



Childhood in 2020

Business plan consultation with children 2020-21

March 2020

Message from the Children's Commissioner

The coronavirus outbreak means we are living in unprecedented times, with social distancing measures putting the kind of restrictions on children's lives we could never have imagined only a few weeks ago. Schools are closed with many children having lessons at home. Children are missing out on playing outdoors, on sports, trips to the cinema or just hanging out with their friends. As the weeks go by, many will miss the structure, safety and stability of school and for some children that will make their life feel more precarious or even unsafe. There are millions of children living in poverty or in vulnerable circumstances who rely on the stability of school and a hot meal who will be deeply affected.



Many children are also worrying about what this virus means for their families and communities. Some are particularly vulnerable to the consequences of the outbreak, including those in residential care or secure settings where they are living in close proximity to others or may be affected by staff shortages or visiting restrictions. I and my team are working hard to ensure that the needs of all these children are taken fully into account by Government and us all as we respond to this crisis, and that the messages and advice that go out to children are clear, easy to understand and delivered in a sensitive, child-friendly way.

But there may be some constructive long-lasting changes for children that emerge from this extraordinary time. Perhaps this crisis could be the catalyst for adults to change their mindset in the way children say they want them to. People have already started to think more about others. Communities are becoming more connected as neighbours help each other out. We are spending more time with our families together or online, and we are connecting with friends virtually. We have been seeing the positives for the environment. And, we are thinking about how to make this time most valuable for children, with activities and support. This may be a time to reevaluate what really matters.

This report highlights many of the issues that children worried about before the coronavirus crisis. But the underlying problems children experience are not going to go away. This report sets out children's views of the vital wider issues in our society that we will still need to address when things start to return to normal. And as with so many problems, it is children who will hold the clues to so many of the answers.

I spend a lot of time talking to children, and I never fail to learn something new. In order to help plan our work programme for 2020/21, we spoke face-to-face to almost 140 children across the country. Some were in care or in the youth justice system, others were from migrant families or had special educational needs and disabilities. Many were in mainstream primary and secondary schools. In addition, we conducted a survey with almost 2,000 children to understand more about what life is like for kids in England today.

In this report you'll see the thoughts of children on a range of issues: from climate change to mental health, from social media to creating a more inclusive society. But what really struck me is how stressed children feel. Feeling stressed and/or sad was one of the main worries for a third of boys and girls across all ages, rising to over half of 16-17 year old teenage girls. When asked what would alleviate their worries, children choose things which you would expect to be routine for any child: someone to talk to at school, receiving love and support, and help for their families when things are difficult. Sadly, budget cuts and the pressure on public services mean the kind of additional support most kids want – a friendly ear from a teacher, some backup for their parents – just isn't available to most of them anymore.

I was also told about the stress caused by poverty, and how it makes children feel stigmatised, even “unaffordable”, as one girl put it. I heard about the frustration felt by children in care at the restrictions placed upon them; and about the barriers faced by young people with disabilities. Since we heard children speak a lot about stress, we asked another 2,000 children to tell us in their own words about how being stressed makes them feel. Around 750 responses were received in time for this report.

Many children told us about the things that make them happy – birthday parties, playing sports, or going on holiday. However, some of the basic expectations of childhood – such as a decent home and a safe community – do seem out of reach for some children. Because of poverty, stigma and inequalities, these children don't always get the same chance at a stable, happy childhood.

You'll read a lot in this report about listening. Children want to be listened to. They told us that when they're not, they feel belittled and frustrated. They have ideas about equality and inclusivity, about poverty and politics, about safer streets and the environment. Our business plan consultation exists to ensure we *do* listen to children, and that their views influence our work. They are best placed to tell us what life is like for them – what's going well, what isn't and what needs to improve. We'll continue to make sure their voices are heard by those with the power to bring about change.

I would like to thank every child and young person who has contributed and shared their experiences and views with us – it enables us to plan our work to help all children. Thank you all.

Acknowledgements

As well as thanking all the children who have given us their time during our business plan consultation, I would also like to acknowledge the support and time given by the different organisations and institutions, parents and carers, who helped to facilitate the planning of the focus groups. We also thank Opinium for speaking to primary and secondary school children in eight focus groups and YouGov for conducting two surveys. Thank you.



