



Business Plan

Business Plan 2018-19

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Introduction by Anne Longfield, Children’s Commissioner for England



Half way through my term as Children’s Commissioner, I am as ambitious and aspirational for children as I ever was. This role is a constant reminder that a childhood that is happy and full of love is the best springboard to adult life that any of us could have; that children are resourceful, and achieve great things, even in adversity; and, sadly, that many children live in such difficult conditions that the state has to step in to help.

The report I produced last year into the experiences of teenage girls in custody told a tale of woeful childhood experiences: children born into chaotic families where drink, drugs and sexual abuse were rife, raised by relatives or in care, bereaved, abandoned, excluded from school.

“Like when my Mum would overdose and then I’d have to deal with it from like the age of 6, like picking her up off the bathroom floor, having to call ambulances, bullied quite a lot at school because of wetting the bed, always smelt like wee, was going to school smelling so was bullied by the other kids. Was never really in a clean house, was constantly running from the police, social service and moving around a lot ...

“...and the woman said ‘your Mum was found dead this morning’... They told me that T (younger brother) had been with her body for a number of days. So he was found by someone, it could have been 1 or 2 days ... I think I cried for 1 or 2 seconds...” (Zoe)

These experiences – of children who told me they welcome being jailed because it’s the first time in their lives they have felt safe – should worry all of us. It is a truism of course that ‘children are our future’, but it should make us all pause to think nonetheless: difficult childhoods become difficult adulthoods. They ricochet down the generations, not only wrecking the lives of the children but carrying huge social and financial costs with them.

In that context, the findings of my work with the Institute for Fiscal Studies to be published later this spring – showing a steep reduction in benefits spend per child and a 20% fall in spend on all children’s services over the decade to 2020, including a 60% reduction in spending on Sure Start services – is extremely worrying. We know that families will try to protect children from the effects of poverty, sacrificing their own needs for those of their children, but the impacts on a child’s experiences and opportunities cannot always be covered up or smoothed over. Local authorities are reporting to me that children are coming into care because they are homeless or poor – not neglected or abused, just poor.

I want to build a national consensus for fair funding for services for children and for families with children, in the children’s interests but also in the country’s interests, and I will campaign for a better deal for kids in government spending.

Our work on vulnerability last year showed how many children are living with high risks in their lives, which wreck their childhoods and will damage their life chances; often unseen and unheard. Our second wave of the Vulnerability Study this year will seek to identify the vulnerabilities and risks which

criss-cross children's lives. In isolation, each one might not be a concern, but the interaction between them can be devastating. These are children who may fall through the cracks in the system at the moment, one problem on its own not deemed sufficiently serious to warrant help: kids living with parents with mental health and substance abuse problems, for instance, or young carers in overcrowded accommodation, or the learning disabled child who is unofficially excluded.

Behind all the numbers are real stories such as Beau Broomfield's, a little boy who featured in the Evening Standard coverage of our Vulnerability study last year, beaming from the front page. The main carer for his sick mother, 8 year old Beau was preparing his own meals, calling for ambulances when his mother had fits, and constantly worrying about her:

"I have loads of friends to play with but I am worried to leave mum so I stay here. I think of my mummy as a fragile cup balancing on the edge of a kitchen table. What I'm trying to say is I love her, but she's high risk. I don't think many eight-year-olds worry as much as me..."

I am struck repeatedly in this job by the extraordinary resilience and creativity of children such as Beau. I meet them all the time: the self-harming teenagers campaigning for better mental health services, children in care building support networks for younger kids, children looking after sick parents but not telling anyone for fear they'll be taken into care. Children of such defiance against the odds with which they live that it takes your breath away. It is my enormous privilege to represent children such as these in Parliament and Whitehall.

Too often in our local and national structures, children's needs are overlooked as adults build systems in adult or bureaucratic interests, ignoring the child in the centre by default. Children often appear to be an afterthought or a second priority in the development of policy or services. We saw it last year in our CAMHS work, which showed the massive discrepancy between both spend and accountability in children's and adult's mental health.

