



THE
BIG
AMBITION

 **CHILDREN'S
COMMISSIONER**

THE BIG AMBITION FOR SUPPORTING FAMILIES
APRIL 2024

The Big Ambition for Families

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

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

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

The Big Ambition results show that most children and parents feel their families are able to do what families want to – provide for their members, enjoy time together, and give children the stable and loving start they need. However, this is sadly not the case for all families. When families are living in poverty and experiencing extreme financial hardship, and without the time to enjoy being a family, small challenges can grow into insurmountable problems.

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

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

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

The Big Ask survey of 557,000 children showed that the vast majority – 94% - of children were either happy or 'ok' with their family life. 97% were happy or 'ok' with their family's ability to buy the things they needed.¹ In the *Big Ambition*, fewer children – 86% - said that their family had everything they needed to support them. However, the 6% of children who were not happy with family life were 9 times more likely to be unhappy with their life overall. Family is central to a child's well-being. It is also central to their hopes and ambitions for the future.

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

This review identified that family casts a protective net around its members, with those who have a strong family doing better on a range of different measures. It showed that families want to turn to their extended family network for support, and argued that this should be supported and encouraged. Parents and carers spoke about how parenting could be deeply challenging, as well as joyful, and that there needed to be non-stigmatising, universal support to help them do the best possible job they could. And they needed relief from the many pressures on family life – particularly balancing work and childcare.

Children and families also spoke about how sometimes things could get too much to deal with, and that they needed more intensive support from services. But too often they felt these weren't designed for families, but for

¹ Children's Commissioner, *The Big Answer*, 2021, [Link](#).

² Children's Commissioner, *Family and its protective effect: Part 1 of the Independent Family Review*, 2022, [Link](#).

³ Children's Commissioner, *A positive approach to parenting: Part 2 of the Independent Family Review*, 2022, [Link](#).

individuals who exist in isolation. They wanted services to understand their complex family dynamics, to be non-judgemental, flexible and there for the long term.

What needs to happen

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

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

Ambitions

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

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

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

What is needed to get there:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

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

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

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

What is needed to get there:

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

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

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

“Put children first.” – Girl, 11.

- **A public information campaign, that opens up a conversation about the challenges of parenting** and normalises the seeking of help and accessing information or parenting courses. There is a single dedicated website for families to access about information and advice about parenting from antenatal to 18, with links to local Family Information Services. This would build on successful, existing resources such as the Start for Life website which provides parenting information for the early years.

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

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

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Examples of how progress can be measured:

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



Sanctuary Buildings,
20 Great Smith Street
London SW1P 3BT

020 7783 8330
www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk

 @childrenscommissioner

 @ChildrensComm

 @childrenscommissionersoffice