Anne Longfield OBE
Children's Commissioner for England

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Introduction



*I ask for something that has to do with my future, **if they [adults] try and do something about it then I know they've listened**, but if they just leave it to the side then they'd probably just be like, 'Oh, they're children, they don't know what they're talking about.*



- Olivia, aged 12-13, secondary school

Every year, our office speaks to children and young people all over the country to hear their views and experiences. For this report, we surveyed almost 2,000 children aged 6 – 17 about what changes would make the biggest difference to their childhoods and what worries them (Part 1). Between December 2019 and February 2020, we spoke face-to-face with 137 children in over 21 separate conversations all over England (Part 2). We spoke to children of all ages and some who are living in particular circumstances, in care, in the youth justice system and in a residential special school. We spoke to children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), with mental health issues, with a migration background, and with HIV. As well as speaking to us, some children also made collages to illustrate the things that make them happy, and many of these are also included in this plan. [View a selection of the collages.](#)

We heard about the impact of poverty, and the stress it causes; how it can make children feel stigmatised and feel that they don't belong. Children in care told us they feel frustrated by the challenges they face. We heard from children who have to wait to access mental health services and feel like their disabilities are not understood. They don't always feel safe. It was also striking how much children want to change the mindsets of adults. They believe much more needs to be done to protect the environment and to promote a more equal and inclusive society. Children also told us they want a world without racism, homophobia and gender inequality, and a world where everyone has the same opportunities.

Some children told us they felt stressed and we asked them about what makes them feel stressed, how feeling stressed makes them feel and what they do to feel less stressed.

Part 3 of this report digs deeper into the lived experiences of some of the more vulnerable groups that we spoke to, allowing them to tell their stories. All of the children's names mentioned in this report have been changed, but their quotes are genuine. More details of our methodology are provided at the end of this report.

This report aims to do justice to what children have shared with us and to highlight what's on their minds – something we should all aim to understand better.

Part 1 - Children’s responses to our survey

In late 2019, we asked a representative sample of 1,924 children in England (aged 6 -17) two questions:

- “Which three, if any, of these do you think would most improve children’s lives in the UK?”
- “Which three, if any, of these worry you the most?”

For each question the children were asked to choose up to three options from a list that was provided. That means when for example 33% of children chose “feeling stressed and/or sad” as one of their main worries, they could have also chosen two others.

The survey also collected information about the child’s gender, age, region, and the employment and marital statuses of their parents or guardians. We set out below the key findings from this survey. [View and download the full results and tables.](#)

Which three, if any, of these do you think would most improve children’s lives in the UK?

Children’s three most common answers (from the list provided) were:

1. If all children could talk to someone at their school if they feel worried or stressed to help them look after their mental health (43%)
2. If every child received love, care and support even if they have done something wrong (39%)
3. If all families were given help when they are finding things difficult (38%).
This was closely followed by ‘if children could feel safe in their local parks and streets’ (36%)

Children’s three least common answers (from the list provided) were:

1. If children were never expelled from school (4%)
2. If politicians set up a group to only work on things for children (9%)
3. If there were police officers and/ or youth workers in every school (11%)

Table 1 What matters in helping kids be the best they can

Answer	% of children	% of girls	% of boys
If all children could talk to someone at their school if they feel worried or stressed to help them look after their mental health	43%	46%	40%
If every child received love, care and support even if they have done something wrong	39%	42%	36%
If all families were given help when they are finding things difficult	38%	40%	36%
If children could feel safe in their local parks and streets	36%	34%	39%
If children with special educational needs or a disability could get the help they need to stay in school	21%	21%	21%
If schools taught children how to use the internet safely	13%	12%	14%

If schools stayed open in the evening, at weekends and during holidays to provide a safe space for activities and play	13%	13%	12%
If there were police officers and/ or youth workers in every school	11%	12%	11%
If politicians set up a group to only work on things for children	9%	9%	10%
I don't know	8%	8%	9%
If children were never expelled from school (i.e. told to leave school and not come back)	4%	3%	4%
Something else	3%	3%	3%
Nothing needs to be done to improve children's lives in the UK (children's lives are already good)	2%	2%	2%
Nothing would improve children's lives in the UK (nothing would help make them better)	1%	1%	1%