Nowhere is the afterthought more apparent than in the design of digital services for children. I have campaigned long and hard to rebalance the power between the digital giants and kids. Last year we shone a light on the experiences of children aged 8-12 growing up amidst the whirlwind of social media; chasing 'Likes' and trying to emulate the lives of the rich, famous and glamorous. That's why I'm so pleased the Government has agreed to include digital life skills in the RSE curriculum, and has introduced laws to force social media companies to consider children's development when they design online services; to help address the problem of irresponsibly addictive platforms aimed at children, and those that may be a danger to them such as Snapmaps or Instagram Live. Our work on children's digital lives continues: I will not leave this office without addressing the imbalances of power that exist between online titans and the children whose data they mine.

Where something needs changing, I will fight for it. Where it needs funding, I will campaign for it. Where it needs to be seen and understood, I will shine a light on it. I want to place children centre stage – no longer an afterthought, but at the heart of policy-making, their views and interests able to shape the world around them.



Anne Longfield OBE, Children's Commissioner for England

‘Invisible’ children

The Children’s Commissioner’s childhood vulnerability framework is the first attempt to measure the number of vulnerable children in England, mapping the full range of difficulties a child might be living with, from physical or mental illness, to going hungry; being homeless or excluded from school; being at risk of neglect; or living with parents with health problems. **This July our annual report to Parliament on childhood vulnerability will update the figures, show trends, and for the first time include breakdowns by age and location.** Where possible we aim to produce estimates by local authority and/or Parliamentary constituency, updated annually, and we will seek to **develop the framework into a live interactive map updated in real time.** This will allow MPs and councillors to track the childhood vulnerabilities in their local area, see movements over time, and compare with similar areas.

We have created a new partnership with the Office for National Statistics and the Economic and Social Research Council’s Administrative Data Research Network to make better use of existing data to fill gaps in knowledge we have identified where children have multiple and overlapping vulnerabilities.

Using the vulnerability framework, we will produce regular ‘datanote’ briefings on issues affecting children. The framework will also guide the Children’s Commissioner’s Office decisions about groups of children on which to focus qualitative, survey and policy work.

The second wave of the Vulnerability Study this year will also seek to **identify the common vulnerabilities, risks and indicators which criss cross children’s lives.** In isolation, each one might not be a concern, but the interaction between them can be devastating. To highlight the impact on children of combinations of hidden risks, **we will produce a report into children living in households surrounded by risk** – where adults have drug or alcohol problems and mental health conditions and where domestic violence is present. These children often go under the radar, un-noticed by adult services working with their parent(s). We will estimate how many of these children there are, of what ages, and show what life is like for them through one of our ‘Voices of Children’ reports.

The children we consulted to inform this year’s business plan were concerned about those growing up abused and neglected, those in poverty, and children who were ill. In order to show the lived experiences of children with multiple disadvantages, we will focus on the lives of children who are poor and living with additional vulnerabilities such as disability, parental neglect, or caring responsibilities.

To inform this business plan we consulted with children with a wide range of experiences – in and out of care, in mainstream schools and pupil referral units, with and without disabilities. All groups expressed high levels of concern over children with physical and learning disabilities, as well as those with mental health problems. The full report of the consultation accompanies this business plan.

“If I had a super-power I would help everyone with an illness; I would stop them being ill and . . . have a free life”. (Younger child with a disability in foster care)

Our work with the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS), tracking spending on children across all services over two decades, found a particular opacity when it comes to NHS spending on children, especially in primary care and children’s mental health services. This year will see the publication by the ONS of the first national survey of child mental health needs for 14 years. We have reason to expect that it will show large increases in children with anxiety-related mental illness and will highlight how much further we have to go to build a system fit for these kids. The children we consulted told a sadly familiar tale of difficulty accessing mental health services – what one teenager described as a “denial industry” – with referrals only made when a child is at ‘crisis point’. They also noted the lack of information available for them online; a sign of a service not designed around user needs.

Our analysis last year showed that local areas spend an average of 6% of their mental health budget on children, despite children making up around 20% of the population.

