



THE  
**BIG**  
AMBITION



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THE STORY OF A MILLION CHILDREN

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# THE **BIG** AMBITION



**Dame Rachel de Souza**  
Children's Commissioner

The **Big Ambition** survey is a new large-scale consultation from the Children's Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza.

After the Children's Commissioner's **The Big Ask** in 2021, it is the second largest survey of its kind, with engagement from nearly 367,000 voices.

In three years, this office has gathered close to a million responses from children on how they feel, and what their experience of growing up in this country is like.

**The Big Ambition** focuses on what needs to change in England to make childhood the best it can be.

This is the story of what children have said.

## MARCH 2024

Over half a million children responded to **The Big Ask** in 2021. They were veterans of the pandemic, and it seemed fitting to refer to them not as a snowflake generation, but as a heroic one.

Most reported that they were happy, but it was clear they were in urgent need of support to recover from the effects of a global crisis.

Three years have elapsed – enough time to assess how effectively these needs have been responded to.

Part of the rationale for this new survey has been to learn more about children's experiences during this critical time, and what more they think the government should do to make their lives better.

*"I'm only 12 and don't actually know much about the government but maybe they can try and make surveys like this (maybe every few years) to see how our lives are doing ... and how we're genuinely feeling because I've been unwell in a way where my heart feels almost empty..."*

*I'm glad I have someone to talk to about my life but I can only tell them over text... Maybe I wrote too much in this paragraph but I hope my message is seen. Thank you!"* | **Girl, 12**

If **The Big Ask** report was a song of innocence – of hope for recovery, for back-to-normal – **The Big Ambition** is a song of experience.

If the theme of the first was 'listen to children,' the challenge of the second is one of belief.

*"I always try my best at school and I want to get a good job. Will I be able to do that?"* | **Boy, 8**

Belief should come easily to children.

Stories are where they come alive. In the narrative of **The Big Ask** report, the pandemic was the dragon we needed to slay. Our mission was clear – an easy cause to believe in.

But in 2024, belief seems to be a more fragile business.

Do we believe in ourselves? In our dreams, and our capacity to realise them?

Do the people around us – parents, teachers, politicians – believe in us too?

Do we believe that where we live is a place of promise? Or a place that keeps its promises? Are the stories we tell ourselves as a nation based on fact, or myth? Or, perhaps more importantly, do they move us forward, or hold us back?

**The Big Ambition** starts to answer some of these questions. But any understanding would be incomplete without considering the events of the three years since **The Big Ask** – a tumultuous time for England, and the world.

## SINCE THE BIG ASK (2021)

*"Give children good parents good food and good houses and things shouldn't be expensive...God bless you for the free food you have given to us. Thank you"*

| **Boy, 7**

The last three years have often felt like a strange time.

September 2021 is two prime ministers ago.

Children were back in school. Then they had to go home again. We learned some new phrases. Crumbly concrete. Cost-of-living. Warm-banks. Mini-budget. Chat GPT. None of these were in common usage in 2021.

There was a sudden glut of public occasions and bank holidays. Time felt celebratory but out of rhythm.

For the first time in children's lives – and perhaps their parents', grandparents' even great-grandparents' lives – a new monarch.

There was a new war in Europe.

News programmes discussed the risk of nuclear conflict.

The queue to see Queen Elizabeth II lie in state had its own Wikipedia page.

The President of Ukraine addressed the same hall in military fatigues.

Next door in Westminster Abbey, the new king received bracelets of sincerity and wisdom, and the crown, made, some say, from the same gold as the crown of Edward the Confessor, who reigned a thousand years ago.

Wembley Stadium saw a riot then rapture. The Lionesses won the Euros.

In 2023, artificial intelligence became so powerful that schools had to reimagine the entire practice of homework, and many parents began to replan their careers.

Since October 7th last year, families, schools and communities have come together and been riven apart by the catastrophic events in the Middle East.

In early 2024, we heard the word conscription on

the radio.

