

Business Plan

2025-26

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



The year ahead - 2025-26 - will be my penultimate year as Children's Commissioner for England. It will also mark 20 years since the establishment of this office—a milestone that offers an opportunity to reflect on the progress we have made and a reminder about the many urgent challenges that remain. More than 25 years since the death of Victoria Climbié, and in the shadow of the death of Sara Sharif, the work of this office has never been more important. The past tells us what happens when we fail to protect children. The future must be different. I will spend my remaining time as Commissioner making sure it is.

During my time so far as Children's Commissioner I have seen clearly that children are often an afterthought for policy makers. They are too often overlooked. That is particularly true as the country responds to new pressures or to severe crises: whether that is how children were treated during the pandemic, or as small boat crossings increased, or in response to the 2024 summer riots. It is also happening as policy makers debate the introduction of assisted dying. Children's views are too often not only unheard: they are not even considered.

With a new government in place, now is the moment to reshape how society considers childhood and children in England. Over the next two years, I will double down on ensuring my work has the greatest impact possible. That means listening to children's voices, responding to them to change policy and

practice directly, and ultimately making sure that everyone working with children is striving to make England the best place to grow up. My job is to help make that happen, by bringing what a million children have told me about their experiences and aspirations to decision makers.

As part of this work, I will be launching my most ambitious data project yet - *Mapping Childhood* - using four years of research to pinpoint the best places to grow up in England. Where a child lives should never define their future. This data will drive targeted action where it is needed most. We must be as ambitious for children as they are for themselves, because they deserve to have childhoods that are full of joy, hope and happiness - regardless of their circumstances or where they come from.

Childhood is short, and children should never be passed between services or left waiting for the help they need. Over the course of their childhood, most children will rely on some form of specialist support – whether that is from social care, for special educational needs, or for health reasons. Those needs often overlap and interact. However, the way we support children is disjointed.

I will shine a light on the importance of putting children at the centre of the way we think about the challenges they face. That means thinking broadly about their needs not designing systems from the top down. Health, education, social care, and justice must work together, ensuring no child falls through the cracks. In particular, I will support the implementation of the consistent identifier - which has the capacity to be a transformational building block for services for children: almost uniformly, failures of children's services involve the failure to share information.

A key part of that story will be the role of schools. In September last year, I launched the biggest-ever survey of schools and colleges, gathering first-hand insights from close to 90% of all schools in England. The survey reveals a stark reality: schools are stepping in to provide essential frontline support for children where other services fall short. Alongside my Business Plan, I am publishing what schools have told me are their priorities and most pressing concerns, which will serve as the foundation for our extensive work on the role of schools in the wider community this year.

The Big Ambition survey told us that only one in five children feel listened to by politicians. I have spent the past year - and am now committing to spending the rest of my time as Commissioner - to changing how children are heard by the adults who make decisions about their lives.

I will listen to children's voices and they will continue to guide everything myself and my office do - through my network of Youth Ambassadors and my SEND panel, through our first conference for young people: the Festival of Childhood, and our newly established Young Voices Forum. As always, I will also continue to engage with young people through surveys and further engagement to embed their voices entirely into all of my work, and any call to action that I make.

Children should not be seen as passive members of society – they should be considered in every piece of legislation which will have an impact on their lives. Children's voices are at the heart of all our reports, and next year I am committing to producing child-friendly versions of our work for young people to be able to engage with. I am calling for all government departments and public bodies to do the same.

My Business Plan sets out our agenda for the year ahead and for my remaining time as Commissioner more broadly – but as always, my office and I will work in a responsive and dynamic way, to stay on top of what matters most to children.

There are still far too many children whose voices go unheard. Children who face shadows on their path that many of us could never imagine, let alone endure. Children like Sara Sharif. Our work has never been important or more urgent: when we say never in 2025, we must mean it.

Executive Summary

'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, *The Big Ambition*.

In everything that we do, we will deliver on our three year strategy to make sure every child feels listened to, to empower children to have their say, to improve children's policy and services, and to drive change that keeps children safe. All of this work is driven by our overarching goal of ensuring that England is the best place in the world to grow up.

One of the great strengths of the office is being able to work across the full range of areas that impact children's lives. This year the office will pay particular attention to ensuring all the public services that children rely on work for them. That will mean looking closely at three cross-cutting areas:

- **A system that works for children:** how to fix the foundations on which services for children are built, with a particular focus on systems for children with additional needs;
- **The role of schools in the wider system:** how they act, and can act, as hubs for support. This work is based on our largest ever survey of schools;
- **Mapping childhood:** using new data and drawing together four years of work to highlight differences and inequalities in children's lives depending on where they live.

As we deliver this cross-cutting work, we will carry out work across every thematic pillar identified by children through *The Big Ask*: **Better World, Community, Children's Social Care, Education, Family, Health, and Jobs and Skills**. We will continue to push for the change children told us they want to see in *The Big Ambition*, working towards each of the changes we called for under every pillar. We will do that work with the same ambition that children have for themselves. That often means pushing for change beyond the current agenda.

We will also continue to make use of the Commissioner's powers under section 2F of the Children Act 2004 to collect new and up to date data from public bodies to inform projects in the pipeline, and to

proactively respond to the emerging issues that matter most to children. Planned data requests include:

- The strip searching of children conducted by police in England and Wales;
- Children and young people's access to mental health services in England;
- Child victims of crime, including hate crimes, and children who stay in hospital after an injury from a sharp object such as a knife;
- The number and characteristics of children with disabilities at local authority level, and their access to services;
- Children living in illegal homes and under a Deprivation of Liberty Order;
- The workforce of health visitors in local authorities; and
- Children living in council-owned Bed & Breakfast accommodation.

Alongside this, we will continue to undertake visits under section 2E powers of the Children and Families Act 2014, which allows the office to enter settings for the purposes of interviewing children and understanding the care provided to them. This is particularly important for children living away from home. All of these visits directly inform the office's research.

A new government means there is a particular opportunity to drive radical change for children. The prize for doing that well is greater than just better public services: it will mean rebuilding the social contract with children.

Reflecting on 2024-25

In 2024-25, there were more than 950 mentions of the Children's Commissioner or the Children's Commissioner's office across print, online and broadcast media. Combining the available audience reach figures across all recorded mentions in national, regional, international, sector and trade press for 2024-25, there was a total opportunity to see in excess of 2 billion. This figure represents media outlets' reported reach figures and does not account for multiple exposures, meaning individuals may have had multiple opportunities to see coverage across different platforms and publications.

