an Education, Health and Care Plan assessment.
- Reduction in the number of special educational needs tribunals.
- Educational outcomes for children with special educational needs and/or disabilities.
- Number of children with special educational needs not in education.

The Big Ambition for Children's Social Care

"Everyone should have a safe place to live. They want somebody to love them and treat them well like their family." – Girl, 10, living with family other than parents/kinship carers.

- 85% of children with a social worker and adults responding on their behalf agreed that they lived with people who make them feel loved and cared for, compared to 94% for children without a social worker. This is based on all children with a social worker, regardless of where they live.
 - For children living with a foster family, 84% agreed they lived with people who made them feel loved and cared for, compared to 79% for children in children's homes, 88% of children living with family other than their parents or in kinship care, and 87% of children who were living with parents and had a social worker.
 - 84% of responses by and on behalf of children with a social worker agreed they had somewhere to call home, compared to 95% for children without a social worker.
 - 86% of responses by and for children living with a foster family agreed that they had somewhere to call home, compared to 88% for children in kinship care, 76% for children in children's homes, and 87% for children who were living with their parents and had a social worker.
 - 71% of children with a social worker, and adults responding on their behalf, agreed that their family had everything they need to support them, compared to 87% for children without a social worker. 75% of children who were living with their parents and had a social worker agreed, compared to 45% of children in children's homes, 74% of children in kinship care, and 69% of children living with foster carers.
 - 71% of children with a social worker agreed that their family gets to spend quality time together, compared to 86% of children without a social worker. 74% of children who were living with their parents and had a social worker agreed, compared to 55% of children in children's homes, 75% of children in kinship care, and 68% of children living with foster carers.
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- 55% of responses for children with social workers agreed that their thoughts about the future were listened to, compared to 71% for children without a social worker.
- 59% of responses by and for children with social workers agreed they had the same opportunities as other children, compared to 72% of children without a social worker. 61% of children living with foster carers agreed, compared to 60% of children in kinship care and 59% of children in children's homes.
- 63% of responses by and for children with a social worker agreed they are treated fairly, compared to 71% for children without one.
- 67% of responses by and for children in a secure setting agreed that they had somewhere to call home, compared to 93% of all children or 52% for children in a mental health hospital.
- 55% of responses by and for children in a secure setting agreed that their family had everything they need to support them, compared to 45% for children in a children's home or 39% of children in a mental health hospital.
- 32% of responses by and for children in a secure setting agreed that they had great teachers who support them, compared to 77% for all children.
- 10% of responses by and for children in a secure setting agreed that people who run the country listen to their views, compared to 22% of all children.

“That foster children and refugees, should be treated the same ... it is the government's job to make sure they are loved.” – Girl, 11.

The Big Ambition results show that thankfully the overwhelming majority of children feel safe, loved and secure at home. However, this is sadly not the case for all children. Those 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, but the results of *The Big Ambition* show that we still have some way to go until this is the case.

We heard from 390 children who were in secure settings, such as Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) or Secure Children's Homes. These children were consistently less positive in their responses than other children. The care that children in custody or living in secure settings for welfare reasons receive must be as safe, loving, and secure as any other form of care.

What children in care have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

The Children's Commissioner has heard from over a million children, parents and carers since taking up her post in 2021. She has explored in detail how children experience family life, and the challenges facing families in England.

The children in care who responded to 2021's The Big Ask were generally happy. Among those aged 9 to 17, the majority (63%) said they were happy with their life, and 68% said they were happy with their family life. However, 14% of children in care were unhappy with their family life, compared to 6% of other children.

The top three issues that children in care (aged 9 to 17) were most likely to say they were unhappy with were their mental health (23% unhappy); the choice of things to do in their local area (20% unhappy) and life at school or college (19%). This is remarkably similar to the top three issues that other children aged 9 to 17 – not in care – were unhappy with.

The Children's Commissioner has carried out several major pieces of research with children in care, for example on siblings who are separated in the care system, looked after children who are not in school,

homeless 16-and-17-year-olds, and children's access to advocacy. What came through clearly in those reports was:

- children not being listened to
- a lack of sufficient, loving homes
- children not having access to consistent and loving relationships
- a system which is overwhelmed, and unable to responsively meet the needs of children

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner has five over-arching outcomes that she wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. To achieve that within children's social care will mean achieving the following ambitions:

1. Every child involved with children's social care is truly listened to, and their views are heard.
2. All families get consistent, effective help to improve children's welfare, and to stay together wherever it is in a child's best interests.
3. Every child in care has a loving stable home.
4. Every young person with care experience continues to receive care and support for as long as they need it.
5. Every child who needs secure care receives it in an integrated, homely environment. All Young Offenders Institutions are closed.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child involved with children's social care is truly listened to, and their views are heard.

"They should listen to us more." – Child, 13, living in a children's home.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every child who is entitled to advocacy must be offered it on a proactive, opt-out basis.** Too many children who are entitled to advocacy are still not receiving it, even though it can play a vital role in safeguarding their rights. This would mean children would not have to seek out advocacy themselves, but instead services would proactively offer it. This must cover all children who have a statutory entitlement to advocacy, including appropriate advocacy for children with special educational needs and disabilities. It must also be extended to children who are informally detained under the Mental Health Act. There needs to be an independent body for advocacy to oversee this, which would act as a broker between local authorities and external advocacy providers to ensure the needs of children and young people are met across local authorities and independence is maintained. Training and qualification standards should be introduced for advocates, including non-instructed advocates who support children who cannot express their own views

"I had my fair share of social workers and most of the time there not much help until you get an advocate involved." - Girl, 15.

"There also needs to be more support for the children of SEN children someone that can advocate for them and help them along the journey as it is a very lonely stressful journey which impacts on the parents health and relationship which can then affect the child." – Parent of boy, 13.

- **Social workers, advocates and other professionals are supported to build deeper relationships with the children they support.** Children need to have reliable and consistent
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relationships to be able to speak openly and honestly. Particularly for social workers, the number of children they support at any one time, and the number of times a child's social worker changes, should be monitored at the national level. There also needs to be a national strategy to increase the number of well trained and skilled advocates.

"Social workers should have less case files so they can speak more with there looked after children, and build stronger relationships." - Young woman, 18.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- More children with an entitlement to advocacy services access help from highly skilled advocates.
- Data collected on quality and provision of advocacy, drawing on feedback from children and advocates.
- There is a reduction in the turnover rates of social workers, with children and families experiencing greater stability.

Ambition 2: All families get consistent, effective help to improve children's welfare and children are supported to remain with their family wherever it is in a child's best interests.

"Help the people who are struggling with family issues or if they don't get looked after very well." – Girl, 12.

What is needed to get there:

- **A unique childhood identifier is developed so that no child falls through the gaps in children's social care.** Having a single unique identifier would better enable services to share information on a child, identify where they need help.
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“Link all the schools and clubs together so that they all talk to each other properly and can help young people better.” – Parent of boy, 4.

- **A statutory duty to deliver universal early help provision must be introduced.** These universal services can be a vital element in preventing problems developing, yet are too often squeezed out as spending is focused on statutory duties.

“Instead of cutting costs in social care budgets the government should... create a more thorough support network that intervenes early to prevent children and their families reaching crisis point.” – Parent of boy, 11.

- **A Children’s Social Care Funding Formula, that is ring-fenced by the Department for Education.** Currently spending on early help is non-ringfenced, and children’s social care services funding is largely a non-ringfenced element of the Department for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing settlement, although there is additional funding through the Social Care Grant, which is ring-fenced for both adult and children’s social care. This means that, unlike for schools, the Department for Education is responsible for children’s social care policy but not responsible for funding allocations.

“I think a lot more money should be raised for children with disabilities and also for children in need.” - Girl, 8.

- **Every child has a single ‘Child’s Plan’ setting out what, if any, additional support they need.** For some children this may detail their education support, for some health support, and for some care support, and for some a combination of two or three. This would give greater clarity to parents and practitioners about who is needed to support that child and could replace the existing system whereby some disabled children, for example, will have an Education Health and Care Plan as well as a separate Child in Need plan.

“They should think about what children actually want not what they want children to have.” – Boy, 11.

“There should be more of a child centred approach with joined up services all trying to help that child reach their full potential.” – Parent of boy, 8.

- **A review of the Children Act to ensure it works for children today.** The Children Act of 1989 was a momentous step forward for children and families. It set out a comprehensive vision for the support and care that children and families should receive. However, since 1989 there have been significant changes to the risks that children face, particularly when it comes to extra familial harms and online exploitation. There have also been significant policy changes affecting children seeking asylum, and children with disabilities. It is essential to ensure that all children have equal protection under the law.

“Strengthening child protection services, legislation, and enforcement can safeguard children from abuse, exploitation, and neglect if this is done then children’s life will become much better as they know and their guardians know they are safe and they can achieve much more in life.” – Girl, 15.

- **Every local authority has a specialist safeguarding team to address extra-familial harms.** As part of a revised Children’s Act, there should be clear expectations around the need for specific teams which have a focus on addressing the harms that children face in their wider environment, including relationship abuse, criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation. These local teams would work closely with youth services, offending services, and community provision to provide an expert response. In 2022/3 there were 14,420 children in England, or roughly 100 per local authority, known to children’s social care because of ‘child criminal exploitation’. These children will need a different approach, that involves their peers, to those facing harm in the home.

“I know the risks within the community that impact on children's lives and I would like to see more provision available to help children stay out of criminal lines and... risk of exploitation.” – Parent of boy, 4.

- **A safeguarding response to child involvement with criminality is developed.** A safeguarding outcome is added to the criminal outcome framework, and a greater emphasis placed on safeguarding children from exploitation. A safeguarding referral would be made after any arrest,
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caution or search of a child, and youth offending teams would be brought into local authority children's safeguarding teams.

"The government should invest in more enrichment activities and most of all, invest in facilities to help young people who are less fortunate and have turned to crime reform, and work with social workers to find the root of their issues rather than blaming young people who have deep seated issues and problems with authority and "arresting them" just to release them without much of a warning or reason to not reoffend." – Girl, 16.

- **Schools and colleges become full statutory members of local safeguarding partnerships alongside the local authority, police and the NHS.** Doing this gives schools a seat at the table designing and implementing safeguarding systems and policies to protect children and promote their welfare. It also provides a statutory framework for a more open exchange of data between schools and partners.

"I think the government should check that schools are handling safeguarding issues correctly and they are putting rules in place and reacting appropriately to such issues without children fearing for their safety." – Girl, 15.

- **A strategy for getting every local authority's children's services department to 'Good' or better.** This needs to include a robust outcomes framework that enables measurement of outcomes that matter for children, sufficient funding to deliver roll out of improvement plans, and clear mechanisms for intervention from central government if standards are not met.

"Do more with child services to ensure that social workers are actually doing their job effectively."
– Child, 16.