This year we will **continue our work to drive transparency in terms of NHS spending and provision for children and advocate for children’s mental health to be a priority locally and nationally**. Last year our work highlighted significant local differences in mental health services for children and **we will continue to monitor (through the NHS Forward View Dashboard and underlying data) what local areas provide**. We have called for greater investment in early intervention mental health services, clear benchmarks as to what local areas should be providing, and proper monitoring of the number of children requiring and accessing treatment.

Children with speech and language difficulties, in particular those living with autism, were also a big concern for the children we consulted with; and our work with the IFS shows a sharp increase in the numbers of children with autism in special schools over the past 5 years.

“These children are treated differently. They don’t know how to express themselves.” (Primary school child)

“Schools should allow kids to follow their interest, we can’t all cope with every subject and schools just have to meet targets now so those of us whose brains are wired differently aren’t catered for. I should be allowed to give up French and work with animals, my friends who are autistic need to move around more and also do more practical stuff. We aren’t all the same so don’t treat us the same.” (Younger child with a disability in foster care)

Children told us of long waiting times for those with speech and language difficulties, stigma, and the absence of early help. They spoke of the impact that speech and language problems can have on education and on emotional wellbeing, but they also praised the services they had received.

“[Speech and language services] do not exist for young people at a certain age.” (Child with a disability)

“It can affect daily life. It can affect how you convey feelings.” (Primary school child)

One in 25 primary school children has speech and language additional needs, and this can affect much more than their education – it has a proven long term impact on mental health and employment

prospects. Six in ten young offenders have language and communication difficulties. Despite anecdotal evidence of extremely long waits, reflected as we heard in children's own experiences, **there is no national data on the amount spent on speech and language therapy for children, or on how long children wait to be helped. We will use our data-gathering power this year to survey local areas and find out who spends what, where services are underfunded, and how long children are having to wait.**

Last year we published reports giving the first-hand accounts of groups of vulnerable children whose voices are rarely heard: children saying in their own words what it feels like to be an asylum seeker, or in detention, or in a gang where abuse is rife. The purpose of our 'Voices of Children' series is to allow children from often unheard groups to speak for themselves, unmediated as far as possible by adults.

This year we will look closely at the experiences of the hundreds of thousands of children living in poor quality or insecure housing. This will run alongside **a major new programme of work to identify and quantify groups of children living in insecure or poor quality housing.** We are very concerned at what appears to be a sharp increase in homelessness among households with children. Stability is as important to children outside the care system as it is to those within it. Children in our consultation with experience of homelessness spoke of how it led to bullying; of the tensions and stress it caused among family members; of being unable to do their homework; and of feeling cold, dirty, sad, embarrassed, worried and unsafe.

"Because they [children who are homeless] don't get to live their childhood... it's not a good childhood to live." (Younger child attending a PRU)

"If people who are homeless go to school they'd be bullied for what they are." (Secondary school child)

"It was disgusting ... it was literally just a room. And my mum had to sleep on the floor." (Older child attending a PRU)

"I lived in a hotel for 8 months ... it's like where all the prostitutes live." (Older child attending a PRU)

A briefing we produced for MPs last year exposed the lack of transparency and clarity over children who fall through the cracks in the education system: not just those receiving fixed period exclusions but those in alternative provision, unofficially or illegally excluded from mainstream schools, 'off-rolled' or home educated in uncertain home environments.

There are tens of thousands of children we cannot be certain are being educated at all, along with anecdotal evidence that more and more kids are being excluded from a 'one size fits all' mainstream education system.

"You do one thing and get excluded, and then no other school wants you because of your past, no matter how much you say you can change." (Older child attending a PRU)

‘Off-rolling’ – the movement of a child off a school’s roll without officially excluding them – will be the subject of further scrutiny by the Children’s Commissioner this year.

Although some children have good experiences of home education, others in our consultation described it as lonely, depressing and unstructured – not really home education at all, but being left alone for long periods.