Differences by gender

- > There were relatively few differences between what boys and girls thought would help overall.
- > Girls were slightly more likely to choose the option 'If all children could talk to someone at their school if they feel worried or stressed to help them look after their mental health' (46% of girls compared to 40% of boys). They were also slightly more likely to choose 'If every child received love, care and support even if they have done something wrong' (42% of girls compared to 36% of boys).
- > Boys were slightly more likely to choose the option 'If children could feel safe in their local parks and streets' (39% of boys compared to 34% of girls).

Differences by age

- > Older children were more likely to choose the option 'If children could feel safe in their local parks and streets' (41% of children aged 13-17 compared to 34% of children aged 12 or under).
- > Younger children were more likely to choose the option 'If every child received love, care and support even if they have done something wrong' (43% of children aged 12 or under compared to 33% of children aged 13-17).

Differences by other characteristics

- > Children whose parents were either working part time (under 8 hours a week) or were not working were slightly more likely to choose the option 'If children with special educational needs or a disability could get the help they need to stay in school' (28% of this group, compared to 20% of other children).

What worries you the most?

Children's three most common answers (from the list provided) were:

1. Feeling stressed and/or sad (33%)
2. Being/feeling pressured to do well at school (31%)
3. The environment (27%)

Children's three least common answers (from the list provided) were:

1. The condition of the home I live in (3%)
2. Not feeling safe generally (such as online, at school, at home) (9%)
3. What's going on online (such as on Instagram, Snapchat or online games) (10%)

Table 2 Children's worries

Answer	% of children	% of girls	% of boys
Feeling stressed and/ or sad	33%	37%	29%
Being or feeling pressured to do well at school	31%	29%	33%
The environment	27%	30%	25%
What I look like	20%	24%	16%
Being treated differently because of who I am/ how I look/ what I believe in	19%	21%	17%
Nothing worries me	15%	13%	17%
Having enough money and food	13%	12%	14%
Feeling unhealthy	13%	12%	14%
What's going on online (such as on Instagram, Snapchat or online games)	10%	11%	9%
Not feeling safe generally (such as online, at school, at home)	9%	11%	8%
Something else	8%	7%	9%
I don't know	6%	5%	7%
The condition of the home I live in	3%	3%	3%
I don't want to answer	2%	2%	2%

Differences by gender

- > Girls were slightly more likely to report feeling stressed and/or sad (37% compared to 29% of boys) and to report worrying about what they look like (24% compared to 16% of boys).
- > The difference in feeling stressed and/or sad is more pronounced for older girls: 45% of girls aged 12-17 reported feeling stressed and/or sad compared to 29% of boys of the same age. There are similar though slightly smaller differences with worries about what they look like. On average, 35% of girls aged 12-17 reported worrying about what they look like and an average of 23% of boys.

Differences by age

- > Younger children were less likely to report any worries. One in four children aged 6-9 (22%) reported that nothing worries them, compared to 1 in 10 children aged 10-17 (11%).
- > Feeling stressed and/or sad was particularly marked amongst 16-17 year olds, even compared to other teenagers – 43% of 16-17 year olds compared to 33% of children aged 13-15.
- > Worries about 'being or feeling pressured to do well at school' are most pronounced amongst children aged 15-16. 42% of these children reported feeling or being pressured at school compared to 29% of other children in the sample.

Differences by other characteristics

- > Children whose parents were not in work (retired, unemployed, or inactive) were approximately twice as likely to report being worried about having enough money and food, compared to children whose parents were in work (part time, full time), students, or 'other' (20% vs. 11%).
- > Children whose parents are divorced or separated were also more likely to report worrying about being treated differently because of who they are / how they look / what they believe in (32% of these children, compared to 18% of children of other families).

Part 2 - Conversations with children about...

Social media and gaming



It's just something that everyone wants and uses in this day and age.



