



THE
BIG
AMBITION

 **CHILDREN'S
COMMISSIONER**

THE BIG AMBITION FOR A BETTER WORLD
APRIL 2024

The Big Ambition for a Better World

“The government should listen to children's ideas more and children shouldn't have to pass their idea to an adult to make it happen. children should be able to change the world too.” – Girl, 11.

- In *The Big Ambition*, only 22% of children and young people agreed that people who run the country listened to what they had to say. This was the most negatively answered question in the survey.
- Older young people were less likely to agree with the statement compared to younger children; responses by or for 8-year-olds were the most likely to agree, while 17-year-olds were the least likely.
- A little over half (52%) of responses by children agreed with the statement ‘You feel empowered to change issues you care about’. Agreement varied by age, with responses by or from children aged 9 most likely to agree (71%), but less than half of teenagers and under-6s agreed.
- In response to the statement ‘Their thoughts about the future are listened to’, 70% of adults responding on behalf of children agreed.
- Overall, 70% of respondents agreed with the statement ‘You are treated fairly’. Adults responding on behalf of children more likely to agree (82%) than when children responded on their own behalf (68%). Younger children and adults responding on their behalf were also more likely to agree: 90% of 4-year-olds agreed, compared to 55% of 15-year-olds.

One of the strongest messages identified from *The Big Ambition*, was that children understand the world, they care about it, and want to have their voices listened to on how to tackle key issues facing children across England.

However, only 22% of children agreed that people who run the country listened to what they had to say. Children said that this affects them in ways large and small, and on local, national and global scales. It means that when decisions are being made about building local parks, they are not asked for their views, although their desire for safe places to play and spend times with friends is palpable.

It means that when the national conversation turns to housing, it is not about what it feels like to be a child in temporary accommodation, who has to move schools in the middle of an exam year, but instead about mortgages and getting a foot on the housing ladder. And it means when it comes to elections, manifestos, and promises from their local MPs, children feel left out in the cold. They feel that because they don't have a vote, the issues

closest to their heart are never addressed. Even when they are talked *about*, they are rarely provided the opportunity to be *heard*.

However, children proposed many practical solutions to ensure their voices were heard, as well as ambitious visions for what childhood could and should look like for their generation.

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

The Children's Commissioner has engaged with a million children, parents and carers since taking up her post in 2021. The Commissioner and her office have undertaken hundreds of visits across England, meeting thousands of children, including the most vulnerable, to ensure the voices of all groups of children are heard. These visits have been conducted across a diverse range of settings, from secure settings, hospitals, children's homes, schools and youth groups, both virtually and in-person.

The Children's Commissioner also directly involves children in decision making and policy development through her Children's Advisory Board, Care Experienced Advisory Board and team of Youth Ambassadors.

In the Children's Commissioner's *The Big Ask* survey of over 550,000 children in 2021, children were also passionate about having their voices heard on the topics that mattered most to them. This matters to them not just on issues related to childhood, but on global and intergenerational issues too. For example, 39% of children said that a healthy environment was their biggest worry for the future, and they want their views on this to be heard.

What needs to happen

Children believe that governments can transform their lives for the better. And they are right. Governments have shown over the past thirty years that it is possible to commit to eradicate the harms of smoking, to narrow the education gap between rich and poor children or reduce child poverty. This takes energy, political will, and commitment. This paper sets out how with a few clear ambitions, shared across government, underpinned by action that can be both radical and practical the lives of children can be dramatically improved.

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 following ambitions must be supported:

1. Every child feels empowered to speak out about issues that they care about.
2. Every child's thoughts, feelings, views, and ambitions are listened to.

Ambitions

Ambition 1: Every child feels empowered to speak out about issues that they care about.

"All young people should be more empowered to have their voices heard and acted upon"- Young woman, 18.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every school and alternative provider runs a student voice council.** These councils should meet regularly with senior leaders and decision makers. These meetings should inform key decisions affecting children's education.

"They should listen to school and the pupils more, like student councils." – Girl, 14.

- **Schools should develop oracy and PSHE programmes** which give children the chance to debate key topics which affect their lives. Children should be supported to learn about these issues and to debate them with their peers on a regular basis.

"I think the government should introduce some new extra-curricular topics that are about learning to and out from other people and be in the top one percent of people who have made it to be successful in the modern world (e.g. social skills, how to talk confidently to an audience, how to set up a business, how to pay bills wisely etc)." – Girl, 14.

- **Every elected official establishes a regular forum to hear from children about their priorities.** This may include MP surgeries for children. When advertising these forums, elected officials should consider how they can reach a wide range of children from all backgrounds within their constituency.

"I believe that [my MP] should be active in the community. whether that's at a school or location youth group to inspire/teach young people the ways of life in and with politics." – Boy, 16.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- Number of children who feel they are empowered to make their voice heard reported in national surveys.
- More young people, from a diversity of backgrounds and regions across England, and particularly vulnerable children, should have the opportunity to take part in youth and school councils, youth parliaments and other local and national groups.

Ambition 2: Every child's thoughts, feelings, views, and ambitions are listened to.

"[...] We need youth summits, youth parliaments, chances to speak to MPs and councils. Young people should be allowed to pitch their ideas to councils". – Girl, 15.

What is needed to get there:

- **Every political party commits to writing a manifesto for children and participating in a leaders' debate about childhood.** The manifesto should set out what they will do for children, and how they will engage them in political decision making.

"They should actually take younger people into account when they are making their manifestos." – Boy, 16.

- **Select Committees hear regularly from children.** Every Select Committee holds at least one inquiry per session into issues affecting children and ensure that they directly from children in those inquiries. In every inquiry, Select Committees should consider whether they should engage with children on the topic at hand, this would be appropriate in instances where the inquiry directly affects children or is likely to affect their future.

"Incorporate our views and needs into the legal system and not just what the government officials think will benefit us the most. Engage with young people more and make their voices feel heard instead of just saying that our views matter." – Girl, 16.

- **Child rights impact assessments are conducted on every policy development**, as well as draft legislation, regulations and statutory guidance. These are published in a publicly accessible database.

"The government should listen more to what children and the youth want, visit schools, be engaged and be proactive on our views." – Girl, 14.

- **Children are consulted on every piece of legislation and policy reform that affects them.** Policy consultations at the national and local level are specifically designed to engage children and gather their views. Every consultation should come with a child-friendly version and a strategy for engaging with children. All government guidance affecting children has a children's version.

"I think they need to listen to children more as it is our future and the world that we will have to live in." – Girl, 11.

- **The Children's Commissioner continues to run her Youth Ambassador Programme** and recruits another group of Youth Ambassadors for 2024/25.

"Involve children in making policies that affect them and in general decisions." – Boy, 12.

Examples of how progress can be measured:

- The government and parliament involves children's in decision making and policy development in a systematic way.
- Number of children who are satisfied with how they are represented in wider political decision-making reported in national surveys.
- Number of children who feel they have their voices heard reported in national surveys.



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