- **There is a consistent offer for children supported under Section 17 of the Children Act.** There should be improved guidance that sets out what the expectations are about how often children receive help, how frequently that help is reviewed, and the thresholds of need for help to be offered. This should include some nationally agreed triggers for an automatic referral to children's social care, including - for example - when a primary care giver enters custody or inpatient mental
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health provision, or when a child is arrested. An outcomes framework should be developed which allows for progress on child in need plans and child protection plans to be evaluated, in a similar manner to the Supporting Families programme's outcomes framework.

"The Government should help children in need." – Girl, 8.

- **Children and families have a clear entitlement to intensive packages of support to keep families together**, which includes children being in care 'part-time' while remaining with their families. This should include a roll out of family support packages for all children in contact with children's social care, to put in practical assistance to keep children with birth families. This should include where necessary shared care arrangements, and short breaks provision. Family Group Conferencing should be used to support families more widely and not just ahead of care pre-proceedings.

"Help families that are struggling." – Girl, 7.

- **A financial allowance for kinship carers to support them to care for children is needed nationally**. Building on the government's pathfinder programme, every kinship carer should receive a financial allowance to support them to care for the children they welcome into their homes.

"Nanny needs some more money so we can do more stuff together and grandad could have a day off work and come too as he always has to work everyday so nan can stay and look after me." – Girl, 7, living with other family/kinship carers.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Child in Need plans are closed because there are clearly defined outcomes which are met.
- Increased spend on Early Help.
- Fewer children entering the care system with no previous contact with Early Help.

- More families' needs are met, and they are stepped down from Child in Need plans due to improved outcomes for the child.
- More children are diverted from entering care, because of effective earlier support
- There is an increase in the number of kinship carers who are able to step in to care for children when needed.

Ambition 3: Every child in care has a loving stable home

"All children should have a nice home!" – Girl, 12, living with foster family.

What is needed to get there:

- **Sufficient high-quality placements for all children in care.** The Department for Education must directly invest in children's homes to drive up supply. Currently too many children in care are placed far from home, are separated from their siblings, or are forced into inappropriate settings that cannot meet their needs. Much of this is down to a lack of supply, which also drives up the costs of places delivered by profit-making providers. The Department should develop a children's social care capital building fund, to support local authorities to increase their own in-house provision of children's homes. There should also be a national foster care recruitment campaign, with a specific focus on larger sibling groups and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

"I think the government could build more foster care and children's homes for children who can't live with their parents or don't have parents." – Boy, 11.

- **A government strategy to end profit-making provision in children's homes.** A significant proportion of the dysfunctional children's home market is currently delivered by for profit providers. The Government should develop a plan for building up local authority and charity provision, to the point where they can, without destabilising children's care or reducing the provision of placements, ban profit-making provision.

“Rules should be put in to control profit of private fostering agencies. It’s not right that people make a profit off the back of traumatised children.” – Boy, 15.

- **All homes provide care, not just support.** Currently, 16- and 17-year-olds can be placed in settings which legally only provide support, and not care. Universal care standards, that align regulatory framework across care settings and ensure that every setting caring for a child is legally able to provide care, must be introduced.

“Make all care providers for all young people Ofsted registered because I’ve been neglected and when released I’m going back to neglect... I need therapy and regulated.” – Boy, 16

- **Legislation is introduced which means that children in care are be placed with their siblings whenever it is in their best interests**, and are better supported to have contact with siblings if separated from them. The Children’s Commissioner has found that 37% of children in care have been separated from a sibling, and often this happens simply because there is no place that can take them together.

“I think they should make sure that both parents and children are happy with the amount of the time they get in a family contact and to keep siblings together when put in foster care.” – Boy, 13, living with foster family.

- **Every child who cannot live at home, and is provided with accommodation, is legally looked after.** Currently, although the guidance is clear, 16- and 17-year-olds who cannot live at home are more often accommodated under adult housing legislation than given looked after child status. To ensure this only happens if a child genuinely refuses care, an Independent Reviewing Officer must have to sign off whether a homeless 16- or 17-year-old has received appropriate advice and can be accommodated under housing legislation instead of being taken into care.

“Find homes for homeless children.” - Girl, 8.

- **Consistent support and autonomy for parents and carers providing different permanence options.** Children living with adoptive parents and kinship carers need to be able to access a permanence support fund. Long-term foster carers should be given greater delegated powers of decision making about the children in their care.

“As a looked after child, be treated equally...[...] my foster mum choose who is safe for me to stay with, not having to have a DBS to stay with family.” - Girl, 12.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- There is an increase in the proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless who get placed in care under section 20, rather than being supported under section 17 and housing legislation.
- More children are placed in accordance with their care plan, including more children placed with siblings when that is in their best interests.
- Increase in the numbers of foster carers, including specialist foster carers.
- There is greater stability of care placements, with children experiencing few placement moves and placement breakdowns.
- Children report greater levels of satisfaction with their care.

Ambition 4: Every young person with care experience continues to receive care and support for as long as they need it

“Allow [children] to stay in residential care until they are fully ready to leave and have the right skills not just because they are 18.” – Girl, 16.

What is needed to get there:

- **Young care experienced people can stay in care if they want to, or be supported to access the most appropriate housing option for them.** Every care leaver should be entitled to either a 'Staying Put' or 'Staying Close' arrangement, where they stay with or near their former foster carers or children's home. Those who do not want it should receive priority housing in whatever area they are living in, and their local authority should act as their guarantor. Every child who has experienced homelessness and has not been looked after under section 20 should be supported to challenge their previous care status.

"I should be able to stay with my foster carers for as long as I and they want this." – Boy, 17.

- **Care leavers are given the financial support they need to thrive well into adulthood.** Care leavers should be entitled the over 25 higher level rate of Universal Credit from the moment they turn 18. The exemption that currently exists for diplomats, students and the armed forces from paying Council Tax should be extended to all care leavers under 25.

"There should be more support for care leavers and more action to alleviate child poverty and to ensure that every child gets a good education and has opportunities." – Girl, 18.

- **Care leavers are supported with their educational goals.** Care leavers should be able to access year round accommodation when attending higher education, and the value of the higher education bursary should be increased. UCAS should provide a consistent, single source of information about every institution's offer for care leavers, and a quality kitemark scheme should be introduced to acknowledge those settings that provide the best offer.

"Look after children in the care system even after they turn 18- make sure they are safe, have a place to go, have an adult/family they can trust and go to when needed." – Girl, 17.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- More 16–17-year-olds who needing accommodation are supported under section 20 rather than under section 17 and housing legislation.
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- More care leavers are supported to go on to university.
- There is a reduction in the number of homeless care leavers.

Ambition 5: Every child who needs secure care receives it in an integrated, loving, homely environment, to replace current forms of secure provision.

“Improve YOIs around the country give young people in prison a right to get themselves an assessment of their mental health by a doctor of their choosing or family’s choosing instead of reluctant prison doctor.” – Boy, 17.

What is needed to get there:

- **The Department for Education, NHS England and the Ministry of Justice must establish a model of care for all children at risk of needing secure care.** This includes a model for joint ways of working so that services can co-commission services, to provide intensive community support to avoid a secure placement, and to co-commission integrated, therapeutic secure placements. This should be funded jointly by NHS, local authorities and the Ministry of Justice, through pooled budgets. This should include step-down services for when children are ready to move on from secure provision, into gradually more open settings.

“The government should improve the care system to try to make sure that children are in the best place they can possibly be.” – Girl, 15.

- **Phase out Young Offender Institutions and Secure Training Centres** and replace them with the above integrated model of care that can support all children with high levels of needs related to their mental health, welfare or offending. This must be based on a model of more, smaller settings that are closer to where children live.

“Don't send us to prison.” - Child living in a secure setting.

- **Introduce legislation to ensure that children in need of secure care are placed in the most appropriate setting and the use of the inherent jurisdiction to deprive children of liberty is no longer used.** Currently children who need secure care, but for whom no secure children's home is either available or appropriate, can only be placed securely through the High Court's inherent jurisdiction. If a new model of care for these children is developed, the legislation governing the placement of children must be reviewed.

"Listen to young people's views, especially those who are often overlooked or when they are the subject of a legal discussion or legislation." – Child, 14.

- **In the interim, other changes are needed in secure custodial settings:**
 - All settings are registered with the Department for Education and required to provide the same minimum hours of education as other schools. All settings are registered to be able to enter children for exams.
 - Children have access to free calls with family, and all settings should offer best practice face-to-face family visits.
 - All children must be able to leave their cells for at least 8 hours every day.
 - Every setting offer evidence-based interventions to reduce violence in settings, using a toolkit developed by the Youth Endowment Fund.
 - Every child in a secure setting have looked after child status, and therefore care leaver support until 25.
 - Every child receives an NHS mental health assessment on entry, and can be urgently transferred to mental health provision if needed, or be able to access in person mental health provision within the setting.
 - No girl should be placed in a majority male secure setting. There should be a national plan for the placement and care for girls in custody.

- Every child receives a NHS neurodevelopmental assessment on entry, and a plan for their care is co-produced regardless of whether they meet a threshold for an Education, Health and Care Plan.
- Force cannot be used to maintain 'good order' and pain-inducing force is banned. A child protection referral is made if it occurs and children have immediate access to support.
- Social worker visits happen in person, on at least a monthly basis, and this data is collected by Ofsted.
- There is a national improvement plan to get every setting rated as good or better across all inspection tests.
- Children on remand are not placed in a YOI or STC.
- The youth justice system must consider the impact on a child's education when making remand and sentencing decisions, and is responsible for ensuring that all children on remand are able to sit exams.

"You put a child behind bars for 23 hours a day and expect us to change ahhhh fuck off where the fuck is the logic in that." – Boy, 17, living in a secure setting.

"Start actually listening and helping kids in need employ people who actually care and want to help rather than people who are only doing it for the money." – Boy, 17, living in a secure setting.

"More time out of their room to do activities such as work for people that's 18." – Young man, 18, living in a secure setting.

"Delve in to their lives see how some people have to live and what troubles they have to deal with and see where the problems start from and try to support them at those stages so there life can be better." – Young man, 18, living in a secure setting.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- All children who are in need of secure care receive it in an integrated therapeutic setting by 2030.
- All children in secure care are given access to a brilliant education and achieve the qualifications they need. Their long term educational and social outcomes are measured.
- Children are cared for in therapeutic environments that focus on rehabilitation.

The Big Ambition for Unaccompanied Children Seeking Asylum

“Make the refugees who come from different countries feel welcome to our country.” – Girl, 10.

In *The Big Ambition* children were asked what they think the Government should do to make children’s lives better. In response to the Big Ambition survey a small number of children identified themselves to be unaccompanied children, however the total number of responses from this group was too few to report on in the survey results.