- **Finlay¹, 17, working with a Youth Offending Team**

Children talked to us about social media more than any other pastime, and generally they see it as part of everyday life. When we asked children what they are worried about in our survey, social media scored ninth in our list of options with only 10% of boys and girls choosing it as one of their main three worries (see Table 2, Part 1). Children told us that they find social media entertaining and that they use it to communicate with their friends. Sometimes, they would use it to copy homework. In one group, children aged 13-15 said that their lives would be boring without social media. It also made them happy (see Figure 1). To some, social media is essential to be able to stay connected and feel part of their friendship groups:

*“Because you **wouldn't have any way of talking to your friends** apart from playing out and I don't live around where everyone else lives. So, I wouldn't know when I had to meet up with them or anything” - Mia, aged 10-11², primary school*



Figure 1 "I love social media", girl, 8-9

Erin (primary school, aged 10-11) even told us that she had met most of her friends online.

Whilst social media was seen as a normal part of life, some children had concerns about aspects of its use. One girl felt pressure to increase the number of her followers:

*“Well, I **want to get to a hundred** [followers] because ... yeah, I've got eighty-something” - Molly, aged 9-10, primary school*

¹ All names were changed.

² Based on school year.

Others said they were spending a lot of time on social media, “a bit too much” as Ruby said (aged 13-15, secondary school):

*“You could be staying on it till one o’clock in the morning, then if it’s a school day you might get up at six o’clock, **so you only really got five hours’ sleep**” - Ruby, aged 13-15, secondary school*

However, other children told us that they had deleted their social media accounts as they felt it was having a negative impact on their lives:

*“For me, I **deleted my social media** because I realise I’m not happy, and I used to compare myself to a lot of girls on Instagram as well, but now I’ve deleted it, I feel much happier with myself” - Jennifer, teenager living with HIV*

Another child said that if she could change anything about the world, she would like to have “less internet” in her life:

*“I’ve got a few things but **probably less internet**. Because if you want to play with your sister or brother and they’re just always sat on their phone, you want them to play with you but they never do” - Megan, aged 10-11, primary school*

And Ayesha, aged 12-13, wanted to see more “off-line” activities for young people:

*“Maybe more **things outside of school to get you and your friends together**. So, like groups to do different activities for more grown-up people, like teenagers, because there’s not many things” - Ayesha, aged 12-13, secondary school*

Children were also aware of cyberbullying and knew what it meant. While the children we spoke to had not personally experienced it, they said it was almost worse than bullying in person because people could hide behind screens. Generally, children felt safe using social media and talked about different ‘strategies’ they would use to stay safe. For example, one girl said that she would block out the logo of her school uniform if she was posting a picture of herself online (aged 12-13, secondary school); and Luke said:

*“Well, I **don’t really feel unsafe because I don’t like put any of my details on there**, like my name. Obviously, there’s pictures of me and my family on there but **obviously I scan through my pictures before I post them to make sure there’s like no bait to lead any perverts in**” - Luke, aged 12-13, secondary school*

Children had been told about the potential dangers of social media, especially at school, but sometimes felt they were ‘exaggerated’:

*“Just like at school, I don’t know, **teachers like overexaggerate** quite a lot about what can happen. Like we see videos of people being cyberbullied but I don’t know anybody in real life who’s actually had that happen to them” - Evie, aged 12-13, secondary school*

Video games were also mentioned, but not as often as social media. Primary school children aged 10-11 named Fortnite, Roblox, Grand Theft Auto, and FIFA as games they like to play. But younger children (aged 7-8) said they were not allowed to play online games because their parents had said it wasn't safe and wouldn't allow it. Some children felt that gaming made them happy (Figures 2 and 3), but it could also be a reason for them to feel sad when things did not go well:

*"I was playing Fortnite and there were two people left and I didn't even win. **That made me so sad.** I was playing with my cousin and I wanted to impress her so much because she's so good at it. And she was like, 'maybe next time'" - Chloe, aged 11-12, secondary school*



Figure 2 "XBOX", boy, 10-11



Figure 3 "Playing computer games!", boy, 11-13

When we asked children how they like to spend their time, many also spoke about doing sports (gymnastics, football, tennis, cricket, netball, water skiing, dancing, biking, ice skating were all mentioned); others do drama and arts, or watching television; some said sleeping. They also enjoyed spending time with family and friends (see more in section 10).

