

Business Plan

2026-27

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Foreword from Dame Rachel de Souza



2026–27 will be my final year as Children's Commissioner, marking the conclusion of a six-year term that began in March 2021. It is a moment to take stock of how children's lives have changed during that time, and to focus on the work that still needs to be done to give every child in England the chance to thrive.

When I took up this role, the country was just beginning to emerge from the Covid-19 pandemic. In my first week as Children's Commissioner, children were beginning to return to school following a second period of remote learning. The disruption children experienced during that period has shaped a generation. Many of those children have continued their journey through education and adolescence in circumstances that remain challenging. Rising absence from school, increasing exposure to risks online, growing pressures within the SEND system, and long waits for support all demonstrate that the consequences of that period are still being felt. Too many children who lived through the pandemic risk becoming a generation whose needs are never addressed.

Six years is a significant portion of a child's life. Many of the children who were beginning secondary school when I started this role are now approaching adulthood. Others have spent most of their childhood navigating systems that too often struggle to meet their needs. This final year provides an

opportunity not only to reflect on the evidence gathered during my term, but – crucially – to use it to drive meaningful change.

This year, I will be bringing together the knowledge and insight gathered over the past six years to provide a clear picture of childhood in England today. My new project, Mapping Childhood, will identify where children are thriving, where inequalities are most severe, and where action is most urgently needed. A child's postcode should never determine their opportunities, yet the evidence shows that where children grow up still matters deeply. Mapping Childhood will allow me to tell that story clearly and help direct attention to the places that need it most.

Children's voice will remain the foundation of all of my work. Since 2021, a million children have shared their views, including through the national surveys *The Big Ask* and *The Big Ambition*. This year, I will complete that series by launching a final survey, *The Big Future*, giving children the chance to describe the world they are growing up in today and the future they hope to see. In particular it will seek their views on the future, their hopes for their local area, and the impact on their lives of technological change.

Children's participation will continue to be central to the work of the office. I will host my second Festival of Childhood in Manchester, bringing together 600 young people to share their experiences directly with decision-makers. My Youth Ambassadors, advisory boards and Young Voices Forum will also continue to play a key role in shaping both my work and that led by government.

Over the past year, I have also worked with government departments to embed children's perspectives in policymaking, in a way that children themselves have told me has not been possible for them in the past. That collaboration will continue, making sure children's views and experiences are heard by adult decision-makers, and I will produce a resource that codifies children's participation by setting out practical guidance for how organisations can meaningfully involve children in shaping the policies that affect them.

My work across the year will continue to focus on the areas that children consistently tell me matter most: children's social care, community, education, health, family, jobs and skills, and a better world. Across each pillar, it is the children to whom I have a particular duty – those with a social worker, living away from home or with care experience – whom I hold most in my mind. This plan can only work if it works for them.

These priorities are closely reflected in *The Children's Plan*, which set out my vision for how services must work together to support every child to attend, engage and thrive. A key focus in the year ahead will be continuing to advocate for the recommendations set out in that plan, particularly ensuring that every child receives the education they deserve and that reforms to the SEND system are implemented effectively. Through the new oversight role for the Children's Commissioner set out in the Schools White Paper, I will also make sure these reforms deliver meaningful change in practice.

In my final year, throughout all my work, I will be pushing for the implementation of a robust single unique identifier. The tragic murder of Sara Sharif, like other cases before it, demonstrated the worst consequences of vital information not being shared between agencies. Education, health, social care and justice services must be able to communicate effectively if children are to be protected. The single unique identifier has the potential to be a transformational building block for children's services, ensuring professionals working with children can identify concerns earlier, share information appropriately, and coordinate support more effectively.

This ambition runs through every area of my work. Whether we are looking at education, children's social care, health services or justice, the same challenge repeatedly emerges: children fall through the gaps between systems that are not designed to work together. By championing the effective implementation of a single unique identifier, we can help build a system that sees the whole child and responds to their needs more quickly and coherently. Ensuring services both share information responsibly but also act on it will be essential to prevent future tragedies and provide the joined-up support children deserve.