In the free text responses, some children indicated that they were living in temporary asylum accommodation, including hotels. One boy aged 14 who was living in asylum accommodation told the team *“I think the government should house asylum children, because it is not suitable for children to live in asylum centres/hotels”.*

To make sure the voices of as many unaccompanied children as possible were heard, the team also visited unaccompanied children where they were living to hear about what they wanted to change ahead of the next election. One young person aged 18 told us *“Over the last 3-4 months I have realised that what I want for the future is not what is out there. I want a normal life. I want to have employment, an income, to pay for my needs, to be able to purchase equipment”.*

Reflecting on what he would say to the Prime Minister if he had a chance, a young person said *“not to see the people from the outside, you need to see them from the inside. Outside we might look beautiful but inside we are broken. I was refused asylum because of the country I am from. I am not the country, I’m a guy from Albania. The government needs to be listening and believing”.*

The Commissioner also heard from other children who told the office they wanted refugee children to feel welcome and accepted and feel a sense of belonging.

When asked what would make children's lives better, one young girl aged 12 said *"look after everyone even if they are not from this country like refugees. They should be looked after and not sent away"*.

Children highlighted the importance of supporting children arriving in the UK to access the same opportunities as other children, particularly in education. One adult responding on behalf of an 8-year-old girl said, *"government should give equal rights opportunities to children no matter their immigration status"*. Another adult, on behalf of a 14-year-old boy, wrote, *"assist new immigrant students with their various development and learning needs"*.

What unaccompanied children have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

Unaccompanied children seeking asylum in the UK are highly vulnerable and in need of care and protection from the moment they arrive. Unaccompanied children have often experienced the most extreme forms of trauma and need a safe and stable home that can provide them with consistent love and care.

The Children's Commissioner and her team regularly visit unaccompanied children living in the hotels and reception centres⁵, and where they live once in local authority care. Through these visits the Commissioner is able provide direct advocacy to children through the Commissioner's independent advocacy service 'Help at Hand'. Last year, the Help at Hand team supported many unaccompanied children in acute situations to access the help and support they needed, as detailed in the 'Help at Hand Annual Report'.⁶

⁵ There are two reception centres currently in operation and are run by Kent Country Council. They have capacity to accommodate around 40 boys between the ages of 16 and 18. Boys are typically accommodated in these settings soon after they arrive into the UK and before they are transferred to another care placement within another local authority through the National Transfer Scheme.

⁶ Children's Commissioner, *Help at Hand Annual report, 2023*, [Link](#)

The Children's Commissioner has also used her statutory data collection powers to carry out major pieces of work aimed at improving the lives and experiences of children seeking asylum. For example, last year the office looked at looked after children who are not in school, 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless, followed the passage of the Illegal Migration Act, and published analysis of Home Office data on the safeguarding of children in contingency hotel accommodation.

It is clear from speaking to these children that they:

- have been let down by those with a statutory duty to safeguard them, and placed in entirely unsuitable accommodation
- are highly vulnerable to continued exploitation and abuse, particularly unaccompanied girls
- are disproportionately receiving unregistered education provision that poses safeguarding risks
- are subject to poor practice when it comes to age assessment
- are not always getting the care they need, and the chance to fully recover from the trauma they have experienced

Instead of establishing a robust system of care and protection for unaccompanied children seeking asylum, last year the government introduced provisions through the Illegal Migration Act that would legitimise the use of inappropriate hotel accommodation as well as removing children the moment they turn 18. Throughout the rapid passage of the Act the Children's Commissioner raised her concerns about the need for a more appropriate safeguarding approach to protect unaccompanied children and support them to thrive.

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner set out the five over-arching outcomes that wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. To achieve that for unaccompanied children will mean achieving the following ambitions:

1. Every child seeking asylum has access to a stable and loving home.
2. Every child seeking asylum is supported to thrive in education.
3. Every unaccompanied child in need of care and protection is supported from the day they arrive.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child seeking asylum has access to a stable and loving home.

“Who can I ask [for help] when I don’t have a support worker? I have no family here. In 3-4 years maybe I can do everything myself. But now I need help. You can’t do everything yourself; you need to learn”. – Young man, 18.

“Don’t move us around so many times. You turn 18 and you don’t have a home, you are still moving around. It’s hard if you are moved around.” – Boy 17.

What is needed to get there:

- **All unaccompanied children are in the care of the local authority from the day they arrive in the country.** To ensure that this happens the powers to accommodate children contained within the Illegal Migration Act must be removed.

“I think the government should house asylum children, because it is not suitable for children to live in asylum centres/hotels” – Boy 14

- **A national foster carer recruitment campaign focusing on placements for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children is launched.** In recognition of unique needs of this highly vulnerable group, The Department for Education and the Home Office should jointly contribute to a ring-fenced funding pot that funds local authorities to establish specialist foster care placements for unaccompanied children.

“Who can I ask [for help] when I don’t have a support worker? I have no family here. In 3-4 years maybe I can do everything myself. But now I need help. You can’t do everything yourself; you need to learn”- Young man, 18.

- **All homes provide care, not just support.** Currently, 16- and 17-year-olds can be placed in settings which legally only provide support, and not care. Universal care standards, that align regulatory framework across care settings and ensure that every setting caring for a child is legally able to provide care, must be introduced.

“Make them feel safe, be friendly and give advice. Talk with them, walk with them, eat with them” – Young man, 18.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Reduction in the use of temporary placements e.g., in reception centre style accommodation for unaccompanied children.
- Increase in unaccompanied children being placed directly in local authority care from the moment they arrive in the UK through the National Transfer Scheme.
- Increase in the number of specialist foster care placements for unaccompanied children.
- Through the introduction of universal care standards there is greater consistency across the different models of care that children receive.

Ambition 2: Every child seeking asylum is supported to thrive in education.

“I’m struggling to form sentences. I didn’t know any letters at first. I have never been to school in my life, so this is a steep learning curve.” – Boy (no age given).

What is needed to get there:

- **Unaccompanied children are on a school roll from the moment they are placed in a local authority** and are supported to integrate into mainstream school where appropriate, with the support from Virtual School Heads. Where mainstream provision is less suitable, local authorities should use their Section 19 powers to provide suitable education for asylum seeking children. Ofsted should examine the education of unaccompanied children and ensure that
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unaccompanied children are receiving an appropriate education offer that is able to meet their needs.

"I want to learn English and become a teacher." - Young man, 18.

- **Unaccompanied children are given access to high quality English for Speakers of Other Languages programme.** This provision should run alongside a child's education to help them thrive in a mainstream school environment.

"College is nice. I couldn't speak English before I came but now I'm trying to get nice scores." - Young man, 18.

- **Schools support unaccompanied children to integrate.** Children should be supported to integrate into the school environment through activities targeted at building a sense of belonging within the school environment.

"College is going very well. With the passage of time my language is quite good now." - Young man, 18.

- **As soon as reasonably possible local authorities need to be made aware about children seeking asylum arriving in their local area.** It is vital that there is careful planning for the education of unaccompanied children. This would enable local authority teams to plan admissions and support asylum seeking children into school.

"I learn English and Maths. The teachers help me. The teachers are good." - Boy 17.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Fewer asylum-seeking children are classified as a child missing education.
 - There is a reduction in the use of unregistered education provision for unaccompanied children.
 - More children seeking asylum are supported to access high quality English language tuition.
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- Unaccompanied children engage in school life and extra-curricular activities that help them to develop a greater sense of belonging.

Ambition 3: Every unaccompanied child in need of care and protection is supported from the day they arrive.

“Look after everyone even if they are not from this country like refugees. They should be looked after and not sent away.” – Girl, 11.

What is needed to get there:

- **For unaccompanied children and children with their families who are fleeing war and persecution there must be sufficient number of safe and legal routes available.**

Unaccompanied children and children with their families, should be excluded from any cap on the number of entrants arriving in the UK via safe and legal routes for humanitarian purposes.

“I have a safe haven here, it’s the first thing I was looking for.” – Boy, 17.

- **The age assessment process for unaccompanied children must be child-centred, age-appropriate and as non-invasive as possible.** Where a child’s age is disputed and they are awaiting a resolution, they must be treated as vulnerable children first and foremost. The office is deeply concerned about the introduction of scientific methods of age assessment, as well as the approach to treat children who refuse to consent to these methods as adults.

“I told them I’m underage but they didn’t believe me and put me with the adults. I didn’t feel safe there because people were drinking, smoking cigarettes and smoking hashish. They are older than myself.” – Boy, 17.

- **Unaccompanied children arriving in the UK must not be removed once they turn 18.** The power in the Illegal Migration Act to remove children when they turn 18 must be removed. Instead children should be supported as care leavers and given the love and stability they need

to begin to heal from the trauma they have experienced and thrive in communities and schools across the country.

“Over the last 3-4 months I have realised that what I want for the future is not what is out there. I want a normal life. I want to have employment, an income, to pay for my needs, to be able to purchase equipment”- Young man, 18.

- **Every unaccompanied child arriving into the country has access to timely and appropriate comprehensive health assessments and care.** In November last year the office found that more than 10% of unaccompanied children arriving between 2021 and 2023 noted to have particular ‘vulnerabilities’ were suffering from an infectious illness, including scabies, tuberculosis, diphtheria, monkey pox and Covid-19. Of the children identified with particular vulnerabilities, alarmingly 9% of the notes refer to suicide, self-harm and mental illness. As looked after children under the Children Act 1989, these children are entitled to Initial Health Assessments (IHAs) and regular healthcare reviews. It is vital that an unaccompanied child’s IHA is carried out swiftly after their arrival and addresses the young person’s physical, mental and social wellbeing. Where possible the assessment and necessary investigations should be conducted in a ‘one stop shop’ multidisciplinary clinic. This would improve service accessibility, facilitate a holistic and integrated approach to health and wellbeing, and avoid the child having to retell their often traumatising stories. Once completed, the IHA should set out how children will receive the health care they need and a clear plan for continuity of care should be implemented. Appropriate information sharing mechanism should be in place to reduce disruption to healthcare provision and follow-up in circumstances where young people are moved placement.

“At the beginning I feel just loneliness, it makes me a little stressed but now it’s OK. Still I have it, but on and off you know? I feel the loneliness because I am by myself a lot.” – Boy 17.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- There are more safe and legal routes available for unaccompanied children and children with their families who are fleeing war and persecution.

- The age assessment process is informed by the latest available evidence on how to conduct a sensitive and age-appropriate age assessment.
- There is a reduction in the number of children being wrongly age assessed.
- The number of unaccompanied children who remain in the UK after turning 18.

The Big Ambition for Youth Work

“Provide more opportunities to take part in locally run sports and activities which are free and safe to attend (football, swimming, tennis...). Provide more teenager run centres or youth clubs so you can socialise and meet different people instead of just being online.”

– Girl, 15.

- In *The Big Ambition*, 72% of children agreed that they had fun activities to do near where they live.
- Children are most likely to agree they have fun things to do when they are aged 9 (82%). This decreases with age, with only 54% of 17-year-olds agreeing.
- 62% of children reported to have a special educational need and/or disability agreed they had fun activities to do, compared to 73% of those without.
- 69% of children with a social worker agreed, compared to 70% of those without.
- Children around the country had different views – 50% of children in Knowsley agreed, compared to 82% in Trafford.