Their ideas for their future

“**For my kids I want to get a good amount [of money] to set them up for life.**”

- **Oliver, aged 14-15, secondary school**

Children had many different ideas about what they would like to do when they are older. Ambitions for future professions included: footballer, singer and dancer, car trader, nurse (Figure 4), doctor, estate agent, actor, millionaire, lawyer, entrepreneur, selling plants, working in a nursing home, gymnastics teacher, art therapist, journalist, mechanic, professional gymnast, joining the navy and army, kickboxer or police officer. These ideas were not necessarily gender stereotypical. A girl wanted to be a kickboxer or a police officer, while some boys wanted to be an art therapist, a gymnast or sell plants. It was striking that many of the children’s ambitions were driven by a desire to help others and give back to society, or protect the environment:

“I want to help with animals and just environment with the animals” - Lola, aged 9-10, primary school

“I want to help people and save lives” - Aameena, aged 11-12, secondary school



Figure 4 "Mental Health Nursing", girl, 11-12

“Because my granddad has got something wrong with his heart and I want to help people that are the same as him” - Hannah, aged 8-9, primary school

The children we spoke to were also very aware they need to make money in the future to be able to pay their bills. They were planning ahead and already thinking that one day they might have to provide for their own children.

“You need to get work for money so you can feed the kids and yourself” - Freddie, aged 8, primary school

Similarly, Oliver, aged 14-15, told us that he wants to set up his own kids for life. He had been researching where he could make the most money and decided he should start a business providing security services. When Adam, 15-16, was asked how his aspiration to become a millionaire sat alongside his wish to see more equality, he said **“I think everybody should have**

the chance that they could be [a millionaire]”. A girl in year 6 expressed a similar thought in her collage (Figure 5).



Figure 5 "You can do anything", girl, 11-12

Young people with disabilities told us that they are often expected only to do voluntary work:

*"I don't have a job but I would love to get a job and be paid rather than people saying, oh, you've got to do voluntary work, I would rather be paid and then paid once a week to do shopping, [...] I would love to be paid. [...] I **would love to contribute to things**"* - Niamh, 18 year old with SEND

The idea of being able to contribute to society as an equal member was stressed by children with SEND, and some with mental health problems. One young person, David, asked his support worker to tell us on his behalf why he felt it was unfair he was restricted to only working 16 hours a week:

*"...because he's in supported living, he can only work 16 hours, because of the benefits. So if he wanted to work more than that, which he feels strongly he would like to do, it would affect the benefits so then he would move out of supported living, [...] he just feels quite strongly about that. It's difficult because actually people want to be able to contribute to society by having a job, by working, but at the same time, they need that support **and it's almost saying we need this support to live but actually if you want to be able to work and be almost a full member of society, we're going to take that away from you**"* - Support worker on behalf of David, young person with SEND

These children told us that being paid means being independent, which was a very important feeling:

"I like being paid because you can be independent" - Leo, 18 year old with SEND

But also, being happy in what you do was important:

*"If you're not happy in your position or what you're doing – like you could have a really good job, an office based job, but you're somebody that succeeds more outside. If you're not happy then you're not happy. **There is no point in doing anything if you're not happy with what you're doing at the moment. It's as simple as that**"* - Leah, 18 year old girl living with HIV

When thinking about the future, children and young people also had other issues on their minds. The environment featured heavily in our conversations with children:

*"Without campaigning for the environment [...], there isn't going to be no future, so **there's no point in worrying about anything else until we have that future secured**"* - Leah, 18 year old girl living with HIV

The environment



We're killing the world



- Scarlett, 7-8, primary school

The environment was the third major worry for children in our survey. For girls, with 30%, it ranked second; a quarter of boys chose the environment as one of the things they worried about most. At the age of 14 boys and girls worried equally about the environment - 27% of girls and 26% of boys chose the environment as one of their main three worries. Across the groups, children and young people were worried about the environment, and pictures of the environment feature heavily in children's collages (e.g. Figure 6). When talking about the environment, children mentioned the future of the planet, but also how older generations seem detached from the future that children will face – today's children will have to deal with the consequences of what is happening to the environment *now*.