The theme of this final year is therefore simple: to look back, listen, and plan for the future. Looking back allows us to understand what has changed during this term. Listening puts children's experiences firmly at the heart of our priorities. Planning for the future means pushing decision-makers to use the lessons of the past six years to create lasting improvements for children across England.

Childhood is brief, and the opportunities children have during those years shape the rest of their lives.

In this final year as Commissioner, my focus will remain the same as it has always been: bringing children's voices to the heart of national debates, explaining the evidence about their lives so that it is more widely understood, and pushing those people with the power to make decisions to act on what children tell me.

Executive Summary

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 two cross-cutting areas:

- **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.
- **Single unique identifier:** pushing for the most ambitious and comprehensive application of unique ID.

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 information 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:

- Child victims of crime
 - Children in inpatient mental health care
 - Children attending colleges
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- Children remanded to youth detention

We will also use the Children's Commissioner's powers where necessary to request data on services for disabled children, and documents from Ofcom, to scrutinise their implementation of the Online Safety Act.

Alongside this, we will continue to undertake visits under section 2E powers of the Children Act 2004, 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.

Reflecting on 2025-26

In 2025-26, there were more than 1,300 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 and specialist, trade and sector press for 2025-26, there was a total opportunity to see in excess of 1.8 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 335 mentions in 2025-26, 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 2025-26, the Commissioner undertook 104 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 Act 2004 - 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 children's lived experiences drive policy change. The office produced 35 reports and published 329 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. 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.

Delivering the three-year strategy

This year's business plan will continue to deliver on the Children's Commissioner's three-year strategy set out in 2024. In that we set out our approach – to listen to children, to champion them, to advocate and influence on their behalf, and to advocate directly for the most vulnerable. That will continue to be the focus of the office.

All of the work of the office will seek to promote and protect children's rights and improve their lives through giving them a voice, influencing policy change, and setting the agenda – ensuring children's concerns are at the heart of national debates.

At the heart of our work is a simple belief: childhood is a time of possibility - in which hopes, ambitions, and potential take root. The office will continue to create meaningful opportunities for children to share their experiences, their aspirations, and their vision for the future. Their voices will not only inform our work but shape the national conversation about what children need to thrive.

Crucially, the office will be ambitious for all children and will focus in particular on systemic issues – which often have the greatest impact on children with the greatest and most complex needs.

We will continue to base our work on the vital importance of children's rights – shining a light on the lives of small and often forgotten groups of children, pushing for values based change even in the absence of strong evidence, and pushing for the highest standards across public services for all children.

Finally, the office will remain responsive and agile. Beyond the planned programme of work, we will act swiftly when events arise that affect children's lives. Whether responding to national crises, emerging safeguarding concerns, or shifts in policy, we will ensure that children's voices, rights, and interests are placed at the centre of decisions that shape their futures.

In everything the office delivers, our focus will be on impact, building on our track record of acting as a vital independent voice on behalf of children growing up in England.

Cross-cutting work: 2026-27

Mapping Childhood

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

A child's outcomes should never be dependent on their postcode: every child deserves caring adults making decisions on their behalf, and the systems and services designed to support them and to have the same ambition as they have for themselves. In short, England should be the best place in the world to grow up.

Yet, for too many 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.

This year, the office will draw all its work together through the publication of its most ambitious data project yet: *Mapping Childhood*. This will bring together much of the data CCo has collected from public bodies and children themselves over the past five years on access, quality and outcomes in a usable and illustrative way, adding new and existing published data to tell a compelling story about childhood in England – and to provide one of the most significant repositories of data about childhood available that shows decision-makers how to improve children's lives.

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.

Single unique identifier

The Children's Commissioner's Office has long been a key advocate for the introduction of a single unique identifier for children, recognising its critical role in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of public services. As legislation moves forward, the office will push for the most ambitious and comprehensive application of unique ID. Our goal is to ensure public services not only share data seamlessly but are also incentivised to act on the data they receive, improving outcomes for children and families across the country.

The introduction of a single unique identifier offers a significant opportunity to streamline services and create a cohesive system that better supports children, particularly those with complex needs. However, to ensure that it is implemented in the most effective way possible, the office will focus on mapping out what this system might look like in practice. A critical element of this will be focusing on multi-agency working - ensuring that schools, social services, health providers, and other key stakeholders are connected and able to share data in a secure and meaningful way.

