



THE  
**BIG**  
AMBITION



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RESEARCH  
MARCH 2024

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## Executive summary

*“The government should listen to the views of children more and consider their opinions” – Girl, 12.*

*The Big Ambition* was a large-scale consultation of children in England carried out between September 2023 and January 2024 by the Children’s Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, which engaged 367,000 children and adults, and received responses from 253,000. Children aged 6 to 17, young people aged 18 still in school or college, and adults on behalf of children, answered a broad set of questions about their lives, and shared their views on what they think needs to change to make children’s lives better.

### Background

The survey built on *The Big Ask*, the largest ever survey of children, which the Children’s Commissioner ran in 2021, and to which 557,077 children aged 4 to 17 responded<sup>1</sup>. The seven core pillars of the Commissioner’s work were developed from analysis of *The Big Ask*. These are: a better world, including equality, environment and children’s voice; children’s social care; community, including local and online safety, crime and youth work; education; family; health and wellbeing; and jobs and skills. *The Big Ambition* survey was structured around these seven themes.

This research report, and a companion policy report, *The Big Ambition for Children*, bring together findings from the survey with interviews and focus groups with children, parents and professionals across the country, and roundtables with experts, policy makers, young people, and others. By bringing together these thoughts, opinions and ideas, *The Big Ambition* presents the voice of children in England on what is going well and what needs to change.

### Purpose of the survey

The Children’s Commissioner has a statutory responsibility to consult children.<sup>2</sup> She gathered children’s voices from across the country, to take their thoughts to government and amplify those voices to decision makers as we approach the next general election. Accordingly, the survey and wider research asked children to explain, in their own words, what they thought the government should do to make children’s lives better. *The Big Ambition* also aimed to inform the Commissioner’s strategy and programme of work for the remainder of her 2021 to 2027 term of office.

## Contents of the survey

*The Big Ambition* survey asked a range of demographic questions, including school name where applicable, and presented respondents with 20 statements to which they could agree or disagree.

These were:

- You have somewhere to call home
- You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for
- Your family has everything they need to support you
- Your family gets to spend quality time together
- You have someone supportive to talk to about how you feel
- You know about good jobs for when you are older
- You feel safe when you go online
- You have great teachers who support you
- You have fun activities to do near where you live
- You feel safe and protected in your local area
- You have a healthy diet
- You have the same opportunities as other children and young people
- You know about money and life skills
- You know about apprenticeships, university options and career paths
- You are treated fairly
- You enjoy school or college
- You feel empowered to change issues that you care about
- Their thoughts about the future are listened to
- You feel happy with the way you look
- People who run the country listen to your views

The final open question allowed respondents to write comments on 'What do you think the Government should do to make children's lives better?'

### **Sample**

The 253,000 responses – 214,553 from children directly, and 38,448 from adults responding on their behalf – account for over 2% of all children in England, making it the second largest survey ever of children in England after *The Big Ask*. There were 366,628 total engagements with the survey, including respondents to the survey who did not share their opinions and who did not click 'Finish Survey'.

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. The survey received large numbers of responses from children whose voices are least likely to be heard, including 39,000 children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), equating to over 2% of all children with SEND in England<sup>3</sup>, 14,000 children with a social worker, 390 children in secure settings and 300 in mental health hospitals. Among the around 3,400 children living with family members other than parents, such as grandparents, aunts and uncles (i.e., in kinship care), around 710 had a social worker.

These numbers are comparable, and sometimes greater than those gathered in *The Big Ask*, which heard from 13,000 children with a social worker, over 5,900 children in care and 5,200 children attending special schools. 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.

As well as those reached through the survey, the Children's Commissioner's office spoke with 394 children and 79 professionals through 37 focus groups and 22 interviews across England. This fieldwork gave the opportunity to explore issues which were not explicitly asked about in the survey and aimed to reach groups of children or those who were less likely to be able to complete an online survey, including children in care, children living in secure settings and children with SEND.

## Overall findings

The survey data has been weighted to better to better represent the population of children in England.

- Only 0.9% of all respondents agreed with all of the statements presented in *The Big Ambition*, highlighting that for the overwhelming majority of children in England, there is at least one aspect of their life which they are not happy with.
- Overall, the questions tended to be answered more negatively by children, and adults responding on behalf of children, who: were secondary school age rather than younger; had SEND; and had a social worker. For some questions, similar proportions of boys and girls agreed with the statement, while for others there was more of a difference between them.
- Over 174,000 respondents (69%) wrote an answer to the free-text question, 'What do you think the Government should do to make children's lives better'.
  - Education was the most frequently mentioned pillar, with 44% of all those who provided a qualitative response mentioning a keyword relating to education, such as 'classroom', 'homework' or 'exam'. A better world was the second most frequently mentioned pillar (32% of all qualitative responses), capturing children's ambitious, socially conscious and reforming visions of the world they want to live in. Family was the third-most mentioned (22%), followed by community (21%), health (16%), jobs and skills (9%) and finally children's social care (5%). References to Covid fell from 9% of comments in *The Big Ask* to 0.4% in *The Big Ambition*.

### **Findings on family**

85% of respondents agreed with the statement, 'Your family has everything they need to support you' (or equivalent wording for adults responding on behalf of children).

84% of respondents agreed that their 'family gets to spend quality time together'.

### **Findings on health**

73% of responses by or on behalf of children agreed that they had a healthy diet.

82% of respondents agreed they had someone supportive to talk to about how they felt.

80% of respondents agreed they could access good healthcare when they needed it.

49% of respondents agreed 'You feel happy with the way you look'.

### **Findings on education**

64% of respondents agreed that they 'enjoy school or college'.

76% of respondents agreed they had great teachers who supported them.

57% of respondents agreed with both statements.

### **Findings on children's social care**

93% of respondents agreed they had 'somewhere to call home'

93% of respondents agreed that they lived with people who made them 'feel loved and cared for'

These were the highest agreement rates of all the questions in the survey.

### **Findings on community**

75% of respondents agreed they felt safe online; 71% of children, and 52% of adults responding on children's behalf).

73% of respondents agreed they felt safe and protected in the local area.

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70% of respondents agreed they had fun activities to do near where they lived.

### **Findings on jobs and skills**

70% of respondents agreed that they had the same opportunities as other children and young people.

65% of respondents agreed that they knew about good jobs for when they were older.

51% of respondents agreed that they knew about 'apprenticeships, university options and career paths'.

61% of respondents agreed they knew about 'money and life skills'; 69% of children, and 49% of adults responding on children's behalf.

### **Findings on a better world**

22% of children agreed that people who run the country listened to what they had to say. More children disagreed with this statement (40%) than any other statement in the survey.

70% of adults responding on behalf of children agreed with the statement, 'Their thoughts about the future are listened to'.

52% of respondents agreed they felt empowered to change issues they cared about.

70% of respondents agreed that they were 'treated fairly'.

The depth and scale of the data available through *The Big Ambition* alongside detailed qualitative data collected through focus groups and interviews, provides a wealth of information on children's thoughts, views, concerns, ideas, and ambitions for the future of childhood in England. This report, and future reports under *The Big Ambition*, will explore these voices and amplify them to ensure England's children are heard and acted upon.





## The Big Ambition in numbers



**366,628**

children and adults engaged with The Big Ambition

**253,001**

submitted a response to The Big Ambition,  
69% of all engagements

Equivalent to over 2% of the whole population of children aged 0-17

Children responded from every local authority in England

**85%** of responses from children, **15%** from parents, carers and other adults

**39,000** responses from children with SEND

**14,000** responses from children with a social worker

**390** responses from children in a secure setting

**300** responses from children in mental health hospitals

**37** focus groups and **13** interviews with young people across England



## 1. Findings

*“I think there should be more surveys like this to give children a stronger say in society” – Girl, 13.*

The following section reports key findings for each of the Likert-scale statements included in *The Big Ambition* survey, grouped according to the Children’s Commissioner’s seven core pillars: a better world; children's social care; community; education; family; health; and jobs and skills. All respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with each statement (Table 1).

**Table 1. Overview of responses to Likert scale questions<sup>i</sup>.**

Statement by pillar	Weighted proportion of responses			
	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	I don't know or want to say
<b><i>A better world</i></b>				
You feel empowered to change issues that you care about	52%	17%	19%	12%
People who run the country listen to your views	22%	15%	40%	23%
Their thoughts about the future are listened to	70%	15%	7%	8%
You are treated fairly	70%	11%	12%	7%
<b><i>Children's social care</i></b>				
You have somewhere to call home	93%	2%	2%	3%
You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for	93%	2%	2%	3%
<b><i>Community</i></b>				
You feel safe when you go online	71%	11%	9%	9%
You feel safe and protected in your local area	73%	11%	11%	5%
You have fun activities to do near where you live	70%	10%	16%	3%

<sup>i</sup> See Annex A for full question wordings and which respondents were shown which questions.

<b>Education</b>				
You have great teachers who support you	76%	10%	8%	6%
You enjoy school or college	64%	11%	19%	6%
<b>Family</b>				
Your family has everything they need to support you	85%	5%	6%	4%
Your family gets to spend quality time together	84%	6%	7%	3%
<b>Health</b>				
You feel happy with the way you look	49%	24%	24%	3%
You can access good healthcare when you need it	80%	10%	9%	2%
You have a healthy diet	73%	10%	9%	8%
You have someone supportive to talk to about how you feel	82%	6%	7%	4%
<b>Jobs and skills</b>				
You have the same opportunities as other children and young people	70%	9%	14%	7%
You know about apprenticeships, university options and career paths	51%	20%	16%	13%
You know about money and life skills	61%	20%	14%	5%
You know about good jobs for when you are older	65%	16%	9%	11%

Overall, the questions tended to be answered more negatively (lower proportion agreeing) by children, and adults responding on behalf of children, who: were secondary school age rather than younger; had SEND; and had a social worker. For some questions, similar proportions of boys and girls agreed with the statement, while for others there was more of a difference between them.

We asked children whether they were a girl, a boy, or whether they preferred not to say/other. The 7,457 children who answered, 'I don't want to say/ other' rather than 'boy' or 'girl' tended to give more negative than average answers to the questions. Given the range of reasons for children giving this response, we have not provided breakdowns for this response group.

## 1.1. Family

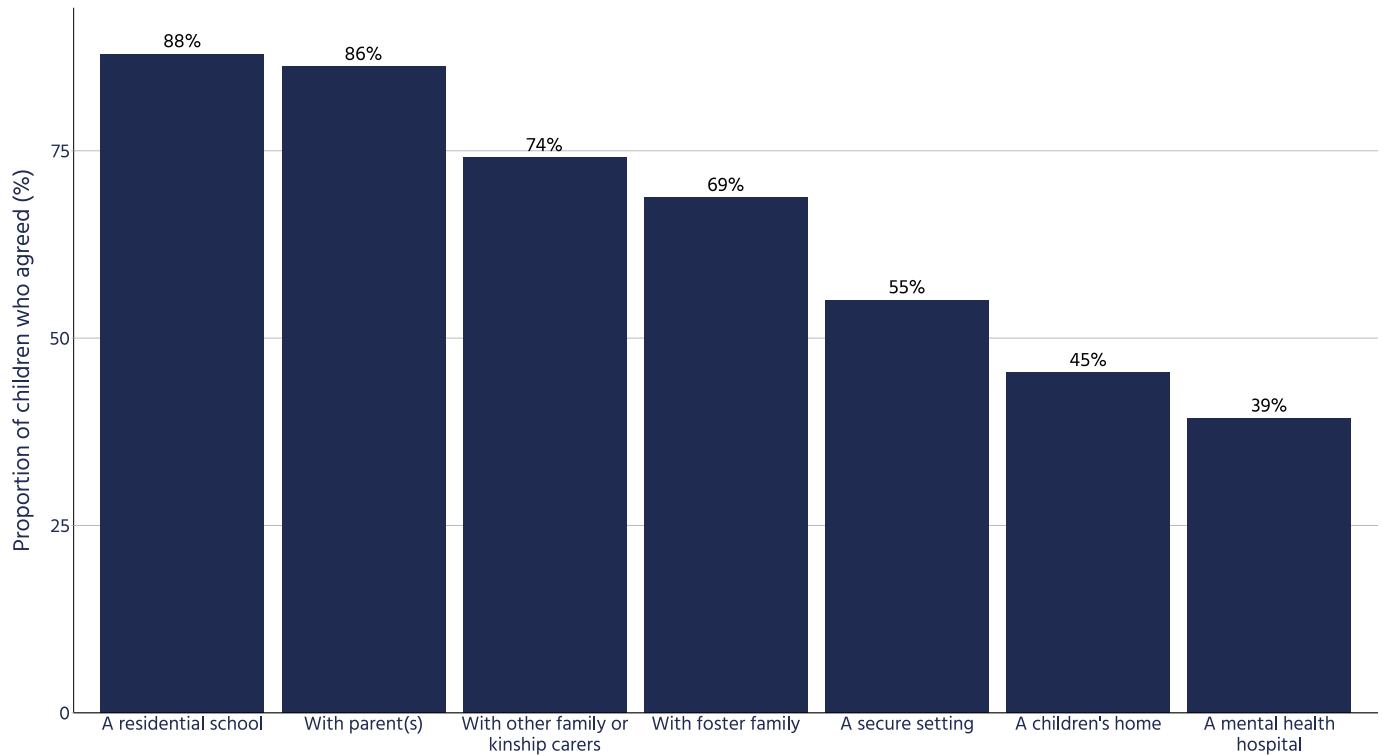
*“All people should have a warm house and a caring family” – Boy, 13.*

A loving family and a stable home life is integral to children and young people’s lives. Learning from the Children’s Commissioner’s *Family Review*, we know that family can include not only children’s relatives, but their friends, pets and wider support network of people that matter to them.<sup>4</sup> The family pillar also includes the pressures currently facing family life, including access to support services, childcare and the rising cost of living. Over a fifth of qualitative responses (22% or 37,995 responses) mentioned a keyword relating to family, ranking third out of the seven pillars. These keywords included, for example, ‘childcare’, ‘sister’, ‘toddler’ and ‘poverty’. Among the 100 most common words used in comments, the family pillar keywords were: need, money, parent, family, poor, homeless, house, cheap, afford, food, and price.

### **Whether families have what they need**

Overall, 85% of respondents agreed with the statement, ‘Your family has everything they need to support you’ (or equivalent wording for adults responding on behalf of children, see Annex A). The proportion agreeing with this question varied substantially based on where the child lived (Figure 1). Most likely to agree were children living in a residential school (or adults responding on their behalf), and children living with their parent(s) (or adults on their behalf) (88% and 86% respectively). Responses by or on behalf of children in a children’s home or in a mental health hospital were the least likely to agree (45% and 39%). Responses by or on behalf of children in home education or not in education were less likely to agree (64% and 50%), compared to those in school or college (86%). Of those attending school or college, responses by or on behalf of children in primary and secondary schools were more likely to be agree (88% and 86%) than responses by or on behalf of children in special schools (66%) and in alternative provision (69%).

**Figure 1. Agreement with ‘Your/Their family has everything they need to support you/children’ by child’s living situation.**



Although the majority of children felt supported both by their family and by their teachers, a sizable proportion do not. 66% of respondents agreed both that ‘Your family has everything they need to support you’ and that ‘You have great teachers who support you’.

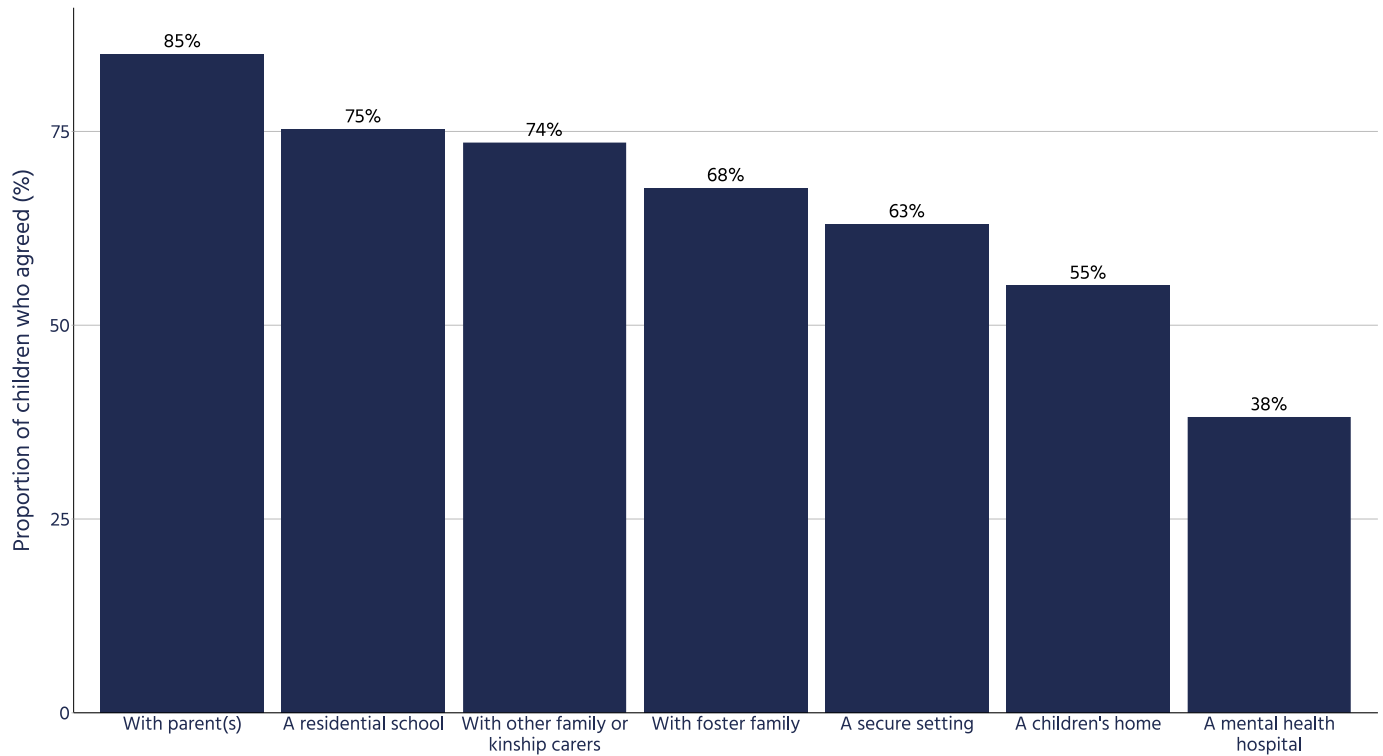
Some recognised that parents needed help: *“It’s not just about children, you also need to help parents. Issues stem from parents”* – Boy, 14. Children referred in comments to topics including the cost of living, poverty and having enough to eat. For example, *“There’s a lot of children who don’t get to eat, there needs to be more done to make sure families can feed their kids”* – Girl, 10. Some made references to the consequences of families not having enough: *“Most parents can’t pay for things for them [...] and they end up only getting the bare minimum which then ends up in most children getting bullied”* – Girl, 16.