It is positive that the majority of children agree that there are fun activities in their local area, but this is far from unanimous. In focus groups children discussed the need for more spaces for children to go where they can enjoy themselves, and feel safe. They wanted clean places to play, to pursue their interests, or simply to spend time with their friends.

Children also spoke about not feeling involved in decisions being made about how their local areas were designed, and how spaces could be used. Children make use of space in a very different way to adults, and their views and needs must be taken into account.

Some children also expressed that they felt access to more fun activities and youth work would also bring down children’s level of involvement with crime.

What children have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

The Children's Commissioner has engaged with over a million children, parents and carers since taking up her post in 2021. She has explored in detail how children use their local areas, their opportunities to play, and to participate in activities they enjoy.

In the Children's Commissioner's *The Big Ask* survey of over 550,000 children, just over half (52%) of children were happy with the choice of things to do in their local area, and this became more of an issue as children got older, although of course this was in the context of pandemic lockdowns. They also raised similar issues about access to somewhere outside that they can go to have fun.

It is clear that much more is needed to meet children's ambitions on this front. A good youth work offer means that children and young people have opportunities to play and engage in enjoyable activities, as is their right under the UNCRC. But this engagement can have much wider positive ramifications. A strong youth work offer should mean that those at risk of becoming involved with violence and criminality are identified, and diverted to more positive choices. It can also help to tackle the school attendance crisis – with schools and youth sectors working closely together, school can become a more trusted, enjoyable place for children at risk of disengaging with education.

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner set out the five over-arching outcomes that she wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. To achieve that within support for youth work will mean achieving the following ambitions:

1. Every child has access to play and fun things to do, and places to spend time with their friends.
2. Every child has access to high-quality youth provision in their local area.
3. Every child is supported by services that work together with youth work, to prevent issues escalating.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child has access to play and fun things to do, and spaces to spend time with their friends.

“The government should put more parks around different places so people can have the same amount as fun I have.” – Girl, 11.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every local authority completes a local child safety audit to map and improve the places that children don't feel safe, and consults with children when making changes to public space.** Children use public spaces in different ways to adults and have different priorities, but their views are often overlooked. Local authorities must consult with children, including those with different needs, about what improvements to the built environment are needed, such as lighting on school routes and in parks, access to playgrounds and open space for games, and safe and accessible transport.

“They need to listen to the children more and ask us what we would like done in our area” – Boy, 14.

“Listen to people's views and make [city] a better place for children with and without disabilities so they can go out without feeling scared. Make more playground that include all ages so that people of all ages can access and have fun. Make playgrounds and parks entertaining.” – Girl, 12.

- **The Government reviews children's access to safe places to play.** This review would be based on local child safety audits, and support local improvements with a national play strategy and an investment fund.

“Build parks near children that don't have parks near them.” – Boy, 7.

- **Every child has access to an expanded out of school offer.** Sport, drama and other enrichment opportunities would be part of this offer at the end of the school day. Where families were unable to pay the cost of enrichment opportunities, schools would be able to draw upon funding to provide them free of charge. There would be a target for all children to have five hours per week of PE or physical activity in schools.

“Make after school activities and half term clubs accessible for all.” – Boy, 11.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Number of children who are satisfied with the things to do in their local area reported in national surveys.
- Number of children who feel safe in their local area reported in national surveys.
- Number of children reporting they take part in at least five hours of physical activity a week.
- Number of children regularly attending enrichment activities, such as art, drama or sport.

Ambition 2: Every child has access to high-quality youth provision in their local area.

“Open more youth centres with youth workers children can go to if they need to speak to someone.” – Girl, 14.

What is needed to get there:

- **Children can easily find information about things to do in their local area via a directory of youth provision.** There is an accessible and child-friendly system for children and young people to discover opportunities to play, receive support, or access statutory and non-statutory youth provision in their local area. This directory, which could be based on the NYA Census, coordinated nationally and used to map provision and identify gaps in the youth offer at a local level.

“They should inform children more of all the opportunities occurring in [city] that could benefit their education. For example, there could be a trusted website especially for announcing great

local opportunities for children, as it is often difficult for them to find them out themselves, especially when their parents aren't from the UK.” – Girl, 14.

- **The Government has a national formula for funding local youth provision, based on the child population.** Local authorities would be funded to ensure a sufficient baseline of youth provision. Currently, there is huge local variation in youth work provision. Predictable and secure revenue, as part of well-coordinated and long-term funding, is needed to ensure a high-quality and reliable youth offer for every young person across the country.

“Supply the youth club with more funding so they could supply us with more activities and equipment.” – Girl, 11.

- **The Government has a long-term youth provision strategy, based on local decision-making.** This would include requiring every area to have a local youth partnership enabled to lead on strategy, commissioning, and partnership between local youth provision and national and local government.

“Fund more money for places to go and have a good day and enjoy activities.” – Boy, 10.

- **National and local youth strategy should protect and support open-access youth work provision.** Universal youth work – open to all young people and delivered in a centre or elsewhere – is the basis for good youth work, building local expertise and capacity of the youth sector and fosters the trusted relationships with children and local communities that targeted services are built on.

“Add more things to do around where I live and make affordable. Fund universal youth services.” – Boy, 12.

- **Public bodies are required to make facilities available at cost to non-statutory youth work organisations working with children.** Much of the most established and trusted youth work is currently delivered by charities and the third sector. However, venue costs are consistently raised as an issue in provision. By introducing a duty on public bodies, not only would this be addressed,

but it would also foster closer relationships between youth work, schools, and other organisations.

“Fund sports and activities for all children of all ages because it’s not fair for the kids whose parents can’t afford the sports.” – Boy, 11.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Every child has access to sufficient local youth provision.

Ambition 3: Every child is supported by services that work together with youth work, to prevent issues escalating.

“There should be more activities for the youth to do/ partake in and make them feel included no matter their background to lower the amount of crime.” – Girl, 15.

What is needed to get there:

- **Youth sector organisations are participants in multi-agency attendance forums.** Local leaders would convene multi-agency forums to discuss the specific local factors driving school absences and the role different agencies play in improving school attendance. Youth workers would be invited to these forums to share their insights and to accept referrals to support children with a history of poor attendance.

“I also think there should be a big push on youth organisations to get more kids making the key relationships they should have with their youth workers.” – Girl, 15.

- **Every police force area has a SAFE taskforce and a Violence Reduction Unit, which is funded to commission evidence-based youth work to reduce violence.** Violence Reduction Units bring together partners to tackle violence in their local areas, and have established best practice models that would be rolled out across the country. The Home Office would fund them to monitor the impact of evidence-based youth work, and agree the long-term commissioning of those that are shown to have a positive impact.

"All children should be able to live without violence." – Girl, 9.

- **All police officers are able to make a 'positive activities referral' for young people they interact with.** This would provide a voluntary, non-justice pathway for children that police have concerns about but do not meet the threshold for statutory services. The referral, to a funded and locally commissioned service, would allow children to receive support from a key worker and access positive relationships.

"Police should ensure we are safe." – Boy, 8.

- **Youth work is represented via the local youth partnership in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.** The statutory safeguarding partners are currently health, police and local authorities. Youth workers operate widely in health, justice, and education settings, and their knowledge and expertise based on trust with young people is vital for safeguarding. The Children's Commissioner wants to see education made the fourth statutory partner, and for youth sector organisations to be able to contribute at the strategic decision making via the local youth partnership.

"In areas of deprivation more needs youth club, youth workers, sporting activities need to be on offer for children and young people. Some children are not lucky enough to have a positive role model in their parents or carers so often a teacher, coach or youth worker can be that person to inspire them and believe in them." – Parent of girl, 11.

- **Ofsted works with the national and regional youth sector to assure itself of high standards of safeguarding in youth provision, encouraging quality and driving accountability.** Youth services are a place that children must always be able to feel safe, with trusted adults. Currently these services are not subject to safeguarding inspections, and Ofsted should review these arrangements.

"More out of hours activities in a safe environment." – Youth worker on behalf of girl, 17.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- More children are diverted away from crime and the justice system.
- Children's confidence in the police is increased.

The Big Ambition for Safety from Crime

“The government should focus on prevention instead of cure, a lot of mistakes I have made and many other young people have made was due to a lack of help from professionals.” – Boy, 17.

- In the Big Ambition 73% of responses by and on behalf of children agreed that they feel safe and protected in their local area.
- 66% of 12 to 18-year-olds said that they feel safe and protected in their local area, compared to 80% of 6 to 11-year-olds. Children were most likely to agree they felt safe at age 7 – 82% agreed – compared to 62% of 15 year olds.
- Children whose ethnicity was mixed, or other, were the least likely (both 69%) to agree that they feel safe and protected in their local area, while children whose ethnicity was white or Asian/Asian British were the most likely (both 73%).
- 74% of children in less deprived schools felt safe and protected, compared to 69% of children in more deprived schools (schools where a majority of pupils are eligible for free school meals).
- 48% of children who were not in education agreed that they felt safe, compared to 73% of children who attended school or college. 55% of children in Alternative Provision agreed they felt safe, compared to 74% in state-funded mainstream schools and 82% of those in independent mainstream schools.
- There was notable variation around the country – 61% in Croydon felt safe, compared to 79% in Richmond upon Thames.

“Instead of investing so much money into keeping guys in prison invest that money into them before they end up in prison it cost you 50 to 60 grand for me to be here a year imagine if you invested that into my education and activities I wouldn't be here.” – Child.

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

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.

What children and families have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

The Children's Commissioner has heard from hundreds of thousands of children, parents and carers since taking up her post in 2021. She has explored in detail how children experience life, what they want to achieve and the challenges that they face.

A strong theme to come out of *The Big Ask* 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.

Between the two surveys, there has been a notable difference in the feelings of safety. In *The Big Ambition*, only 73% agreed that they felt safe in their local area.

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner set out the five over-arching outcomes she wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. To achieve that within support in keeping children safe from crime will mean achieving the following ambitions:

1. Every child is safe in their home, school, relationships and local area.
2. Every child is prevented from being affected by violence and criminality.
3. Every child who is a victim of crime receives specialist care and support.
4. Every child is safer after an interaction with the police or youth justice system.

Many of the recommendations set out in other chapters are fundamental for promoting a holistic and preventative approach to children's involvement with criminality, from tackling child poverty to ensuring every child has the opportunity to thrive in their community or pursue the career they dream of.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child is safe in their home, school, relationships and local area

"I think the Government should try to make children feel safe whoever they are, wherever they are." – Girl, 9.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every local authority completes a children's safety audit to map and improve the places where children don't feel safe and consults with children when making changes to public space.** Children use public spaces in different ways to adults and have different priorities, but their views are often overlooked. Local authorities must consult with children, including those with different needs, about what improvements to the built environment are needed, such as lighting on school routes and in parks, access to playgrounds and open space for games, and safe and accessible transport.

"They need to listen to the children more and ask us what we would like done in our area." – Boy, 14.

“Listen to people's views and make [city] a better place for children with and without disabilities so they can go out without feeling scared. Make more playground that include all ages so that people of all ages can access and have fun. Make playgrounds and parks entertaining.” – Girl, 12.