The office also maintained a strong presence in Parliament, with 86 mentions in 2024-25, including references in Parliamentary Questions (PQs), Select Committees, and legislative debates. These engagements reinforce our ability to influence policy and decisions affecting children's lives.

In 2024-25, the Commissioner undertook 98 visits, covering every region of England and touching on all key areas of our work, and carrying out extensive engagement with children, professionals, and frontline services. These included, but were not limited to, visits under section 2E powers of the Children and Families Act 2014 - to young offender institutions, reception centres for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, schools, children's homes and hospitals.

Over the past year, the office delivered an extensive body of research, policy reports, and thought leadership pieces, ensuring that children's lived experiences drive policy change. The office produced 19 reports, and published 106 blogs and statements on the CCo website, in addition to individual responses on a reactive basis to media requests responding to emerging issues, legislative changes, and sector-wide developments, ensuring a consistent and authoritative voice on matters affecting children. In order to do this, nine data requests were made under section 2F of the Children Act 2004, which allows the office to collect data relating to children and all public sector organisations in England.

Cross Cutting Work: 2025-26

A system that works for children

One of the crucial roles the Children's Commissioner's office plays is looking across services and systems that children rely on. Over the next two years CCo will focus on the need for radical reform in the way public services work for children.

Fixing the foundations

Children are ambitious but their expectations of the state are reasonable. They want to go to a local school with their friends, they want to get help quickly, and for services to work for them and be easy to navigate. They expect the services to work together and to be working towards the same goals.

This year, the Children's Commissioner's office will highlight the prize of making sure the state works for children. That will only happen through reform beyond individual public services. We will make the case for childhood to be taken more seriously, establishing a flight path to full incorporation of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

Throughout the office's work we will continue to make the case for the structural changes outlined in *The Big Ambition*. There has been some progress towards those, such as legislating for a consistent identifier and simplifying local authority funding. The office will ensure those changes lead to genuine improvements for children. That will include looking at how we can build new local institutions that can deliver and drive change for children for the long term.

Over the course of their childhood, most children will rely on some form of specialist support – whether that is from social care, for learning needs, or for health reasons. Those needs often overlap and interact – but the way we support children is often fragmented. This year, CCo will make the case that children's services should think about 'additional needs' in the round. We will build on our analysis of education, health, and care plans (EHCPs) looking more closely at much needed ambitious reform of the system to ensure it works for a wide range of additional needs.

That will include looking closely at the experiences of disabled children and of those children who rely on multiple services, building on our thinking of a single child plan, setting out how to make sure every child who needs support gets it, and that the professionals in their lives are pulling in the same direction.

That disconnect is worst for the most vulnerable children who often rely on support from multiple services. The Children's Commissioner's office will continue to shine a light on their challenges by listening to their voices, learning from their experiences and visiting them where they are growing up. As part of this work, the office will draw particular attention to 'never events' – the things that no child should experience in 2025. A child should never be inappropriately strip searched, sprayed with chemical incapacitant spray, admitted onto an adult hospital ward, or wait months for necessary healthcare treatment to begin. A homeless family should never be placed by a council in Bed & Breakfast accommodation. No child should live in constant fear of being legally assaulted by a parent.

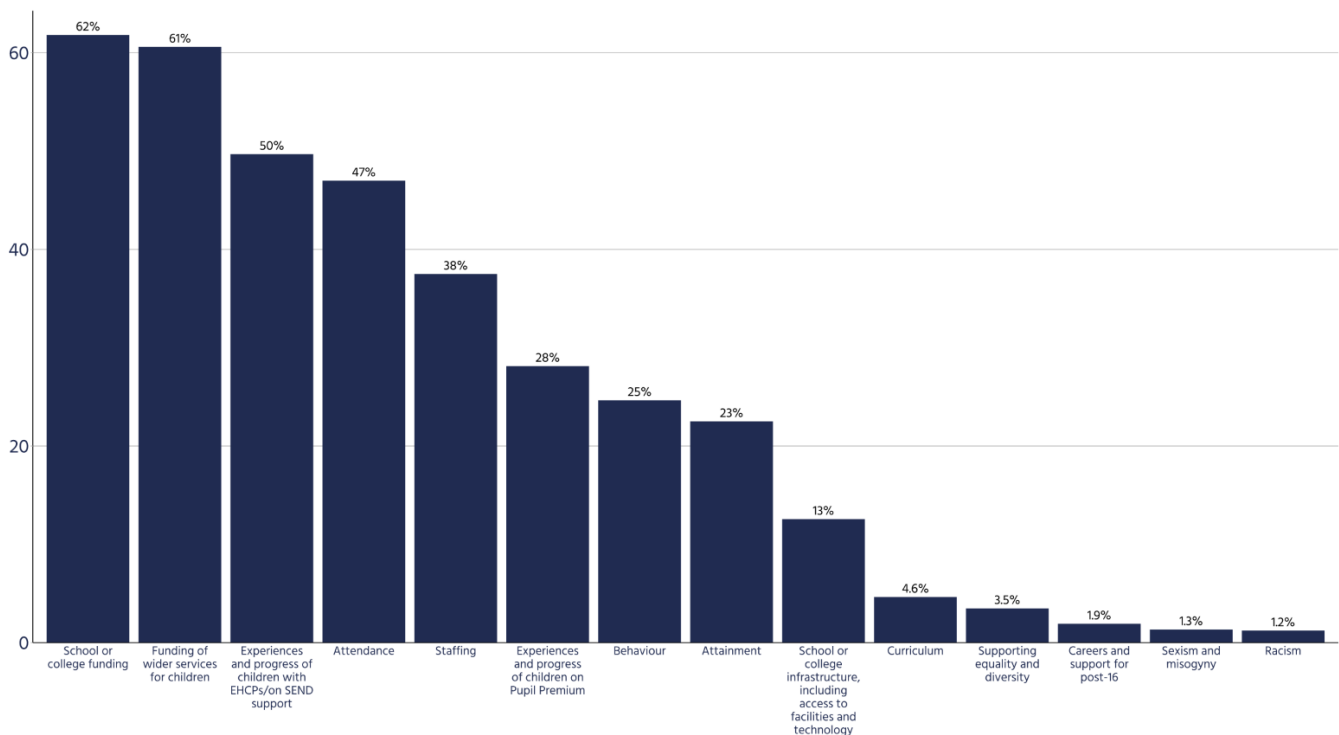
The role of schools in the wider system

A vital part of making the public services work for children is designing a school system that meets their needs. In September 2024, the Children’s Commissioner launched the School and College Survey—the largest of its kind—gathering insights from ~90% schools and colleges across the country.

