

Children's Commissioner for England

A review of 2016-2017 and the year ahead



Children's
COMMISSIONER

'Published in 2015, "Ambitious for Children" set out my priorities for my term in office...' - building the aspirations of children, particularly those who have a difficult start in life, and shining a light on the hidden issues affecting the vulnerable in order to change their lives for the better.

In the past year, my office has continued that mission. We have examined how well services support vulnerable children. We did this through a series of data-gathering 'lightning reviews' which have revealed gaps in child mental health provision and school nurses, and the identification of young carers by local councils. A strengthened focus on data and evidence has enabled us to create a new measure of stability of children in care – the very thing that they say is most important to them. We have made bold challenges to policy-makers and social media companies to put resilience, power and information at the heart of the digital world in which children now live and we launched a new landmark Growing up North project, which examines opportunities and gaps for children growing up in the north of England and challenges the new northern mayors and City regions to put children at the heart of plans for devolution and regeneration.

"I use my unique statutory powers to stand up for the rights of children and to seek out any hidden issues affecting the most vulnerable."

I am extremely proud of this work. It has revealed more about children's aspirations, resilience and shortfalls in provision at every level. We have also been able to provide in-depth advice and representation for hundreds of children in care through our newly extended Help at Hand service. For many of these children, it was the call to Help at Hand that meant that they were able to stay in the foster home they loved, get help to overcome the anxiety and depression that troubled them, or apply for a place on the course they hoped for. Our visits to children who are behind the closed doors of youth custody institutions, secure children's homes or secure hospital accommodation have revealed much about their experiences - and the changes that are needed if they are to develop and flourish.

Our ambition and aspiration for children is at the heart of all that we do and is driven by the experiences and issues that children talk to us about. From children's hopes and dreams for their lives now and in the future, to their concerns about friends and family and the challenges of those who need help but struggle to get it. Growing up can be a complicated business, and in 2017 it often feels more complicated than ever.



I am grateful to the fine team that has been built to deliver this work, now with a strengthened focus on enacting my unique powers for data gathering and on digital engagement. We will continue to deliver our ambitions for improving the lives of children within a budget of £2,562,700, a 7.3% reduction percent reduction on last year.

I will build on these achievements as I move into my third year in office with a new focus on children who are 'invisible' or overlooked by policy makers, planners or providers. Children's mental health and children who fall between the cracks in education are just two of the groups of vulnerable children I will be focusing on alongside gangs, vulnerable babies and those children who have come to this country alone for refuge.






I want all children to have the brightest future possible. I am determined to bring about real change for those that need help to get there.

Anne Longfield
Children's Commissioner for England

The year in review

2016 – 2017



Strategic objective	Key activities
 <p>Improving aspirations and resilience in childhood</p>	<p>Led by a taskforce of experts, Growing Up Digital recommended that every child in the country studies digital citizenship; that children are empowered to tackle social media companies through a digital ombudsman; and that there is independent oversight of complaints that social media providers receive from children to enable them to benefit from the opportunities provided on line whilst being protected from harm.</p> <p>Launched in late 2016, Growing Up North aims to improve understanding of regional discrepancies in children's outcomes and identify what local areas can do to address them.</p> <p>In May our Lightning Review of Children's Access to Mental Health found that 28% of children referred for specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health support are turned away and those who get an appointment can wait up to 200 days.</p> <p>The Takeover Challenge provided 50,000 children across the country with opportunities to get involved in the world of work and bring fresh ideas to workplace decision-making, enabling companies to learn more about children's views and children to gain confidence and new skills.</p> <p>Our Lives: Growing Up Today sought to capture and celebrate the diverse nature of childhood through digital channels and film. 3,000 children responded with many loading their story to the site. https://live.firstnews.co.uk/our-lives/</p>
 <p>See a reduction in children being harmed or neglected</p>	<p>Our report, Investigating Child Sexual Abuse, found that child sexual abuse investigations take longer than for any other type of offence, including adult sexual abuse investigations. The Commissioner wants to see improved performance by the police and more support for schools to identify those who need help.</p> <p>The Children's Commissioner led a call to pilot the Icelandic Barnahus 'children's house' in England. The house brings together under one roof services for sexually abused children, improving support for victims and increasing perpetrator conviction rates. Several houses are now being developed or piloted in England.</p> <p>Research published in partnership with NSPCC showed that many children are unwillingly finding pornography and unpleasant content online and that greater safeguards and education in schools are needed.</p> <p>An evaluation of the See Me Hear Me model of child-centred prevention and protection highlighted the value of child-centred approaches to multi-agency safeguarding practice.</p> <p>We convened a roundtable of specialists and practitioners working to tackle Female Genital Mutilation to agree how education should support prevention.</p>
 <p>Being ambitious for every child in care</p>	<p>In response to children's concerns in April 2017, the Stability Index was published giving the first annual measurement of placement, school and social worker moves.</p> <p>In June 2016 an investigation into advocacy services uncovered inconsistent support and recommended changes.</p> <p>Help at Hand, the Children's Commissioner's advice and representation service was reorganised, relaunched and extended and provided advice and help to hundreds of children in care or who receive social care support.</p> <p>Throughout the year the Commissioner supported regional meetings of Children in Care Councils and hosted meetings with Ministers for children in care to raise the issues that are important to them.</p>
 <p>Tackling disadvantage and vulnerability</p>	<p>A Lightning Review of school nurses found that the amount of time they spend on paperwork could reduce their ability to identify children at risk of neglect or abuse. It recommended reviewing and promoting the services they offer so that they provide better support to children.</p> <p>Published in December, a Lightning Review found that four out of five young carers receive no support from their local authority and recommended that local authorities review the ways in which they identify, assess and support young carers.</p> <p>Six visits were made to medium secure and forensic Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services to talk to children and professionals. The Commissioner is concerned about delays in discharging patients from these facilities and will investigate this issue further.</p> <p>We worked with the Children's Commissioner's French counterpart to challenge authorities to improve the process for transferring lone child asylum seekers with rights to come to the UK from the Calais 'jungle.' We also made a series of visits to meet children and families resettled in the UK.</p>
 <p>Children at the heart of everyday life</p>	<p>In partnership with the other UK Children's Commissioners we reported on the UK's progress to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child.</p> <p>More than 40 organisations were involved in advisory groups during the year and we increased our contact with children and young people. We also worked with schools to develop and promote a model that enables young people to engage with national and local policy makers and service providers, including local authorities and health and voluntary sectors organisations. children and families resettled in the UK.</p> <p>We submitted a report to the UN Committee on the Rights of Disabled People which assessed the UK's compliance with the Convention on the Rights of Disabled People. The Committee will publish its recommendations for the UK in 2017, which will inform our future work with disabled children.</p> <p>We asked Directors of Children's Services for information about innovative projects that improve children's outcomes. Forty-five responses were received which we are using to inform our work and enable us to share best practice.</p>



