

# Children's views on assisted dying

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**Content warning:** This report explores a sensitive topic which some people, particularly children, may find upsetting or difficult to read. The views expressed reflect the perspectives of ten young people who were part of the conversation, and are important to highlight how subjects which may not be immediately related to children’s rights can actually have a very real and broad impact on their lives.

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## Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



As Children's Commissioner, it is my greatest privilege to listen to children and to amplify their voices on the issues that matter most to them — both those that affect them directly, and those that may appear, at first glance, to lie beyond their immediate experience.

At the heart of my role, as defined in legislation, is a responsibility to promote and protect the rights of children, and to ensure their views are not only heard, but acted upon. Over the last four years, I have engaged with one million children and young people about the issues that are important to them. One 12-year-old girl living in hospital told me: *"[The government] should consider our thoughts. What they decide dictates our future."*

It is therefore deeply concerning to me whenever legislation that affects children's lives passes through Parliament without taking their views and opinions into consideration.

Such is the case for the Assisted Dying Bill.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UK Parliament, *Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill*, [Link](#), accessed April 2025.

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The Bill currently before Parliament seeks to legalise assisted dying for terminally ill adults or adults living with life-limiting conditions. Though the proposed legislation applies only to those over the age of 18, its implications for children — especially those nearing legal adulthood — are undeniable.

If passed, the Bill will mean that, for the first time, medical professionals will be able to discuss the concept of assisted dying with young people deemed competent who are approaching their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, as well as the possible choices that would become available to them as they reach this milestone of adulthood.

Despite the significance of this potential legislative change, children have not been consulted on it at any stage.

One of the areas children and their parents or carers consistently raise with me is the difficulties of navigating life with additional needs or disabilities, including those for whom childhood will be their whole life, who will never grow up into adults. Families describe a system that is complex, slow, and often adversarial. A system that they must fight, rather than one that fights for them.

I recently established a panel of young people to consider the wide-ranging issues encountered by children living with additional needs and what provision should look like for them. In one of their most recent sessions, this group of young people – joined by two of my Youth Ambassadors – had a wide-ranging conversation about the Assisted Dying Bill.

The views shared by these young people are deeply personal. They do not speak for every child — nor should they have to. Their views, like adults, are nuanced and diverse that take inspiration from their own life experiences and circumstances – but their deep consensus was that whatever their view, they must be engaged in this debate, one of the most profound moral and philosophical debates of a generation.

I absolutely agree. It is essential to listen, to reflect, and to ensure that policy and law-making does not overlook the perspective of those they will one day impact. Whether or not a child would, on turning 18, become within scope of the Assisted Dying Bill's proposals, whether it would allow a family member to end their own life and leave them without adequate support in their grief, or whether it fosters a belief in a child that their life somehow has less value than others because of their condition – all their voices deserve to be heard as part of this conversation.

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Since taking up the role of Children's Commissioner in 2021, I have been clear about the urgent need to reform how we support children with disabilities, and with life-limiting or life-shortening conditions. I have continued to raise these issues at the highest levels of government.

Many people have rightly highlighted concerns about the potential pressures such legislation could place on disabled people, and the message it might send about whose lives are considered worth living, fostering a sense that some lives have 'less' value than others. As the young people taking part in this discussion agreed, the focus on policy conversations must also be about supporting people to live, not just to die.

Children experience the world differently from adults – but they understand the inherent inequality and risk in allowing judgements to be made about the value of one life over another. They are developing their identities and views, doing so while navigating systems that are not designed with them in mind, and asking questions that require honest, respectful answers.

On matters of such profound moral and ethical importance, their insights are not just valuable — they are essential.

This paper captures some of what they said.

## Children's views on assisted dying

*"This is a sensitive topic for me. Sometimes doctors can be wrong [...] and if someone is told they have 6 months to live and they actually have a couple of years, I think they're actually missing out, [...] I think it can influence them. It's difficult to explain."* - Girl, 16.

While speaking about their views on the Assisted Dying Bill, the young people recognised that it is a sensitive and complex topic where lots of different circumstances have to be taken into consideration, and that they can only speak from their own point of view.

*"But for those who are very ill, very sick, then in some cases it could relieve pain, suffering, not just for the whole family."* - Girl, 16.

*"Long term illnesses - you might have more than six months to live, but not much quality of life. So there might be people who [this is helpful for]."* - Boy, 16.

Some young people also offered their own experiences of illness or disability and explained how they have shaped their views on assisted dying.