### **Spending quality time together**

Similarly, 84% of respondents agreed with the statement, 'Your family gets to spend quality time together' or equivalent wording (annex A). Responses by or on behalf of children living with their parent(s) or in a residential school were the most likely to agree (85% and 75% respectively), while responses by or on behalf of children in a children's home or in a mental health hospital were the least likely (55% and 38% - Figure 2). Children were generally less likely to agree as they got older. A striking difference in agreement was found between adults responding on behalf of children under one year old (53%) and children aged one (79%). Responses on behalf of four-year-olds were the most likely to agree (93%), while 18-year-olds in school or college, and adults responding on their behalf, were the least likely to agree (76%).

Many children called for more quality time with their family, again often linking this to the cost-of-living crisis and the extra hours that many parents are working. One boy wrote, *"Having more time to spend with my family because family time is quality time"* – Boy, 11. One girl told us; *"Help people get more money for working my daddy works 45 hrs and I don't see him much"* – Girl, 9. Another wrote *"I also wish that my parents could work less hours with the same pay because I want to spend time with them"* – Boy, 13.

**Figure 2. Agreement with 'Your/Their family gets to spend quality time together' by child's living situation.**



## 1.2. Health

*“That they should cut down on NHS waiting times, to allow for the health care system to run more efficiently” – Boy, 14.*

Health encompasses not only children’s physical health, but also their mental health and wellbeing and ensuring that all children can access good quality support for their health when they need it. 27,382 responses (16% of all qualitative responses) mentioned a keyword relating to health and wellbeing, ranking fifth of the seven pillars. These keywords included, for example, ‘doctor’, ‘dentist’ and ‘illness’. Among the 100 most common words used in comments, the health pillar keywords were: health and mental.

Responses by or on behalf of children living in a mental health hospital were among the most negative in their responses to *The Big Ambition*. They were the among the least likely to agree to statements

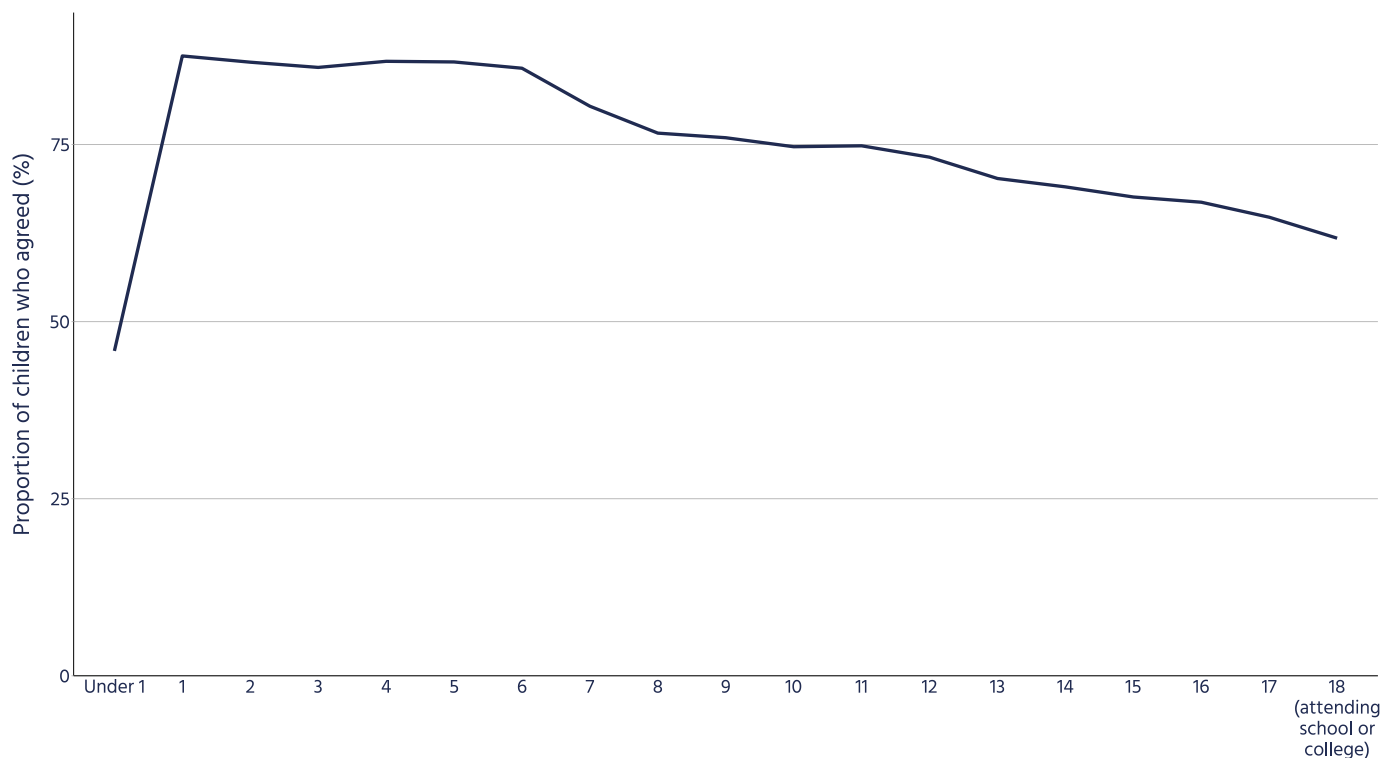
across all pillars, not just the health pillar. For example, only 21% agreed with 'You are treated fairly', compared to 70% across all responses.

### Healthy diets

Overall, 73% agreed that they had a healthy diet with older children less likely to agree than younger children (Figure 3). Responses on behalf of one-year-olds were the most positive (88%), while 18-year-olds in school or college were the least likely to agree that their diet was healthy (62%).

Some children shared views and experiences of their diets in written comments: *"We should have better health diet recommendations at school on how to eat healthily and how to eat healthily at homes well"* – Girl, 11.

**Figure 3. Agreement with 'You/They have a healthy diet' by child's age.**



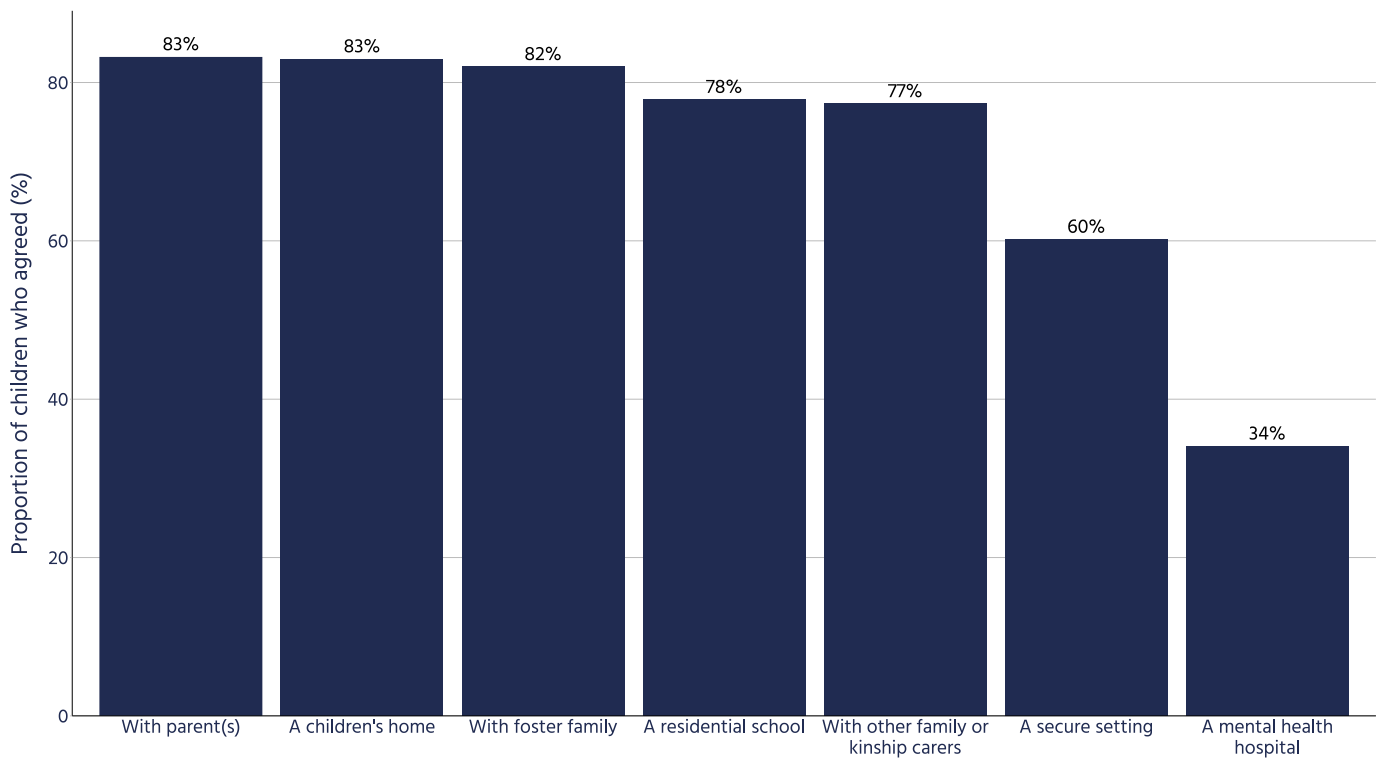


### Having someone supportive to talk to

The majority of respondents (82%) agreed with 'You have someone supportive to talk to about how you feel' (or equivalent wording for adults responding on behalf of children, see Annex A). Responses by or on behalf of children living with their parent(s) were the most likely to agree, followed by responses by or on behalf of children living in a children's home (both 83%). Only 60% of children living in a secure setting, and adults responding on their behalf, agreed. For children in mental health hospitals – settings which should be employing staff who provide a supportive service – only 34% agreed (Figure 4).

Children were generally less likely to agree as they got older. Adults responding on behalf of five-year-olds were the most likely to agree (93%), while 15-year-olds, and adults responding on behalf of 15-year-olds, were the least likely (74%). Children not in education, and adults responding on their behalf, were less likely to agree (59%) than children, and adults responding on their behalf, who were in school or college, or in home education (83% and 79% respectively).

**Figure 4. Agreement with 'You/They have someone supportive to talk to about how you/they feel' by child's living situation.**



Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is an overlap between children who agreed that they had someone supportive to talk to, and children who agreed that they lived with someone who made them feel loved and cared for. 77% of respondents agreed both that 'You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for' and that 'You have someone supportive to talk to about how you feel'.

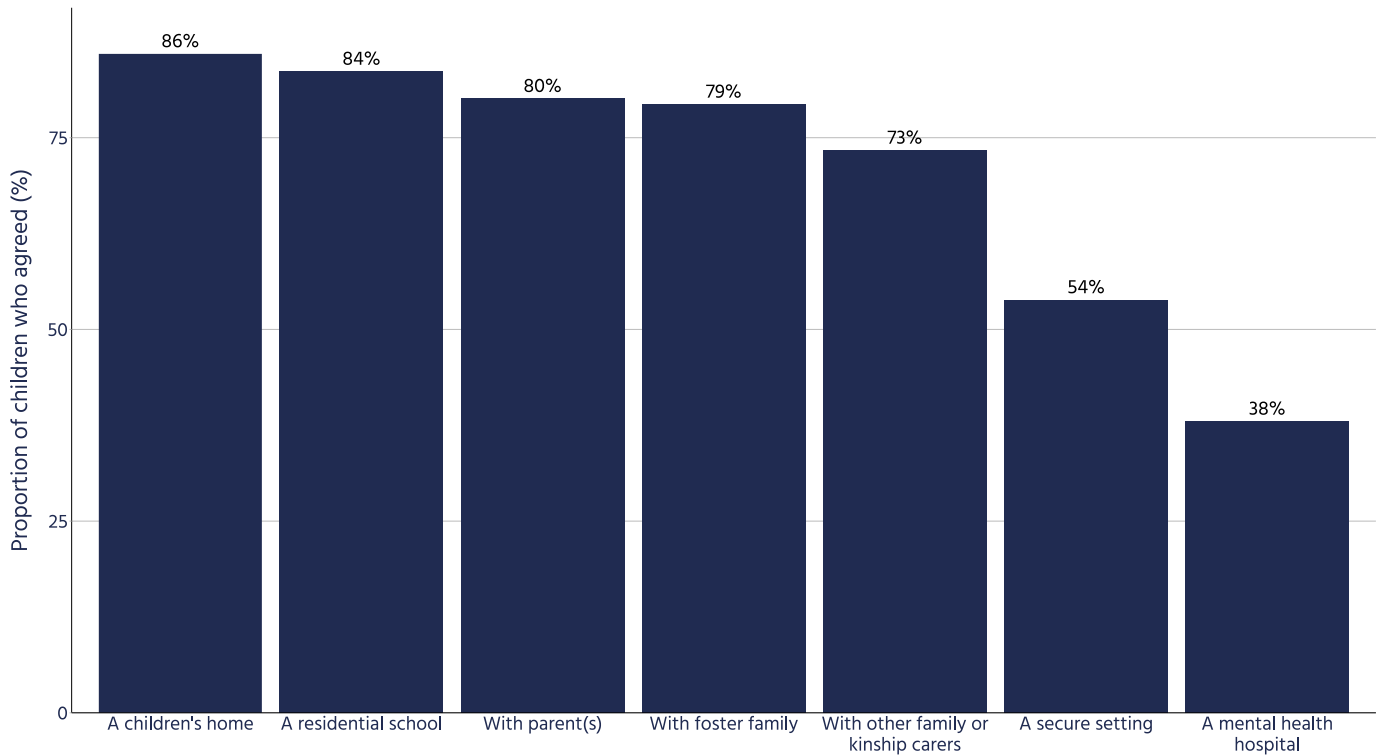
Children suggested ways to promote conversations about mental health, for example, one girl suggested; *"We have a chart in our classroom so you know how your friends are feeling. Teachers can use it to help and make people feel happy"* – Girl, 9. Another wrote: *"Children should have more supporters and people they can talk to"* – Child, 10.

### **Access to healthcare**

Children aged 12 to 18 and adults responding on behalf of children were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement 'You can access good healthcare when you need it' (or equivalent wording for adults responding on behalf of children, see Annex A). The large majority (80%) agreed. Responses by or on behalf of children who lived in children's homes and residential schools were more likely to agree (86% and 84% respectively), while only 38% of those who lived in a mental health hospital, and adults responding on their behalf, agreed (Figure 5). Less likely to agree were responses by or on behalf of children who lived with other family or kinship carers (73%) or foster family (79%) or with their parent(s) (80%).

Children commented on waiting for healthcare, among other themes: *"Children who need treatment can sometimes find themselves waiting a long time for it"* – Girl, 17; *"Improve the NHS, it is very slow"* – Boy, 15.