To facilitate this, we will pull together an expert group made up of representatives from key sectors, with the aim of designing a system that works for everyone. This group will carefully examine the practicalities of implementing the unique identifier, considering the challenges and the opportunities it presents. Their insights will help to ensure that unique ID is designed in a way that is robust enough to address the complexities of multi-agency working.

It is crucial that this process is carried out with careful thought and attention to detail, and that the single unique identifier is implemented correctly from the outset. Our commitment is to make sure that this system works not just as a tool, but as an essential mechanism for improving the lives of vulnerable children across the country.



Better World

How we delivered in 2025-26

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.

Our Future, Our Voice: A Festival of Childhood

Last year CCo held its inaugural event: *Our Future, Our Voice: A Festival of Childhood*. This brought together children, young people, policymakers, and leaders to discuss issues that matter most to them. The festival served as a call to action for decision-makers to listen to and act on what young people say and highlighted best practices in engaging with children, ensuring that young people's voices are central to policy discussions.

Youth engagement: embedding children's voices in decision-making

To ensure that young people are involved in shaping the work of the office, we recruited 17 new Youth Ambassadors. This group was 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 assembled and held frequent meetings with a SEND Panel of 15 young people who helped to shape our work on special educational needs reform, and to bring the voices of children with additional needs into our wider work, to ensure that policy decisions reflect their experiences. In addition, the office recruited two further youth voice groups in partnership with Ofcom and the Government Office for Science. We also launched our Youth Voices Forum, for any children and young people aged 13 and above to share their voices and experiences on the work of the office.

Global Citizenship

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

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.

The Big Future

The last five years of the office's work has been built on the two largest surveys of children ever, and listening to children will continue to be the priority of this year's work. We will conduct our final large-scale survey of children in England, exploring how their lives have changed in the last five years and about their hopes and fears for the future. The programme of work will gather views on crucial changes facing children this year in England – not least their views on voting and the impact AI will have on their lives. The survey will be launched at our second Festival of Childhood in May - and we will use the summer to host a series of visits and 'roadshows' in key regions around the country to bring the themes of the survey to children, including groups of children who are least often heard.

Driving participation

We will continue to drive decision makers to embed youth voice into all policy making and legislation. We will deliver two more Festivals of Childhood that will celebrate children's participation across society and give them an opportunity to share and shape how their lives are thought about. We will further push and promote high quality participation, particularly across government, partly through the

publication of handbook of best practice for youth engagement or participation. our guide on youth participation. That will include maintaining our high levels of participation through the third cohort of Children's Commissioner's Youth Ambassadors and through our Youth Voices Forum. We will also continue to deliver participation projects for other parts of government (including Ofcom and the Government Office for Science) and recognise the organisations that are providing high quality participation.

Global Citizenship

We will continue working with the offices of the Children's Commissioner of Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and 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 2025-26

Offline

Children on custodial remand

In 2023-24, 45% who were remanded to custody did not ultimately receive a custodial sentence. A further 17% had their case dismissed altogether. The office delivered a report to develop a fuller understanding of the experience of being a child on custodial remand. It brought together data on looked after children and children's voices, to ensure children's experiences are central to any future reform. Our recommendation for a youth sentencing framework and increase the number of remand foster carers was taken forward by government.

Criminalisation of children in care

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. The office published work on the criminalisation and adultification of children in care, building on its work on child-centred policing. This work, and the office's work on children on remand both shaped the Commissioner's Longford Lecture, delivered in November 2025.

Crime and Policing Bill parliamentary briefing

The office produced a parliamentary briefing on the Crime and Policing Bill, highlighting key areas where the legislation could be strengthened to better protect children from criminal exploitation and sexual abuse. Its core recommendation on criminal exploitation to make the new offence of 'Child Criminal Exploitation' a strict liability offence was tabled by government, ensuring that all children are protected from harm.

Online

Children, nudification tools and sexually explicit deepfakes

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is transforming the online world. AI models can generate text, images, videos, and hold conversations in response to a handful of prompts and are rightly being seen as a development with huge potential for the enhancement of people's lives. However, these tools are also being misused at an alarming cost to children's online and offline safety. This report identified and laid out the threat that sexually explicit deepfake technology presents to children. Following this report, the Government has committed to banning nudification apps in its Crime and Policing Bill.

