



THE
BIG
AMBITION

 **CHILDREN'S
COMMISSIONER**

THE BIG AMBITION FOR YOUTH WORK
APRIL 2024

The Big Ambition for Youth Work

“Provide more opportunities to take part in locally run sports and activities which are free and safe to attend (football, swimming, tennis...). Provide more teenager run centres or youth clubs so you can socialise and meet different people instead of just being online.” – Girl, 15.

- In *The Big Ambition*, 72% of children agreed that they had fun activities to do near where they live.
- Children are most likely to agree they have fun things to do when they are aged 9 (82%). This decreases with age, with only 54% of 17-year-olds agreeing.
- 62% of children reported to have a special educational need and/or disability agreed they had fun activities to do, compared to 73% of those without.
- 69% of children with a social worker agreed, compared to 70% of those without.
- Children around the country had different views – 50% of children in Knowsley agreed, compared to 82% in Trafford.

It is positive that the majority of children agree that there are fun activities in their local area, but this is far from unanimous. In focus groups children discussed the need for more spaces for children to go where they can enjoy themselves, and feel safe. They wanted clean places to play, to pursue their interests, or simply to spend time with their friends.

Children also spoke about not feeling involved in decisions being made about how their local areas were designed, and how spaces could be used. Children make use of space in a very different way to adults, and their views and needs must be taken into account.

Some children also expressed that they felt access to more fun activities and youth work would also bring down children’s level of involvement with crime.

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

The Children's Commissioner has engaged with over a million children, parents and carers since taking up her post in 2021. She has explored in detail how children use their local areas, their opportunities to play, and to participate in activities they enjoy.

In the Children's Commissioner's *The Big Ask* survey of over 550,000 children, just over half (52%) of children were happy with the choice of things to do in their local area, and this became more of an issue as children got older, although of course this was in the context of pandemic lockdowns. They also raised similar issues about access to somewhere outside that they can go to have fun.

It is clear that much more is needed to meet children's ambitions on this front. A good youth work offer means that children and young people have opportunities to play and engage in enjoyable activities, as is their right under the UNCRC. But this engagement can have much wider positive ramifications. A strong youth work offer should mean that those at risk of becoming involved with violence and criminality are identified, and diverted to more positive choices. It can also help to tackle the school attendance crisis – with schools and youth sectors working closely together, school can become a more trusted, enjoyable place for children at risk of disengaging with education.

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. To achieve that within support for youth work will mean achieving the following ambitions:

1. Every child has access to play and fun things to do, and places to spend time with their friends.
2. Every child has access to high-quality youth provision in their local area.
3. Every child is supported by services that work together with youth work, to prevent issues escalating.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child has access to play and fun things to do, and spaces to spend time with their friends.

“The government should put more parks around different places so people can have the same amount as fun I have.” – Girl, 11.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every local authority completes a local child safety audit to map and improve the places that children don't feel safe, and consults with children when making changes to public space.** Children use public spaces in different ways to adults and have different priorities, but their views are often overlooked. Local authorities must consult with children, including those with different needs, about what improvements to the built environment are needed, such as lighting on school routes and in parks, access to playgrounds and open space for games, and safe and accessible transport.

“They need to listen to the children more and ask us what we would like done in our area” – Boy, 14.

“Listen to people's views and make [city] a better place for children with and without disabilities so they can go out without feeling scared. Make more playground that include all ages so that people of all ages can access and have fun. Make playgrounds and parks entertaining.” – Girl, 12.

- **The Government reviews children's access to safe places to play.** This review would be based on local child safety audits, and support local improvements with a national play strategy and an investment fund.

“Build parks near children that don't have parks near them.” – Boy, 7.

- **Every child has access to an expanded out of school offer.** Sport, drama and other enrichment opportunities would be part of this offer at the end of the school day. Where families were unable to pay the cost of enrichment opportunities, schools would be able to draw upon funding to provide them free of charge. There would be a target for all children to have five hours per week of PE or physical activity in schools.

“Make after school activities and half term clubs accessible for all.” – Boy, 11.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Number of children who are satisfied with the things to do in their local area reported in national surveys.
- Number of children who feel safe in their local area reported in national surveys.
- Number of children reporting they take part in at least five hours of physical activity a week.
- Number of children regularly attending enrichment activities, such as art, drama or sport.

Ambition 2: Every child has access to high-quality youth provision in their local area.

“Open more youth centres with youth workers children can go to if they need to speak to someone.” – Girl, 14.

