



THE
BIG
AMBITION

 **CHILDREN'S
COMMISSIONER**

THE BIG AMBITION FOR CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE
APRIL 2024

The Big Ambition for Children's Social Care

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

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

- 63% of responses by and for children with a social worker agreed they are treated fairly, compared to 71% for children without one.
- 67% of responses by and for children in a secure setting agreed that they had somewhere to call home, compared to 93% of all children or 52% for children in a mental health hospital.
- 55% of responses by and for children in a secure setting agreed that their family had everything they need to support them, compared to 45% for children in a children's home or 39% of children in a mental health hospital.
- 32% of responses by and for children in a secure setting agreed that they had great teachers who support them, compared to 77% for all children.
- 10% of responses by and for children in a secure setting agreed that people who run the country listen to their views, compared to 22% of all children.

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

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

Children with social workers and those in care deserve to have lives that are as fulfilling, rounded and happy as any other child, but the results of *The Big Ambition* show that we still have some way to go until this is the case.

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

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

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

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

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

The Children's Commissioner has carried out several major pieces of research with children in care, for example on siblings who are separated in the care system, looked after children who are not in school, homeless 16-and-17-year-olds, and children's access to advocacy. What came through clearly in those reports was:

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

What needs to happen

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

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

5. Every child who needs secure care receives it in an integrated, homely environment. All Young Offenders Institutions are closed.

Ambitions

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

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

What is needed to get there:

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

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

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

- **Social workers, advocates and other professionals are supported to build deeper relationships with the children they support.** Children need to have reliable and consistent relationships to be able to speak openly and honestly. Particularly for social workers, the number of children they support at any one time,

and the number of times a child's social worker changes, should be monitored at the national level. There also needs to be a national strategy to increase the number of well trained and skilled advocates.

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

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

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

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

What is needed to get there:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- **Every local authority has a specialist safeguarding team to address extra-familial harms.** As part of a revised Children’s Act, there should be clear expectations around the need for specific teams which have a focus on addressing the harms that children face in their wider environment, including relationship abuse, criminal exploitation and sexual exploitation. These local teams would work closely with youth

services, offending services, and community provision to provide an expert response. In 2022/3 there were 14,420 children in England, or roughly 100 per local authority, known to children's social care because of 'child criminal exploitation'. These children will need a different approach, that involves their peers, to those facing harm in the home.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

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

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

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

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

What is needed to get there:

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

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

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

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

- **All homes provide care, not just support.** Currently, 16- and 17-year-olds can be placed in settings which legally only provide support, and not care. Universal care standards, that align regulatory framework

across care settings and ensure that every setting caring for a child is legally able to provide care, must be introduced.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- There is an increase in the proportion of 16- and 17-year-olds who present as homeless who get placed in care under section 20, rather than being supported under section 17 and housing legislation.

- More children are placed in accordance with their care plan, including more children placed with siblings when that is in their best interests.
- Increase in the numbers of foster carers, including specialist foster carers.
- There is greater stability of care placements, with children experiencing few placement moves and placement breakdowns.
- Children report greater levels of satisfaction with their care.

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

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

What is needed to get there:

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

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

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

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

- **Care leavers are supported with their educational goals.** Care leavers should be able to access year round accommodation when attending higher education, and the value of the higher education bursary

should be increased. UCAS should provide a consistent, single source of information about every institution's offer for care leavers, and a quality kitemark scheme should be introduced to acknowledge those settings that provide the best offer.

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

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

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

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

What is needed to get there:

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

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

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

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

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

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

- **In the interim, other changes are needed in secure custodial settings:**
 - All settings are registered with the Department for Education and required to provide the same minimum hours of education as other schools. All settings are registered to be able to enter children for exams.
 - Children have access to free calls with family, and all settings should offer best practice face-to-face family visits.
 - All children must be able to leave their cells for at least 8 hours every day.
 - Every setting offer evidence-based interventions to reduce violence in settings, using a toolkit developed by the Youth Endowment Fund.
 - Every child in a secure setting have looked after child status, and therefore care leaver support until 25.
 - Every child receives an NHS mental health assessment on entry, and can be urgently transferred to mental health provision if needed, or be able to access in person mental health provision within the setting.

- No girl should be placed in a majority male secure setting. There should be a national plan for the placement and care for girls in custody.
- Every child receives a NHS neurodevelopmental assessment on entry, and a plan for their care is co-produced regardless of whether they meet a threshold for an Education, Health and Care Plan.
- Force cannot be used to maintain 'good order' and pain-inducing force is banned. A child protection referral is made if it occurs and children have immediate access to support.
- Social worker visits happen in person, on at least a monthly basis, and this data is collected by Ofsted.
- There is a national improvement plan to get every setting rated as good or better across all inspection tests.
- Children on remand are not placed in a YOI or STC.
- The youth justice system must consider the impact on a child's education when making remand and sentencing decisions, and is responsible for ensuring that all children on remand are able to sit exams.

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

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

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

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

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

- Children are cared for in therapeutic environments that focus on rehabilitation.



Sanctuary Buildings,
20 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

020 7783 8330
www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

 @childrenscommissioner

 @ChildrensComm

 @childrenscommissionersoffice