Social media's impact on children's wellbeing

The office published a guide for parents and carers on managing children's digital lives to make those conversations easier, alongside an activity pack for children, in recognition of the complex, rapidly evolving landscape in which children, and their parents or carers, are navigating. It focuses on the challenge of managing children's everyday online habits.

Pornography

No child should see pornography, and yet 70% do before the age of 18. The office published a report last year using data collected just before the suite of rules designed to protect children under the Online Safety Act came into force in July 2025. It provided a benchmark for how prevalent pornography is in children's online lives, mapped the types of pornography children are coming across online, where they are seeing it, and the impact it has on them. Following this work, the Government has now committed to criminalising depictions of strangulation in online pornography.

Tackling online harm and exploitation

Childhood is short and precious, and too many children are growing up with skewed, unhappy beliefs about themselves. Last year, the office published a report on children's exposure to appearance-changing products online, with 41% of children telling the office that have seen advertising for prescription-only weight loss drugs, despite advertising of these kinds of products being illegal in the

UK. This work added weight to the conversation around a social media ban for children and emphasised the importance of the Online Safety Act needing to evolve in strength and scope.

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.

Education for children in custody

This year, the office will continue to build on our work on the youth justice estate and how the education provided in custodial settings can be reformed to better support children in custody. Currently, many young people in custodial settings receive education that is often disconnected from their needs and the realities of their lives. In our upcoming work, we will outline a comprehensive plan for transforming education within the youth justice system.

Court decision-making on youth remand

This year, the office will continue to build on the work understanding children on youth remand by examining the remand decision-making that courts are required to provide in writing following the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 that amended Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 s102(5).

Children as victims

The office will build on its earlier work, which highlighted the specific failures experienced by victims of sexual assault, by expanding the focus to cover the broader experience of children as victims of crime within the justice system. Many children who enter the justice system often find themselves further victimised by a system that fails to provide adequate support or protection. We will examine the barriers children face in accessing justice and support, and work to make sure children's voices are heard and that their needs are prioritised throughout the justice process.

Strip searching of children in England and Wales

The office will deliver its fourth and final report on the strip searching of children across England and Wales by the police as well as examine the wider use of force by police on children. The report will underline the importance of continued scrutiny and serve as an essential call for police leaders and government to maintain focus on reforms and ensure meaningful, lasting protections for children are delivered.

Children motivated by violence

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.

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.

Shaping a safe online world for children

The Online Safety Act represents a significant step forward in the UK's efforts to protect children online and, in many respects, is a success story of policymaking. It establishes important duties on technology companies to reduce the risk of harm to children and creates new regulatory powers for Ofcom to hold platforms accountable. However, despite these advances, there are still questions about whether the Online Safety Act and its implementation is having a positive impact on children's lives. Children continue to encounter harmful content online and remain exposed to risks created by the design and operation of many platforms

Over the coming year, the office will play a key role in shaping how the Act is implemented and improved. A central focus will be engaging with ongoing consultations and regulatory processes to ensure that the interests and safety of children are fully reflected. The office will seek to gain deeper insight into how technology companies and Ofcom are interpreting and executing their responsibilities under the Act, where necessary using the Commissioner's statutory powers.

This work will involve closely scrutinising the systems and safeguards that platforms claim to have introduced, as well as gathering evidence from children themselves about their experiences online. Understanding how children interact with online services will be crucial to assessing whether the protections set out in legislation are working in practice.



Children's Social Care

How we delivered in 2025-26

Criminalisation of children in care

Last year, the office highlighted the stark injustice faced by vulnerable children, especially those in care, who are often criminalised instead of supported. Many children in care, who come from challenging backgrounds, are treated as criminals for behaviours linked to trauma. A significant proportion of children in care enter the justice system due to a lack of appropriate support, with police involvement in situations that would typically be handled by parents. This report calls for a reimagined system where children's services are prioritised, focusing on rehabilitation, care, and support, ensuring every child has a chance to thrive and be heard.