**Figure 5. Agreement with 'You/They can access good healthcare when you/they need it' by child's living situation.**



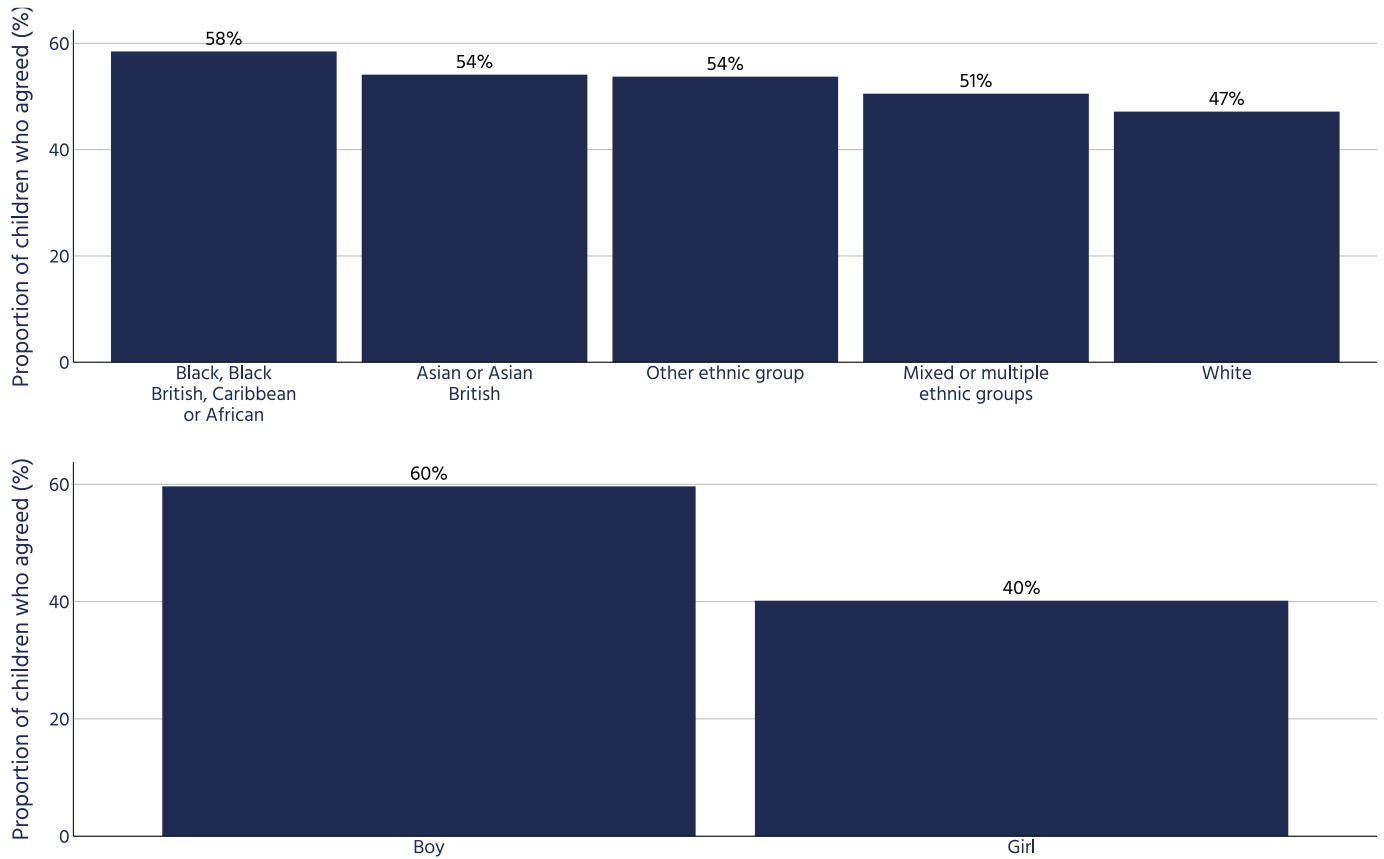
### The way you look

Children aged 12 to 18 were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement 'You feel happy with the way you look'. Overall, 49% agreed, making it one of the most negatively answered questions. More boys than girls agreed: 60% compared to only 40%. This was the biggest difference between girls and boys of any question (Figure 6). Adults responding on behalf of children were not asked this question.

Furthermore, 47% of children from a white ethnic background agreed, compared to 58% of children from a black ethnic background. As a result, this question was also the biggest difference in responses by ethnicity of any question (Figure 6).

Children were generally less likely to agree as they got older: 58% of 12-year-olds agreed, compared to 48% of 18-year-olds at school or college. Children in special schools were more likely to agree (59%) than children in secondary schools (49%) and children in alternative provision (43%).

**Figure 6. Agreement with 'You feel happy with the way you look' by the child's ethnicity and whether the child is a boy or girl.**



Children wrote a variety of comments referencing personal appearance: *"The government should do more to stop bullying about appearance in schools"* – Girl, 12. Another wrote *"No child should have to suffer because of how they look or where they live"* – Girl, 11. Some children made reference to issues of body image or eating disorders: *"Focus on improving mental health/eating disorder services by providing them with more funding, so that children don't have to suffer alone and they can get the intervention they need as soon as possible"* – Girl, 16.

### **The Covid-19 pandemic**

*The Big Ask* asked children the free-text question, 'What do you think stops children in England achieving what they want to achieve when they grow up?' which received 255,352 responses. Within those, 21,961

(9%) mentioned 'covid', 'lockdown', 'coronavirus' or 'pandemic'<sup>ii</sup>. *The Big Ask* was carried out in the spring of 2021 when the country was emerging from the series of lockdowns and the impact of Covid-19 was fresh in children's minds.

Strikingly, in *The Big Ambition*, the same keywords related to Covid-19 were mentioned in only 700 or 0.4% of responses, demonstrating the extent to which it has faded from the collective consciousness of children. Most of these responses also mentioned keywords relating to education with children talking about missing education during the pandemic and the impact this is still having on their progress. As one 15-year-old girl explained: *"Due to covid I missed a whole year's education and even though we get help sheets, the pass rate being 11% further proves how difficult it was. I am nervous for my real ones next year because of this extremity"* – Girl, 15.

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<sup>ii</sup> The full list of words used in this analysis was: 'covid', 'corona', 'virus', 'pandemic', 'lockdown', 'crons', and 'social distan'. The methodology used for this analysis was the same as the methodology used to identify which responses mentioned a given pillar.

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### 1.3. Education

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

Education encompasses everything to do with children’s experiences of school, including the curriculum, school facilities and resources, their interactions with school staff and classmates and the experiences of children with SEND.

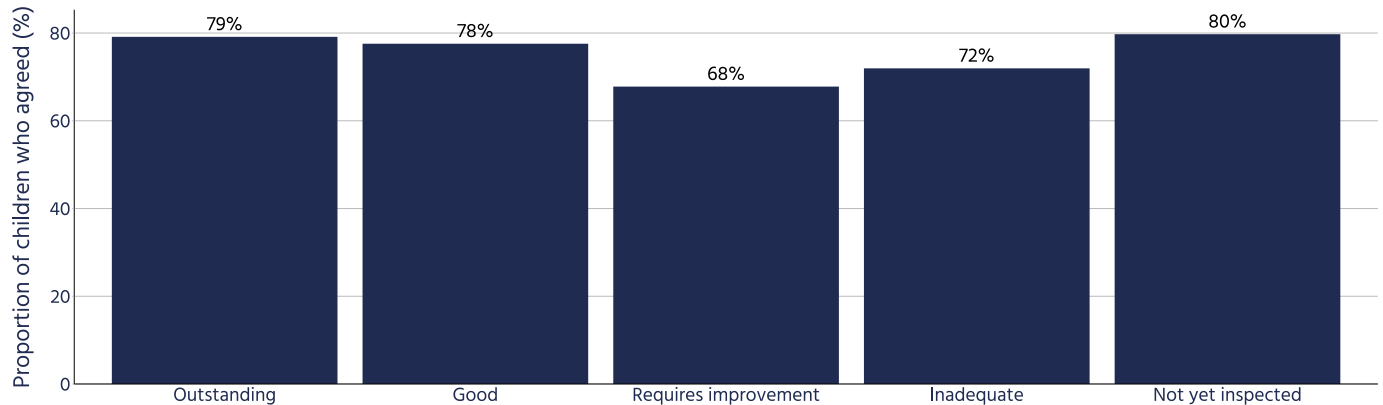
In *The Big Ambition*, education was the most frequently mentioned of the seven pillars, with 76,035 or 44% of all qualitative responses mentioning a keyword relating to education. These keywords included, for example, ‘classroom’, ‘homework’ and ‘exam’. ‘School’ was the most common word used in *The Big Ambition* responses (Figure 22). Among the 100 most common words used in comments, the education pillar keywords were: education: school, education, teacher, learn, teach, homework, and lesson.

Overall, 64% of respondents agreed that they ‘enjoy school or college’, 76% of respondents agreed they had great teachers who supported them, and 57% agreed with both statements. See Annex A for exact question wordings.

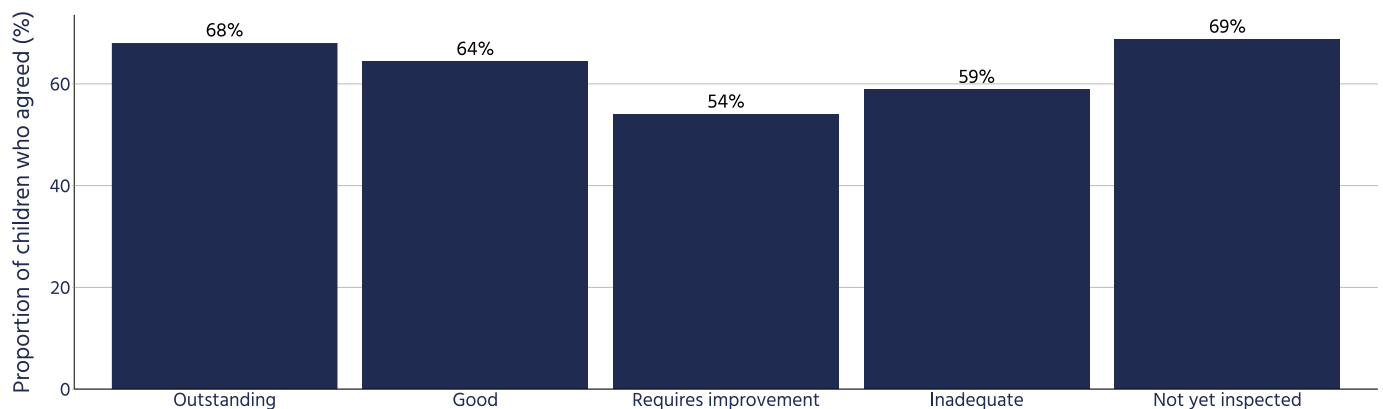
For both statements, responses by or on behalf of children in schools with better Ofsted ratings (Outstanding and Good) were more likely to agree than those attending schools with lower Ofsted ratings (Requires Improvement and Inadequate – see Figure 7). Other groups answered more negatively than average. For example, for whether they enjoyed school or college, fewer than half of responses by or on behalf of children in secure settings (38%), in alternative provision (47%), and in mental health hospitals (20%) agreed. Responses by or on behalf of children in home education were also more negative than average (35%), though they may have been reflecting on their previous school, if any, or their current situation, or both.

**Figure 7. Agreement with education statements by child's school's Ofsted rating.**

**'You/They have great teachers who support you/them'**



**'You/They enjoy school or college'**



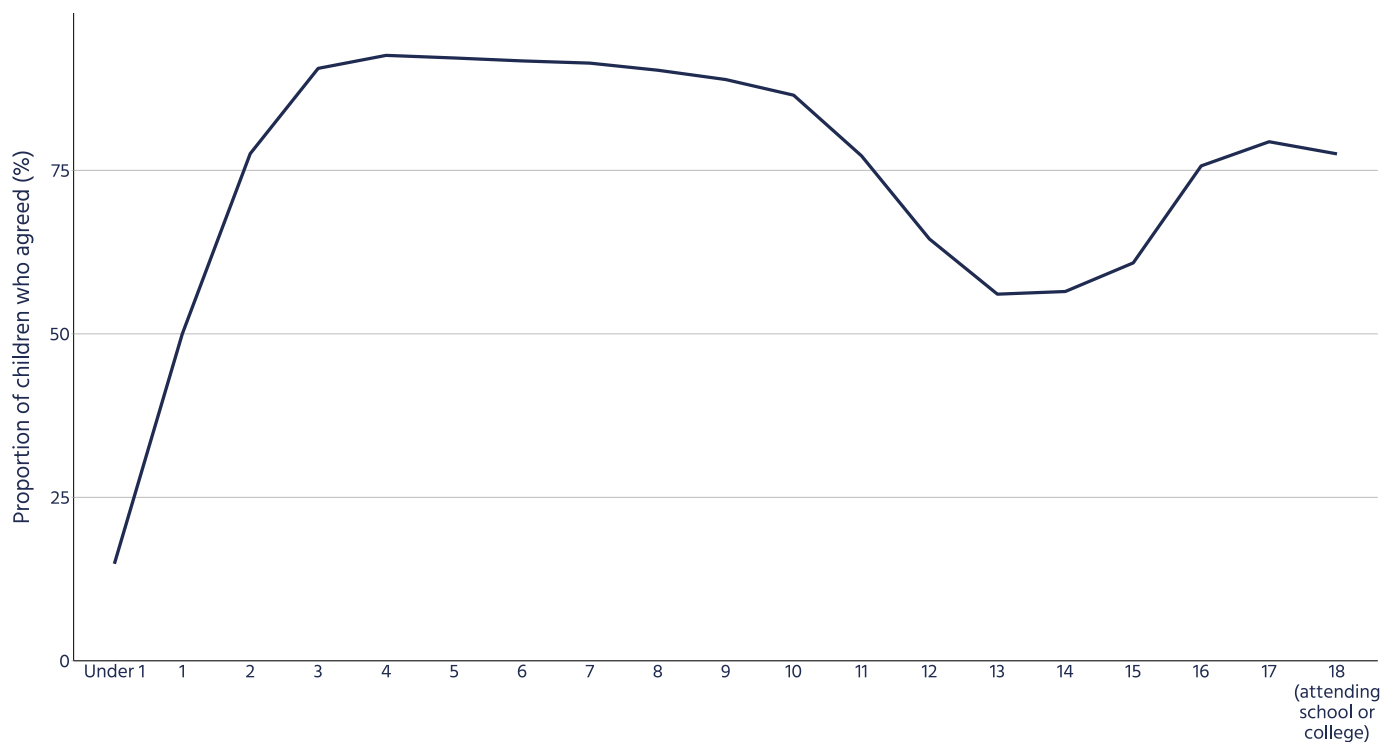
But interestingly, children in schools where the majority of pupils received free school meals (FSM), and adults responding on their behalf,<sup>iii</sup> were also more likely to agree with each statement than responses by or on behalf of children in schools where the minority of pupils had FSM (83% versus 77% agree for 'You have great teachers who support you', 71% versus 64% agree for 'You enjoy school or college').

For both statements, responses by or on behalf of children with SEND were less likely to agree (56% agreed they enjoyed school, and 72% agreed they had great teachers who support them) than those without SEND (69% and 79% respectively).

<sup>iii</sup> Schools where exactly 50% of pupils had FSM were categorised as a school where the majority of pupils had FSM.

Responses by or on behalf of primary aged and younger children were the most likely to agree with either statement, followed by responses by or on behalf of children aged 16 and over. Secondary aged children, and adults responding on their behalf, were the least likely to agree. By school phase, children in primary school were more likely to agree with either statement than those in secondary school – 90% of children in primary school agreed that they ‘have great teachers who support you’, compared to 67% of those in secondary school, and 79% of children in primary school agreed that they ‘enjoy school or college’, compared to 53% of those in secondary school. By age, interestingly, responses by or on behalf of 12-year-olds were much less likely to be agree than those for 11-year-olds. For 12-year-olds this was 50% for ‘enjoy school’, compared to 60% for 11-year-olds; and for ‘great teachers who support you’ this was 65% for 12-year-olds, compared to 77% for 11-year-olds (Figure 8).

**Figure 8. Agreement with ‘You/They have great teachers who support you/them’ by child’s age.**



Children spoke to the Children’s Commissioner’s office about many ideas around school and college, particularly focussing on ensuring that all children have access to a great education and the resources they need to learn. This is reflected in the finding that only half of children (50%) agreed with both statements, ‘You enjoy school or college’ and ‘You are treated fairly’. As one girl said: *“Make every child have equal opportunities; all books and equipment that many children can’t afford for free”* – Girl, 16.



Some comments focused on the experience of attending school: *“Make schools more fun”* – Boy, 13; *“The government should make schools a better place to make children’s lives better”* – Boy, 12.

Others remarked on teachers or teaching, particular aspects of life at school such as subjects, exams, or the school day or week. One child near the end of compulsory education commented on the stress of school: *“[...] a lot of young people are struggling in school. It feels draining, and feels too long. I enjoy education normally, but now it just feels stressful and to much pressure”* – Girl, 15. Others commented on the length of the school day or school week: *“They should make weekend longer, the weekend goes too fast and doesn’t give me time to recover from the long week at school. I’m still just as tired on Monday than I was on Friday”* – Girl, 14.

Only a small majority (55%) of children agreed that they both ‘enjoy school or college’ and they have someone supportive to talk to about how they feel. This is reflected in children’s comments, in which some children said that they wanted teachers and school staff to know about the difficulties they faced, whether at school or not, and to be equipped to help them. One child asked for: *“More safe spaces around the schools/colleges where young people can talk about their issues with someone trustworthy [...]”* – Girl, 16.

## **1.4. Children’s social care**

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

The Children’s Commissioner has particular responsibility for promoting and protecting the rights of children receiving social care, to ensure that care experienced children and young people can live happy lives in loving families, with the same opportunities as everyone else. Keywords relating to children’s social care were mentioned by 7,981 respondents, or 5% of all qualitative responses. Children’s social care was therefore the least often mentioned of the seven pillars in qualitative responses. To an extent, this is unsurprising – care is perhaps the pillar least likely to directly affect the lives of most children. The keywords included, for example, ‘foster’, ‘homeless’ and ‘mistreat’. Among the 100 most common words used in comments, the care pillar keywords were: care and homeless.