“The Children's Commissioner is like having an army of people into one. We can't go out there and give evidence but she can.”

Our Time, All Ability Youth Forum

The year ahead 2017 – 2018

Our aspiration for children drives everything we do. From those in care, to those behind the closed doors of young offender institutions or secure children's homes; those with hidden needs or all those grappling with childhood and young adulthood in a complex and often disempowering digital environment, all children are all capable of greatness and should be given the support they need to succeed.



'Invisible' children

We will focus on 'hidden' and 'invisible' groups of vulnerable children whose needs are not fully recognised or understood such as those with lower level mental health needs, those who get caught up with gangs or who fall through the gaps in the education system.

In 2017-18 our work to highlight 'invisible' children will include:

- assessing the scale of child **vulnerability** in England in order to reveal gaps in services
- publishing a series of reports which will directly represent the voices of small groups of children whose views and interests might otherwise go unheard including refugee children and those of service personnel
- researching and publishing reports on children who 'fall through the gaps' such as those in **gangs**
- leading a debate about our priorities as a country for spending on vulnerable children
- piloting a new model of **assessing council-led spending** at different levels of child need, in order to understand how resources are allocated to different groups of vulnerable children.



Children Behind Closed Doors

Children are accommodated by the state in England in a variety of centres, from secure welfare units to Tier 4 mental health beds and young offender institutions.

In 2017- 2018 our work on behalf of children behind closed doors will include:

- gathering data on and visiting children in **health, criminal justice and welfare** settings to assess where these children are, how far from home they are, and what we know about their welfare
- investigate the **mental health provision** for these children
- publishing a report which reflects on the lives of girls before they entered custody in England.



Digital children

'Growing up Digital', found an extreme inequality between the rights, protections and freedom afforded to children online, and those of the big by social media companies.

In 2017-2018 we will follow up this work:

- by continuing to campaign to include **digital resilience** in the new Life Skills curriculum, so that children learn digital citizenship and online resilience
- through continuing research into the relationship between **social media** use and children's mental health, aspiration and wellbeing
- by developing a pack of teaching aids based on social media companies' bewildering terms and conditions, to guide children in their understanding and decisions about use of their data online
- by continuing to press for the introduction of a **children's digital ombudsman**
- by exploring whether the access of children in care and adopted children to digital networks is restricted by their care status or safeguarding concerns of the adults caring for them, and what can be done to broaden access
- by working with partners and care leavers to try to develop a safe digital platform for children in the care system.



Children in Care

The Children's Commissioner has a particular responsibility to listen to and represent the views of looked after children and children living away from home. In 2017-18 we will:

- extend the hours of the **Help at Hand** service to ensure that more children and young people can get the help and advice they need
- extend and develop the **Stability Index**, to shine a light on the children 'pinged' between social workers, placements and schools
- continue to extend knowledge about the views, experiences and perspectives of looked after children and children leaving care through **Care Monitor**.



Children's voices

The views and interests of children in England influence all the work that we do. To develop our programme of work for the year ahead **we consulted 330 children** through a survey and a network of schools, and listened, in addition, to the views of 80 children in care.

The primary concern which children told us about was mental health, including the effects of parental **mental ill health** and the stress caused by divorce. They also expressed fears about feeling anxious and lonely, and lacking confidence.

Their responses point to the need to build the resilience of children against a blizzard of messages telling them how to look and 'be'. As a result we will work this year to highlight the scale of the problem of **low-level anxiety**, particularly among younger children, and the imperative that we have as a society to address it.

To help inform our programme of work in the forthcoming year, we have also developed a **network of digital youth platforms** who have generously agreed to provide the Children's Commissioner with aggregated data and regular insight into their users' interests and concerns.

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"I THINK SOME CHILDREN FEEL REALLY WORRIED ABOUT THEIR LIVES, YOU KNOW, IF THEIR PARENTS ARE SHOUTING AT EACH OTHER OR IF THEY FEEL NO ONE LOVES THEM. THEY CAN BE WORRIED OR BLAME THEMSELVES. THEY CAN FEEL LOST OR SAD IF THEIR PARENTS ARE SHOUTING AT EACH OTHER. THEY MIGHT NEED HELP AS THEY DON'T KNOW WHO TO TELL THEIR PROBLEMS TO."

10-year-old



"IF WE ARE NOT WITH OUR MUMS AND DADS ETC. THEN WE NEED SOMEONE TO LOOK AFTER US AND SUPPORT US AS WE ARE QUITE VULNERABLE AND IT'S EASY TO GO OFF THE RAILS."

Teenage girl in the care system