Schools and colleges are not just places of learning; they have become lifelines. They are supporting children’s mental health, addressing a growing volume of special educational needs, safeguarding children inside and outside of school, and providing vital assistance to families in need. Yet, despite their tireless efforts, the education system is not equipped to sustain this expanding role.

When asked, *“What are the most concerning issues for children in your school or college?”* the top response was their own funding - highlighted by 62% of respondents. However, concern over funding wasn’t limited to education alone; 61% of schools and colleges also cited inadequate funding for wider children’s services as a critical issue.

Figure 1: Proportion of respondents identifying the most concerning issues for children in their school or college. Schools and colleges were asked to select their top four issues from a list of 14.



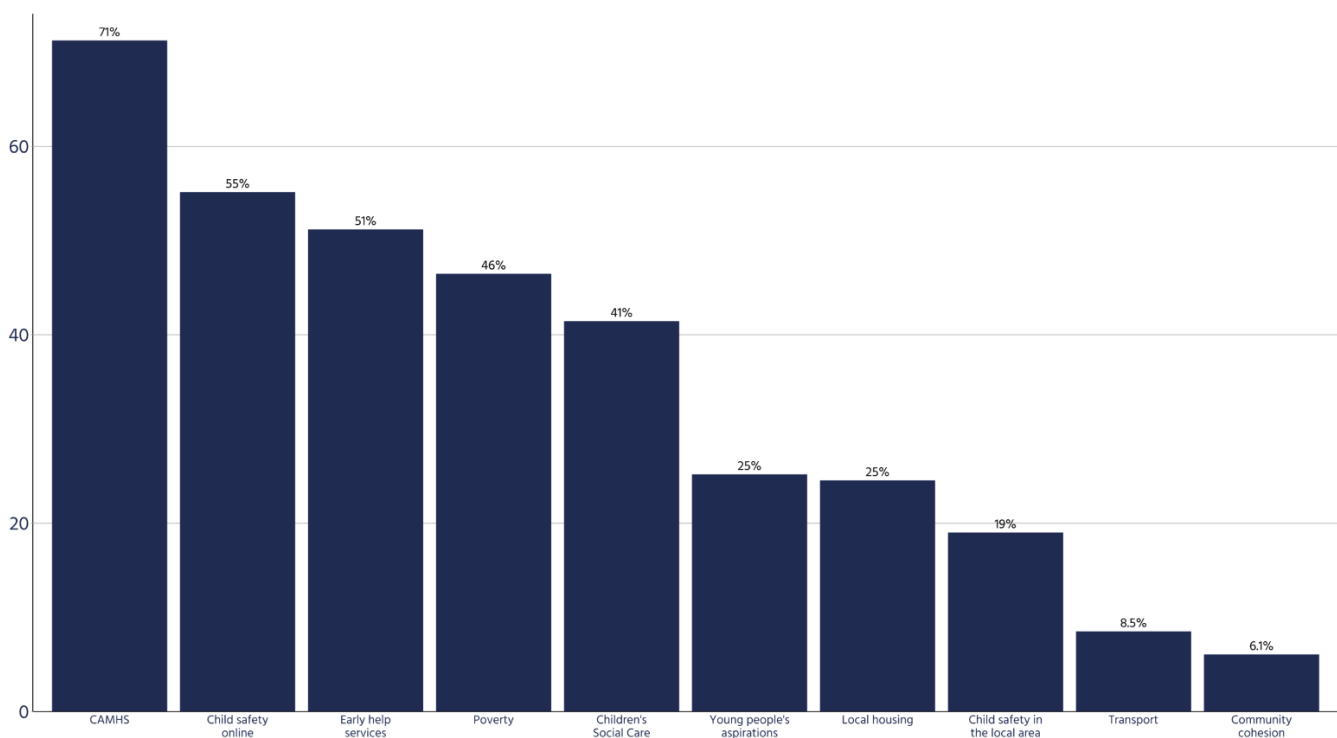
Schools and colleges expressed deep concerns about the support available for children with additional needs:

- 50% highlighted concerns about the experiences and progress of challenges for children with Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) or on SEN Support.
- 28% flagged issues affecting children on Pupil Premium.
- 38% identified staffing struggles as a major challenge. Without sufficient staff, educational settings cannot meet the growing demand for tailored support services challenge for their school or college.

The survey also asked schools and colleges about challenges facing children beyond education. The most pressing concerns schools and colleges reported in their local communities were:

- Children and adolescent's mental health services (CAMHS) – cited by 71% of respondents;
- Online safety – cited by 55%;
- Early Help services – cited by 51%; and
- Poverty – cited by 46%.

Figure 2: Proportion of respondents identifying the most concerning issues for children in their local area. Schools and colleges were asked to select their top four issues from a list of 10.



Schools and colleges are doing everything they can to support children—but they cannot do it alone. Over the coming year, the Children’s Commissioner’s office will conduct further analysis of these findings. The office will be using data from School and College Survey to highlight the role schools and wider services play in supporting children with a range of additional needs.

Mapping childhood

'What do adults expect us to do when we have nowhere to go, nothing to do?' – Girl, 15, The Big Ambition.

England should be the best place in the world to grow up, but there is too much variation in accessibility and quality of the services that children need. That is true within areas, as well as between them. Local services often do not take enough of a joined-up approach to planning, delivering and reviewing all local services for children and families. This harms children's experiences of services and their outcomes. *The Big Ambition* found that some of the largest differences between areas were in the percent of children who agreed they had fun things to do in their local area, and those feeling safe and protected in their local area.

A child's outcomes should never be dependent on their postcode: every child deserves the adults making decisions on their behalf, and the systems and services designed to support them, to have the same ambition as they have for themselves.

This year, the office will draw all of its work together through its most ambitious data project yet: *Mapping Childhood*. This will be a focal point for new work, as well as enabling us to draw on much of the data CCo has collected from public bodies and children themselves over the past four years on access, quality and outcomes, and new and existing published data, to tell a compelling story about childhood in England.