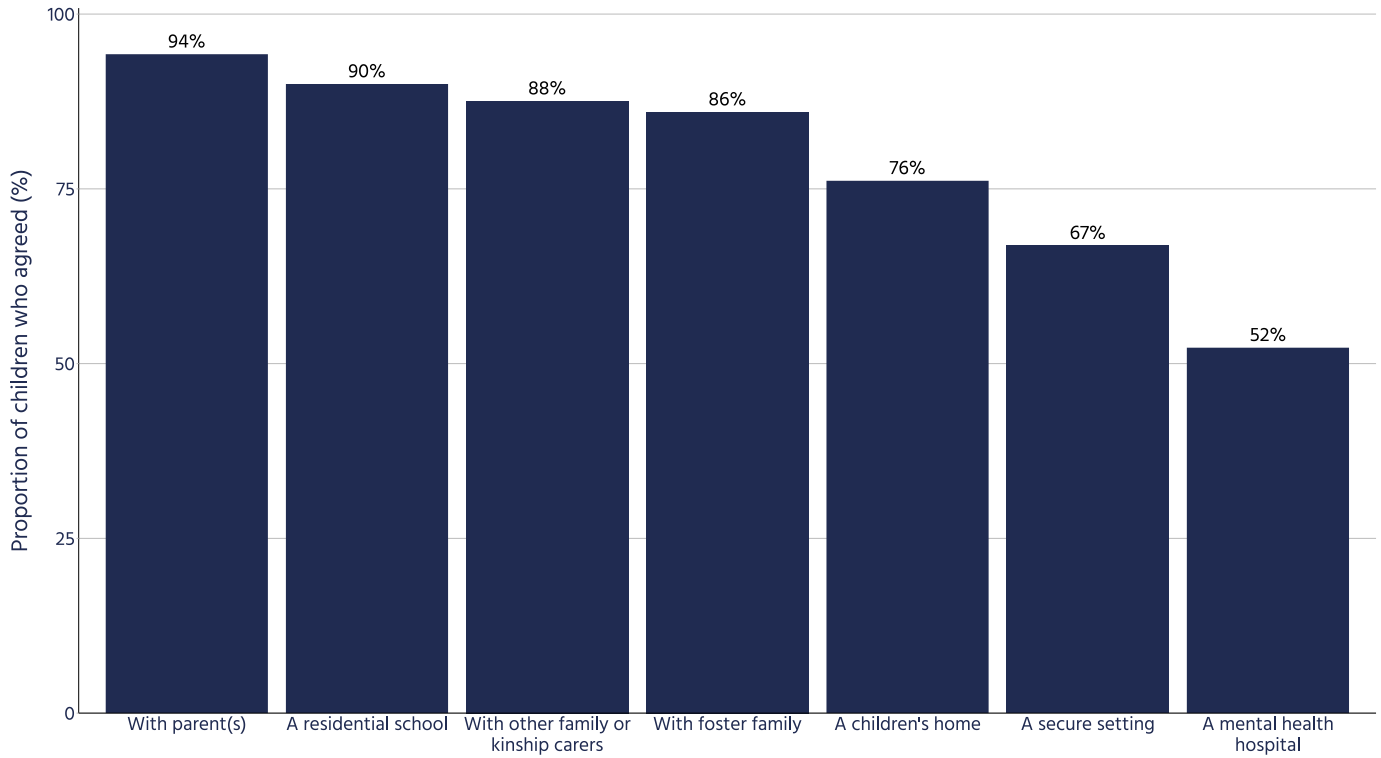
*The Big Ambition* asked all respondents whether they agreed with the statements, ‘You have somewhere to call home’ and, ‘You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for’ (or

equivalent wordings for adults responding on behalf of children, see Annex A). Both statements gained a positive response, each gathering an agreement rate of 93%, the highest of all the questions in the survey. Almost all respondents agreed with either statement (96%), and 86% agreed with both statements.

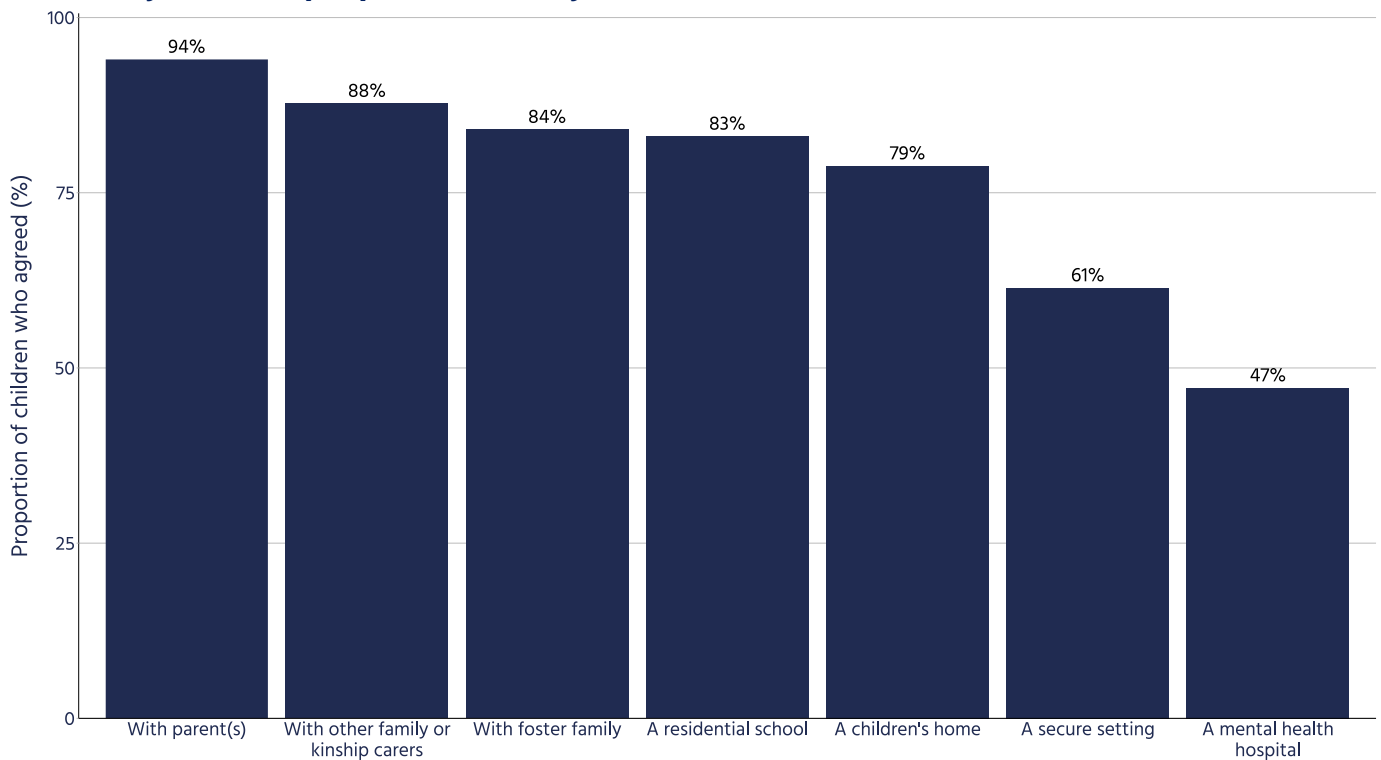
For both statements, responses by or on behalf of children living in a mental health hospital were the least likely to be agree (52% agreed with 'You have somewhere to call home' and 47% agreed with 'You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for') (Figure 9). This compares to 94%, for each statement, among responses by or on behalf of children who lived with their parents (Figure 9). One girl wrote: *"Kids who are not being treated the way other children are being treated they should be taken away and be put with a loving family which they can call home"* – Girl, 9. Another girl called on the government to; *"Make sure all children have a roof over their head and a loving, supportive family around them"* – Girl, 11.

**Figure 9. Agreement with 'You/They have somewhere to call home' and 'You/They live with people who make you feel loved and cared for' by child's living situation.**

**'You/They have somewhere to call home'**



**'You/They live with people who make you/them feel loved and cared for'**



## 1.5. Community

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

The community pillar includes making sure that all children and young people live in happy, safe communities, in both the online world including social media and gaming, and the offline world. It also encompasses children’s access to local resources and activities, such as youth groups, sports activities and other enrichment outside of school. Keywords relating to community were mentioned by 35,892 respondents, or just over a fifth (21%) of all qualitative responses to *The Big Ambition*, making community the fourth most frequently mentioned pillar out of the seven. These keywords included, for example, ‘internet’, ‘neighbourhood’ and ‘play’. Among the 100 most common words used in comments, the community pillar keywords were: park, play, local, sport, area, club, and activity.

### Online safety

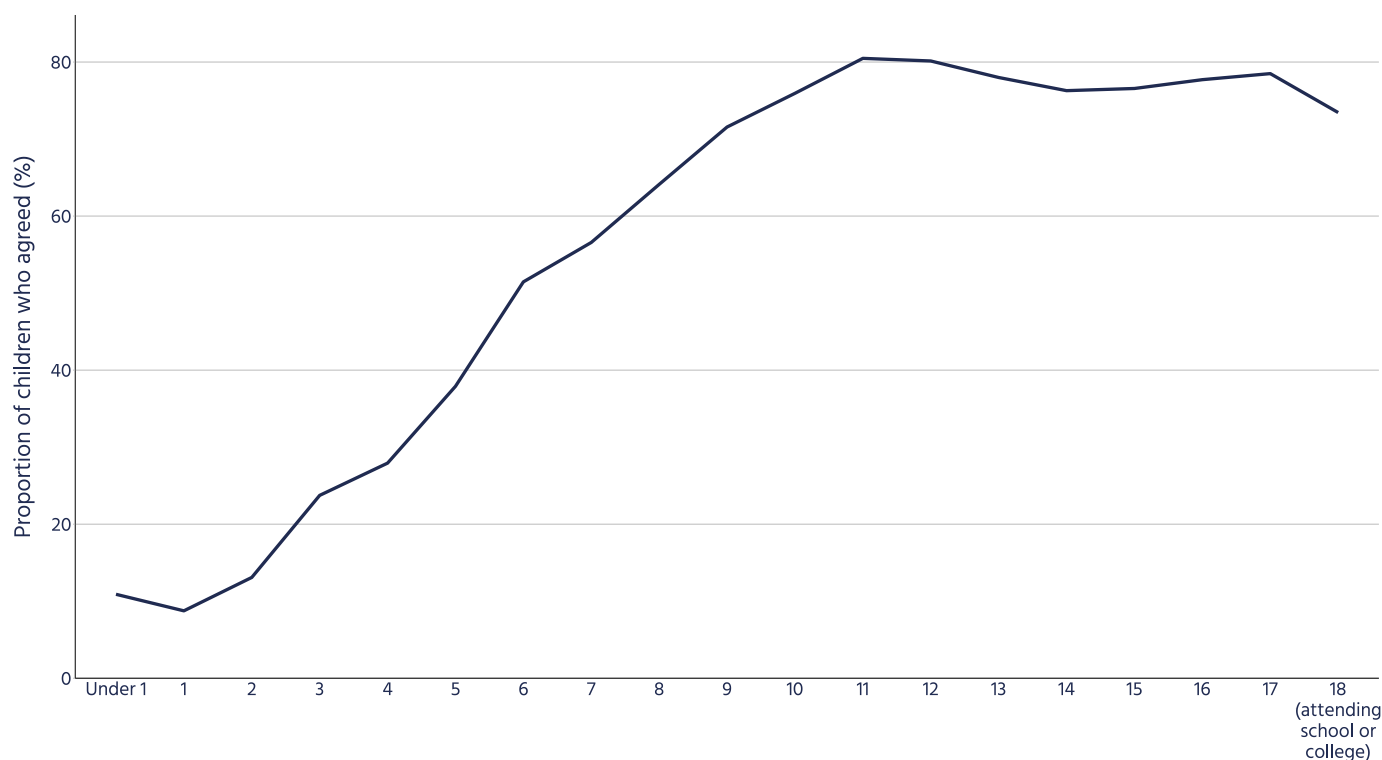
Overall, 75% agreed they felt safe online; 71% of children, and 52% of adults responding on children’s behalf. Perceptions of online safety varied by age. The majority of adults responding on behalf of children aged five or under did not agree with the statement, ‘They feel safe online’, while 11-year-olds were the most likely to agree with ‘You feel safe when you go online’ (Figure 10). See Annex A for equivalent wording for adults responding on behalf of children.

Responses by or on behalf of children in school or college were more likely to agree (71%) than responses by or for children in home education (56%) and not in education (53%). Furthermore, boys, and responses on behalf of boys, were more likely to agree (75%) than girls and adults responding on behalf of girls (67%).

Some felt safe online or described being protected from potentially harmful content, for example, *“I only watch stuff for my age not stuff for adults because it is not appropriate.”* – Girl, 8. Others felt unsafe: *“I see a lot of violent stuff that I don’t want to”* – Girl, 14.

Children suggested many solutions to improving online safety, from parental restrictions to content moderation by social media companies. For example, one boy said in a focus group, *“Platforms should set a limit and automatically turn the app off”* – Boy, 13.

**Figure 10. Agreement with 'You/They feel safe online/when you go online' by child's age.**



### Fun activities in the local area

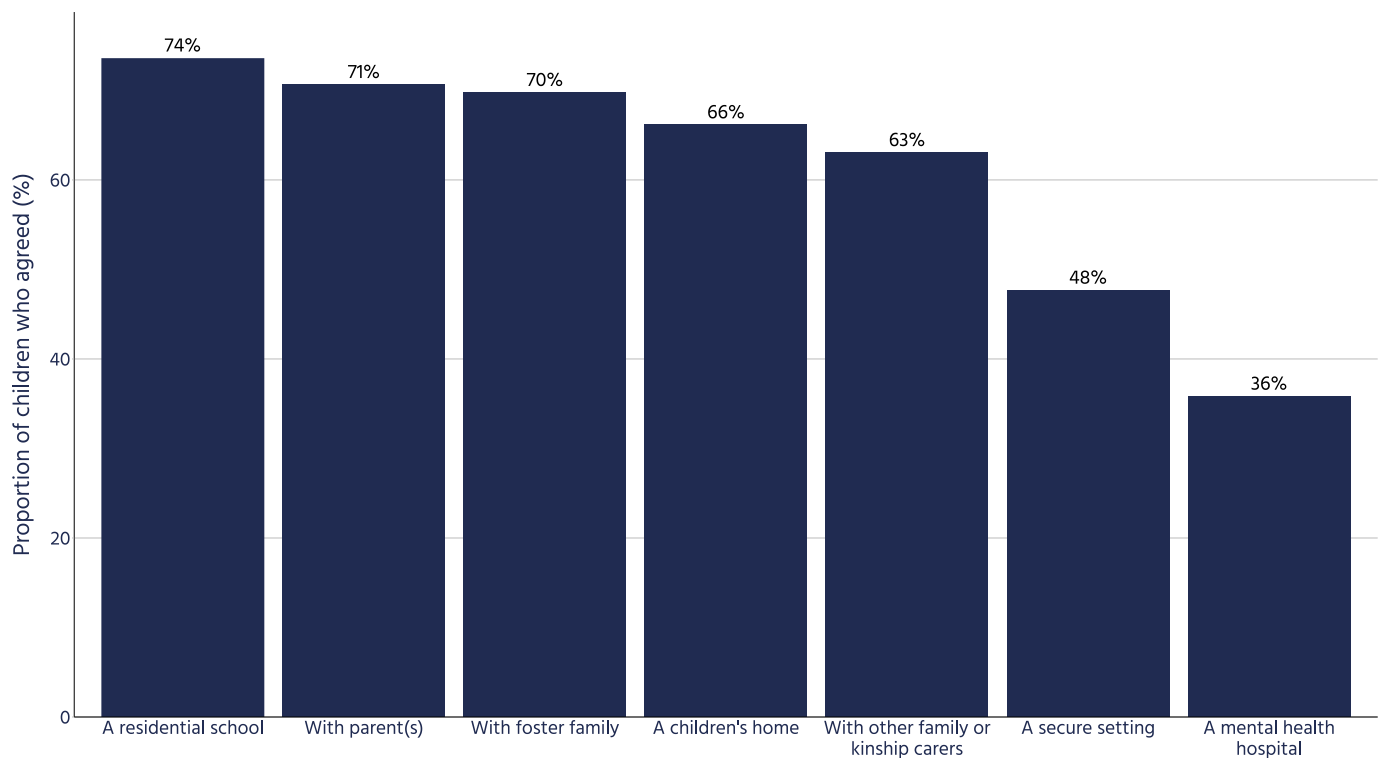
Respondents were asked whether they agreed they had fun activities to do near where they live (see Annex A for question wordings). Overall, 70% of children and adults responding on behalf of children agreed. Younger children were more likely to agree as they aged, peaking with responses by and from nine-year-olds, among whom 82% agreed. Older children were then less likely to agree as they aged, and 18-year-olds in school or college, and adults responding on their behalf, were the least likely (52%). Responses by or for children living in a secure setting or a mental health hospital were less likely to agree (48% and 36% respectively) than 71% for responses by or for children living with their parent(s) (Figure 11).

Responses by or on behalf of children in North East England were the least likely to be agree out of any region of England (66%), while responses by or from children in London were the most likely to be agree (73%). This was one of the larger differences between regions across all survey questions. Similarly, there was substantial variation between local authorities. For example, 50% of respondents in Knowsley agreed, compared to 82% in Trafford.

In open-text responses, children told us they were keen to see more local sports clubs: *“The government should offer more free sports clubs to give children a platform where they can be healthy and have fun”* – Girl, 17. Another child called for more funding for youth activities; *“There’s not enough youth clubs. Even the ones that are there struggle to stay open because there’s no funding”* – Child, 15.

Some children only felt safe in the offline world, while others only felt safe in the online world. Although 71% of respondents agreed that ‘You feel safe when you go online’ and 73% agreed that ‘You feel safe and protected in your local area’, only 54% agreed with both statements.