On any given day, a children's author or a TV presenter might be a national treasure or a pariah, often at the same time.

Flitting between moments of silence and the chaos of flare smoke, states of grace and madness, life in England – still less the world – has not felt calm or predictable.

**The Big Ambition** survey asked children what the government should do to make their lives better.

*"don't know (I don't know what to think (I'm tired))"*

| **Boy, 11, The Big Ambition**

If we are to avoid overburdening young people, there is a balance to be struck between allowing them to be children, and engaging them in the sphere in which decisions are otherwise made on their behalf.

*"Listen to us more. I know that they may think that we're children and cannot possibly know the rules that need to be followed by parliament, and can obviously not have a better idea than them. But I see multiple countries starting wars... I don't know a single child that wants war to start, so why is it starting? This is our future, our world and we cannot grow up living in fear... It's not fair when we weren't the ones to have started the wars in the first place."*

| **Girl, 12**

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## YOUTH INTERRUPTED

“...when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting  
For the miraculous birth, there always must be  
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating  
On a pond at the edge of the wood”

**Musée des Beaux Arts, W H Auden**

Of course, it is a mistake to consider childhood experience in terms only of wider events, or through new trends or changes in public life. While many watched the momentous and spectacular anointing of a new king, others simply went to the beach. Many children will have had an unremarkable time lately. Celebrating birthdays, revising for exams, being kids.

But it is important to remember this post-pandemic generation – and their parents – have experienced politics and, in a broad sense, information, of all kinds, in unprecedented and sometimes unwanted ways. The span of childhood itself has felt squeezed.

“Don’t rush to throw children into reality – allow them to have a proper childhood without worries.”  
| **Adult on behalf of boy, 5**

“I would like another thing sorry. I think the Government should make work less stressful for adults like my dad. I AM DONE.” | **Boy, 10**

When times are tough, we absorb each other’s cares and worries, and not just within the home. The reach of the digital world is both a blessing and a curse, meaning that children experience distant events in real-time, and with an immediacy which is both high definition, and two-dimensional; compellingly real, but fundamentally misrepresentative.

“Kids are regularly fed utterly useless TikTok content that doesn’t benefit them in any way and can often spread misinformation. More and more kids... receive information from unreliable sources. It’s sickening. This probably isn’t what you expected but I wanted to write it anyhow. Hope you enjoyed, have a nice day.” | **Girl, 15**

In his track ‘Children of the Internet,’ the English rapper Dave calls the mobile phone ‘a connection and disconnection device’. The result is a generation of children who have been thrust into the full glare and complexity of political change, but feel disempowered, and often forgotten.

“The government should listen to children’s opinions more and not just things that are brought up by MPs in the House of Commons. For example petitions that are done I never see responded to and all these minor things that aren’t actually minor never get brought up and put on headlines of TV to make awareness of it. Young people voices aren’t heard enough in the generation we live in today and it needs to change. This world and the internet can be so cruel and some teachers don’t seem to understand that.” | **Girl, 13**



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## AN UNWRITTEN PROMISE

“...Children in the future will be burdened and I feel it is unfair, given that the government has had such a long time to make changes. Politicians should truly have this role if they have a genuine concern for the people that have voted for them, which I feel is not the case currently. There is a distrust between the government and young people.” | **Girl, 16**

What is the scale of this sense of disempowerment amongst young people, and what might be the cost?

**The Big Ambition** indicates specific areas of policy where children need further support.

- > Only 54% of children said they felt safe both online and in their local area.
- > 60% of boys are happy with their appearance; only 40% of girls.
- > Only 21% of children in mental health hospitals feel treated fairly.
- > Only 56% of children with Special Educational Needs (SEND) enjoy school.

International education data released in 2023 tells us that, in terms of happiness with their lives, English school children are below the global average.