Based on measures of the things children tell us are important, interactive maps will act both as a resource for children, parents, schools and other services for children, and as an accountability tool to drive improvements. This will allow any tensions or trade-offs to be explored, such as between services for all children and services for the most vulnerable. It will highlight opportunities to invest in early intervention and prevention to stop problems escalating, causing avoidable problems for children and families and costly late intervention.



Better World

How we delivered in 2024-25

This year, the office has strengthened children's voices, expanded youth participation, and ensured their ideas shape national policy. The Better World pillar has been about engagement, accessibility, and ensuring every child feels heard.

Bringing young voices to the table

CCo launched the Youth Ambassadors programme, selecting 16 young people from across England to represent their peers. These ambassadors were chosen not just for their passion but for their lived experience, ensuring that the voices of care-experienced children, those with special educational needs and disabilities, and from marginalised backgrounds are part of every conversation.

The office launched *The Big Conversation* podcast, hosted by our Youth Ambassadors, which explores the major themes children raised in *The Big Ambition*. This has given young people a national platform to discuss their experiences, hopes, and the changes they want to see.

Creating a direct line to children

Last year, the office also introduced *The Big Conversation* survey, a permanent feature on the website that gives children and young people a direct way to contact us. This 'digital post box' will be promoted in publications and at events or visits, so that children from all backgrounds, including those who may not usually have a voice in policymaking, can reach the office directly with their concerns and ideas.

The office made the findings of *The Big Ambition* more accessible by launching *The Big Ambition Maps*, an interactive, publicly available map of all children's responses to the survey. This ensures that children, policymakers, and the public can see what children are saying directly.

A global perspective on childhood

The office has looked beyond England to learn from the best international models of education, health, justice, and social care. Visits to Australia, Norway, Switzerland and France have provide insights into alternative approaches to children’s services, particularly in youth justice and multi-agency collaboration, which will be used to inform our recommendations for change.

The year ahead

Every child should feel that their voice matters and that their opinions can drive real change. This year we will continue to focus on our ambitions, that:

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

Our Future, Our Voice: A Festival of Childhood

This year CCo is holding our inaugural event: Our Future, Our Voice: A Festival of Childhood. This will bring together children, young people, policymakers, and leaders to discuss issues that matter most to them. The festival will serve as a call to action for decision-makers to listen to and act on what young people say and highlight best practices in engaging with children, ensuring that young people's voices are central to policy discussions. This event will be a key moment in ensuring that young people have direct access to those in power, helping to shape policies that affect their future.

Youth Engagement: Embedding Children's Voices in Decision-Making

To ensure that young people are involved in shaping the work of the office, we have recruited 17 new Youth Ambassadors. This group has been designed to amplify the voices of under-represented children, including children with disabilities and additional needs, young carers and care-experienced young people and children from ethnic minority backgrounds. Additionally, the office has assembled a new SEND Panel of 15 young people who will shape work on special educational needs reform, ensuring that policy decisions reflect their experiences.

Global Citizenship

Children's rights and well-being are global issues, and the office will continue its global citizen work this year to learn from international best practice. This will include examining alternate models for education and care from other countries to inform policy recommendations in England. We will continue to regularly work with the offices of the Children's Commissioner of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and will proactively share research with our British and Irish Network of Ombudsman and Children's Commissioners (BINOCC) on matters that affect children across the UK.



Community

How we delivered in 2024-25

Offline

Over the past year, the office has driven forward vital work on justice, focusing on protecting children from harm, ensuring their rights are upheld, and advocating for systemic reforms to make the justice system fairer and more child-centred. Our work has involved deep analysis of children's experiences with the police, courts, and youth justice system, resulting in major reports and policy interventions.

Strip searching of children

CCo's third report on the strip searching of children in England and Wales confirmed that serious safeguarding failures persist, with 457 searches conducted on children between July 2022 and June 2023, 47% of which resulted in no further action. While the overall number of searches is declining, and safeguarding referrals increased, Black children remain four times more likely to be searched than their peers. This work shone a light on the need for urgent reforms, including stricter guidance, increased oversight, and a shift in police culture to prioritise children's safety first. This year the office has also advised on the portrayal of a permitted strip search of a teenage girl in a storyline for BBC EastEnders, which aired on March 25.

Listening to child victims of crime

Through the office's report *Children's Experiences as Victims of Crime*, we provided a platform for children who have been victims of serious crime, exposing barriers to reporting crimes, traumatic experiences in the justice system, and a lack of proper support, with 92% of child victims of sexual and domestic abuse not having access to a specialist advocate. CCo has used these findings to push for child-centred reforms in victim support services, ensuring children receive trauma care and legal protections. The office campaigned to ensure the distinct needs and experiences of children were

reflected in the Victims and Prisoners Act, which received Royal Assent in May 2024, including successfully pushing for changes to the law so that children who have not reported the crime are recognised as victims, and child victims must be given due regard in the new Victims Code.

Children's involvement in the 2024 riots

In response to the violent unrest across England in 2024, the office published *Children's Involvement in the 2024 Riots*, that investigated why children got involved, their experiences of the justice system, and how to prevent similar incidents in the future. This research reinforced the need for rehabilitation, and trust-building between children and the police.

The educational journeys of children in secure settings

Through the office's report, *The educational journeys of children in secure settings*, CCo looked at the educational experiences of these children, before and during their time in secure settings. The report found that these children are disproportionately more likely to have had lengthy gaps in their education, with more than half (54%) out of education for at least one academic year prior to entering a secure setting, some for more than three. As a result, the office set out a clear vision for what the youth justice system could be for these children.

Online

Over the past year, the Children's Commissioner's office has shaped the national conversation on online safety, ensuring children's voices shape policy, regulation, and industry standards. Our work has focused on strengthening legal protections, improving platform accountability, and ensuring that children's digital experiences are safer by design.

Exposing the reality of online harms

A major milestone last year was the publication of the office's online safety report, *"I've Seen Horrible Things"*, which provided first-hand evidence from children on the dangers they face online. Drawing on insights from *The Big Ambition*, this report:

- highlighted the prevalence of harmful content including child sexual abuse material, self-harm and eating disorder content, and algorithm-driven harm;
- exposed tech companies' failures to remove harmful material quickly or prevent children from being exposed to it; and
- called for urgent action from government and industry, pushing for faster implementation of the Online Safety Act and stronger regulation by Ofcom.