- **Every child learns about safety, their rights if they are a victim of crime, and where to go to if the need support, through high-quality PSHE lessons in schools.** Teachers should be trained to deliver high-quality lessons which are based on current and emerging risks to children's safety. Oak National Academy should produce a range of age-appropriate resources to be used by schools.

“Sex education should be spoken about in early years of secondary school because some children who aren't educated in these areas could easily be sexually assaulted and therefore not know what to do after being assaulted.” – Girl, 17.

- **Every child is safe from bullying or sexual harassment and abuse, wherever they experience them.** Schools are empowered to take a whole of school approach to tackling sexual harassment and a safeguarding approach to harm between pupils. Children know who to go to receive support, and professionals working with children are empowered to respond to harms that happen outside the school or online.

“Take action against bullying.” – Girl, 13.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- More children report feeling safe in their communities.
- More children report feeling safe in their school.
- All local authorities submit children's safety audits.
- Fewer children report being bullied.

Ambition 2: Children are prevented from being affected by violence and criminality

“Try to make the world safer and less violent for generations to come.” – Girl, 12.

- **The government commits to a cross-government public health strategy to preventing serious violence.** This takes a life-course approach, identifying key opportunities from the early years onwards to support children and families, including addressing disparities driven by poverty, deprivation and discrimination based on ethnic background.

“Crime needs to be tackled on the streets, meaning the youth of today can feel safe and able to use the positive aspects of the world to help them to grow.” – Boy, 15.

- **The government defines serious violence affecting children and has a clear and ambitious target to reduce it to its lowest-ever level.** This definition must include all forms of violence which children suffer, including sexual violence, and set out a national strategy for tackling it.

“Make there be no gun violence or gangs and make the kids feel safe again when they go outside.” – Boy, 14.

- **Every police force area has a SAFE taskforce and a Violence Reduction Unit, which is funded to commission evidence-based youth work to reduce violence.** Violence Reduction Units bring together partners to tackle violence in their local areas, and have established best practice models that would be rolled out across the country. The Home Office would fund them to monitor the impact of evidence-based youth work, and agree the long-term commissioning of those that are shown to have a positive impact.

“All children should be able to live without violence.” – Girl, 9.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Fewer incidents of serious violence affecting children.
 - All areas have a Violence Reduction Unit and SAFE taskforce.
-

Ambition 3: Every child who is a victim of crime receives specialist care and support

“Protect children, support children who are victims. All children deserve to be safe and happy.” – Boy, 13.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every child victim has their rights as a victim upheld, and all professionals working with children understand their responsibilities to them.** All victims have rights under the Victims Code if they are a victim of crime, whether or not they report it. It is essential that there is a Victims’ Code which addresses the unique needs of children, and guidance for the professionals who will need to support them.

“The police and authority figures in general (including teachers/schools) need to respond in a better way to things like sexual assault and harassment and take them seriously rather than dismissing them and nothing happening. These situations also need to be handled with more empathy for the victims and they should be asked how they are, and what they want to happen.”
– Girl, 14.

- **Every child victim of the most serious crimes is supported by a specialist advocate.** These advocates support children to navigate the police and criminal justice system, and to access their rights under the Victim’s Code. Every child receives a mandatory, multi-agency needs assessment at the earliest opportunity after a crime is reported.

“The children should be heard about their points of view as in if a crime was committed and they are the victim they should be listened to.”– Girl, 16.

- **All child victims are recognised in law and consistently identified.** This must include those subject to exploitative, abusive and coercive relationships with adults, as well as with their own peers. This will be enabled by a statutory definition of Child Criminal Exploitation.

“Me and countless people I know around the ages of 15-18 have been a victim of or directly witnessed youth on youth violence, been assaulted, and nobody reports it because they feel as though the punishment the police give will not be useful, whereas the backlash from teens involved in crime (for reporting the crimes they have done to you) will outweigh the police actions.” – Young man, 18.

- **Child victims of crime receive therapeutic support that is holistic and not subject to a postcode lottery.** This includes the establishment of a sustainably-funded national network of Child Houses, which provide joined up care to child victims of sexual abuse. These would be based on the Lighthouse in Camden which brings together all the services children and their families need.

“More support must be in place for children [...] who are the victims of crime. There is not enough support for such people, as I have found in my own experience help has either been withheld until that is no longer possible, or is simply inaccessible.” – Child, 17.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Children report they have agency in the youth justice system.
- Child victims are consistently identified and supported.
- Timely decisions are made about cases involving children as victims and/or perpetrators.

Ambition 4: Every child is safer after an interaction with the police or youth justice system

“There needs to be more on offer that is relatable to children so they don’t fall victim to child exploitation or feel they have nothing to do but turn to crime.” – Parent of boy, 8.

What is needed to get there:

- **The age of criminal responsibility is raised from 10 to 14.** No child at the age of ten should be sentenced for a crime. While a robust response to any harmful behaviour from a child of any age is required, for young children this must always be a safeguarding response.

“The age of criminal responsibility should be higher, as 10 is too young to be responsible for your actions.” – Girl, 13.

- **Every police force has an action plan to treat every child fairly, with respect, and as children first, which addresses ethnic disproportionality.** This is part of a child-centred justice system that recognises vulnerability, prioritises diversion and rehabilitation, and meaningfully addresses disproportionality experienced by children from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds, children with SEND, and care experienced children.

“Currently, homicide appears to be the only thing taken seriously and only just. There is a lack of investigation when it comes to other forms of crime and I would not trust that the police would be able to protect me before/after a crime has taken place.” – Girl, 17.

- **The Home Office reforms PACE codes to reform stop and search.** Children report the traumatising impact of searches, particularly strip searches, and the way they affect their trust and confidence in police. Ensuring that searches only happen where absolutely necessary and proportionate, that there is no ethnic disproportionality in their use, and that safeguards are in place in every search could address this.

“Stop the police from harassing the young black youths in the area if they haven’t done anything wrong because stop and searches have increased with the police not finding nothing and leaving it about even an apology.” – Boy, 17.

- **Children who have suffered exploitation are given specialist support.** Training is given to all frontline police officers on responding to trauma and exploitation.

“Nobody should be getting sexually exploited especially not young people.” – Girl, 15.

- **A safeguarding response to child involvement with criminality is developed.** A safeguarding outcome is added to the criminal outcome framework, and a greater emphasis placed on safeguarding children from exploitation. A safeguarding referral would be made after any arrest, caution or search of a child, and youth offending teams would be brought into local authority children's safeguarding teams.

"The government should invest in more enrichment activities and most of all, invest in facilities to help young people who are less fortunate and have turned to crime reform, and work with social workers to find the root of their issues rather than blaming young people who have deep seated issues and problems with authority and "arresting them" just to release them without much of a warning or reason to not reoffend." – Girl, 16.

- **Every local authority has a specialist safeguarding team to address extra-familial harms.** These team would have a specific focus on addressing the harms that children face in their wider environment, including relationship abuse, criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation. They would work closely with youth services, offending services, and community provision to provide an expert response.

"I know the risks within the community that impact on children's lives and I would like to see more provision available to help children stay out of criminal lines and... risk of exploitation." – Parent of boy, 4.

- **The youth justice system recognises vulnerability in children, and agencies have the knowledge and resources to effectively safeguard children in need.** This will mean all agencies, including the police and all those in the court system, have appropriate training on working with children, and their safeguarding responsibilities towards them.

"Fix the justice system so children can actually feel safe." – Girl, 11.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- More children are diverted away from crime and the justice system.
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- Children's confidence in the police is increased.
- Children report feeling that their race does not determine how they are treated by the police or within the youth justice system.

The Big Ambition for Online Safety

"Restrict social media usage and make it safer to use. More and more younger children have easy access and this ruins their childhood and future." – Girl, 16.

- In *The Big Ambition* 75% of children said that they felt safe when they went online.
- Adults responding on behalf of children were less likely to agree (52%) than children responding on their own behalf (75%).
- The majority of adults responding on behalf of children aged five or under did not agree with the statement 'They feel safe online', while 11-year-olds were the most likely to agree with 'You feel safe when you go online'.
- Children in school or college were more likely to agree they felt safe when they went online (71%) than children in home education (56%) and children not in education (53%).
- Boys were more likely to agree they felt safe when they went online (75%) than girls (67%).

The Big Ambition results show that children do not see a difference between their online world and offline world. Children want to engage with all of the opportunities that the online world offers them—the chance to socialise, learn and play in online spaces.

While many children enjoy being online, this is sadly not the case for all children. In *The Big Ambition*, children told the office that they have sometimes had bad experiences online, whether that's through cyber bullying or seeing content that they do not want to see. This generation has grown up in the digital age and expect to be kept safe online just as they expect to be kept safe in their communities.

What children and families have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

The Children's Commissioner has heard from over a million children, parents and carers since taking up her post in 2021. She has explored in detail how children experience the online world and the challenges they face as a digital generation.

The Big Ask showed that the large majority of children were happy with their experiences online (74%). It demonstrated that the online world is a key part of most children's lives. Children engage with social media, gaming, and messaging platforms as a way of keeping in touch with friends and family. For some children, the online world has allowed them to develop a stronger sense of identity and community.

However, *The Big Ask* also showed that for some children, the online world does not feel safe. Children told the office about their experiences of being contacted by strangers or about seeing pornography or violent images that they did not want to see.

In 2022, the Children's Commissioner was commissioned by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and the Secretary of State for Education to bring the voices of children to the Online Safety Act. In the same year, the Commissioner published analysis of a nationally representative survey of 2,005 children aged 8 to 17 and their parents. It found that there was widespread underage use of social media platforms and that most parents were concerned about the nature of content their children saw online, despite the majority of parents using online safety tools. 45% of children aged 8 to 17 reported that they had seen content they felt was inappropriate or made them worried or upset.

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner set out the five over-arching outcomes that wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. To achieve that within support for families will mean achieving the following ambitions:

1. Every child can play and learn online safely.

2. Every child has the knowledge and support to be safe online.
3. Every child is protected from online harms, and services can effectively safeguard and support them.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child can play and learn online safely.

“The Government could help keep children safe online by blocking unsafe or inappropriate websites on a majority of devices, or making it so that you have to enter your age before clicking on websites that could be unsafe to protect children.” – Girl, 12.

What is needed to get there:

- **Protections in the Online Safety Act are implemented swiftly and robustly.** Ofcom, as the regulator for online safety, must hold online platforms to account for children’s safety.

“Online safety is non-existent and parents are so ill-informed and don’t put restrictions in place (across the class spectrum) so I have friends who have seen porn, fighting and other inappropriate content and they are only 10/11 years old or younger. It feels like there is nothing in place to help.” – Girl, 12.

- **Children’s rights are protected and their voices are empowered in the online world.** Children’s rights to play, to privacy, to safety and to free expression are protected in the online world. Children are listened to about what they experience or want to change, and are given control of their safety and experiences.

“They should give more places for children to have their say on things that matter to them and also that children are warned about social media and how it can affect them.” – Girl, 11.