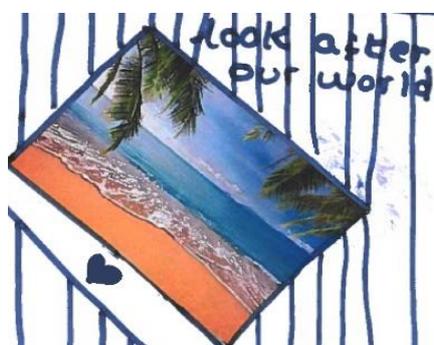


Figure 6 "Look after our world", girl, 10-11

*"People just don't believe it, a lot of people. But not a lot of young people. **It's a lot of older people**"* - Sienna, aged 15-16, secondary school

*"I was in the car yesterday and I thought in millions of years there won't be a world because the amount of people that are still using plastic bottles and the ice that's melting, **eventually the planet will literally flood over**"* - Daisy, aged 8-9, primary school

*"Because the Earth is getting damaged. It's like mankind is going to die soon because we can't live under this heat. **If we can't move to Mars then we can't do anything**"* - Daniel, aged 11-12, secondary school

*"Global warming. The older generations have caused all of this trouble but realistically we've got longer on the planet. **It's affecting us the most**. So I'm seeing it as them being selfish"* - Finn, aged 13-15, secondary school

As well as expressing their frustration with older generations, children spoke about people not taking recycling seriously enough, and dropping litter – also represented in their collages (Figures 7-8):

*"Maybe because they might not **think recycling isn't as important as doing their hair in the***

morning, but it is” - Molly, aged 9-10, primary school



Figure 7 "Recycle" girl, 7-8



Figure 8 "Bin", girl, 7-8

*"There have been posters [about littering] but no one's really listening to them. There have been loads of posters, but people, **they just don't really care**. A lot of people get drunk and then they just **throw it (litter) on the floor**. [...] People don't pay attention to it"* - Joseph, aged 9-10, primary school

*"You see litter everywhere. Some people can't even be bothered to **put rubbish in the bin**. They just throw it on the floor"* - Ruby, aged 13-15, secondary school

Children said we should all be trying together to save the future of our planet:

*"People would think more about stuff that's actually destroying the world than stuff that's not and **then everybody would be trying** and it'd work out because everyone's trying"* - Lola, aged 9-10, primary school

Children also knew what everyone should be doing; they emphasised recycling, no littering and producing and using less or no plastic:

*"**Stop littering**. There are shops near our school and there is loads of litter everywhere"* - Jacob, aged 11-12, secondary school

*"**Recycling**. Things that can be recycled, actually recycle them rather than just chucking them. And litter, rather than putting it on the floor, put it in the bin"* - Annie, aged 13-15, secondary school

*"**Ban littering**"* - Dylan, aged 7-8, primary school

*"Maybe **stop making loads of plastic** because it's hurting the animals and stuff"* - Erin, aged 10-11, primary school

Children stressed the importance of "people in power" addressing the issue, too:

*"I think that all the **people in power should come together and work together** to solve the problem"* - Alfie, aged 11-12, secondary school

*"It's just people in power [...] If people knew it was a problem then things would be changing and nothing's changing. Everyone talks about it and says how big of a deal it is and how bad it is. Then if it's that bad then **why isn't the people who's saying it's a problem actually dealing with it?**"* - Sienna, aged 15-16, secondary school

Children also explained what they themselves were already doing to help care for the environment. Zara (aged 15-16, secondary school) told us that she was eating less meat, which she said was “*an underrated thing*” and Dexter (8-9, primary school), told us that when on holiday he had been using one straw throughout. Children were particularly concerned for animals which they already see suffering from climate change:

*“We’re producing loads of pollution that goes into the sky and it’s **harming all of the animals**. It’s causing all the bushfires in Australia and stuff”* - Mia, aged 10-11, primary school

*“There would be **more sea animals** in the water”* - Dexter, aged 8-9, primary school

*“Because it might go in the sea and **kill fish** and because if it was a little can and the fish went in there, the fish might die and because things like loom bands, if they are really tiny they can stretch over fish”* - Dylan, aged 7-8, primary school

Also animals feature heavily in children’s collages about what makes them happy, and this across all age groups (see Figures 9-10).