Shaping online safety regulation

We also engaged extensively in shaping online safety regulation by submitting responses to key consultations, including:

- The Science and Technology Committee Inquiry into online harms;
 - The Illegal Harms Code and Children's Code, ensuring stronger protections against inappropriate and exploitative content; and
 - the Statement of Strategic Priorities and Part 5 Guidance, advocating for greater transparency from tech companies on the steps they take to protect children.
-

The year ahead

Offline

This year, the office will continue its focus on ensuring every child grows up safe and supported. We are committed to our ambitions, that:

- Every child has access to play and fun things to do, and places to spend time with their friends.
- Every child has access to high-quality youth provision in their local area.
- Every child is supported by services that work together with youth work, to prevent issues escalating.
- Every child is safe in their home, school, relationships and local area.
- Every child is prevented from being affected by violence and criminality.
- Every child who is a victim of crime receives specialist care and support.
- Every child is safer after an interaction with the police or youth justice system.

Child-centred policing

Every interaction between children and the police should leave them safer. However, recent cases have shown that too often, this is not the reality. In the coming year, the office will continue to advocate for child-centred policing. We will continue to scrutinise the police's use of strip-searches, pushing for reforms to ensure that they are only used in the most exceptional circumstances and that proper safeguards are in place.

Following the 2024 summer riots CCo will explore the reasons why children are losing trust in the police and how this trust can be rebuilt, including looking at racial disparities in policing. The office will also look at how early intervention and wider support services can prevent interactions with the youth justice system.

Children's access to justice and their rights as victims

Building on our work exploring the experiences of child victims of sexual harm in the justice system, this year we will seek to further measure children's access to justice and their rights as victims.

The office will continue to assess the youth justice system, advocating for the end of large prison-like settings for children and examining how criminal justice decisions impact children's futures.

Children who commit violent acts

The tragic murders in Southport brought attention to the issue of violent individuals who are motivated primarily by violence rather than ideology – or 'violence fixated individuals'. More than one in 10 terror suspects in the UK last year were under 21 years of age, and there is growing concern in the sector about individuals committing violence with no clear ideological motivation. CCo will look more closely at those children and what can be done to identify them and to protect the wider public.

Detained children's educational histories

We will build on our work this year which looked at the educational histories and experiences of children in the secure youth estate by analysing the school experiences of children who are deprived of their liberty more generally.

Online

This year, the office will continue to prioritise children's safety in the digital world. We will continue to work towards our ambitions that:

- Every child can play and learn online safely.
- Every child has the knowledge and support to be safe online.
- Every child is protected from online harms, and services can effectively safeguard and support them

Keeping children safe online

As the online and offline worlds continue to converge, it is more important than ever to ensure that children are safe in digital spaces. This year, the office will push for stronger protections in online safety, social media regulation, and digital design. We will investigate whether the Online Safety Act is truly keeping children safe online and will hold platforms accountable for their role in child safety.

Social media's impact on children

The office will examine how design features on social media, such as algorithms and engagement-driven content, disproportionately affect children with additional needs – including SEN, mental health challenges, and physical disabilities. We will also explore whether social media influencers have a positive or negative impact on young people, looking at issues such as financial exploitation, unrealistic body standards, and misinformation.

At this moment in time, boys face unique challenges both in the online and offline world. For instance, boys are disproportionately permanently excluded from school, are overrepresented in SEN diagnoses, less likely to go on to higher education, and make up the entire youth offender institute population. To address this, we will engage directly with boys to understand their experiences.

Tackling online harm and exploitation

CCo will push for urgent action on issues such as online grooming, self-harm content, and the spread of harmful 'health, beauty, and wellness' trends targeting children. Children should be able to explore the digital world without fear of harm, and the office's work will continue to demand that both policymakers and tech companies take responsibility for ensuring this.



Children's Social Care

How we delivered in 2024-25

Over the past year, the Children's Commissioner's office has driven forward major reforms in children's social care, ensuring that vulnerable children receive the support, protection, and opportunities they need. Through data-led research, policy interventions, and direct engagement with government and care professionals, we have strengthened the case for urgent change across the sector.

Improving oversight and accountability

A key focus has been on examining Child in Need (CiN) plans, combining both qualitative and quantitative data to build a clearer picture of the support available to vulnerable children. This large-scale analysis has set the foundation for future policy recommendations. The office also published our findings on the deaths of children in need, a stark reminder of the urgent reforms required to strengthen child protection.

Driving systemic reform and legal change

The office's work on Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) has been a major milestone. Commissioned by the Department for Education, this project allowed us to advocate for stronger safeguards for children placed in restrictive settings. The office used that evidence as part of an intervention in the Court of Appeal highlighting the importance of judicial oversight of decisions to deprive children of their liberty, and further built on that work by looking at the use of unregistered children's homes, shining a light on the need for safe, legal, and appropriate placements.

Strengthening support for care leavers

Last year, the office launched the Higher Education Handbook, a comprehensive resource for professionals working with care-experienced students. The launch event brought together key

stakeholders in higher education, government, and social care to discuss how to improve opportunities for care leavers. The office also carried out care leaver training throughout the year, equipping professionals with the tools to better support young people as they navigate education, employment, and independent living.

Advocating for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC)

The office was invited to give evidence to the Bill Committee on the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, reflecting our expertise in advocating for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Ensuring these children receive proper care, legal protections, and support has been a key priority, and CCo's work in this area continues to influence policy discussions.

The year ahead

This year, the Children's Commissioner's office will continue to work towards our ambitions for social care, that:

- Every child involved with children's social care is truly listened to, and their views are heard.
- All families get consistent, effective help to improve children's welfare, and to stay together wherever it is in a child's best interests.
- Every child in care has a loving stable home.
- Every young person with care experience continues to receive care and support for as long as they need it.
- Every child who needs secure care receives it in an integrated, homely environment. All Young Offenders Institutions are closed.
- Every child seeking asylum has access to a stable and loving home and is supported to thrive in education.
- Every unaccompanied child in need of care and protection is supported from the day they arrive.

Notably, the office will continue to push for urgent reform in children's social care. Our focus will be on improving multi-agency working, tackling the criminalisation of children in care, and pushing for national consistency in care standards.

The experience of children in care within the criminal justice system

Care-experienced children are often disproportionately targeted by police and are more likely to be arrested or criminalised for behaviours that, in a family setting, would be handled differently. This year, the office will examine the criminalisation and adultification of children in care, building on its work on child-centred policing. We will advocate for reforms to ensure that children in care are treated with fairness and support, rather than being pushed unnecessarily into the criminal justice system.