“The environment created in schools surrounding mental health seems very performative to me. They speak about how “mental health matters”, hold mental health charity days, do speeches and assemblies and presentations about mental health, put up posters, but then when it comes to a genuinely struggling student, the care isn’t there, the support isn’t present, and it’s really disappointing. I have anxiety and can’t even make it out of the door some days, yet when I call up college to notify them of my absence and

my mum authorises it with them also, I’m still met with emails about my attendance and my teachers down my throat about how I need to try more and put more effort into college, even though I’m truly trying my best, and each day I make it into college and get through the day is an achievement.” | **Girl, 17**

Reading this testimony, there can be no doubt as to how deeply it is felt, how the truth it contains must be similar for other young people. It is possible to both know the statistics – i.e. the higher a pupil’s attendance, the better they are likely to perform in assessments – and to recognise that real change will come from listening to young people when they talk about the education system they want to see.

Being heard in this way is especially valued by migrant or unaccompanied children.

“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**

The snapshot of data in **The Big Ambition** suggests that as children become teenagers, they begin to feel less and less empowered. 54% of children agreed with the statement ‘You feel empowered to change issues you care about’ – a low baseline – which then drops below 40% as children reach 14.

But perhaps the most worrying statistic was this. When children were asked to state whether or not they believed that people who run the country listened to their views, only 22% said yes. So for every class of 30 children who filled in this survey in 2023, six felt heard by the government. Nearly 80% did not.

From a data set of hundreds of thousands, the breach between young people and national leadership feels stark and concerning.

A housing minister representing the government remarked this year that, due to the challenge of securing a home, rented or owned, an increasing number of young people will lose faith in our economic model, or even in democracy.

“The government should be working towards positive change regarding issues like the environment/climate change, social inequality and the economy, and be open about what they are doing to help. Most people my age I know feel completely hopeless, apathetic, anxious and even depressed due to the state of England and the world at the moment.” | **Girl, 16**

The unwritten promise at the heart of democracy is that things can be better for our children than they are right now. Whether this is through growth, or a shared vision for nation-building, or gradual reform, we are motivated by the idea that a kind of progress is achievable. Without that

possibility, there is a deficit of hope – of belief – for both adults and children. If true, it means we do not really believe in the capacity of the society we have created to deliver happiness, prosperity and security.

We cannot make that claim on the basis of this report alone. But **The Big Ambition** suggests a degree of disconnection and bad faith that will not stay buried forever – something leaders would be unwise to ignore.

“that the Government should start caring about kids because even though we are only 20% of today’s society, we are 100% of the future so the Government should hear our voices even though kids can’t vote” | **Girl, 12**



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## SOMETHING BIGGER THAN OURSELVES

“The giant, once well buried, now stirs. When soon he rises, as surely he will, the friendly bonds between us will prove as knots children make with the stems of small flowers.”

**The Buried Giant, Kazuo Ishiguro**

In the final words of **The Big Ask**, 16-year old-boy described the challenge of young people “trying to achieve something bigger than themselves”. It suggested the need to build something equal to this ambition.

The NHS sprung from the same sentiment.

At the height of World War II, Sir William Beveridge was preparing a report which was to become the blueprint for post-war national reconstruction.

He knew that the task was colossal in scale. So, to focus national energy, Beveridge drummed a call to action, which seemed inspired by ancient myths.

In English folklore, the land was the domain of giants.

In one myth, a thousand years before the Romans arrived, a Trojan called Brutus landed in Devon, fought the giants and won, becoming the first King of Albion – a new civilisation.

In 1942, Beveridge said that ‘five giant evils’ stood in the way of progress.

He named them Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness.

These words sound so old-fashioned now.

In modern social policy terms: social security, the NHS, education, housing, employment.

The vision was to provide for citizens ‘from the cradle’.

So, as a child might put it - having enough money, being healthy, going to school, having a decent home, and good jobs for when I grow up.

From 1945, post-Beveridge governments rose to his challenge and began to defeat the giants.

The good news stories in **The Big Ambition** descend directly from Beveridge’s achievement.