“Say if you get kicked out of mainstream... the kid probably thinks like, I failed... they just lose confidence.” (Older child attending a PRU)

“I had work sent home for like 2 weeks and then they stopped sending it.” (Older child attending a PRU)

“For like eight months before I came here [I was home schooled] and like, I never saw my friends. I literally had like no friends for ages... I used to smoke all the time.” (Older child attending a PRU)

A further issue highlighted by our consultation with children was the over-exclusion of children with disabilities or learning difficulties. **We will investigate the experiences of children with disabilities excluded from mainstream schools.**

“My best friend can’t come to school with me as she has cerebral palsy and is in a wheelchair. She uses her eyes on her computer to talk, but she is just as clever as me and should be able to make lots of friends where she lives and do GCSEs like me. It’s not fair she doesn’t have choice of schools.” (Younger child with a disability in foster care)

“At my old school... they permanently excluded me for having autism... that’s a bit out of order.” (Younger child attending a PRU)

Finally, in response to widespread concerns over the quality of education and safeguarding of children in unregistered schools, **the Children’s Commissioner will accompany Ofsted this year on a series of inspections of unregistered and suspected illegal schools.**

Children Behind Closed Doors

Nowhere is it more important to shine a light than on the experiences of children in care or incarcerated by the state. Children locked up by the state – whether in young offender institutions, secure children’s homes or in specialist mental hospitals – are both highly protected, ‘visible’ to service providers if not to the public, and acutely vulnerable. A series of critical inspection reports has exposed the poor state of young offender institutions and secure training centres, with unprecedented levels of violence and poor outcomes. There is far less public scrutiny of other secure institutions for children, those designed to help with mental health, behavioural or emotional problems, but which nonetheless remove a child’s liberty.

The Children’s Commissioner and her staff make regular visits to the children’s secure estate, accompanied where possible by influential policymakers and Parliamentarians, and these visits will continue this year.

As part of the Vulnerability framework, we will repeat a survey last conducted in 2016 by NHS England and due to be published this April, to **map the location of all beds in the health, welfare and criminal justice secure estate for children, who is in them, and why.**

For children locked away, the step down from institutionalised care back into the community is very high. All the risks and vulnerabilities that drove them behind the closed doors of the state await them when they step outside. After hearing repeated concerns over failures in resettlement planning for young people leaving YOIs and STCs, this year **we will track the pathways of children leaving secure custody, to identify the barriers to effective reintegration into the community** – housing, mental health and educational support – and report to the new Youth Justice System oversight board.

Our investigation last year into mental health inpatient provision for children – how far children had to travel to access specialist beds – exposed the lack of accountability in the system. These are some of the most vulnerable children in England, yet we know very little about how many require in-patient care, where they receive it, for how long, or how often such care is refused because of lack of capacity. When we looked at the data held centrally by the NHS which ought to answer these questions, we found huge gaps in the data with different hospitals and regions collecting and reporting information in very different ways, leaving us unable to answer basic questions about the provision and accessibility of NHS care to children with very acute needs.

We are concerned that the wider system around inpatient hospital placements for children is opaque. In order to increase confidence that children at high risk are getting the services they need, **we will continue to work with NHS Digital and NHS England to improve data collection and transparency and will publish a comprehensive list of the in-patient mental health units treating England’s most vulnerable children.**

Children in Care

Our **Help at Hand** advice and assistance service for children in care and the very vulnerable continues to grow. We responded to over 1,500 enquiries last year – the number of cases coming to us is roughly doubling year on year. Among the typical cases we resolved were helping a care leaver whose local authority had failed to get her immigration status established/recorded to remain at university; getting proper education for a young disabled boy at home; and keeping two teenage sisters with the foster family they loved.

“I don’t like the way I’m described in documents or any reports I read. The wording is wrong... I’m not a victim and everything I read is always telling everyone about my past.” (Older child with a disability in foster care)

Children in the care system are still too often threatened with financially-driven moves, or made the victims of poor planning and decision-making. We are here to help put it right. We have helped homeless teenagers, excluded children, and young offenders leaving secure units with nowhere to go. Both children and the professionals trying to help

them contact us for help, and we intervene with local authorities or other services to get them the support they need. The cases that come to us inform the Children’s Commissioner’s wider priorities and help sharpen the focus of our policy and evidence work.

This year, we will continue to help the most vulnerable children, ensuring that we use our expertise and influence to make a real difference for those in the most urgent and difficult situations.