Multi-agency working

A core priority, and a thread which runs throughout the office's work this year, will be strengthening multi-agency coordination. Too often, failures in information sharing between services leave vulnerable children without the support they need. Following our response to the death of Sara Sharif, the office will investigate how local authorities, schools, police, and health services communicate and what improvements are needed. A key aspect of this work will be ensuring the successful implementation of a unique child identifier.

Every child growing up in a home-like environment

Our work this year has shed new light on the conditions of children in the children's social care system. Too often they are growing up with their liberty deprived or spending time in illegal or unsuitable placements. The Children's Commissioner believes that no child should grow up in an institution. We will continue to highlight the numbers of children deprived of the liberty and in illegal homes.



Education

How we delivered in 2024-25

Over the past year, the office has delivered impactful work across education with a focus on attendance, and inclusion. CCo's work has been defined by groundbreaking data collection, targeted policy engagement, and direct collaboration with schools, local authorities, and government to drive change for children.

Tracking children who leave school: 'Lost in Transition'

Last year, the office created the first-ever pupil database of children who leave state education, drawing on data from all local authorities in England. This unprecedented dataset has provided new insights into school transitions, absenteeism, and the challenges faced by children who are not in education. These findings were shared directly with ministers and the Attendance Action Alliance, shaping national conversations on attendance and school engagement.

Children missing education: CME Unrolled Story

For the first time, CCo published comprehensive research on Children Missing Education (CME)—a policy area that has long lacked national focus but affects thousands of vulnerable children. The office's research highlighted the barriers that prevent children from re-entering education, the gaps in local authority oversight, and the need to support children to return to education. These findings have influenced the office's response to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, ensuring that the needs of these children remain a priority in legislative reforms.

Driving change in Greater Manchester: GMLAAA

Over the past year, CCo chaired a series of meetings with 10 local authorities in Greater Manchester, focusing on improving school attendance. This work included:

- running taskforces on transition absences and severe absenteeism, bringing together experts from education, health, and social care;
- hosting workshops with regional professionals, ensuring frontline experiences inform policy solutions, and
- delivering training for over 200 professionals working in schools, equipping education leaders with strategies to improve attendance.

This region-wide initiative has provided a blueprint for tackling school absence at scale, reinforcing the role of multi-agency collaboration in keeping children engaged in education.

Curriculum Review: Amplifying children's voices

Education reform should reflect the needs and aspirations of children. Last year, the office submitted a response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review, drawing on insights from over 20,000 responses from children in *The Big Ambition* survey. By ensuring that children's voices are embedded in curriculum discussions, we have reinforced the need for an education system that prepares young people for life, work, and the future they want to build.

SEND reform: Elevating the needs of children with additional needs

CCo has played a leading role in advocating for children with SEND, ensuring that their needs remain at the forefront of policy discussions. This year, the office submitted evidence to the Education Select Committee's Inquiry on SEND, pushing for system-wide reforms; formed the first-ever SEND Panel, ensuring that young people with SEND directly inform our work; and hosted meetings with the Inclusion Expert Advisory Group Chair, Tom Rees, bringing together policymakers and specialists to drive change.

The largest-ever survey of schools and colleges

Recognising the critical role that schools play beyond education, the office conducted the largest-ever survey of schools and colleges in England. With responses from ~90% of schools nationwide, this research has provided unprecedented insights into the challenges faced by education settings. These findings will form the foundation of CCo's upcoming report on the role of schools in the wider system.

The year ahead

This year, the Children's Commissioner's office will continue to work towards our ambitions for education, that:

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

One of our key focuses this year will be on SEND reform and multi-agency working in education, and continuing to highlight the importance of regular school attendance and engagement for all children.

As part of the office's work on this, we will look to continue influencing the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill and the pace of school improvement – ensuring that no child grows up attending a failing school.

School attendance: Tackling barriers and absenteeism

Ensuring that children attend school regularly will remain a key focus for the office this year. The office's research has shown that severe absenteeism is often linked to issues such as mental health challenges, SEND needs, and inadequate local support services. The office will continue to analyse data on attendance looking more closely at different levels of absence and their causes.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND): Pushing for system reform

Children with SEND face some of the biggest barriers in the education system. This year, the office will continue to push for urgent SEND system reform, ensuring that every child receives the support they need to thrive in school. Building on the insights of children and young people with SEND, the office will ensure their voices shape policy changes. We will highlight the need for reform to better support a wider range of children with additional needs and ensure that any reforms are child-centred, well-funded, and implemented with urgency. In particular, that will look at the role of health in supporting children with additional needs.

Unregistered alternate provision

Some of our most vulnerable children are placed in educational settings with little or no accountability. The office will build on our work on attendance by publishing focussed research on unregistered alternative provision.

The role of schools as a hub for multi-agency support

Schools and colleges are no longer just places of learning - they have become lifelines for children's wider support needs. This year, the office will look at how schools are providing mental health, social care, and safeguarding support, using data from the School and College Survey. We will push for reforms that give schools the resources they need to support children with additional needs.



Family

How we delivered in 2024-25

Supporting families is essential to ensuring that children grow up safe, healthy, and with the opportunities they need to thrive. This year, our work on Family has focused on poverty, housing, and implementing the recommendations of the Family Review, ensuring government policy truly reflects the needs of families across England.

Tackling child poverty

This year, the office has played a key role in shaping the government's response to child poverty, engaging with the new Child Poverty Unit as part of a dedicated Taskforce. The office's work is ongoing, ensuring that the experiences of children growing up in poverty inform future policy decisions. To maximise impact, CCo's final report will align with the child poverty strategy allowing us to push for real, systemic change in how families are supported through financial hardship.

Understanding the role of schools in family support

Schools are often at the frontline of supporting families, providing more than just education. Through the School and College Survey, the office has gathered national data on how schools help families, including access to family hubs and children's centres, provision of free food support, such as food banks, and availability of wraparound childcare.

The impact of housing instability on children

A child's home environment shapes their health, education, and happiness, yet thousands of children in England are growing up in temporary, insecure, or unsuitable housing. The office undertook new data analysis on the long-term impact of housing instability on education outcomes which found a strong correlation between multiple house moves and educational performance. CCo's work will continue to support families in securing long-term, stable homes.