The Children's Plan: Vision for Care

Too many vulnerable children still lack the support they need to thrive. The office's School and College Census found that more schools are concerned about funding for social services than core education needs. This report highlighted that with over 29,000 children in care living in underperforming local authorities, we must make children's social care a priority. Comprehensive reform is essential for improving the outcomes of these children, ensuring their voices are central to the reform process.

Children living in illegal homes

Despite a slight decrease in the number of children placed in illegal homes, hundreds of vulnerable children are still being housed in inappropriate, unregistered settings, such as caravans and holiday rentals. These placements, costing local authorities millions, fail to meet the children's needs and place them at increased risk. The lack of appropriate, safe alternatives remains a systemic issue. While new laws promise improved oversight, without significant investment in early intervention and therapeutic support, these harmful practices will continue. This report highlighted that a fundamental shift is needed to ensure children receive proper care and support, not temporary, unsafe solutions.

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.

Support for detained children

Throughout the Commissioner's tenure, the office has highlighted a range of issues facing children in care. This year we will double down on pushing for changes to improve their lives. This will include shaping guidance so that fewer children in care come into contact with the criminal justice system, building on our work for children detained, whether for health, welfare or criminal justice reasons, to highlight how detained children can be better supported, and speaking to children across the care system.

Children in the asylum system

The Children's Commissioner will listen to the views of children in the asylum system to ensure that their views are heard, and their rights protected in forthcoming changes to the asylum and immigration system. By listening to the lived experiences of these children, we will ensure that their unique needs are addressed in policy discussions and that their experiences are reflected in the solutions we advocate for.



Education

How we delivered in 2025-26

The Children's Plan

For the first time, the Children's Commissioner used her statutory powers to conduct a nationwide census of all schools and colleges, responding directly to the voices of children who shared their need for a more inclusive education system. The findings of this census, informed by responses from nearly 90% of schools and colleges, fed into the Government's Schools White Paper. The report highlighted a clear vision to transform the education landscape, emphasising the necessity of not only excellent teaching but also targeted and reformed support for children with disabilities and additional needs – so that every child, regardless of background or circumstance, has the opportunity to attend, engage, achieve, and excel.

Children in unregistered alternative provision

Every child deserves an excellent education, regardless of their background. Through surveys like *The Big Ask* and *The Big Ambition*, the office have heard from over a million children who have told us how deeply they value their education. However, many face significant barriers which impact their school attendance. Alarming, in 2023/2024, over 24,000 children were placed in unregistered alternative provision, some of which lack proper oversight and safeguarding. This report calls for a national register for unregistered providers, safeguarding standards, and a clear inspection framework to ensure every child receives a safe, high-quality education.

School attendance: tackling barriers and absenteeism

Last year we highlighted that the level of disengagement from school has scarcely recovered since its peak during the pandemic, and this fed into the recommendations of *The Children's Plan*: that the Children's Commissioner wants to see the government introduce a unique ID for every child, and a plan for every child who needs one.

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.

Additional needs reform

This year marks a pivotal moment for education reform in the UK, with significant challenges within the SEND system prompting a comprehensive review of both SEND provision and the wider schools system. The office's work this year will focus on driving reforms that address these challenges and ensure that every child, regardless of their needs, has access to a high-quality education that enables them to thrive.

Our School and College Census identified the key challenges facing schools and how they are responding, and we laid out the office's answer to this in detail in The Children's Plan. We set out our approach to addressing the gaps in the system, including the need for better support for children with SEND, improved access to mental health and well-being services, and stronger collaboration between schools, families, and local authorities. This work will continue to guide our efforts to ensure that every child has the support they need to succeed.

Strengthening support in schools

We will advocate for measures that ensure schools have the resources, training, and infrastructure needed to deliver a high-quality pastoral care and extra-curricular offer. This includes strengthening the support systems for children with additional needs and disabilities, advocating for a functional and inclusive system for every child.



Family

Embedding children's voices into the Child Poverty Strategy

One of the office's key priorities last year was our contribution to the government's Child Poverty Strategy. Commissioned by the Cabinet Office's Child Poverty Unit, CCo conducted interviews and focus groups with children experiencing poverty. Their insights shaped national policy, ensuring that children's real-life experiences drive action to reduce deprivation. The office held an event in parliament with the children who contributed to this work, ensuring that their voices were heard by decision makers.