- **Highly effective age assurance prevents children from seeing illegal or harmful content online.** Ofcom strongly enforces the effectiveness of age assurance by platforms, and regularly reviews efforts to circumvent it by child users.

“Age restrictions on devices so children can socialise better.” – Girl, 13.

- **Online spaces are safe for children by design with child safety features built-in from the beginning.** Platforms anticipate and mitigate, as well as identifying and removing, threats to children online. Online spaces are designed according to principles that ensure the fundamental safety of child users.

“Make devices harmless or less harmful.” – Boy, 9.

- **Platforms use age-appropriate engagement and recommendation algorithms and are transparent with users and regulators on their design.** Platforms do not screen harmful content or features to child users and take active steps to reduce and mitigate the addictiveness of products for children.

“Don’t let people under a certain age play on computers or other technology because it can be addictive stopping people from doing other activities which they might enjoy.” – Boy, 12.

- **The standards for online and offline pornography and adult content are aligned.** Online content accessed in the UK should be compliant with British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) ratings, including prohibiting extreme and harmful content that would not be classified by the BBFC.

“The government needs to do a whole lot more about online safety and porn online among children.” – Girl, 13.

- **No child is able to use a platform under the age specified in their terms and conditions.** Children cannot use social media or platforms with user-to-user functionalities enabled before the age of 13, and after that age can only access ones that are safe by design.

"I only watch stuff for my age not stuff for adults because it is not appropriate." – Girl, 8.

- **Children are familiar with and have confidence in the processes to make complaints, report content or users, or seek help and advocacy online.** Reporting functions on platforms are visible, child-friendly and effective. Ofcom advocates for children and ensures that children's concerns lead to action. It also leads on sector-wide interoperability of reporting systems to address cross-platform issues, such as peer-on-peer abuse, bullying, and the sharing of distressing material involving children.

"They should make sure that people on Roblox actually read the report when someone reports a bully because you can report them and then they are just back the next day." – Girl, 10.

- **Children are not exposed to gambling harms online through paid loot boxes in video games.** Regulation of paid loot boxes in video games is aligned with other gambling harms.

"Put limit on gaming as I feel I have to do the same as my friends." – Boy, 11.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Children and parents' perceptions of their safety improves.
- Reduction in the number of children reporting they see content that they consider harmful online.
- Number of underage children accessing online platforms.
- Standards are consistent across all platforms.

Ambition 2: Every child has the knowledge and support to be safe online.

"I think children should be more exposed to online safety and health and relationship educations." – Girl, 14.

What is needed to get there:

- **Children are adequately prepared for the online world, and get high-quality education and guidance about online safety in and out of school.** Children are confident in the education and advice on navigating the online world safely that they receive, including as part of a high-quality PSHE offer. Families and professionals working with children have clear and accessible resources and guidance on supporting children.

"Promote more awareness of online safety." - Girl, 15.

- **Parents and caregivers of children have the information that they need to make decisions about children's online lives.** This means that parental controls are consistent, accessible, easy to understand, and are turned on by default. Family Hubs and schools are resourced to support families to increase their awareness of how they help their child to be safe online.

"Despite setting up all the tech as best we can to protect them, it is so easy for them to view just about anything, whether they want to or not. There seems to be no way of stopping bad content coming through." - Parent of girl, 13.

- **Schools are empowered to address difficult and emerging topics and to counter extreme views, such as misogyny and the normalisation of sexual harassment and abuse.** Teachers have the resources to anticipate, identify and understand harmful content and trends online, and to adequately respond to the harm to their pupils and to educate the wider school community.

"The amount of kids that end up having prejudiced views is disgusting just because social media companies and parents don't do enough." - Boy, 15.

- **Platforms provide adequate and accessible links to tools, information and advice for parents, children, and teachers.** Guidance is clear and accessible and allows children, families and professionals to make informed decisions about children's safety and experiences online.

“A subset of adults lack digital skill and their children surpass them, it would be more useful for practical information (like what buttons to press - it might need to be that clear) on safety for common apps to be given out.” – Parent of girl, 6.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- More schools and parents report feeling confident to support children for the online world.
- Number of parents and schools accessing online safety resources.

Ambition 3: Every child is protected from online harms, and professionals can effectively safeguard and support them.

“Strengthening child protection systems is essential to prevent and respond to abuse, exploitation, and neglect. [...] Digital literacy initiatives prepare children for the digital age, ensuring access to technology and critical digital skills.” – Boy, 15.

What is needed to get there:

- **The UK has a proactive culture to protecting children from emerging threats online.** Ofcom and the Department for Science, Innovation & Technology, with the Home Office and police, proactively monitor emerging threats online and are able to respond swiftly by closing legal loopholes.

“Letting kids feel safe on the internet and ban every scammer or any one who can talk to them without their permission.” – Child, 9.

- **Professionals working with children have the expertise and powers to address online harms that children are experiencing.** When children or parents report online harms from content or users, professionals, such as police, teachers, or social workers, can ensure that swift and appropriate action is taken by platforms. Professionals are able to triage the harm, support the child to navigate the most appropriate reporting and complaints procedure, advocate for the
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child with the platform, and, where necessary, escalate to Ofcom to ensure the platform is held accountable for harmful content.

"There should be [...] stricter laws against bullying on social media." – Child, 14.

- **Children who experience online harms receive specialist support.** Professionals working with children are able to refer to specialist services, including for children who have seen illegal or harmful content online, children concerned about addiction to or dependence on video games or social media, child victims of online bullying or harassment, child victims of sexual abuse, or child victims of intimate image abuse.

"More support must be in place for children [...] who are the victims of crime. There is not enough support for such people, as I have found in my own experience help has either been withheld until that is no longer possible, or is simply inaccessible." – Child, 17.

- **Illegal content, including child sexual abuse material (CSAM), is identified and removed.** Platforms work together to address cross-platform child sexual exploitation and abuse (CSEA). Police have increased specialist resources to investigate and disrupt the creation and sharing of CSAM, and online exploitation and grooming.

"A focus should be put on keeping children safe. This could be done by enforcing child safety laws online better, giving harsher punishments to child sexual offenders and taking greater care in ensuring all children live in a safe environment and can get help if they need it." – Girl, 16.

- **A robust, safeguarding-first response to intimate images.** Platforms have enhanced reporting functions for child victims of intimate image abuse and work together to combat cross-platform abuse. Children sharing non-consensual intimate images of another child, or generating or sharing AI-CSAM involving another child will meet a safeguarding-first, joined-up response from education and statutory safeguarding partners that does not minimise the harm to the victim. Children are not criminalised for the consensual production or sharing of intimate images.

“The government should put more safety into online security such as putting a further emphasis on the importance of not sending explicit photos online and putting a higher penalty on those who go in to share those photos with other people after having been sent them.” - Girl, 15.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Number of children who are satisfied with their ability to report online harms and the action that is taken.
- Number of children who experience online harms who receive specialist support.

The Big Ambition for Jobs and Skills

“There should be more awareness of the university courses, as well as more degree apprenticeships.” – Girl, 17.

- In *The Big Ambition*, 51% of respondents agreed that children knew about apprenticeships, university options and career paths.
- 65% of respondents agreed that children knew about good jobs for when they were older.
- 70% of children agreed they had the same opportunities as other children and young people.
- 57% of responses by or on behalf of children with SEND agreed they had the same opportunities as other children and young people, compared to 76% of responses for children without SEND.
- 59% of responses by children with a social worker or on their behalf agreed they had the same opportunities as other children and young people, compared to 72% of responses for children without a social worker.
- In *The Big Ambition* 61% agreed that they, or the child for whom they were responding, knew about money and life skills.
- 48% of responses by or for children with SEND agreed they knew about money and life skills, compared to 64% of responses for children without SEND.

The Big Ambition results show that most children and young people feel like they have the same opportunities as their peers, they feel confident in their knowledge about apprenticeships, university options, and career paths and most feel that they have learnt about the skills they will need in later life. However, this is not the case for every child. Some children feel like they have not been given the support they need to succeed in adulthood.

Children and young people are desperate to learn about the world of work. They are ambitious and driven by their dream careers and want to be given the support they need to achieve their goals. They want PSHE lessons to be the most exciting and engaging lesson on the curriculum, to equip them with all the skills and knowledge they will need for adulthood. They want greater access to vocational routes and subjects which excite them and lead to brilliant careers. It is clear from the findings of *The Big Ambition* that we need to rebalance the education system to focus more on how to better prepare children for adulthood.

What children and families have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

The Children's Commissioner has engaged with hundreds of thousands of children, parents, and carers since assuming her role in 2021, actively listening to their aspirations and dreams for the future.

In *The Big Ask*, children's top priority for the future was getting a good job or career. Over two thirds of children (69%) said that having a good job in their future was one of their top priorities.

This generation exhibits remarkable ambition, striving for success and showing their determination to get on in life. Many children have told the Children's Commissioner that their biggest dream is to find a job that is fulfilling and makes the most of their talents. Children want to pursue a brilliant range of career paths, from vocational routes through to academic.

Yet despite these ambitions, children have told the Commissioner that they are often not equipped with the advice and support they need to pursue their dreams. Children are desperate to learn about the life skills they will need as adults but do not feel like schools and colleges are set up to provide them with these life lessons.

Young people have told the Children's Commissioner that they want support to learn about a wide range of careers and to choose the path which is right for them. They want to learn about the workplace and their options after education. Children and young people want to see schools, colleges, and employers work together to improve the careers advice they receive.

The Commissioner has heard from children who want better access to vocational career routes, whether through vocational qualifications or apprenticeships. They recognise the value of practical skills and emphasize the need for their education to focus on the skills needed for the world of work.

The Commissioner has also spoken to children with additional needs about their aspirations for the future. While these children share the level of ambition of other children, sometimes they feel like they do not receive the extra support they need to achieve their goals. These young people have remarked that they want greater access to programmes which will allow them to secure a brilliant job in the future.

What needs to happen

The Children's Commissioner set out the five over-arching outcomes that she wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. She believes that there are three over-arching principles that the Government should prioritise in their jobs and skills reforms. These are:

1. Every child is taught about the life skills they will need as adults.
2. Every child has access to high-quality careers advice, information, and guidance which is tailored to their interests.
3. Every child, no matter their background, is given the support they need to secure their dream job whether that is through further or higher education or an apprenticeship.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child is taught about the life skills they will need as adults.

“Schools should teach more to children about life skills, money and health matters giving them more of opportunity to learn about skills that will help them grow.” – Adult on behalf of girl, 10.

What is needed to get there:

- **The Department for Education updates the statutory RSHE guidance to include life skills, economic wellbeing, financial education, and careers planning.** Children told us how much they valued the teaching of wider life skills, including financial education. They were keen to make sure all children were taught about these issues, either through PSHE or the wider school offer.

“Less PSHE lessons about unimportant things more about money and finances and taxes to know issues we will face when we are older.” – Boy, 16.