The experiences of children in the care system inform our work on stability for looked after children. Many calls to Help at Hand relate to unwanted placement moves and school changes, and the disruption that these bring. This is why we created the **Stability Index** to encourage councils to hold themselves to account for children being ‘pinged’ around the system. It measures placement moves, school moves and changes in social worker. This year **we will show where there have been improvements or declines in stability, and will also work closely with one council to explore the reasons for multiple moves and their impact on the child(ren) concerned.** We will also start work on building sibling relationships into the Index.

In order to join up the voices of children in the care system and give them a more effective national network, we are funding the creation of a **digital hub** linking children in care councils across the country. This year the Children’s Commissioner office will run the hub, steered by an advisory group of 21 young people in care. We want to explore what children want from the hub, which services could be provided via it, and the possibility of developing a mentoring scheme for children with care experience to help one another. We will be encouraging sports and entertainment businesses to donate tickets and memberships to the hub, to give children in the care system the social opportunities enjoyed by other kids.

We will continue to attend **regional children in care council meet-ups** around the country in order to meet and learn from looked after children and give them a louder voice in Whitehall.

Digital Children

Our work on children growing up in the digital age has exposed the gulf between children's experiences online and the protections and preparation in place for them.

We will continue to work with government and the Information Commissioner to design an effective digital resilience curriculum and enforce children's rights online including the right to be informed through clear terms and conditions, to be protected from location tracking, and to know how their data is used.

Our report last year into the experiences of children aged 8-12 on social media platforms, 'Life in "Likes"', suggested increasing anxiety over chasing popularity and 'likes' and unattainable lifestyles. Older children we consulted for this business plan drew unprompted parallels between social media and their mental health, saying it made them anxious and put them under pressure to conform.

*"Young people's mentality has changed. You wanna know why? All this social s***, this social media s***". (Older child attending a PRU)*

Having launched last year our 'Digital 5 a Day' campaign to help children manage their online lives, and designed straightforward terms and conditions for popular social media companies, this year we will explore whether guidelines can be drawn up to help parents keep children emotionally healthy online.

We will also extend our campaigning on children's digital lives to **shine a light on the multiple ways in which children's data is given away, sold and used; and campaign for greater transparency and decent policies to protect children from digital profiling which might negatively affect them in future.**

Children's data is collected and marketised by a range of organisations from online shopping to social media and the health advice industry, schools, police, the NHS, 'smart' watches, toy manufacturers and the myriad of other websites that children visit online; as well as potentially by services which parents use such as supermarket loyalty schemes. It is not always clear who collects, aggregates, sells and otherwise uses this data either to market directly to children or their parents, or to profile children for other purposes. There is also significant uncertainty over the uses to which a child's digital profile might be put in future. We continue to believe that educating children early and comprehensively about the many ways in which their data might be used is the best way to foster digital resilience and rebalance the power between young internet users and service providers.

We will produce a guide this year for schools and parents to demonstrate the ways in which children's data is used and sold, and how it may be used in future.

Advisory Board

The Children's Commissioner's advisory board challenges and advises the office about its work. It meets six times a year. We recruit through open advertisement as positions fall vacant. The Advisory Board's current membership is:

- > Dr David Halpern
- > Josh MacAlister
- > Sir Martin Narey
- > Alison O'Sullivan
- > Edward Timpson, CBE

Budget

The Office of the Children's Commissioner budget is £2,434,565, amounting to 21 pence per child in England*.

**Indicative; subject to confirmation by Department for Education*

United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

The work programme for 2017-18 relates to the following articles in the UNCRC.