**Figure 11. Agreement with ‘They have fun things to do in their local area/You have fun activities to do near where you live’ by child’s living situation.**

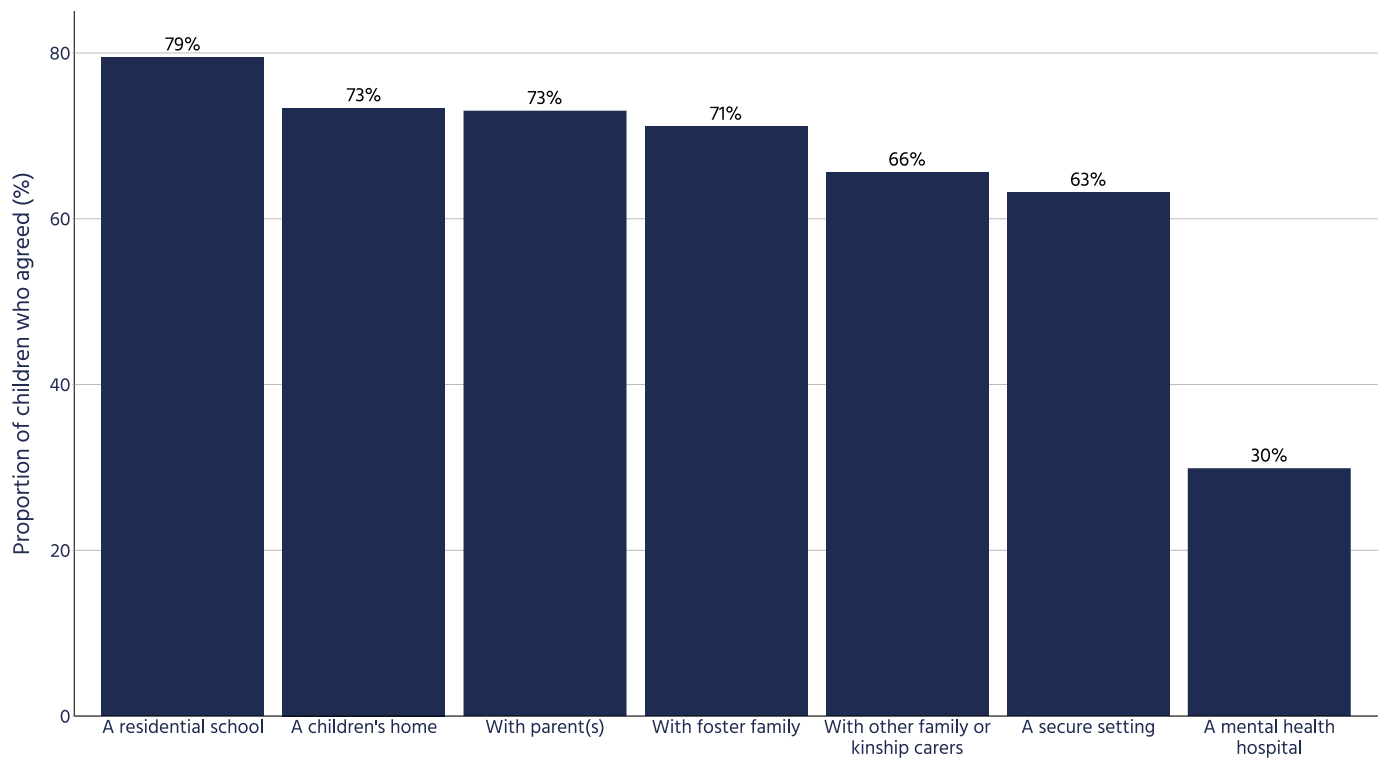


### Safety in the local area

Children were also asked about their thoughts on safety in their local area. Overall, 73% of respondents agreed they felt safe and protected in the local area (see Annex A for question wordings). The proportion agreeing with this question varied substantially based on where the child lived (Figure 12). Responses by or on behalf of children living in a residential school were the most likely to be agree (79%), while

responses by or for children living in a mental health hospital were the least likely (30%). There was also a sizable difference between responses by or for those living with their parent(s) (73%) and those living with other family or kinship carers (66%). Regionally, children in the North East, and adults responding on their behalf, were the least likely to agree (68%), while those in the South East were the most likely to agree (75%). Some children explained their views on personal safety: *"I don't feel safe walking home. I feel anxious walking so I always wait for my friends"* – Girl, 11. Another told us: *"I don't feel worried. I can walk with my friends or alone. I think it's because I know my way round"* – Boy, 11.

**Figure 12. Agreement with 'You/They feel safe and protected in your/their local area' by child's living situation.**



## 1.6. Jobs and skills

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

The jobs and skills pillar includes helping children to achieve their dream career, through a range of routes including further education and apprenticeships. It also comprises the ambition for all children to have the skills needed to support themselves as adults, including financial, communication and other life skills. Nearly a tenth (14,846 or 9%) of all children who provided a qualitative response to *The Big Ambition* mentioned a keyword relating to jobs and skills, making it the sixth most frequently mentioned of seven pillars. Keywords used for jobs and skills included ‘apprentice’, ‘life skills’ and ‘volunteer’. Among the 100 most common words used in comments, the jobs and skills pillar keywords were: work, opportunity, and job, as well as education (some of which were references to 'higher education' or 'further education').

### **The same opportunities as other children**

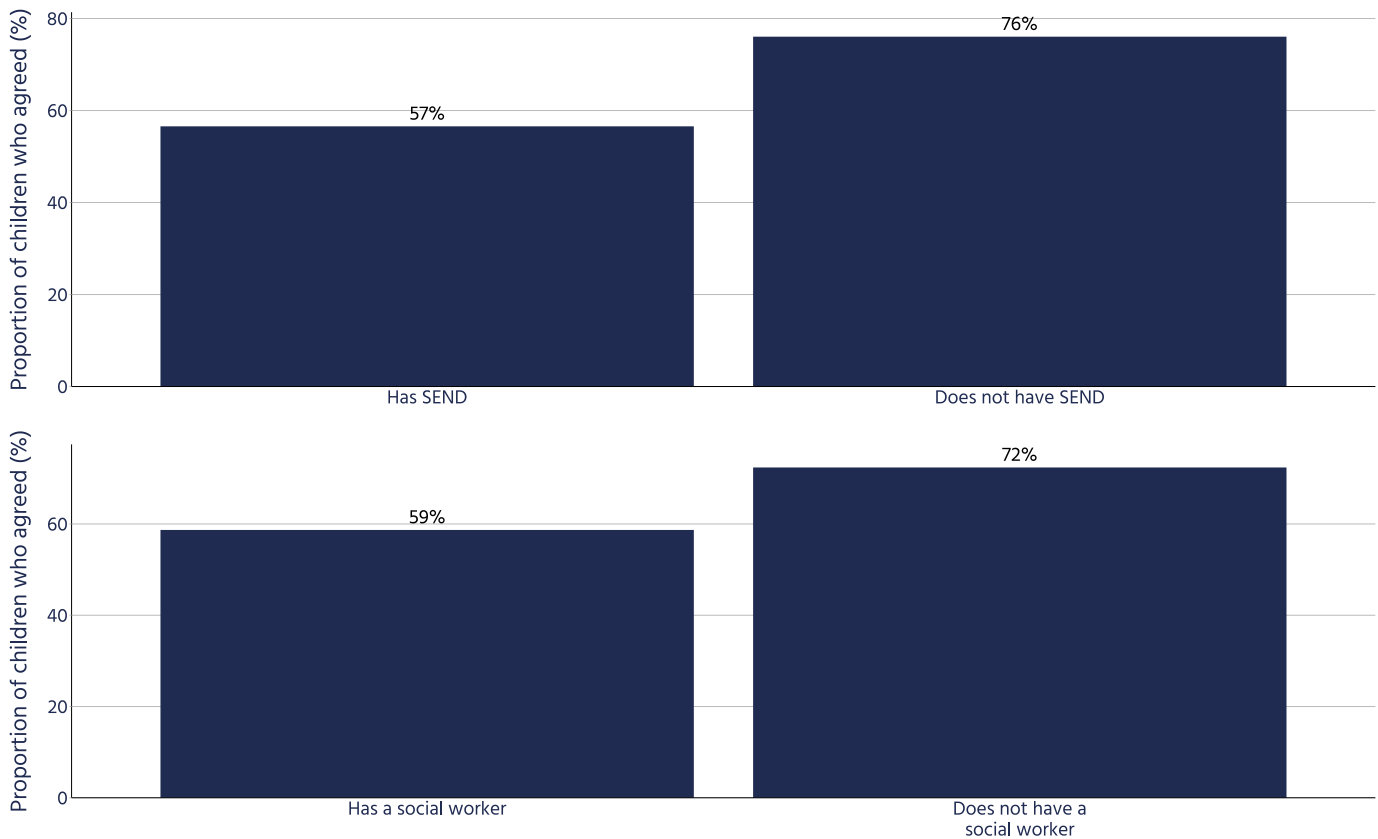
In *The Big Ambition*, 70% of respondents agreed that they had the same opportunities as other children and young people (see Annex A for question wordings). Responses by or on behalf of children with SEND and children with a social worker were less likely to agree that they have the same opportunities as other children; only 57% for children with SEND and 59% for children with a social worker, compared to 76% for children without SEND and 72% for children without a social worker (Figure 13). Furthermore, responses by or on behalf of children from a white or Asian ethnic background were more likely to be agree (72% for each) than responses by or on behalf of children from a black, mixed or other ethnic background (65%, 67% and 67% respectively).

Only a small majority (55%) of respondents agreed both that ‘You are treated fairly’ and that ‘You have the same opportunities as other children and young people’ (or equivalent wordings for adults responding on behalf of children, see Annex A).

In comments, several children expressed a wish for fair treatment or equal opportunities in life. For example, *“More job opportunities for wheelchair users”* – Boy, 17. Another wrote: *“They should make career paths more open to a variety of people and give people the same opportunities any pupil would get”* – Girl, 12.



**Figure 13. Agreement with 'You/They have the same opportunities as other children and young people' by child's SEND status and whether they had a social worker.**



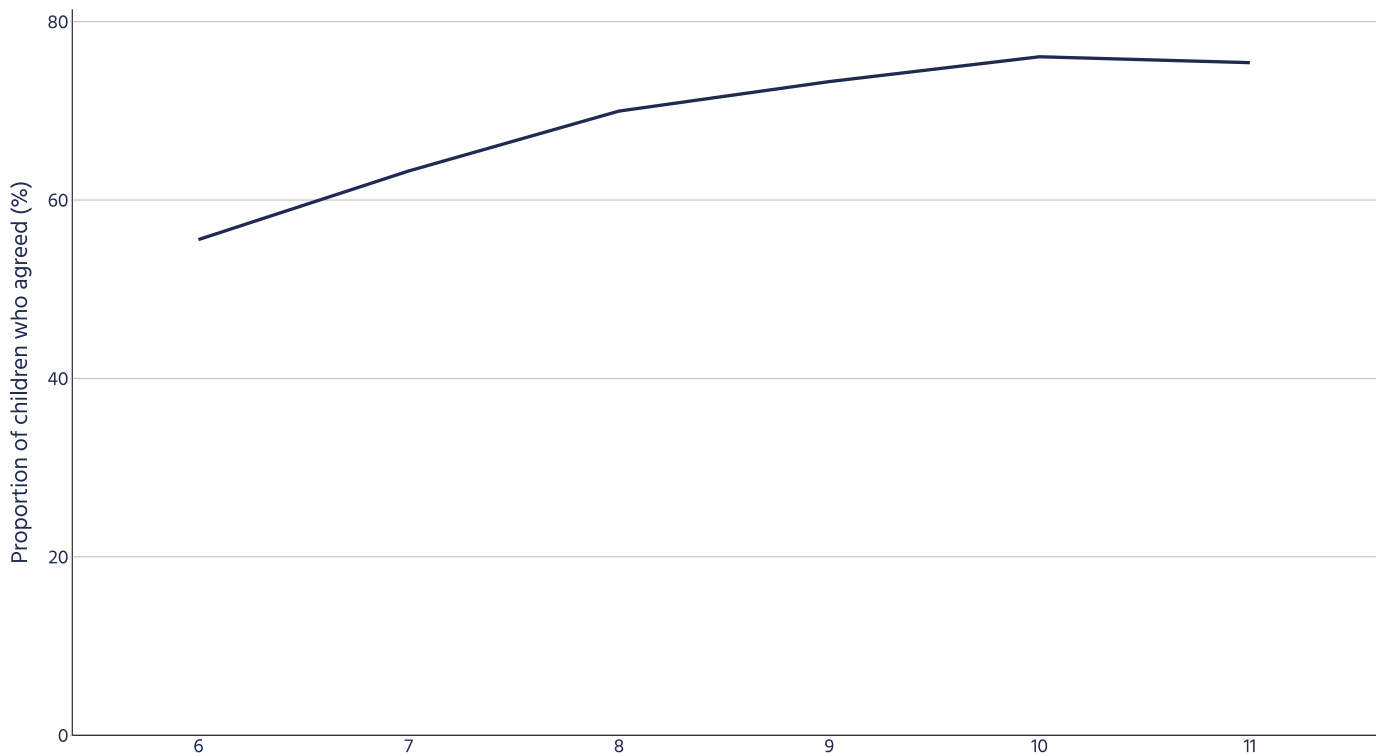
### Knowing about good jobs for when you are older

Children aged six to 11 and adults responding on behalf of children were asked whether they agreed that they knew about good jobs for when they were older (see Annex A for question wordings). About two-thirds (65%) agreed with this statement, with responses by and on behalf of primary-aged children generally more likely to be agree as they got older (Figure 14). This peaked at age ten (76%). In contrast, responses on behalf of secondary-aged children were all roughly equally likely to agree and were less likely to agree than responses from or by children aged eight to 11. Among responses on behalf of 12- to 18-year-olds, 63% agreed.

Some children commented on this theme in their written answers, for example, *“They should teach more career options in school”* – Girl, 16. One boy wrote: *“Give us more opportunities early on in our lives*

*instead of getting them later. For example, I want to be an architect, but no one has helped me or do anything to achieve my goals” – Boy, 12.*

**Figure 14. Agreement with ‘You/They know about good jobs for when you/they are older’ by child’s age (for children aged 6 to 11).**

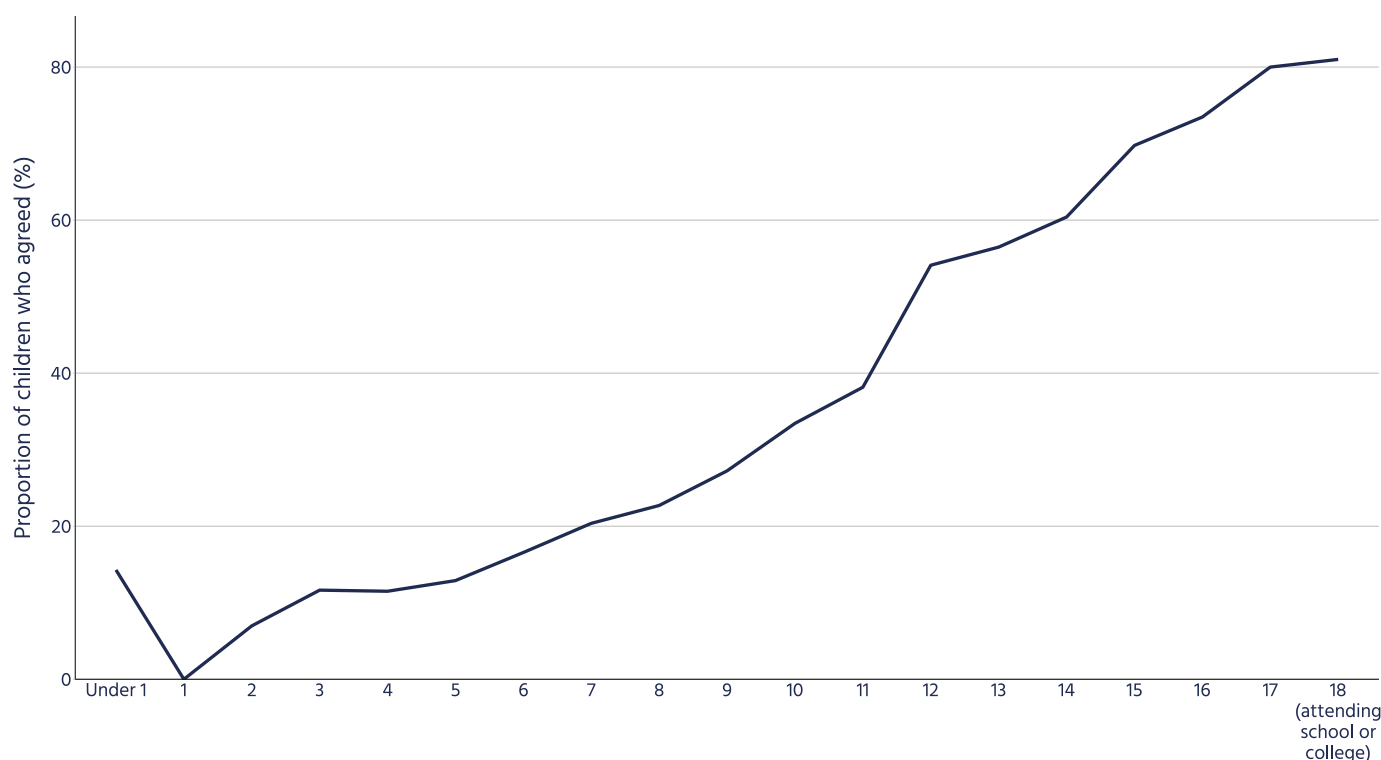


**Knowing about apprenticeships, university options and career paths**

Children aged 12 to 17, 18-year-olds still at school or college, and adults responding on behalf of children, were asked whether they agreed that they knew about ‘apprenticeships, university options and career paths’. Only 51% of respondents agreed, making this the third-most negatively answered question in the survey. Responses by or on behalf of older children were more likely to be agree than those for younger children and there was a particularly large difference between those responding on behalf of 11-year-olds (38%) and responses by or for 12-year-olds (54%) (Figure 15). A relatively high proportion of respondents (13%) answered ‘I don't know or don't want to say’ in response to this question, a greater proportion than all other statements besides ‘People who run the country listen to your views’.

This question had the second-biggest difference in response between ethnic groups, with responses by or for children with a black ethnicity (55%), Asian ethnicity (57%), or other ethnicity (59%) more likely to agree than responses by or for children from white (50%) or mixed ethnic groups (49%).

**Figure 15. Agreement with ‘You/They know about apprenticeships, university options and career paths’ by child’s age.**



Some children expressed views on these topics, including: *“University shouldn’t be pushed as much, more information should be given out about apprenticeships or other alternative routes”* – Girl, 17. One child suggested, *“More exposure to different possible career paths, university courses, apprenticeships and life skills to prepare us”* – Girl, 12.