The year ahead

Supporting families remains at the heart of the office's work this year. We are committed to achieving the following ambitions:

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

Embedding children's voices into the Child Poverty Strategy

One of the office's key priorities this year will be contributing to the government's Child Poverty Strategy. Commissioned by the Cabinet Office's Child Poverty Unit, CCo is conducting interviews and focus groups with children experiencing poverty. Their insights will shape national policy, ensuring that children's real-life experiences drive action to reduce deprivation.

The reality of poverty for children

The office wants to explore how deprivation impacts children in their day to day lives, and the reality of what this means practically. This will be woven throughout the wider work of the office, shining a light on how children in poverty are overlooked by the state, and the impact that this has on their outcomes. CCo will continue to examine the impact of housing on children's well-being, focusing on those living in temporary accommodation, overcrowded conditions, or homes in disrepair.

Equal protection for children

Another major area of focus will be ending the legal assault of children. The office will continue to push for the removal of the defence of 'reasonable punishment,' ensuring that children in England have the same legal protections from assault as adults. In particular, we will highlight international evidence to show the benefits of preventing children from being physically punished.

Supporting early childhood development

Additionally, the office will explore how childcare provision can be improved to support early childhood development and ensure that every child is school-ready.



Health

How we delivered in 2024-25

Over the past year, the Children's Commissioner's office has continued to push for systemic improvements in children's health, particularly in mental health services and neurodevelopmental support. The office's research has highlighted critical gaps in service provision.

Exposing failures in neurodevelopmental support

CCo's report, *Waiting Times for Assessment and Support for Autism, ADHD, and Other Neurodevelopmental Conditions*, revealed that children are still waiting years for assessment and diagnosis, delaying their access to vital support:

- 400,000 children are currently waiting for their first contact with community health services related to neurodevelopmental conditions;
- the average wait for an ADHD or autism diagnosis in community health services is over two years, with some children waiting more than four years, and
- long waiting times are forcing families into crisis, with some children facing exclusion from school, mental health decline, and in extreme cases, hospitalisation.

The office has called for urgent reforms, including better integration of health, education, and social care services, to ensure early identification and support without requiring a formal diagnosis.

Strengthening children's mental health services

The office has continued to scrutinise the provision and funding of children's mental health services (CAMHS), ensuring that children have timely access to support. CCo will publish its findings shortly.

The year ahead

This year, the Children's Commissioner's office will focus on ensuring that children's health needs are embedded in national policy, particularly in shaping the NHS 10-Year Plan. The priority will be ensuring that children's voices are at the heart of health system reform, addressing gaps in care provision, and improving multi-agency coordination to prevent unnecessary hospital admissions.

Our ambitions remain clear:

- Every child grows up happy and healthy and where children need additional help it is provided as early as possible.
- Every child has access to high-quality mental health and wellbeing support in their school and local community.
- Every disabled child or child with special educational needs, and neurodiverse child receives excellent, joined up healthcare, social care and education.
- Every child with the most acute health needs living away from home receives loving, caring support.

Children who grow up and live in hospital

Using the Commissioner's statutory powers, the office will collect and analyse data on the number of children in hospitals, the reasons for their prolonged stays, and the barriers preventing them from receiving care closer to home. This will include engagement with children, families, and medical professionals to understand the challenges they face in moving to more community-based care.

Assessing children's mental health services

We will continue to monitor children's mental health services (CAMHS). CCo will track how well and how quickly mental health services are meeting the needs of children and young people, publishing spending, waiting times and other key metrics in Children and Young People's Mental Health Services.

Care for children with life limiting conditions

The office will also shine a light on children's palliative care, examining how services for children with life-threatening and life-limiting conditions differ from adult services. This will include assessing the consistency of care across the country. As we do that work, we will seek to improve understanding of children's perspectives on assisted dying.

Drivers of low self esteem

The Big Ambition highlighted that only 60% of boys are happy with the way they look, and only 40% of girls are. Many children are being exposed to potentially harmful cosmetic products on social media. CCo wants to explore children's exposure to these products, the extent to which they play a role in fuelling children's low self-esteem, and what further regulation is needed.



Jobs and Skills

How we delivered in 2024-25

Over the past year, the Children's Commissioner's office has focused on improving support for care leavers and young people in post-16 education, ensuring they have the guidance, opportunities, and stability needed for a successful transition into adulthood.

Supporting care experienced students in higher education

In collaboration with the Care Experienced Advisory Board, CCo published a handbook for professionals working in higher education to support care experienced students within their institutions. This is a resource that previously did not exist in the sector, aimed at helping professionals recognise the challenges faced by care experienced students and encouraging them to embed policies that improve their students' lives.

To maximise its impact, the office hosted a launch event with the Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing, and shared it with policymakers, higher education institutions and employers. By ensuring that universities, colleges, and workplaces are aware of the challenges faced by care leavers, we are pushing for better support structures and increased opportunities for young people leaving care.

Hierarchy of needs for care experienced young people

Together with the Care Experienced Advisory Board, CCo also published a hierarchy of needs for care experienced young people based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. The publication is a novel one within the sector and acts as a visual guide to help any professionals working with care experienced young people understand their specific needs, supporting them to access and participate in any experience.

An Alternative Route: Post-16 Support for young people attending Alternative Provision

CCo also published a comprehensive report on post-16 alternative provision, addressing the gaps in education, training, and employment support for young people who are not in mainstream education. Shared with government and education policymakers, this report provides evidence-based recommendations to improve pathways for young people, ensuring that alternative provision leads to real opportunities, not dead ends.

These initiatives reflect our ongoing commitment to ensuring that every young person—regardless of background—has the support they need to thrive in adulthood.

The year ahead

This year, the office will continue to support children in preparing for their futures. We will work towards our ambitions, that:

- Every child is taught about the life skills they will need as adults.
- Every child has access to high-quality careers advice, information, and guidance which is tailored to their interests.
- Every child, no matter their background, is given the support they need to secure their dream job whether that is through further or higher education or an apprenticeship.

Supporting young people with additional needs in education and employment

Young people with SEN and other additional needs face significant barriers when transitioning from education to work. This year, the office will build on insights from the School and College Survey to examine how further education institutions support young people with additional needs and where improvements are required.

Strengthening transition pathways

Too many young people with SEN struggle to move from education into employment. They need better career guidance, employer support, and work experience opportunities. CCo will push for reforms that ensure every young person with additional needs has a clear and accessible pathway into work or further study. The office will identify the challenges they face and push for more accessible and inclusive work experience programmes.