Children's views on assisted dying

The office considered children's views on the Assisted Dying Bill, sharing its profound implications for children, especially those nearing adulthood. We spoke to a panel of young people with additional needs and emphasised the need for their voices to be heard in this debate. Their views highlight the importance of supporting life, not just focusing on death, and ensuring children are engaged in critical moral discussions that affect their future.

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.

Early years screen time

Family life is the most important supportive and protective factor in children's lives. One of the key changes to family life in recent years is the encroachment of digital devices and screen time into how families spend their time. We co-chaired a group of experts advising government on the first piece of guidance for parents on how to manage screen time in the early years, and will continue working with ministers to share this with families.

Disabled children

In a number of areas of upcoming reform, disabled children's interests are at risk of being overlooked. Whether that is in the health system's approach to diagnosis, the education system's approach to additional needs, or the slow pace of reform to children's social care for disabled children.

In all of our work this year, we will pay particular regard to the lives of disabled children and how they are impacted by policy and practice failures. One of the main lenses for this will be through our response to the Government's first SEND White Paper for 46 years, and whether this ambitious enough for disabled children. Our Mapping Childhood project will also look at the services which disabled children receive in their local area.



Health

How we delivered in 2025-26

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

Children who are waiting to leave hospital

Every year millions of children in England spend time in hospital. For some, hospital becomes a place they spend months and sometimes years of their lives – facing barriers to being discharged. Last year, the office published new data on how long children spend in hospital across their childhoods, alongside the voices of families of children with complex needs, and health and care professionals working in hospitals and the community. Families and professionals told the office about the key challenges children face when it comes to being discharged from hospital and what they believe needs to change. This is critical work to inform the government's push for NHS services to shift from 'hospital to home' in its 10-year health plan.

Children's experience of and access to mental health services

Each year, the office publishes research into how long children are waiting to access Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS) in England. The office published its fourth report last year, showing that demand continues to grow for CYPMHS, and children are still facing long waits for support. Last year's work had a particular focus on children 'in crisis' – showing that almost half of children referred while in crisis have their referrals closed or were still waiting for their second contact with CYPMHS by the end of the year.

The office has also called for greater protections for children with severe mental illnesses who are receiving treatment in inpatient settings. This includes strengthened safeguarding against being placed in inappropriate settings, such as adult wards and placements far away from home, and ensuring

children are able to be visited and maintain vital relationships with family and carers while receiving treatment away from home.

Care for children with life limiting conditions

The office focused on children's palliative care, examining, through a series of visits, how services for children with life-threatening and life-limiting conditions differ from adult services. This included assessing the consistency of care across the country.

Drivers of low self esteem

After the Commissioner's *Big Ambition* survey highlighted that only 60% of boys are happy with the way they look, and only 40% of girls are, the office set out to investigate the ways children are being exposed to potentially harmful appearance-focused products online. This work explored the impact of online content and advertisements on children's self-esteem through a national survey and speaking to young people about their experiences. This work added weight to the conversation around a social media ban for children and emphasised the importance of The Online Safety Act evolving in strength and scope.

Housing and health

The office continued its work into understanding the impact on children's housing on their health and wellbeing by calling for strengthened housing standards and successfully calling for changes to Awaab's Law guidance to prevent children's preventable and tragic falls from windows.

The year ahead

This year the Children's Commissioner's Office will continue to work towards our ambitions for health services so that:

- 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 additional needs receives joined up healthcare, social care and education.
- Every child with the most acute physical and mental health needs living away from home receives loving, caring support.

Mental health

We will continue to build on our previous work by examining waiting times and service quality in mental health services in our annual report into children and young people's mental health services. This report will provide analysis of the persistent challenges children face in accessing timely and effective care. The office will also undertake targeted research into children's experiences of inpatient mental health services, where those children with the greatest needs are sometimes the least well served.

Additional needs

Children with mental health conditions, disabilities and neurodevelopmental conditions often face significant challenges in both education and daily life, and these challenges can be compounded by gaps in support and understanding. The office will focus on these children by shaping the ongoing Independent Review into Prevalence and Support for Mental Health Conditions, Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Autism. This review presents an invaluable opportunity to assess how well the current system identifies and supports children with these conditions and to identify areas where improvement is urgently needed.