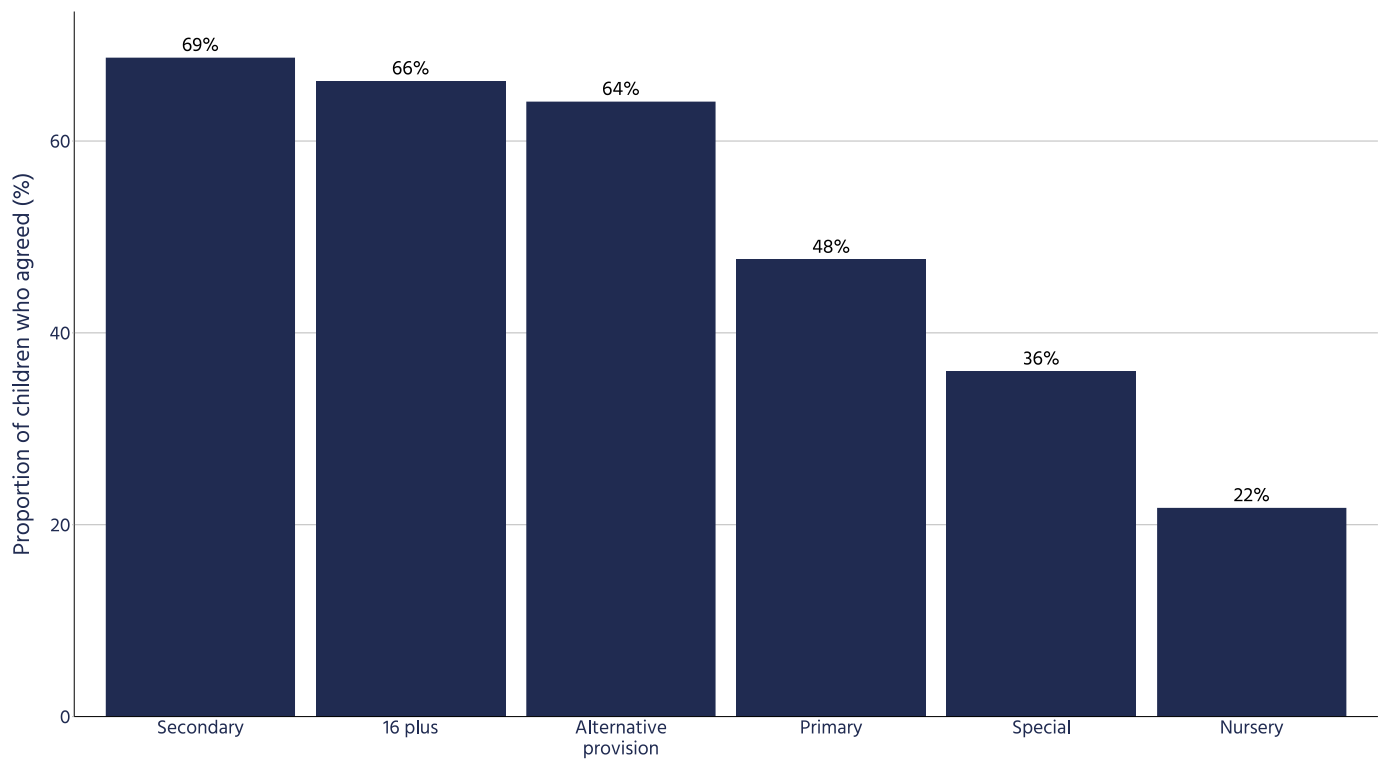
### **Knowing about money and life skills**

Children aged 12 to 18 and adults responding on behalf of children asked whether they agreed they knew about ‘money and life skills’. Just under two-thirds agreed (61%), with children responding on their own behalf more likely to agree (69%) than when an adult responded on their behalf (49%). Children attending alternative provision were among the most likely to agree (64%), compared to only 36% of

children in special schools (Figure 16). Otherwise, children in schools for older pupils were more likely to agree (69% of children in secondary schools agreed, compared to 48% for primary schools).

As one girl said, *“I think we should learn more about life after school like jobs, what are good jobs and bills and taxes”* – Girl, 14. A range of topics were suggested by children in comments, including: *“Teach about real life issues like money management, bills, tax, mortgage etc.”* – Girl, 17.

**Figure 16. Agreement with ‘You/They know about money and life skills’ by child’s phase or type of education.**



## 1.7. A better world

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

In *The Big Ask*, children described a range of ambitious, socially conscious, and reforming visions of the world they want to live in. They raised themes of participation and inclusion alongside consideration of the environment and wider social issues. These issues were grouped together under the pillar ‘a better world’.

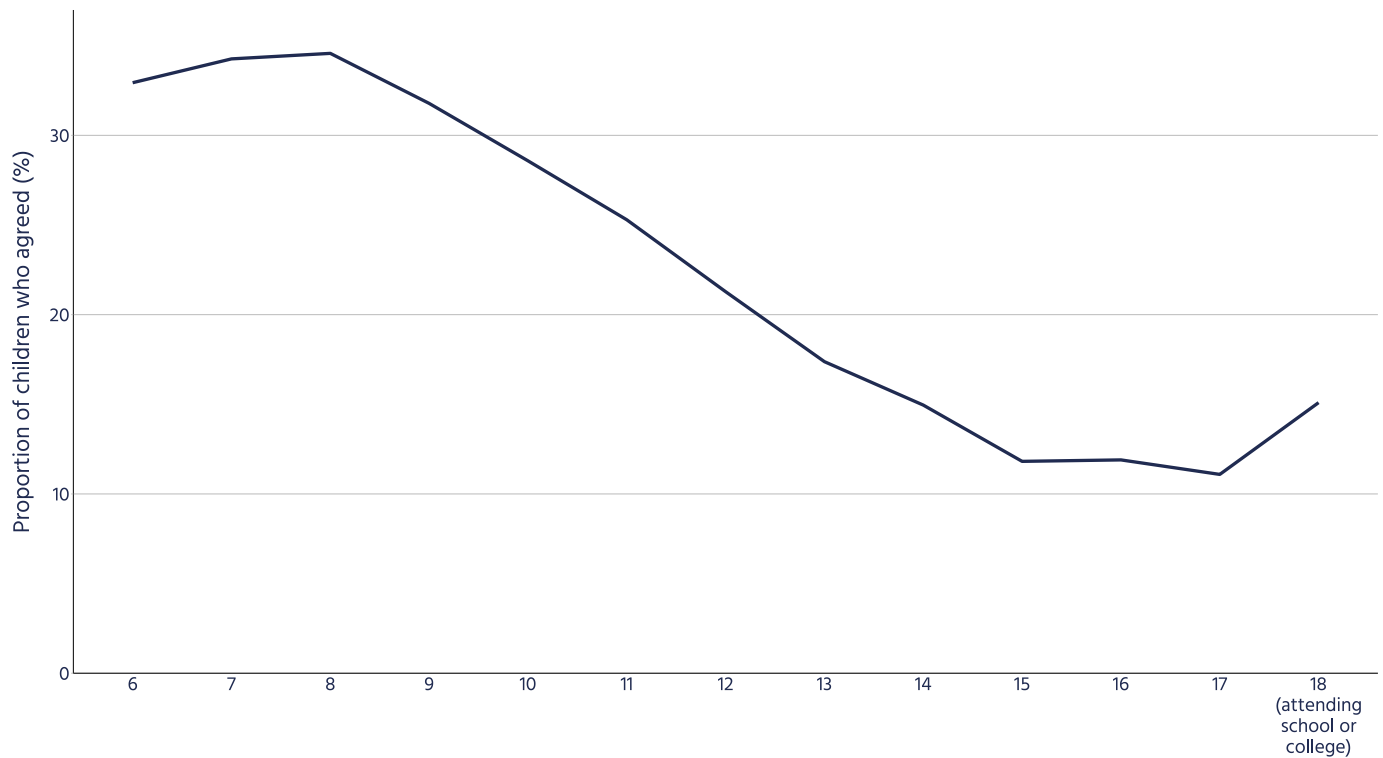
In *The Big Ambition*, children set out their vision for the future, across their local area, England, and the world. From the qualitative responses, 55,234 responses (32%) mentioned a keyword related to a better world, such as ‘environment’, ‘fairness’, and ‘voice’. As such, it was the second most frequently mentioned pillar out of the seven. Among the 100 most common words used in comments, the better world pillar keywords were: listen, world, vote, climate, and opinion.

### **Whether government listens to children**

Only 22% of children agreed that people who run the country listened to what they had to say. More children disagreed with this statement (40%) than any other statement in the survey. The remainder either responded ‘neither agree nor disagree’ (15%) or did not know or did not want to say (23%). Older children were less likely to agree with the statement compared to younger children: eight-year-olds were the most likely to agree, while 17-year-olds were the least likely (Figure 17). 59% of 17-year-olds disagreed with the statement. Adults responding on behalf of children were not asked this question.

Focussing on specific groups of children, children living in secure settings were less likely to agree (10%) than children living with their parent(s) (21%) and children attending alternative provision were less likely to agree (8%) than those in primary or secondary schools (31% and 17% respectively).

**Figure 17. Agreement with 'People who run the country listen to your views' by child's age.**



**Whether their thoughts about the future are listened to**

Similarly, 70% of adults responding on behalf of children agreed with the statement, 'Their thoughts about the future are listened to'. Agreement with this statement was lower for adults responding on behalf of younger children (particularly those aged under three) and peaked for adults responding on behalf of children aged six to 11 years old.

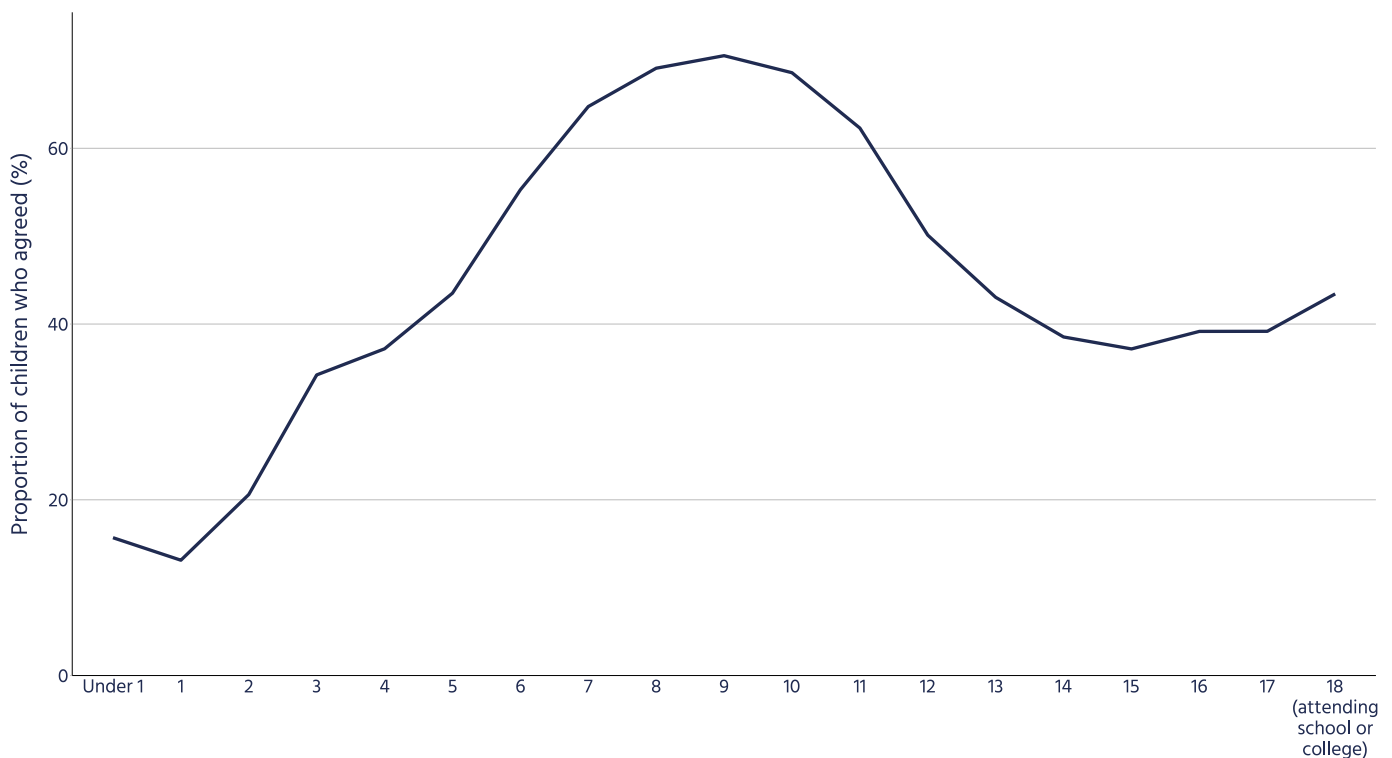
In their open-text responses, children spoke about their voice and wanted to be listened to, in general or on a range of issues, from children's rights to long-term, global issues such as war and conflict and climate change. They want to learn about the world, how it works and gain skills that will allow them to personally engage with issues.

**Feelings of empowerment**

Overall, 52% of children agreed they felt empowered to change issues they cared about. Again, responses varied by age, with children aged between eight and ten responding most positively (Figure 18).

However, only a minority (39%) of children agreed that ‘You feel empowered to change issues that you care about’ and that ‘You have the same opportunities as other children and young people’.

**Figure 18. Agreement with ‘You/They feel empowered to change issues you/they care about’ by child’s age.**



Children from across England offered many practical solutions to increase their participation around issues that they cared about. For example, one girl suggested that more surveys such as *The Big Ambition* should be circulated: “They could send surveys out like this so that we have a say even though we can’t vote yet” – Girl, 12. Another child suggested a variety of ways to engage children in change: “Don’t just engage young people in change. We need youth summits, youth parliaments, chances to speak to MPs and councils. Young people should be allowed to pitch their ideas to councils” – Child, 15.

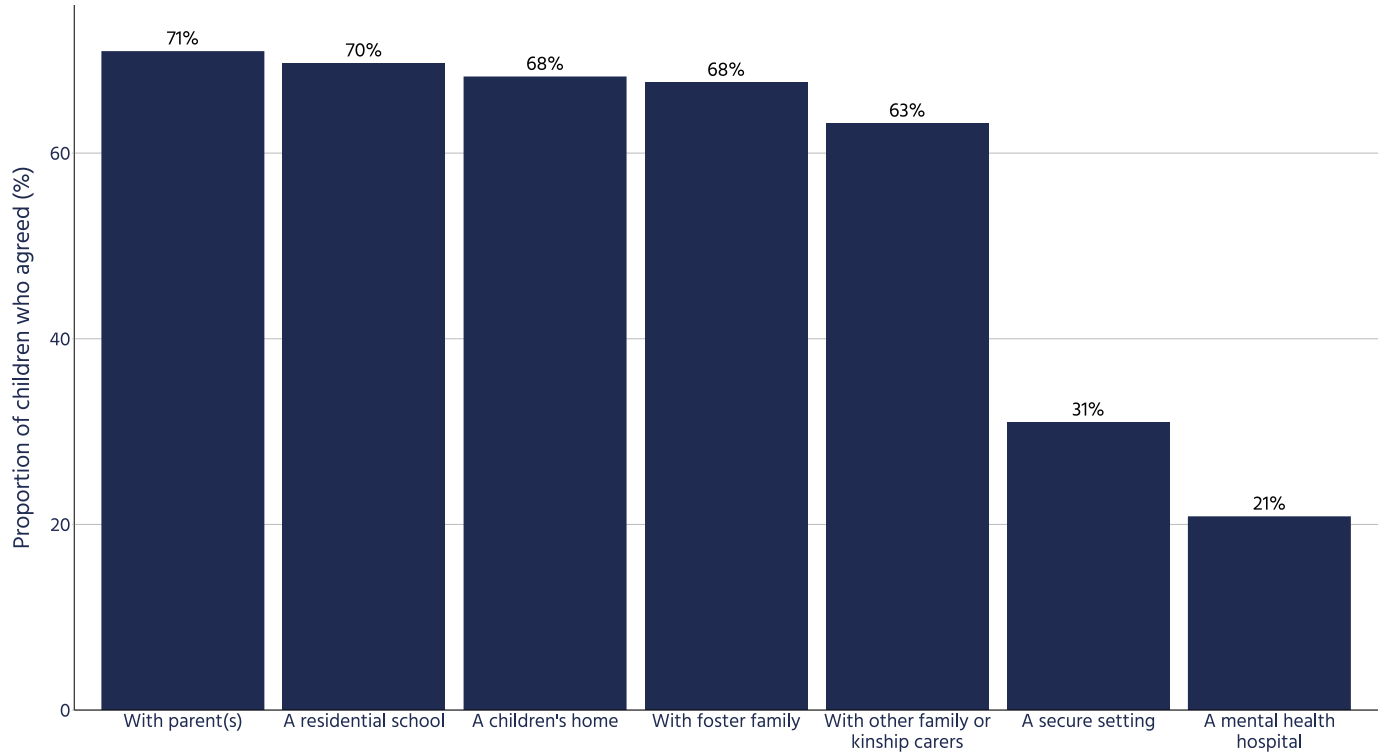
## **Treating children fairly**

Children were also asked whether they agree with the statement, 'You are treated fairly' (or 'They are treated fairly' for adults responding on children's behalf). Overall, 70% of children agreed, with adults responding on behalf of children more likely to agree (82%) than when children responded for themselves (68%). Younger children were also more likely to agree: 90% of adults responding on behalf of four-year-olds agreed, compared to 55% of 15-year-olds.

Where children lived also made a big difference. Children living with their parents, with a foster family, in a residential school or in a children's home were more likely to agree (71%, 68%, 70% and 68% respectively) than children living with other family or kinship carers (63%), in a secure setting (31%) or in a mental health hospital (21%) (Figure 19). Furthermore, only a small majority (56%) of children agreed with both statements, 'You feel safe and protected in your local area' and 'You are treated fairly'. Many comments by children deal with the issue of fairness. One boy wrote: *"We should all be treated fairly and equally everywhere we are or we go"* – Boy, 11. A girl wrote: *"Help children who are treated unfairly or not cared for"* – Girl, 10.



