



THE
BIG
AMBITION

 **CHILDREN'S
COMMISSIONER**

THE BIG AMBITION FOR EDUCATION
APRIL 2024

The Big Ambition for Education

“Invest more in schools.” – Girl, 11.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Commissioner has found that children aren't absent from school because they don't want to learn. On the contrary, they are desperate to learn but everyday thousands of children find themselves without the support that they need to engage in education and attend school. They have told the office about the barriers they face to accessing the support they need in school and about the reforms they want to see to make schools better.

What needs to happen

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

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

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child has access to a brilliant education

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

What is needed to get there:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

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

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

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

What is needed to get there:

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

"Invest more money into school trips." – Girl, 13.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- The school attendance rates.
 - The academic attainment of children in schools.
 - The number of children who are persistently or severely absent, including the number of children with additional needs who are persistently or severely absent.
 - The number of children whose attendance improves.
 - The number of children who report that they enjoy going to school.
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Ambition 3: Every child who needs additional support to engage in education can access it easily.

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

What is needed to get there:

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

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

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

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

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

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

- **A school nurse in every school** who can work with youth workers, paediatricians, public health leaders and other partners in a local Integrated Care System to identify and support children who are particularly

at risk of poor health - including children with experiences of poverty, violence and abuse, difficult home lives, and exclusion from education.

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

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

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

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

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

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

What is needed to get there:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

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



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