Young people in the secure estate often lack access to educational and vocational training. CCo will assess whether these young people are receiving the right support to develop employability skills and reintegrate into society.



Help at Hand

How we delivered in 2024-25

Help at Hand fulfils the Commissioner's powers under section 2D of the Children Act 2004: to provide advice, assistance, and representation to children who are living away from home or receiving social care services, and to care leavers up to the age of 25. Last year, Help at Hand continued to expand its reach, impact, and accessibility.

Making Help at Hand more accessible

To ensure more children and young people can access Help at Hand, the office delivered a full rebrand of the service, including a new website and an accessibility-focused video. This makes the service easier to use, particularly for children with disabilities, ensuring that all children can understand how to reach out for help when they need it.

Alongside this, CCo published its Annual Report on Help at Hand, providing a comprehensive review of the service and its impact. This included consultation with children and young people who have used Help at Hand, ensuring that their feedback directly informs how we improve advocacy and support for the most vulnerable.

Strengthening advocacy for children in care

Following an 18-month pilot, the office has formally written to Ofsted to call for a clear plan to ensure that every child in care has access to advocacy. Advocacy is a lifeline for children facing instability, placement breakdowns, or being moved without explanation, and we will continue to push for every child to receive the independent support they are entitled to.

CCo has also worked to strengthen safeguarding systems. As part of this, the office has gathered new evidence through the School and College Survey on Local Authority Designated Officers (LADOs)—

professionals responsible for managing allegations against adults working with children. These findings will inform recommendations to improve the safeguarding system, ensuring children are better protected from harm.

Training and collaboration to improve support

CCo's Care Leaver Training programme has continued to expand, equipping advocates, social workers, and professionals with the knowledge they need to better support young people leaving care. This training is directly shaped by care leavers' lived experiences, ensuring that professionals understand what young people need as they navigate the transition to independence.

Additionally, the office published a Whistleblowing Report, analysing all safeguarding concerns raised with CCo throughout 2023/24. This report highlights systemic failings, holds decision-makers to account, and strengthens protections for children in care.

The year ahead

The office's Help at Hand team will continue to provide the highest standards of support and advocacy to children in care, children living away from home, children with a social worker, and care leavers. This, as always, will inform and shape the work of the office, so that we remain focused on championing the voices of vulnerable children and particularly those living away from home.

In 2024, Help at Hand received 1,001 referrals, and was able to make a positive impact in 92% of the 313 cases where a representation was made. The main themes that emerged from Help at Hand's work last year were concerns about children and young people living in illegal homes, suitable housing for care leavers, children and young people with additional needs missing education, and the lack of adequate advocacy services for children in care or in need.

High standards of advice and advocacy










This year the office's child's rights experts will continue to intervene in cases where children's voices are being ignored or undermined, working through complex bureaucratic challenges to deliver positive outcomes in the vast majority of cases.














Shining a light on system failure











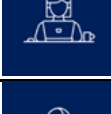


CCo will ensure that, where cases highlight wider system failings and challenges, the office will look more closely at those – shining a light on whether they are part of a bigger problem. That will include supporting work on the criminalisation of children in care.




Appendix: How the work in the Business Plan will map against the UNCRC articles

In line with our statutory duty to protect and promote the rights and needs of children and young people, all our work has been mapped against the UNCRC.

Work Stream	Principal Pillar	Article of UNCRC
Fixing the foundations		1, 2, 3, 4, 23, 18, 19, 27, 37
The role of schools in the wider system		18, 19, 23, 28, 31
Mapping childhood		3, 18, 19, 23, 24, 27, 28, 31
Better World		3, 4, 12, 13, 20, 23, 28, 42
Our Future, Our Voice: A Festival of Childhood		12, 13
Youth Engagement: Embedding Children's Voices in Decision-Making		12, 13, 23, 42
Global Citizenship		3, 4, 20, 28
Community		2, 3, 4, 12, 16, 17, 18, 19, 23, 33, 34, 35, 36, 39, 40
Child-centred policing		2, 3, 33, 34, 35, 37, 40

The journey of child victims through the justice system		2, 3, 4, 12, 19, 33, 34, 35, 39
Children who commit violent acts		17, 18, 36, 39, 40
Keeping children safe online		3, 4, 16, 17, 18, 34, 36
Social media's impact on children		3, 16, 17, 23, 36
Tackling online harm and exploitation		3, 4, 16, 17, 18, 34, 35, 36
Children's Social Care		2, 3, 6, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 27, 33, 34, 35, 39, 40
The experience of children in care within the criminal justice system		2, 3, 20, 39, 40
Multi-agency working		3, 6, 18, 19, 20, 23, 27, 39
Every child growing up in a home-like environment		3, 12, 18, 19, 20, 22, 25, 39
Education		2, 3, 4, 18, 19, 23, 24, 26, 28, 29, 31
School Attendance: Tackling Barriers and Absenteeism		18, 19, 23, 24, 28, 29
Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND): Pushing for System Reform		2, 3, 4, 18, 23, 24, 26, 28, 29
The Role of Schools as a Hub for Multi-Agency Support		18, 19, 23, 28, 29, 31

Family		3, 4, 5, 6, 12, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 31
Embedding children's voices into the Child Poverty Strategy		3, 5, 12, 18, 26, 27
The reality of poverty for children		3, 6, 18, 26, 27
Equal protection for children		3, 4, 19
Supporting early childhood development		5, 6, 18, 20, 23, 24, 27, 28, 31
Health		3, 6, 12, 17, 18, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 39
Children who grow up and live in hospital		3, 6, 18, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26
Assessing children's mental health services		6, 18, 24, 25, 39
Care for children with life-limiting conditions		3, 6, 12, 23, 24, 25
Drivers of low self-esteem		3, 4, 17, 24, 36
Jobs and Skills		2, 3, 18, 23, 28, 29, 40
Supporting Young People with Additional Needs in Education and Employment		2, 3, 23, 28, 29
Strengthening transition pathways		2, 3, 18, 23, 28, 29, 40

Help at Hand		2, 3, 12, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, 33, 34, 35, 37, 39, 42
High standards of advice and advocacy		2, 3, 12, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25, 27, 28, 33, 34, 35, 37, 39, 40, 42
Shining a light on system failure		3, 4, 18, 19, 20, 23, 37, 40



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