What is needed to get there:

- **Children can easily find information about things to do in their local area via a directory of youth provision.** There is an accessible and child-friendly system for children and young people to discover opportunities to play, receive support, or access statutory and non-statutory youth provision in their local area. This directory, which could be based on the NYA Census, coordinated nationally and used to map provision and identify gaps in the youth offer at a local level.

“They should inform children more of all the opportunities occurring in [city] that could benefit their education. For example, there could be a trusted website especially for announcing great local opportunities for children, as it is often difficult for them to find them out themselves, especially when their parents aren't from the UK.” – Girl, 14.

- **The Government has a national formula for funding local youth provision, based on the child population.** Local authorities would be funded to ensure a sufficient baseline of youth provision. Currently, there is huge local variation in youth work provision. Predictable and secure revenue, as part of well-coordinated and long-term funding, is needed to ensure a high-quality and reliable youth offer for every young person across the country.

“Supply the youth club with more funding so they could supply us with more activities and equipment.” – Girl, 11.

- **The Government has a long-term youth provision strategy, based on local decision-making.** This would include requiring every area to have a local youth partnership enabled to lead on strategy, commissioning, and partnership between local youth provision and national and local government.

“Fund more money for places to go and have a good day and enjoy activities.” – Boy, 10.

- **National and local youth strategy should protect and support open-access youth work provision.** Universal youth work – open to all young people and delivered in a centre or elsewhere – is the basis for good youth work, building local expertise and capacity of the youth sector and fosters the trusted relationships with children and local communities that targeted services are built on.

“Add more things to do around where I live and make affordable. Fund universal youth services.” – Boy, 12.

- **Public bodies are required to make facilities available at cost to non-statutory youth work organisations working with children.** Much of the most established and trusted youth work is currently delivered by charities and the third sector. However, venue costs are consistently raised as an issue in provision. By introducing a duty on public bodies, not only would this be addressed, but it would also foster closer relationships between youth work, schools, and other organisations.

“Fund sports and activities for all children of all ages because it’s not fair for the kids whose parents can’t afford the sports.” – Boy, 11.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Every child has access to sufficient local youth provision.

Ambition 3: Every child is supported by services that work together with youth work, to prevent issues escalating.

“There should be more activities for the youth to do/partake in and make them feel included no matter their background to lower the amount of crime.” – Girl, 15.

What is needed to get there:

- **Youth sector organisations are participants in multi-agency attendance forums.** Local leaders would convene multi-agency forums to discuss the specific local factors driving school absences and the role different agencies play in improving school attendance. Youth workers would be invited to these forums to share their insights and to accept referrals to support children with a history of poor attendance.

"I also think there should be a big push on youth organisations to get more kids making the key relationships they should have with their youth workers." – Girl, 15.

- **Every police force area has a SAFE taskforce and a Violence Reduction Unit, which is funded to commission evidence-based youth work to reduce violence.** Violence Reduction Units bring together partners to tackle violence in their local areas, and have established best practice models that would be rolled out across the country. The Home Office would fund them to monitor the impact of evidence-based youth work, and agree the long-term commissioning of those that are shown to have a positive impact.

"All children should be able to live without violence." – Girl, 9.

- **All police officers are able to make a 'positive activities referral' for young people they interact with.** This would provide a voluntary, non-justice pathway for children that police have concerns about but do not meet the threshold for statutory services. The referral, to a funded and locally commissioned service, would allow children to receive support from a key worker and access positive relationships.

"Police should ensure we are safe." – Boy, 8.

- **Youth work is represented via the local youth partnership in multi-agency safeguarding arrangements.** The statutory safeguarding partners are currently health, police and local authorities. Youth workers operate widely in health, justice, and education settings, and their knowledge and expertise based on trust with young people is vital for safeguarding. The Children's Commissioner wants to see education made the fourth statutory partner, and for youth sector organisations to be able to contribute at the strategic decision making via the local youth partnership.

"In areas of deprivation more needs youth club, youth workers, sporting activities need to be on offer for children and young people. Some children are not lucky enough to have a positive role model in their parents or carers so often a teacher, coach or youth worker can be that person to inspire them and believe in them." – Parent of girl, 11.

- **Ofsted works with the national and regional youth sector to assure itself of high standards of safeguarding in youth provision, encouraging quality and driving accountability.** Youth services are a place that children must always be able to feel safe, with trusted adults. Currently these services are not subject to safeguarding inspections, and Ofsted should review these arrangements.

"More out of hours activities in a safe environment." – Youth worker on behalf of girl, 17.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- More children are diverted away from crime and the justice system.

Children's confidence in the police is increased.



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