Jobs and Skills

How we delivered in 2025-26

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 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. Last year, the office built on insights from the School and College Census to examine how further education institutions support young people, including those with additional needs.

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. As the government implements its post-16 skills and education White Paper reforms, we highlighted that these can only succeed if the needs of all young people are accounted for, to ensure all young people can access and navigate post-16 pathways and get the support they need to succeed.

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.

Young people not in education, training or employment

The growing number of children transitioning into adulthood without being in education, training, or employment (NEET) is a significant indicator of failure in how the system supports young people. These children, often the most vulnerable, face barriers that prevent them from accessing opportunities that would allow them to thrive and build a successful future. A large proportion of NEET young people come from disadvantaged backgrounds or have complex needs that are not adequately addressed by the current education and support systems. We will support the ongoing Milburn Review with a particular focus on the challenges that young people who become NEET face in education and as children.



Help at Hand

How we delivered in 2025-26

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.

High standards of advice and advocacy

Last year the office's child's rights experts continued 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

As ever, the office has ensured that where cases highlight wider system failings and challenges, we look more closely at those – shining a light on whether they are part of a bigger problem. That has included supporting work on the criminalisation of children in care and children living in illegal homes.

The year ahead

Support and advocacy for vulnerable children

While the scope of Help at Hand's advocacy has not changed in the last 10 years, its caseload continues to grow rapidly year on year. Last year, the team of three advisors handled more than 1,100 new cases – an increase of nearly 20% from the previous year. These come from children in unsafe or unsuitable care placements to those navigating homelessness or immigration systems, while highlighting the system-wide changes required to prevent such cases in the future. One quarter of the cases supported by Help at Hand last year related to housing concerns, while 21% related to complaints about support from a public service, 12% to care leaver support and 11% related to education.

Our 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 will also inform and shape the work of the office, so that we remain focused on championing the voices of vulnerable children and particularly those involved with the social care system.

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
Mapping childhood		3, 18, 19, 23, 24, 27, 28, 31
Single Unique Identifier		3, 18, 19, 23, 24, 25
Better World		2, 3, 12, 13, 42
Our Future, Our Voice		12, 13
Driving Participation		2, 3, 12, 13
Global Citizenship		2, 12, 13, 42
Community		1, 2, 3, 4, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 29, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40
Education for children in custody		1, 2, 3, 28, 29, 37

Children as victims		2, 3, 12, 19, 34, 35, 37, 39, 40
Strip Searching of children in England and Wales		2, 3, 37, 40
Children motivated by violence		2, 13, 17, 18, 19, 39, 40
Shaping a safe online world for children		3, 4, 13, 16, 17, 18, 34, 36
Children's Social Care		2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 25, 37, 39, 40
Ambitions for children's social care		2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 12, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 25, 39
Support for detained children		2, 3, 12, 19, 20, 23, 25, 37, 39, 40
Children in the asylum system		2, 3, 19, 20, 22, 35, 37
Education		2, 3, 5, 12, 13, 17, 18, 23, 28, 29, 31
Additional needs reform		2, 3, 18, 23, 28, 29, 31
Strengthening pastoral support		3, 5, 12, 13, 17, 18, 29

Family		2, 3, 5, 12, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31
Early Years Screen Time		3, 5, 18, 31
Disabled Children		2, 3, 12, 19, 20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31
Health		2, 3, 18, 23, 24, 25, 28, 37, 39
Mental Health		2, 3, 18, 23, 24, 25, 28, 37, 39
Additional Needs		2, 3, 18, 23, 28
Jobs and Skills		2, 3, 23, 28, 29
Young people not in education, training or employment		2, 3, 23, 28, 29
Help at Hand		2, 3, 4, 12, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 34, 35, 26, 37, 39, 40, 42
High standards of advice and advocacy		2, 3, 12, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 34, 35, 36, 37, 39, 40, 42
Shining a light on system failure		2, 3, 4, 18, 19, 22, 23, 25, 26, 27, 28, 34, 37, 40



**11th Floor, 64 Victoria Street
London, SW1E 6QP**

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