- **All teachers receive better and more thorough training on how to deliver the RSHE curriculum.** Training for teachers on RSHE needs to be regular, high-quality and connected to local services. Teachers should be trained in how to deliver high-quality RSHE for children with special educational needs.

“I think more money should be put into mental health and better sex education in schools about symptoms and where to go if you need advice, also to teach about healthy relationships and how to be a good person generally.” – Girl, 16.

- **Oak National Academy becomes a platform that teachers and professionals can go to access high-quality, kitemarked materials and resources to support the teaching of RSHE.** These materials are freely available and without the copyright limitations that some resources have. Schools must be confident that these materials are age-appropriate, in line with parents’ and children’s preferences, and reflect the statutory guidance.

“Teach kids about real life issues like buying a house and applying for a bank card rather than the same PSHE curriculum year after year.” – Boy, 16.

- **Teachers are able to specialise in RSHE as they do in other subjects given the nature and breadth of the topics covered.** A high quality National Professional Qualification (NPQ) in RSHE is vital to effectively prepare teachers to deliver and discuss the more challenging or sensitive

topics included in the proposed curriculum in an age-appropriate and safe manner. Specialist RSHE teachers should be equipped to adapt the RSHE curriculum to the needs of their students.

"Have PSHE lessons where you learnt about important things like money and what's going on in the world and things that some people's parents might teach but other people won't have a parent figure to help them." – Girl, 13.

- **Ofsted should hold schools to account for the quality of their PSHE lessons.** Children have told the office that they want greater access to high-quality PSHE which sets them up for life. Ofsted has conducted a range of subject reviews but has not yet done one on PSHE. Ofsted should conduct a subject report on the quality of PSHE in England.

"They should prepare us for when we are older and teach us more about collages and university and life skills at school. And listen to our opinions." – Girl, 13.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- The content of the RSHE guidance is expanded to cover life skills.
- Children report that they know about life skills.
- Number of teachers trained in RSHE.
- Number of teachers specialising in RSHE.
- Ofsted reported quality of PSHE.

Ambition 2: Every child has access to high-quality careers advice, information, and guidance which is tailored to their interests

What is needed to get there:

- **A greater emphasis is given to careers in primary and secondary schools.** All teachers should receive basic training in the different career routes available for children and in delivering the
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Gatsby benchmarks. All children should also have regular access to careers advisors to speak to as they pick their options for post-16 pathways.

“More resources available for learning about future careers and GCSE options.” – Girl, 14.

- **All schools are supported by a Careers Hub by the end of 2024.** Careers Hubs were launched in 2018. They bring together schools, colleges, employers, and apprenticeship providers in local authorities to improve the quality of careers provision for young people. The Department for Education has set a target for 95% of schools and colleges to be in a Careers Hub by August 2024. This should be 100%.

“That there should be more in school about futures. Careers and universities, I feel like I don’t know what will happen when I go to a uni and I still am not sure what I want to be.” – Boy, 14.

- **All Careers Leaders are given training on improving careers provision and establishing relationships with local employers.** Training should be mandatory and focus on how best to support children from underrepresented groups. The Department for Education should update its statutory guidance with a minimum expectation around how much time Careers Leaders should have protected for fulfilling their duties as a Careers Leader.

“The government should get schools to talk about future careers more often and tell more people at a young age about jobs.” – Girl, 11.

- **All primary schools, secondary schools, alternative provision, special schools and colleges publish child-friendly guidance on their careers provision.** This guidance makes clear to children and young people the careers provision that they can access in school and college and in their local area.

“Perhaps make schools talk more about career paths? Because I’m in y8 and I don’t really know much about apprenticeships and career paths. I know what I want to be but not exactly how to achieve it...” – Girl, 12.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Number of children supported by a Careers Advisor.
- Number of schools supported by a Careers Hub.
- Number of Careers Leaders who complete training in careers provision.
- Number of children sustaining a positive post-16 destination.
- Reported child satisfaction on careers provision.
- Number of schools which publish child-friendly guidance on their careers provision.

Ambition 3: Every child, no matter their background, is given the support they need to secure their dream job whether that is through further or higher education or an apprenticeship.

“Give more opportunities to people who don't have the means at home to have a bright future.” – Parent on behalf of girl, 8.

What is needed to get there:

- **All school leavers are offered a Young People’s Apprenticeship Guarantee.** The government introduces a separate ring-fenced funding stream for apprenticeships for 16 to 18-year-olds so all apprenticeships for this age group are fully funded. Businesses are offered a further financial incentive to hire young people using their levy funding, this could involve allowing businesses to pay young people’s salaries through the levy.

“Finance companies to encourage more apprenticeships for younger people.” – Girl, 13.

- **The government introduces more supported internships for children most at risk of becoming not in education, employment, or training.** This scheme is extended to reach more young people.

"I want to get a job I have EHCP but the college said I can't go there because there's no money to support me so I'm at home waiting for them to send a tutor. All I am going to get is 4 hours a week English and maths. I want a job but no one is helping me except my mum and dad." – Boy, 16.

- **Care leavers are supported with their educational goals.** Care leavers should be able to access year-round accommodation when attending higher education, and the value of the higher education bursary should be increased. UCAS should provide a consistent, single source of information about every institution's offer for care leavers, and a quality kitemark scheme should be introduced to acknowledge those settings that provide the best offer.

"Look after children in the care system even after they turn 18- make sure they are safe, have a place to go, have an adult/family they can trust and go to when needed." – Girl, 17.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Number of young people taking up apprenticeships.
- Employment outcomes for children with SEND and children known to social care.
- Number of care leavers progressing to higher education.

The Big Ambition for a Better World

“The government should listen to children's ideas more and children shouldn't have to pass their idea to an adult to make it happen. children should be able to change the world too.” – Girl, 11.

- 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.
- Older young people were less likely to agree with the statement compared to younger children; responses by or for 8-year-olds were the most likely to agree, while 17-year-olds were the least likely.
- A little over half (52%) of responses by children agreed with the statement ‘You feel empowered to change issues you care about’. Agreement varied by age, with responses by or from children aged 9 most likely to agree (71%), but less than half of teenagers and under-6s agreed.
- In response to the statement ‘Their thoughts about the future are listened to’, 70% of adults responding on behalf of children agreed.
- Overall, 70% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘You are treated fairly’. Adults responding on behalf of children more likely to agree (82%) than when children responded on their own behalf (68%). Younger children and adults responding on their behalf were also more likely to agree: 90% of 4-year-olds agreed, compared to 55% of 15-year-olds.

One of the strongest messages identified from *The Big Ambition*, was that children understand the world, they care about it, and want to have their voices listened to on how to tackle key issues facing children across England.

However, only 22% of children agreed that people who run the country listened to what they had to say. Children said that this affects them in ways large and small, and on local, national and global scales. It means that when decisions are being made about building local parks, they are not asked for their views, although their desire for safe places to play and spend times with friends is palpable.

It means that when the national conversation turns to housing, it is not about what it feels like to be a child in temporary accommodation, who has to move schools in the middle of an exam year, but instead about mortgages and getting a foot on the housing ladder. And it means when it comes to elections, manifestos, and promises from their local MPs, children feel left out in the cold. They feel that because they don't have a vote, the issues closest to their heart are never addressed. Even when they are talked *about*, they are rarely provided the opportunity to be *heard*.

However, children proposed many practical solutions to ensure their voices were heard, as well as ambitious visions for what childhood could and should look like for their generation.

What children and families have told the Children's Commissioner over the last three years

The Children's Commissioner has engaged with a million children, parents and carers since taking up her post in 2021. The Commissioner and her office have undertaken hundreds of visits across England, meeting thousands of children, including the most vulnerable, to ensure the voices of all groups of children are heard. These visits have been conducted across a diverse range of settings, from secure settings, hospitals, children's homes, schools and youth groups, both virtually and in-person.

The Children's Commissioner also directly involves children in decision making and policy development through her Children's Advisory Board, Care Experienced Advisory Board and team of Youth Ambassadors.

In the Children's Commissioner's *The Big Ask* survey of over 550,000 children in 2021, children were also passionate about having their voices heard on the topics that mattered most to them. This matters to them not just on issues related to childhood, but on global and intergenerational issues too. For

example, 39% of children said that a healthy environment was their biggest worry for the future, and they want their views on this to be heard.

What needs to happen

Children believe that governments can transform their lives for the better. And they are right. Governments have shown over the past thirty years that it is possible to commit to eradicate the harms of smoking, to narrow the education gap between rich and poor children or reduce child poverty. This takes energy, political will, and commitment. This paper sets out how with a few clear ambitions, shared across government, underpinned by action that can be both radical and practical the lives of children can be dramatically improved.

The Children's Commissioner set out the five over-arching outcomes that she wants for every child, namely that they are safe, healthy, happy, learning and engaged in their community. To achieve that following ambitions must be supported:

1. Every child feels empowered to speak out about issues that they care about.
2. Every child's thoughts, feelings, views, and ambitions are listened to.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child feels empowered to speak out about issues that they care about.

"All young people should be more empowered to have their voices heard and acted upon"- Young woman, 18.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every school and alternative provider runs a student voice council.** These councils should meet regularly with senior leaders and decision makers. These meetings should inform key decisions affecting children's education.

"They should listen to school and the pupils more, like student councils." – Girl, 14.

- **Schools should develop oracy and PSHE programmes** which give children the chance to debate key topics which affect their lives. Children should be supported to learn about these issues and to debate them with their peers on a regular basis.

"I think the government should introduce some new extra-curricular topics that are about learning to and out from other people and be in the top one percent of people who have made it to be successful in the modern world (e.g. social skills, how to talk confidently to an audience, how to set up a business, how to pay bills wisely etc)." – Girl, 14.

- **Every elected official establishes a regular forum to hear from children about their priorities.** This may include MP surgeries for children. When advertising these forums, elected officials should consider how they can reach a wide range of children from all backgrounds within their constituency.

"I believe that [my MP] should be active in the community. whether that's at a school or location youth group to inspire/teach young people the ways of life in and with politics." – Boy, 16.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Number of children who feel they are empowered to make their voice heard reported in national surveys.
 - More young people, from a diversity of backgrounds and regions across England, and particularly vulnerable children, should have the opportunity to take part in youth and school councils, youth parliaments and other local and national groups.
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Ambition 2: Every child's thoughts, feelings, views, and ambitions are listened to.

"[...] We need youth summits, youth parliaments, chances to speak to MPs and councils. Young people should be allowed to pitch their ideas to councils". – Girl, 15.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every political party commits to writing a manifesto for children and participating in a leaders' debate about childhood.** The manifesto should set out what they will do for children, and how they will engage them in political decision making.

"They should actually take younger people into account when they are making their manifestos."
– Boy, 16.

- **Select Committees hear regularly from children.** Every Select Committee holds at least one inquiry per session into issues affecting children and ensure that they directly from children in those inquiries. In every inquiry, Select Committees should consider whether they should engage with children on the topic at hand, this would be appropriate in instances where the inquiry directly affects children or is likely to affect their future.