- > 92% of children say they live with people who love and care for them.
- > 83% agree they have quality time with their family.
- > 75% say they have great teachers. Children in schools where the majority receive Free School Meals are more likely to say they have supportive teachers. The majority say they enjoy school overall.
- > 86% of children say their family has what they need to support them.

These figures are a reminder of the resilience and potential of the society England’s children are being raised in.

In global terms, to grow up in England is profoundly fortunate. It remains a place of huge possibility. So how can we transform the doubts and fears in **The Big Ambition** into something more confident and coherent?

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## RESTORING BELIEF

“Government should let children follow their dreams and make them more motivated and by giving them a spark of courage such as telling them they can be whatever they want to be or just in general give them a spark of confidence” | **Girl, 8**

It is clear that recent years have summoned up huge questions about the past – monarchy, empire, cold and ancient wars; about the present – how to recover from plague, or cope with lightspeed progress in artificial intelligence; and how to think about a future, when old certainties feel less assured, and we are internally preoccupied with cultural division and what sort of society we are trying to build. It is also hard to think about these questions clearly when basic responsibilities like dealing with the cost of living are so pressing.

Whatever answers have been proposed, it seems children are unconvinced by them. So, a difficult scenario has emerged – young people feel responsible, but not empowered.

When Beveridge’s proposals were announced, the response was overwhelming – nine out of ten approved. He became a national hero overnight.

Would a modern Beveridge’s call to action work in England today?

Gareth Southgate’s Dear England letter came close. It has since become a hit play.

As that story was being written, another reappeared on the English stage – Jerusalem – a revival of a St George’s Day story about a modern Falstaff, who parties his way through life, until his tall tales meet a reckoning.

Faced with capture, the anti-hero Byron strikes a drum in the dark of an English wood, and summons the giants of Albion to help him.

He begins to chant their ancient names.

Ascapart. Blunderbore. Colbrand. Cormoran.

Gogmagog. Goram. The Giant of Penhill.

Galligantus. Jack-in-Irons. Jack o’ Legs. Rebecks.

Thunderdell. Vili. Ve. Vincent. Yernagate.

Suddenly behind him, the trees begin to shake.

We never find out how or why.

The difference between Beveridge’s and Byron’s giants is a question of values and of faith.

For Beveridge, the nation-builder, giants are metaphoric foes to be subdued.

For Byron, the mischief-maker, they’re his allies. And they really exist.

So, who is right?

To answer that question, here are another 16 names.

Aaliya. Ben. Emmanuel. Evie. Maximilian. Maya. Mehul. Penelope. Poppy. Rebecca. Rhea. Rylie. Sofia. Sumaira. Tamar. Zara.

Each of them has volunteered to represent England’s children as part of the Children’s Commissioner’s work to give young people a voice in the future direction of this country.

What these names tell us is that in 2024, we don’t need to know whether or not we believe in giants.

Myths have their place, but our real-life national story is being written and re-written every day.

Whether our footsteps are large or small, each of us leaves an imprint of colossal importance, and the soil evolves.

To these ambassadors, and to all children in England who have put their faith in this work, we can simply say, we believe in you.

Paths have opened in the wood.

Let England shake under your feet.

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READ THE  
FULL REPORT:



The Children's Commissioner for England,  
Dame Rachel de Souza, and her Youth  
Ambassadors welcome you to the launch of

## THE BIG AMBITION

Monday 25th March, 3pm-5pm  
Terrace Pavilion, House of Commons

An afternoon of powerful speeches, moving performance and uplifting music

Opening music from the National Children's Orchestra  
- Elizabethan Serenade by Ronald Binge

Closing music from the London Oratory Choir  
- Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day by David Willcocks; You Raise Me Up  
(special arrangement for **The Big Ambition** by James Speakman)

With thanks to Robin Walker MP and to First News for their support of today's event.

The data and findings from **The Big Ambition** survey are being taken forward by First News to underpin its Children's Party manifesto in the run-up to the General Election. Sky's FYI programme will broadcast a special edition of the show dedicated to **The Big Ambition** this weekend.



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