**Figure 19. Agreement with 'You/They are treated fairly' by child's living situation.**



## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. The survey**

The main element of *The Big Ambition* project was an online survey, launched on 14 September 2023 via channels including the Children's Commissioner's office (CCo) website and social media, with a link emailed to all schools. The survey was open for four months and five days, from 14 September 2023 to 19 January 2024. All children in England aged six to 18 years old were invited to take part, and adults could respond on behalf of children from nought to 18 years old. 18-year-olds and adults responding on behalf of 18-year-olds could only submit a response if the young person was attending school or college.

#### **2.1.1. Purpose of the survey**

*The Big Ambition* aimed to collect children's thoughts, ideas and priorities in advance of the next general election, in order to gather and convey children's views and experiences to government and decision makers.

The survey was designed to hear the voices of as many children in England as possible. The survey was hosted by SmartSurvey, an online survey platform, and used customised fonts, colours and graphics to maximise accessibility. The survey was entirely voluntary and optional. The survey stated that children did not have to fill in the survey if they did not want to and could leave the survey at any point.

#### **2.1.2. Survey versions**

The survey was developed using four different versions so the wording and graphics could be tailored by age group and additional needs:

- A version for adults responding on behalf of children aged 0 to 18,
- A version for children aged six to 11 (primary school aged),
- A version for children aged 12 to 18 (secondary school aged),
- An 'easy read' version for children aged six to 18, with larger text and more pictures.

The version for children aged six to 11 assumed a lower reading age than the version for children aged 12 to 18. The easy read version had the lowest reading age and was designed for children with moderate to severe special needs but was open to children of any age. Despite this, most children who reported that they had special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) did not opt for the easy read version (Table 2). More often, children completed the easy read version than reported that they had SEND.

**Table 2. Comparison of child’s reported SEND status versus whether the respondent chose to complete the ‘easy read’ version of the survey (%).**

	Reported having SEND	Did not report having SEND <sup>iv</sup>	Total
Completed ‘easy read’ version	6%	32%	38%
Did not complete ‘easy read’ version	9%	52%	62%
Total	16%	84%	<b>100%</b>

If a child could not answer the questions, an adult could fill in the survey on the child’s behalf and were able to answer as they imagined a child would answer or ask the child for their views.

### **2.1.3. Content of the survey**

The survey began by asking all respondents whether they were a child, or an adult responding on behalf of a child. The children were asked whether they would prefer the ‘easy read’ version of the children’s survey. All respondents were then asked a series of demographic questions, including the child’s age, whether they are a boy or a girl, ethnic group, where they currently live (such as with their parent(s) or with foster parent(s)), local authority and education (such as whether they were attending school, or being home educated), including school name where relevant. Adults were also asked for information about themselves, including their age group, gender, and relationship to the child they were responding on behalf of.

All respondents were then asked a series of Likert scale questions, on to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements. The Likert scale questions were organised into themes according to the Children’s Commissioner’s seven core pillars: a better world; children’s social care; community;

<sup>iv</sup> Includes respondents who selected ‘I don’t know’ and ‘I don’t want to say’, and respondents who did not answer the question about SEND.

education; family; health; and jobs and skills. These question groups were put in random order to minimise the impact of survey fatigue on responses, but the order of the statements within each pillar group remained the same. The number of questions and the wording of the Likert scale questions varied slightly between survey versions, to tailor the language to each respondent group, and to ask age-appropriate questions. Given the large numbers of children who opted for the easy read version, responses to questions not asked in the easy read version may be unrepresentative of the general population of children. Annex A provides an overview of each question, variations in wording and which respondent group was asked each question. Finally, all respondents were asked an open-text question, *"What do you think the Government should do to make children's lives better? I think..."*.

#### **2.1.4. Piloting**

The online survey was piloted in summer 2023 with 19 children across England, including children from a range of age groups, children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) and children living in children's homes and mental health hospitals, to ensure that the survey was quick to complete, easy to understand, and to gain feedback on question wordings. Additional feedback was provided on the 'easy read' version of the children's survey from an expert in research with children with SEND. All feedback was collated and informed final revisions to the survey before the official launch.

#### **2.1.5. Materials accompanying the survey**

A lesson plan and assembly presentation were designed for each school phase (primary and secondary) to accompany the survey and facilitate educators in explaining the purpose of the survey to children. These were available for download on the CCo website, alongside flyers and social media assets to advertise the survey link online and during visits<sup>5</sup>. A data protection impact assessment was conducted and published before launching the survey<sup>6</sup>.

#### **2.1.6. Data collection**

*The Big Ambition* survey ran for four months and five days, from 14 September 2023 until 19 January 2024. During this period, links to the survey and accompanying materials were sent to all schools and multi-academy trusts (MATs), all local authorities and all Directors of Children's Services (DCSs) in England. To reach a wide range of children, including children living away from home, the survey link was shared by email to mental health hospitals, youth custody settings, children's homes, fostering

organisations, children in care councils, young carer projects, groups working with disabled children, and other charities and community groups.

Children and adults responding on their behalf could access the survey through a URL link or a QR code. Over 20,000 responses (8%) were collected via the QR code. Respondents could complete the survey on any online device with an internet browser, including mobile phones, tablets and computers. Paper versions of the survey were also available for download on the CCo website<sup>7</sup>, to facilitate those who were unable to use or access a digital device.

### **2.1.7. Data cleaning**

All survey data analysis and cleaning were conducted in R (version 4.3.2<sup>8</sup>).

Partial responses to the survey (responses that did not click the 'Finish Survey' button) were included in analysis if at least one Likert scale question was completed. The total number of engagements with the survey, without this restriction, was 366,628. Where a written comment suggested that a single response had been submitted on behalf of a group of children, this was classified as a single response as the demographic characteristics of all children in the group could not be assumed.

Responses received from or on behalf of individuals aged 18 or over who were not in school or college were not included in the analysis of *The Big Ambition*.

To enable comparison of findings across survey versions (i.e. the adult, six to 11, 12 to 18 and 'easy read' versions), strongly agree and agree responses, and strongly disagree and disagree were combined as net 'agree' and 'disagree' categories to match the easy read version.

For the questions, 'Where do you live now?' and 'What is your relationship to the child for whom you are responding?', respondents were able to select a pre-set category from a list or respond in their own words. Free-text responses to these questions were categorised where possible into existing categories or new categories if necessary. All other responses were categorised as 'Other'.

For the question ‘Which local authority do you live in?’, fuzzy matching<sup>v</sup> was used to quantify the likelihood that a free-text response matched a local authority name and all matches above a threshold score was accepted into the cleaned dataset. The threshold score was chosen based on the highest value achievable without allowing manually identified false positives. All unmatched non-null responses (for example, ‘England’) were categorised as ‘Other’.

For all responses to ‘Which school or college do you go to most of the time?’, additional school-level information was joined into the dataset from the Department for Education’s Get Information About Schools (GIAS) database<sup>9</sup>, to enable analysis of school characteristics such as the proportion of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM). All children who reported attending a special school were considered as having SEND, even if they indicated otherwise when asked in the demographic questions.

For the purposes of analysis, responses to the free-text question, *“What do you think the Government should do to make children’s lives better? I think...”*, were cleaned programmatically in R, by first converting all text to lowercase and removing leading and trailing whitespace. Responses such as ‘I don’t know’ or ‘not sure’ and invalid responses, for example a single punctuation mark, were removed. This reduced the number of comments from a total of 186,434 to the 174,131 comments that were analysed.

### **2.1.8. Weighting**

The data were weighted by age, whether they were a boy or a girl and region, to better represent the population of children in England. This used the latest Office for National Statistics mid-year population estimates, which are for mid-2022<sup>10</sup>.

Responses from adults on behalf of children aged under six were excluded from the weighting process and given a weight of one instead. Due to how few responses were received from this group, including them in the weighting process would have assigned them excessively large weights, occasionally above 100. Similarly, if data was missing for any of age, whether they were a boy or a girl or region, a weight could not be calculated, and the child was instead given a weight of one.

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<sup>v</sup> Fuzzy matching (or approximate string matching) is a method used to systematically find strings of information (in this case, local authority names) that match a pattern approximately.

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Throughout, weighted numbers are used to calculate the proportion of children who agreed with a Likert question. Unweighted numbers are used in all other cases. As the weighting applies to the sample as a whole, caution should be taken when interpreting findings, particularly for groups of children with a small sample size.

### **2.1.9. Data analysis**

Breakdowns of the survey data were produced by survey version (adult, children aged six to 11, children aged 12 to 18, and easy read) and all demographics (including age, ethnicity, whether the child had SEND, whether the child was a boy or girl, whether the child had a social worker, local authority and region), who the child lives with, and education status. Additional breakdowns were produced for children who provided school-level information, including school type, Ofsted rating (as of each school's latest Ofsted inspection) and proportion of children attending the school who received free school meals (as of the most recent School Census at the time, retrieved via GIAS<sup>11</sup>).

Keyword groups were developed for each of the CCo's strategic pillars (a better world, children's social care, community, education, family, jobs and skills, and health). These were identified iteratively through the analysis of the focus group data (see section 2.2) and by manually reviewing a random sample of 1,800 open-text survey responses (1% of all written responses). Responses were assigned to a keyword group if the response mentioned a matching keyword. For example, 'homework' and 'school' were keywords under the 'education' keyword group (see Annex C for the full list). The frequency of references could then be quantified, as well as how often themes were mentioned together in the same response. As the open text question came at the end of the survey, it is possible that some themes were prompted by keywords included in earlier questions (such as 'life skills').

### **2.1.10. Description of the survey sample**

The 253,001 responses are equivalent to 2.1% of England's population of 0- to 17-year-olds<sup>vi</sup> (11,886,906 in mid-2022)<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, *The Big Ambition* is, to our knowledge, the world's second largest survey of

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<sup>vi</sup> Excludes responses from 18-year-olds in school or college from the count of responses to *The Big Ambition*.

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children after the Children's Commissioner's 2021 survey, *The Big Ask*<sup>13</sup>. a survey conducted by the Children's Commissioner for England in 2021.

In total, nearly 367,000 children and adults on their behalf clicked on the survey link or scanned the QR code. Therefore, over two thirds (69%) of those who interacted with the survey chose to complete the survey.

Of the 253,001 responses gathered, 85% came directly from children themselves, with the rest from parents, carers and other adults on behalf of children (Table 3). *The Big Ambition* received responses for over 39,000 children with SEND, nearly 14,000 children with a social worker, 390 children in secure settings and 300 in mental health hospitals. Over 1,000 children were not in education, and over 1,000 were home educated.

Of the 15% of responses received from adults on behalf of children, the majority were parents (including step-parents) (92%, around 35,000). The next most common were teachers and teaching assistants (3%, around 1,200), then other relatives and kinship carers (2%, around 700), foster parents and carers (1%, around 500) and finally youth workers (<1%, around 70).

Responses were gathered from every local authority in England and across a diverse range of demographic and vulnerable groups of children (Table 3, Figure 20). Response rates varied across local authorities and there was a peak of responses in young secondary school-aged children, so the data were weighted to be more representative of the population of children in England, as described above.



**Table 3. Demographic overview of *The Big Ambition* sample.**

Demographic variable	Number of respondents	Proportion of all respondents	Weighted number of respondents	Proportion of all weighted respondents <sup>vii</sup>
<b><i>Type of respondent</i></b>	Unweighted N	Unweighted %	Weighted N	Weighted %
Child/young person	214,553	85%	205,715	81%
Adult on behalf of child/young person	38,448	15%	47,286	19%
<b><i>Child's age group</i></b>	Unweighted N	Unweighted %	Weighted N	Weighted %
0 to 5	9,099	3.6%	9,099	3.6%
6 to 11	106,188	42%	118,648	47%
12 to 18	133,881	53%	121,421	48%
I don't want to say	3,656	1.4%	3,656	1.4%
Not answered	177	0.1%	177	0.1%
<b><i>Boy/girl/I don't want to say/other</i></b>	Unweighted N	Unweighted %	Weighted N	Weighted %
Boy	112,753	45%	123,277	49%
Girl	127,791	51%	117,267	46%
I don't want to say/ other	7,457	2.9%	7,457	2.9%
Not answered	5,000	2.0%	5,000	2.0%
<b><i>Child's ethnicity</i></b>	Unweighted N	Unweighted %	Weighted N	Weighted %
White	163,897	65%	162,030	64%
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	12,886	5.1%	13,112	5.2%
Asian or Asian British	30,944	12%	31,627	13%
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	15,696	6.2%	16,044	6.3%
Other ethnic group	4,886	1.9%	4,933	1.9%
I don't want to say	8,285	3.3%	8,575	3.4%
I don't know	12,812	5.1%	12,985	5.1%
Not answered	3,595	1.4%	3,695	1.5%
<b><i>Child's SEND status</i></b>	Unweighted N	Unweighted %	Weighted N	Weighted %
Yes	39,486	16%	40,063	16%
No	170,594	67%	171,981	68%
I don't want to say	6,763	2.7%	6,744	2.7%

<sup>vii</sup> Proportions may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

I don't know	32,016	13%	29,971	12%
Not answered	4,142	1.6%	4,241	1.7%
<b><i>Whether child has a social worker</i></b>	<b>Unweighted N</b>	<b>Unweighted %</b>	<b>Weighted N</b>	<b>Weighted %</b>
Yes	13,698	5.4%	13,760	5.4%
No	210,459	83%	211,154	83%
I don't want to say	4,171	1.6%	4,102	1.6%
I don't know	20,045	7.9%	19,154	7.6%
Not answered	4,628	1.8%	4,830	1.9%
<b><i>Child's living situation</i></b>	<b>Unweighted N</b>	<b>Unweighted %</b>	<b>Weighted N</b>	<b>Weighted %</b>
With parent(s)	235,599	93%	235,124	93%
With other family or kinship carers	3,377	1.3%	3,357	1.3%
With foster family	1,893	0.7%	1,891	0.7%
Independent or university	36	0.0%	43	0.0%
Supported accommodation	31	0.0%	48	0.0%
A children's home	684	0.3%	735	0.3%
A residential school	1,919	0.8%	1,941	0.8%
A secure setting	388	0.2%	481	0.2%
A mental health hospital	302	0.1%	295	0.1%
Asylum centre or hotel	<sup>viii</sup>	-	-	-
Homeless	-	-	-	-
At home <sup>ix</sup>	413	0.2%	406	0.2%
Other	1,760	0.7%	1,915	0.8%
I don't want to say	3,668	1.4%	3,716	1.5%
I don't know	74	0.0%	80	0.0%
Not answered	2,839	1.1%	2,949	1.2%
<b><i>Child's place of education</i></b>	<b>Unweighted N</b>	<b>Unweighted %</b>	<b>Weighted N</b>	<b>Weighted %</b>
In school/college	243,940	96%	243,556	96%
Home educated	1,027	0.4%	1,045	0.4%
Another setting <sup>x</sup>	241	0.1%	249	0.1%
Not in education	1,092	0.4%	1,211	0.5%
I don't want to say	2,034	0.8%	2,126	0.8%

<sup>viii</sup> Some figures have been suppressed for reasons of statistical disclosure control.

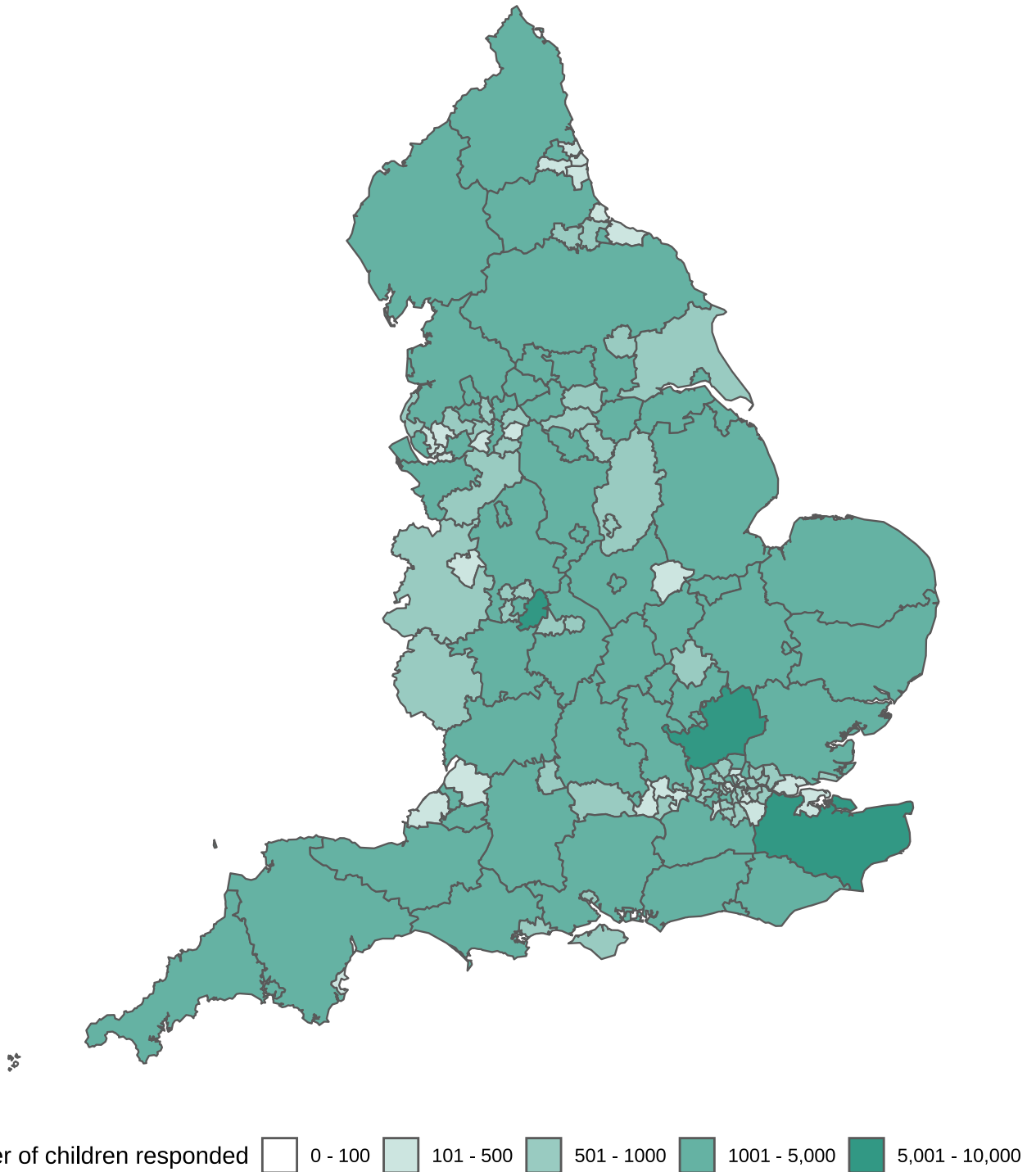
<sup>ix</sup> 'At home' was an unspecific free-text response from some children regarding their living situation.