*"Throughout my journey I have been told by many doctors that I won't be able to relearn to ski, to surf, but I am doing it. [...] If it wasn't for my family, I wouldn't be able to do these things. So if this comes in, people who have a strong family might [have more opportunities]. [...] Also, doctors might be wrong."* - Girl, 16.

*"I think it makes vulnerable people like me [...] feel even more vulnerable. I have a hidden disability which is because of my lifelong trauma. [...] I don't agree with assisted dying. I think it's cruel and makes me feel like some lives are more valuable than others."* - Girl, 15.

## Introducing safeguards

Young people were worried about whether there would be necessary safeguards introduced before the Bill is written into law.

*"I believe that the safeguards are not strong enough. [...] People might be coerced."* - Girl, 16.

*"There is a lot in the Bill about coercion and there is no investigation in depth of people taking the medication [to die], and those potentially have been coerced or made that decision, there is nothing there to protect them. It's a 'he said, she said', but a person might not be there anymore."* - Girl, 16.

They also thought about the practicalities of assisted dying and raised questions about people making the decision.

*"When you see nurses and doctors going around, sometimes [they might] feel like ok, I need to release people from this burden."* - Girl, 16.

*"If a person was that close to end of life, they will have pain medication, and they will struggle to think clearly. It just clouds your brain when you're on pain medication."* - Girl, 16.

*"I think one of the concerns for me would be one of the people with chronic illnesses. It could be about how society values their life. [...] Is life with a disability not worth living? Could there be a pressure [to choose assisted dying] rather than fight for the cure?"* - Girl, 16.

*"When you think about this decision, people with progressive diseases will lose capacity [to make decisions]."* - Girl, 16.

## Impact on young people

Young people also thought about how the Bill might affect themselves and their peers.

*"[M]y concern is at the moment it's just for over 18s, but could it turn into this way of where you draw the line."* - Girl, 16.

*"My concern was, they said that it's for people over the age of 18. Even though you're not of the age to make that decision, when I turn 18, this is a decision I have to make." - Girl, 16.*

*"There is talk about whether this may apply to children with life-limiting or severe progressive diseases. My concern is not necessarily parents, but professionals. There needs to be more there to hold people accountable" - Girl, 16.*

Young people thought about the support, or the lack of it, when a loved one dies and the emotional impact on everyone around them.

*"I haven't experienced this yet, but I have a really close relationship with my grandma and I worry about one day she will go and I will be really depressed and lonely and I worry that this will happen when I do my A levels, and I would really like to see some support in exams." - Boy, 16.*

*"More youth groups or whatever, where children could go and it's something that needs to be considered. What are the consequences for family members and how can we alleviate them?" - Girl, 16.*

## **The bigger picture**

The young people talked not just about the practicalities of assisted dying, but also what it might mean for society. They discussed the implications for how society values people and questioned whether there is a risk that assisted dying removes some people from society. They agreed that the focus of policy conversations should be more around how to support people in their living, rather than support them in their dying.

*"What if it ends up removing people from society that people don't want in society?" - Girl, 16.*

*"I have a mixed opinion on the Bill. In some respects, when someone is at the end stage of their lives, there is no way they can possibly recover, where nothing can alleviate their pain, I think it's an option. BUT only if the necessary safeguard is in place. [...] I am quite conscious that children with complex needs have higher death rates. [...] Someone might think they are not a valuable contribution to society, or these individuals being coerced. [...] There is no one to hold accountable, there is no*



*responsibility, they have removed the high court, there is nothing to support and protect and support those vulnerable adults.” - Girl, 17.*

*“The government gives no social care to people like me and then gives me an option to choose to die if I feel I can no longer live.” - Girl, 15.*

*“What can we actually do to make you feel more valued?” - Girl, 16.*

*“This bill is not about how you die, it’s about how you live.” - Girl, 15.*

## **Assisted dying and health inequalities**

The theme of health inequalities was also discussed in the context of how services already differ across the country. The young people discussed the question of whether assisted dying would be equally accessible for all, and whether regional variations in services would have an effect on people’s choices.

*“If you are in a hospital in a smaller area, will you be able to access the same [services as in other areas]?” - Girl, 16.*

Young people said that they already see an impact of the Bill on people with disabilities, and how it can shape views negatively.

*“I read a lot of stuff. People saying really horrible things about people with disabilities, and I think that’s a direct effect of the Bill. [I am] also worried about the drug. It could still actually cause the person a lot of pain. [...] It’s a very slippery slope. Has safeguarding been watered down? Not only do young people need to be consulted more, we also need to fix the issues that the NHS has first, rather than fixing it at the end.” - Girl, 17.*



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