"Incorporate our views and needs into the legal system and not just what the government officials think will benefit us the most. Engage with young people more and make their voices feel heard instead of just saying that our views matter." – Girl, 16.

- **Child rights impact assessments are conducted on every policy development,** as well as draft legislation, regulations and statutory guidance. These are published in a publicly accessible database.

"The government should listen more to what children and the youth want, visit schools, be engaged and be proactive on our views." – Girl, 14.

- **Children are consulted on every piece of legislation and policy reform that affects them.** Policy consultations at the national and local level are specifically designed to engage children and gather their views. Every consultation should come with a child-friendly version and a strategy for engaging with children. All government guidance affecting children has a children's version.

"I think they need to listen to children more as it is our future and the world that we will have to live in." – Girl, 11.

- **The Children's Commissioner continues to run her Youth Ambassador Programme** and recruits another group of Youth Ambassadors for 2024/25.

"Involve children in making policies that affect them and in general decisions." – Boy, 12.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- The government and parliament involves children's in decision making and policy development in a systematic way.
- Number of children who are satisfied with how they are represented in wider political decision-making reported in national surveys.
- Number of children who feel they have their voices heard reported in national surveys.

Next steps

The findings of *The Big Ambition* will continue to shape the Children's Commissioner's work for the next three years. We will ensure that everything children have told us shapes our campaigns and policy work and underpins the actions of the Children's Commissioner's office.

This month, the Children's Commissioner will be publishing her Strategy for the next three years. This Strategy will be built on the findings of *The Big Ambition*. Given the importance of listening and engaging with children, the Strategy will outline the office's next steps to expand our youth participation work. For every future year of the Children's Commissioner's time in office, we will recruit a group of Youth Ambassadors to represent young people's views and opinions and to help build our campaigns.

The office will also shortly publish the Children's Commissioner's Business Plan for the next financial year. This plan has been developed based on the findings of *The Big Ambition*. Throughout the next year, the office will draw upon the quantitative and qualitative findings from *The Big Ambition* to shape our research and reports. We will draw upon the recommendations of children and young people to make proposals for government.

Listening to children is the first step in improving childhood in England. The next step is action. Over the next three years, the Children's Commissioner will be using *The Big Ambition* results to advocate for children, to scrutinise government, and to make England the best place for children to grow up.

Ambitions mapped against the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

Ambition	Principal Pillar	Article of UNCRC
The Big Ambition for Families		3, 5, 18, 24, 26, 27
Every child grows up in a family who has what they need to support them and no child grows up in poverty.		3, 24, 26, 27
Every child grows up in a loving and supportive family, with close and loving relationships.		3, 20, 24, 26, 27
Every child has access to high quality support in the early years.		3, 5, 18, 27
Every child grows up happy and healthy and where children need additional help it is provided as early as possible.		3, 5, 24, 26, 27
The Big Ambition for Health		3, 5, 6, 18, 23, 24, 25, 39,42

Every child has access to high-quality mental health and wellbeing support in their school and local community.		3, 6, 18, 23, 24
Every disabled child or child with special educational needs, and neurodiverse child receives excellent, joined up healthcare, social care and education.		3, 18, 23, 24
Every child with the most acute health needs living away from home receives loving, caring support.		3, 5, 6, 24, 25, 39, 42
The Big Ambition for Education		2, 3, 18, 23, 28, 29
Every child has access to a brilliant education.		2, 3, 18, 23, 28, 29
Every child attends and is engaged in school every day.		3, 28, 29
Every child who needs additional support to engage in education can access it easily.		2, 3, 23, 28, 29
The Big Ambition for Children's Social Care		3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 25, 26, 37, 38, 39, 40, 42

Every child involved with children's social care is truly listened to, and their views are heard.		11,12, 13, 14,19, 20, 21, 22, 39, 42
Every family get consistent, effective help to improve children's welfare, and to stay together wherever it is in a child's best interests.		3, 6, 8, 9, 18, 26, 27
Every child in care has a stable home, where they can form loving relationships with carers.		3, 19, 20, 25, 26, 27
Every young person with care experience continue to receive care and support for as long as they need it.		3, 19, 20, 25, 26, 27
Every child who needs secure care receives it in an integrated, homely environment. All Young Offenders Institutions are closed.		3, 19, 20, 25, 37, 39, 40
The Big Ambition for Unaccompanied children seeking asylum		2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 19, 20, 22, 23, 28, 29, 30, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 42
Every child seeking asylum has access to a loving and stable home.		3, 19, 20, 25, 26, 27, 39
Every child seeking asylum is supported to thrive in education.		2, 3, 23, 28, 29, 30

Every unaccompanied child in need of care and protection is supported from the day they arrive.		2, 3, 6, 7, 10, 20, 22, 25, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 42
The Big Ambition for Youth work		3, 24, 29, 30, 31
Every child has access to play and fun things to do, and places to spend time with friends.		3, 29, 30, 31
Every child has access to high-quality youth provision in their local area.		3, 29, 30, 31
Every child is supported by youth work services that work together, to prevent issues escalating.		3, 24, 29, 30, 31
The Big Ambition for Safety from Crime		2, 3, 16, 17, 19, 24, 29, 31, 33, 34, 36, 37, 39, 40, 42
Every child is safe in their home, school, relationships and local area.		3, 19, 29, 30, 31
Every child is prevented from being affected by violence and criminality.		2, 3, 16, 17, 19, 33, 34, 36
Every child who is a victim of crime receives specialist care and support.		2, 3, 24, 39

Every child is safer after an interaction with the police or youth justice system.		2, 3, 24, 37, 39, 40, 42
The Big Ambition for Online Safety		3, 17, 19, 29, 31, 33, 34, 36
Every child can play and learn online safely.		3, 17, 19, 29, 31, 33
Every child has the knowledge and support to be safe online.		3, 17, 29
Every child is protected from online harms, and professionals can effectively safeguard and support those who do.		3, 17, 19, 33, 34, 36
The Big Ambition for Jobs and Skills		2, 3, 23, 28, 29, 30
Every child is taught about the life skills they will need as adults.		2, 3, 23, 28, 29, 30
Every child has access to high-quality careers advice, information, and guidance which is tailored to their interests.		28, 29, 30
Every child, no matter their background, is given the support they need to secure their		2, 3, 23, 28, 29, 30

dream job whether that is through further or higher education or an apprenticeship.		
The Big Ambition for Better World		1, 2, 3, 4, 12, 13, 14, 15, 20, 41, 42
Every child's thoughts, feelings, views, and ambitions are listened to.		1, 2, 3, 4, 12, 13, 14, 20, 41, 42
Every child feels empowered to enact change about issues that they care about.		12, 13, 14, 15

Thank you

The Commissioner would like to thank all those who have contributed to The Big Ambition – through responding to the survey, through attending roundtables, and through hosting focus groups and visits, for the team and the Children’s Commissioner.

The first and most important thanks of course goes to all the children and young people who filled out the survey, who came to focus groups, or met the Commissioner on visits. This report would not have been possible without you.

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- Alexandra School
- Auditory Verbal UK
- Bedford Free School
- Biggleswade Children's Home
- Blaise High School
- Bourne End Academy
- Chester le Street Primary School
- Cranbrook Education Campus
- Exeter College
- Green Bank House
- Greenview House

- Hale Family Centre
- Harris Academy St. Johns Wood
- Harris Westminster Sixth Form College
- Jubilee Primary
- King Solomon Academy
- Moat House Primary School
- North Shore Academy
- Oakhill Secure Training Centre
- Outwood Foxhills Academy
- Pears Family School
- Pentland Field School
- Plymouth Marine Academy
- Potters Bar Clinic, Inpatient mental health ward
- Reach Academy Feltham
- Roundabout charity
- Sheffield Hospital
- Somerford Community and Youth Club
- Somerford Grove Adventure Playground
- Somerville Primary School
- St Bede's Catholic School
- St Evelina's Children's Hospital
- St Mary's Ukrainian School
- Star Academies
- The Big Conversation – Grimsby
- The Edge Youth Club
- University of Cambridge School
- Unity Radio
- Eden School
- HMP Feltham
- HMP Isis
- HMP Wetherby
- Kent Intake Unit
- Middlesex Cricket Young Person Panel

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- Action for Children
- Adoption UK
- Alliance for Youth Justice
- Alternative Provision Network
- Anna Freud Centre
- Association of Directors of Children's Services
- Association of School and College Leaders
- Barnardo's
- Become
- BoxWise
- British Association for Child and Adolescent Public Health
- Careers and Enterprise Company
- Centre for Emotional Health
- Centre for Mental Health
- Centre for Sexual Abuse
- Centre for Social Justice
- Cheshire and Merseyside Health and Care Partnership
- Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel
- Children's Rights Alliance for England, part of Just for Kids Law
- Civil Service
- Confederation of School Trusts
- Co-op Academies Trust
- Coram Children's Legal Centre
- Council for Disabled Children
- Crown Prosecution Service
- Director of the Secure Training Centre
- E-ACT
- Early Education and Childcare Coalition
- Early Years Alliance
- ECPAT
- Education and Employers

- Education Endowment Fund
 - Family Hubs Network
 - Family Rights Group
 - First News
 - Football Beyond Borders
 - Fostering Network
 - Foundations
 - Frontline
 - Future Governance Foundation
 - Future Youth Zone
 - Google
 - Governors of Young Offender Institutions
 - Greater Manchester Combined Authority
 - Hackney Council
 - Hackney Quest
 - Harris Federation
 - Helen Bamber Foundation
 - His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons
 - His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services
 - Institute of Health Visiting
 - Joseph Rowntree Foundation
 - Kinship
 - Kwajo Tweneboa
 - Leeds Children's Services
 - Local Government Association
 - London Violence Reduction Unit
 - London Youth
 - Magic Breakfast
 - Manchester Children's Services
 - Manchester Enterprise Academy
 - Meta
 - Metropolitan Police
 - Mulberry Stepney Green College
 - National Association of Head Teachers
 - National Association of Virtual School Heads
-

- National Children's Bureau
- National Crime Agency
- National Lottery Community Fund
- National Police Chiefs Council
- National Youth Advocacy Service
- National Youth Agency
- National Youth Sector Advisory Board
- Newham Children's Services
- NHS England
- NHS Frimley Integrated Care Board
- NHS Providers
- Nicky Cox, MBE
- NSPCC
- Ofsted
- Prince's Trust
- PSHE Association
- Refugee Council
- Registered Managers of Secure Children's Homes
- Resolution Foundation
- Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
- Royal Society of Public Health
- Sport England
- Star Academies
- The Church of England
- The Lighthouse
- The Sanctuary Foundation
- The Scouts
- TikTok
- Trust for Developing Communities
- X
- Ukie
- The UK Committee for UNICEF
- University of Sunderland
- University Technical College South Durham
- Victims' Commissioner

- Wellspring Academy Trust
- Young Carers Alliance
- Youth Endowment Fund
- Youth Justice Board
- Youth Sport Trust

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- Sofia
- Sumair
- Tamar
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