<sup>x</sup> 'Another setting' was an option only presented to adults and includes, for example, childminders.

I don't know	1,163	0.5%	1,211	0.5%
Not answered	3,504	1.4%	3,602	1.4%
<b><i>Phase of school</i></b>	<b>Unweighted N</b>	<b>Unweighted %</b>	<b>Weighted N</b>	<b>Weighted %</b>
Nursery	273	0.1%	275	0.1%
Primary	76,159	30%	93,245	37%
Secondary	129,841	51%	109,769	43%
Special	3,998	1.6%	4,260	1.7%
Alternative provision	516	0.2%	523	0.2%
16 plus	13,164	5.2%	15,825	6.3%
Miscellaneous <sup>xi</sup>	167	0.1%	184	0.1%
No school given	28,883	11%	28,921	11%
<b><i>Child's region</i></b>	<b>Unweighted N</b>	<b>Unweighted %</b>	<b>Weighted N</b>	<b>Weighted %</b>
East Midlands	17,030	6.7%	20,474	8.1%
East of England	29,896	12%	28,028	11%
London	29,612	12%	37,083	15%
North East	14,573	5.8%	11,717	4.6%
North West	36,346	14%	33,282	13%
South East	44,160	17%	40,895	16%
South West	22,452	8.9%	22,969	9.1%
West Midlands	23,458	9.3%	26,703	11%
Yorkshire and The Humber	27,967	11%	24,343	10%
Other	1,990	0.8%	1,990	0.8%
Not answered	5,517	2.2%	5,517	2.2%
<b>All respondents</b>	<b>253,001</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>253,001</b>	<b>100%</b>

<sup>xi</sup> 'Miscellaneous' includes respondents that attended a type of school which did not fit into the typical school categories listed in Get Information About Schools.

Figure 20. Map of responses to *The Big Ambition* survey by local authority.



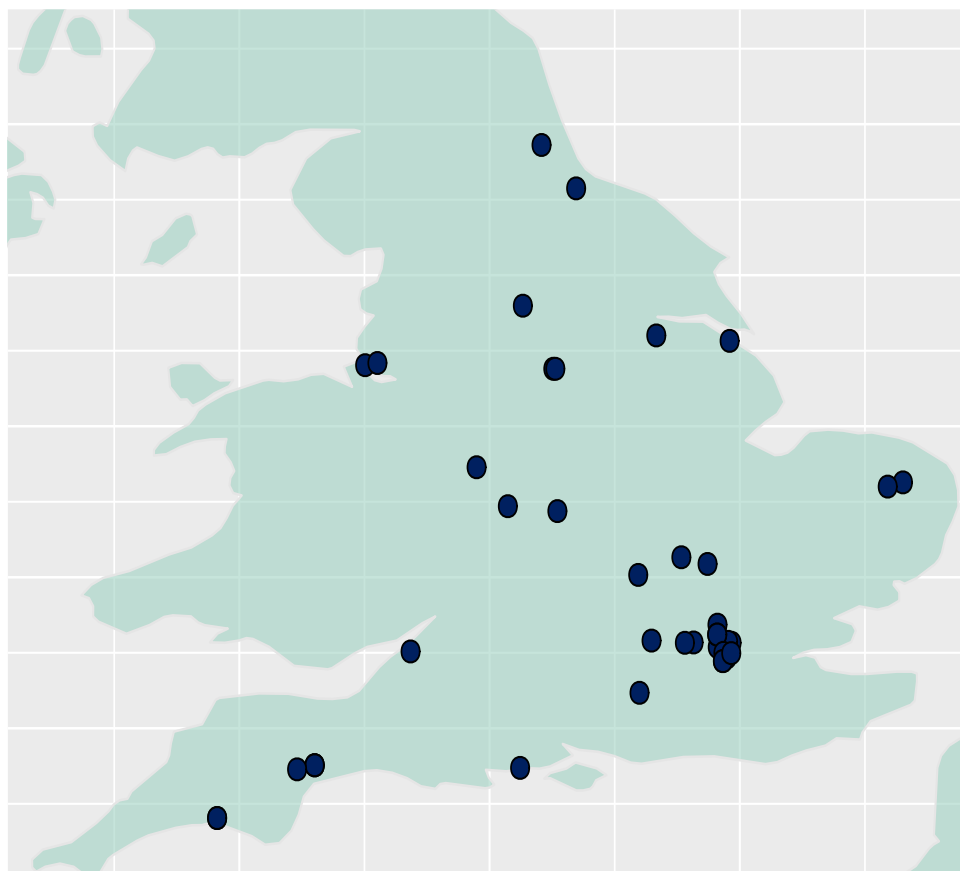
## 2.2. Focus groups, interviews and roundtables

Alongside the survey, the Children's Commissioner's office visited 40 locations across England to hear from children (Figure 21). Of these visits, 35 were for research purposes, during which the Children's Commissioner's office spoke to 394 children and 79 adults through 37 focus groups and 22 interviews. These visits focussed on groups of children who are harder to reach or who were less likely to be able to complete an online survey. These groups include:

- Children in care living in a residential children's home or unregulated accommodation,
- Unaccompanied asylum-seeking children,
- Children in secure settings including secure mental health settings,
- Children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND),
- Parents of young children (aged under five).

This fieldwork gave the opportunity to explore issues which were not explicitly asked about in the survey, including climate change and the environment, public transport, and the school curriculum, and gave children an opportunity to raise issues proactively, such as current affairs including wars, conflicts, and the cost of living. Visits were also conducted to advertise the survey and encourage participation, while also collecting in-depth qualitative findings through focus groups. Parents and carers gave consent for their children to take part. In most cases, children took part during the school day, and were thanked for their time with a participation certificate signed by the Children's Commissioner.

**Figure 21. Map of locations visited across England as part of *The Big Ambition*.**



### **2.2.1. Qualitative data analysis**

Notes from all visits were transcribed and collated by a researcher. Themes were identified iteratively and categorised according to the CCo's pillars of work. Within many of the broader themes (for example, 'online safety', 'curriculum', 'cost of living') sub-themes and arguments were recorded. Some comments referenced themes which did not fit into any of the pillars, for example, transport, current affairs, and politics. In some cases where respondents' written comments are quoted, text has been shortened, and spelling, grammar or punctuation have been corrected. Annex B provides a list and word cloud of the most commonly mentioned words.

### **2.2.2. Policy roundtables**

A series of policy roundtables were hosted by the Children's Commissioner to further explore the CCo's core pillars, policy areas and emerging themes from the survey and information gathered from visits with children across the country.

In total, 15 roundtables were held between January and March 2024. These discussions brought together key policy and decision makers, experts, children, and the Children's Commissioner's youth ambassadors<sup>14</sup>. They informed a report containing findings from *The Big Ambition* and policy recommendations.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. Annexes

#### Annex A: Versions of The Big Ambition questionnaire

**Table 4. The questions asked under each version of *The Big Ambition*. Greyed out boxes represent questions which were not asked in that version.**

<b>Pillar</b>	<b>Primary (6-11)</b>	<b>Secondary (12-18)</b>	<b>Easy read</b>	<b>Adult</b>
<b>A better world</b>	You feel like you can make a difference to things you care about	You feel empowered to change issues that you care about	You feel like you can make a difference to things you care about	They feel empowered to change issues that they care about
	People who run the country listen to your views	People who run the country listen to your views	People who run the country listen to your views	
				Their thoughts about the future are listened to
	You are treated fairly	You are treated fairly	You are treated fairly	They are treated fairly
<b>Jobs and skills</b>	You have the same opportunities as other children	You have the same opportunities as other children and young people	You have the same opportunities as other children	They have the same opportunities as other children
		You know about apprenticeships, university options and career paths		They know about apprenticeships, university options and career paths



<b>Pillar</b>	<b>Primary (6-11)</b>	<b>Secondary (12-18)</b>	<b>Easy read</b>	<b>Adult</b>
		You know about money and life skills		They know about money and life skills
	You know about good jobs for when you are older			They know about good jobs for when they are older
<b>Health</b>		You feel happy with the way you look		
		You can access good healthcare when you need it		They can access good healthcare when they need it
	You have a healthy diet	You have a healthy diet	You have a healthy diet	They have a healthy diet
	You have someone supportive to talk to about how you feel	You have someone supportive to talk to about how you feel	You have someone supportive to talk to	They have someone supportive to talk to about how they feel
<b>Care</b>	You have somewhere to call home	You have somewhere to call home	You have somewhere to call home	They have somewhere to call home
	You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for	You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for	You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for	They live with people who make them feel loved and cared for
<b>Education</b>	You have great teachers who support you	You have great teachers who support you	You have great teachers who support you	They have great teachers who support them

<b>Pillar</b>	<b>Primary (6-11)</b>	<b>Secondary (12-18)</b>	<b>Easy read</b>	<b>Adult</b>
	You enjoy school	You enjoy school or college	You enjoy school	They enjoy school or college
<b>Family</b>	Your family has everything they need to support you	Your family has everything they need to support you	Your family has everything they need to support you	Their family has everything they need to support children
	Your family gets to spend quality time together	Your family gets to spend quality time together	Your family gets to spend time together	Their family gets to spend quality time together
<b>Community</b>	You feel safe when you go online	You feel safe when you go online	You feel safe online	They feel safe online
	You feel safe and protected in your local area	You feel safe and protected in your local area	You feel safe in your local area	They feel safe and protected in their local area
	You have fun activities to do near where you live	You have fun activities to do near where you live	You can do fun things near where you live	They have fun things to do in their local area



**Table 5. The 20 most frequently mentioned words across all qualitative responses. Excludes common words like 'a' and 'the', and words which appeared in the question.**

#	Word	Number of
1	school	75,165
2	people	34,845
3	need	30,876
4	good	29,396
5	give	22,743
6	help	22,260
7	money	17,977
8	support	17,333
9	life	14,532
10	time	13,899
11	listen	13,860
12	education	13,712
13	free	12,402
14	day	12,164
15	parent	12,103
16	kid	12,102
17	young	11,890
18	little	11,396
19	stop	11,255
20	health	11,196

## Annex C: Keyword groups to match responses against the office's strategic pillars

**Table 6. Keywords and their pillars.**

<b>Pillar</b>	<b>Keywords</b>
<b>Children's social care</b>	abuse, adopt, advocate, asylum, child in need, children in need, childrens home, childrens services, cin, foster, homeless, homeless, hotel, in care, kinship, looked after, lost child, migra, mistreat, neglect, refugee, rough sleep, sleeping rough, social care, social work, uasc, ucsa, vulnerable child, wrap around care
<b>Community</b>	abuse, activit, ai, alcohol, area, arrest, artificial intelligence, augmented reality, bully, call of duty, chat gpt, chatgpt, chav, club, communit, computer, console, crime, criminal, cyber bully, device, digital, drug, environment live, facebook, feel unsafe, fifa, fornite, forza, gaming, gang, google, hmp, illegal, imessage, instagram, internet, knife, laptop, lawyer, local area, local park, local, lootbox, mario kart, minecraft, neighbourhood, oculus, offend, online gam, online safety, park, patrol, phone, play, play, playground, playstation, police, porn, prison, ps4, ps5, pubg, reddit, remand, road m, roadm, roblox, safe place, safety, search engine, shank, skate park, skatepark, snapchat, social media, sport, sport, stabb, street, super mario, surroundings, tiktok, tik tok, town, twitter, violence, virtual reality, vr, website, whatsapp, xbox, yoi, yot, youth facilit, youth service, youth work, zelda
<b>Family</b>	abusive parent, afford, au pair, baby, babysit, better house, bills, brother, cat, cheaper, child abuse, child benefit, childcare, childminder, cost of food, cost of living, cousin, dad, dad, debt, discount, divorce, dog, early year, families, family, familys, food for free, food price, free food, grandad, grandma, grandpa, grandparent, granny, guinea pig, hamster, home life, home, homes, house, housing, hubby, hungry, husband, income, inflation, living conditions, living cost, mam, material deprivation, maternity, mom, mom, mortgage, mould, mum, mum, nan, nanny, nice food, nursery, parent, partner, paternity, pay for, pet, poor, poverty, purse, rabbit, sibling, sister, social class, toddler, upbringing, wages, wallet, wealth, wife
<b>Health</b>	adhd, anxiety, anxious, autis, camhs, cams, cancer, clinic, corona, coronavirus, counselling, covid, covid19, covid-19, cronavirus, cypmhs, dental, dentist, depress, depressed, depression, diet, disabilit, disabilities, disability, disabled, doctor, dyslexi, eating disorder, germ, health, hospital, illness, junk food, lockdown, medicat, mental, mentally, metal health, metal heath, neurodivergen, nhs, nurse, obes, pandemic,

	pandemics, physical health, prescribe, prescription, pressure, sanitary, self harm, smoking, social distancing, stress, stressful, suicid, therapy, vape, vaping, virus, well being, wellbeing, wellness, worry
<b>Jobs and skills</b>	apprentice, apprenticeship, artist, banking, career, college, credit card, credit score, dancer, doctor, duke of edinburgh award, employ, employment, famous, farmer, foot ball player, football player, footballer, further education, gamer, higher education, horse rider, i want to be a, job, leadership, life skills, mentor, mortgage, nurse, player, police man, police officer, post-16, qualification, singer, skill, tax, train driver, ucas, uni, universities, university, vet, video game designer, vocation, volunteer, when im older, work access, work experience, youtuber
<b>Education</b>	academic, academy, after school club, attainment, attend, attendance, boarding, bullies, bully, bunk, classmate, classroom, college, curriculum, educat, educated, education, ehcp, exam, exclude, free school meal, gcse, grade, headteacher, home work, homework, in class, independent school, learn, lesson, lessons, levels, maths, mock, nursery, pastoral, phse, private school, pshe, pupil, results, rse, sats, school, science, sen, senco, send, sex ed, skills, special need, study, subject, teach, teacher, teaching assistant, test, tuition, uniform
<b>A better world</b>	air clean, animal, animals, atmosphere, carbon dioxide, carbon footprint, carbon neutral, clean air, climate, climate catastrophe, climate change, climate crisis, co2, countryside, cycle path, deforestation, earth, eco friendly, electric car, emission, energy, enviroment, environment, extreme weather, fossil fuel, habitat, global warm, global warming, green, greenhouse gas, litter, melting, natural, nature, net zero, planet, plastic, pollution, renewable, rubbish, sea, sustainab, throwing rubbish, tree, world, divers, ageism, ageist, background, black, capitalism, classism, child rights, childrens rights, colour, communities, community, culture, discriminat, equal, fairly, fairness, freedom, gender, help poor people, homeless, homophob, homophobia, misogyn, identity, lgbt, lgbtq, non binary, nonbinary, petition, prejudice, protest, race, racial, racism, racist, religion, respect, sexism, sexist, sexual orientation, sexuality, skin, skin colour, social mobility, social pressure, social standard, societal, society, stereotype, trans, treated fairly, treated unfairly, unfair treat, white, white people, rights, being as social, being social, body shaming, bullied, bullies, bullying, bully, cyber, decision, discuss, freinds, friend, get a say, get wrong crowd, hater, have a say, heard, horrible people, influence, internet, interview, judgement, judging, listen, looking down, making fun, mean people, negative people, online, opinion, other people, our view, peer, people discourage, people discouraging, people doubtte, people opinion, people think,

	peer pressure, pressure expectation, relationship, roundtable, rude people, seeing people, social life, social media, social platforms, social pressure, speak up, survey, told that you cant, told you cant, voice, workshop, wrong crowd, ambition, attitude, belief, believe, believing, believe, confidence, determination, determined, doubt, dream, effort, encourage, esteem, failure, fear, hater, high expectation, insecure, lack encouragement, laziness, lazy, left out, mind set, motivate, motivation, negative things, negative thought, procrastination, put down, put others down, put you down, putting them down, scared, shyness, work ethic, views
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## Annex D: Summary of responses to closed questions, in order from most positive to least positive

Statement (see Annex A for all question wordings)	% agree, child/young person	% agree, adults	% agree, all respondents
You have somewhere to call home	93%	96%	93%
You live with people who make you feel loved and cared for	92%	98%	93%
Your family has everything they need to support you	86%	80%	85%
Your family gets to spend quality time together	83%	89%	84%
You have someone supportive to talk to about how you feel	81%	91%	82%
You know about good jobs for when you are older	76%	54%	65%
You feel safe when you go online	75%	52%	71%
You have great teachers who support you	75%	83%	76%
You have fun activities to do near where you live	72%	61%	70%
You feel safe and protected in your local area	72%	74%	73%
You have a healthy diet	71%	83%	73%
You have the same opportunities as other children and young people	70%	71%	70%
You know about money and life skills	69%	49%	61%
You know about apprenticeships, university options and career paths	68%	27%	51%
You are treated fairly	68%	82%	70%
You enjoy school or college	60%	80%	64%



<b>Statement</b> (see Annex A for all question wordings)	<b>% agree, child/young person</b>	<b>% agree, adults</b>	<b>% agree, all respondents</b>
You feel empowered to change issues that you care about	54%	46%	52%
Their thoughts about the future are listened to		70%	70%
You feel happy with the way you look	49%		49%
People who run the country listen to your views	22%		22%

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