Piece of Work	Article
<p>This year we will campaign for a better deal for children in government spending. The Children’s Commissioner’s Office wants to build a national consensus for fair funding for services for children and for families with children.</p>	<p>3, 4, 6, 24, 26</p>
<p>Our second wave of the Vulnerability Study this year will seek to identify the vulnerabilities and risks which criss-cross children’s lives. This July our annual report to Parliament on childhood vulnerability will update the figures, show trends, and for the first time include breakdowns by age and location. Where possible we aim to produce estimates by local authority and/or Parliamentary constituency and we will develop the framework into a live interactive map updated in real time. Using the vulnerability framework, we will produce regular ‘datanote’ briefings on issues affecting children. The framework will also guide the Children’s Commissioner’s decisions about groups of children on which to focus qualitative, survey and policy work.</p>	<p>3, 6, 12, 16, 19, 20, 23, 24, 26, 36, 27, 28, 34, 42</p>
<p>To highlight the impact on children of combinations of hidden risks, we will produce a report into children living in households surrounded by risk – where adults have drug or alcohol problems and mental health conditions and where domestic violence is present.</p>	<p>3, 6, 19, 26, 27, 33</p>
<p>This year we will continue our work to drive for transparency in NHS spending and provision for children. We will advocate for children’s mental health to be a priority locally and nationally. Last year our work highlighted significant local differences in mental health services for children and we will continue to monitor (through the NHS Forward View Dashboard) what local areas provide.</p>	<p>3, 6, 12, 13, 20, 24, 39, 42</p>
<p>We will use our data-gathering power to survey local areas on funding for speech and language services. Despite anecdotal evidence of extremely long waits, there is no national data on the amount spent on speech and language therapy for children, or on how long children wait to be helped.</p>	<p>3, 6, 24, 28, 29</p>
<p>We will develop a major new programme of work to identify and quantify groups of children living in insecure or poor quality housing.</p>	<p>3, 6, 9, 16, 18, 26</p>

<p>'Off-rolling' – the movement of a child off a school's role without officially excluding them – will be the subject of further scrutiny by the Children's Commissioner this year.</p>	<p>3, 6, 12, 28, 29</p>
<p>We will investigate the experiences of children with disabilities excluded from mainstream schools.</p>	<p>3, 12, 23, 28, 29, 37</p>
<p>We will accompany Ofsted this year on a series of inspections of unregistered and suspected illegal schools.</p>	<p>3, 19, 28, 29</p>
<p>We will track the pathways of children leaving secure custody, to identify the barriers to effective reintegration into the community – housing, mental health and educational support – and report to the new Youth Justice System oversight board.</p>	<p>3, 40, 37, 27, 19</p>
<p>We will continue to work with NHS Digital and NHS England to improve data collection and transparency and will publish a comprehensive list of the in-patient mental health units treating England's most vulnerable children.</p>	<p>3, 6, 24, 25, 20</p>
<p>We will continue our work on the Stability Index and will work closely with one council to explore the reasons for multiple moves and their impact on the child(ren) concerned.</p>	<p>3, 9, 13, 20, 25, 27, 28, 42</p>
<p>The Children's Commissioner's Office will continue to run the Help at Hand service to ensure that more children and young people can get the help and advice they need.</p>	<p>3, 9, 12, 13, 20, 42</p>
<p>We will also extend our campaigning on children's digital lives to shine a light on the multiple ways in which children's data is given away, sold and used; and campaign for greater transparency and decent policies to protect children from digital profiling which might negatively affect them in future. We will produce a guide this year for schools and parents to demonstrate the ways in which children's data is used and sold, and how it may be used in future.</p>	<p>3, 4, 5, 8, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 31, 36, 42</p>
<p>We will map the location of all beds in the health, welfare and criminal justice secure estate for children, who is in them, and why.</p>	<p>3, 9, 24, 25, 27, 37, 39, 40, 42</p>
<p>We will show where there have been improvements or declines in stability for children in care.</p>	<p>3, 8, 9, 16, 19, 20, 26, 27, 39</p>

<p>We are funding the creation of a digital hub linking children in care councils across the country. This year the Children’s Commissioner office will run the hub, steered by an advisory group of 21 young people in care. We want to explore what children want from the hub, which services could be provided via it, and the possibility of developing a mentoring scheme for children with care experience to help one another.</p>	<p>3, 13, 15, 17, 25, 31, 39, 42</p>
<p>We will continue to attend regional children in care council meet-ups around the country in order to meet and learn from looked after children and give them a louder voice in Whitehall.</p>	<p>3, 8, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 39, 42</p>



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