Figure 9 “Animals”
boy, 7-8



Figure 10 “Animals”
girl, 15-16

Across the groups, children spoke about how they’d like to change people’s mindsets, including on the environment. Asked about what she would like to see change in her life, one girl said:

*“Probably **people’s mindsets on the future**, because some people are like, ‘Oh it doesn’t matter, it’ll happen in twenty years, I won’t be around then’, but we will and we’ll have to deal with what they’ve done, we’ll have to deal with their consequences. So, like pollution and climate change, we can’t do much about it because everyone in the generations ahead of us has not helped as much to help our generation, so we’ll grow up with these problems getting worse and us trying to fix them will get harder and harder”* - Amy, aged 12-13, secondary school

Changing mindsets for a more inclusive society



*If [...] everybody just thought about what they would feel like if that, what they were doing, if that happened to them, like thinking about that they might decide that it's not worth it and they should just stop it because **they wouldn't like it if it was happening to them.***



- Evie, aged 12-13, secondary school

It is not only the environment where children feel society's mindset need to change. They told us people need to think afresh about how society itself works, how it can be kinder and more inclusive, to allow *all* to participate equally.

*"There's a lot of problems in society: racism, crime, that should not be there. I don't know, it's just very unnecessary and I feel like, as a society, **we all live on the same earth so we should just be kind to everyone.** But there's so many problems that can't be solved because of people's thinking, and I don't know where it comes from, but it's just not needed"* - Ahana, aged 15-16, secondary school



Figure 11 "Kindness", girl, 7-8; girl, 10-11

Children also expressed their ideas about being kind to each other on their collages (Figures 11-12). And Jim, living with HIV, said that what makes him happy is:

"[...] empowerment, [...] kindness, love, [...] genuine love, to be honest" - Jim, teenager living with HIV

It makes me happy when people are kind to each other

Figure 12 "It makes me happy when people are kind to each other", girl, 9-10

Children with SEND also wanted to see a more inclusive and accessible world that enables them to participate fully. On top of not being paid and being expected to do voluntary work as explained above (section 2), they also mentioned missing out on financial support and benefits to which they are entitled, as they feel the application process is too complicated and stressful:

*"For me to apply for PIP, I have a lot of **anxiety-related issues** and I hate using the phone, [...] I have to phone up and request a form and I'm, like, yes, but... So I just don't get it, I haven't applied for it still even though I've been told I should"* - Robin, 17 year old with SEND

They also spoke about inaccessible transport as a barrier to independence:

*“[to] try and get into that space [on a bus], you have to do like a **six-point manoeuvre** to be able to get into the wheelchair space, because there’s a pole in the middle of it” - Jonah, 18 year old with SEND*

*“It does say on buses that if a wheelchair user requires a space ... I was recently on a bus where a bus driver did say, sorry, there’s a wheelchair, you’re going to need to move your pram, love, however **often they don’t bother because they don’t want the argument with the other guy**” - Robin, 17 year old with SEND*

*“They both turn up to the station with their carers, [George] actually can get around himself, and at the station they would **only let one of them on**...And there was lots of space on the train as well, wasn’t there? He was just saying it’s their policy” - Support worker, speaking on behalf of George, young person with SEND*

On top of struggling to access public transport, these young people also faced a lack of sensitivity from others:

*“I’ve been having bad days when I’ve been out in my chair, I’ve had **people literally step over my footplates** to get in front of me. It’s like, hang on a second...so people’s attitudes can be really horrible sometimes” - Jonah, 18 year old with SEND*

Children with SEND felt that schools should be more inclusive and tailored to their needs, providing work placements and a better range of subjects. When we asked children in our survey what they would like to see to help children do the best they can, 1 in 5 children (21%) chose the option “If children with special educational needs or a disability could get the help they need to stay in school”, making it the fifth most common response (Table 1, Part 1).

Cameron, 17, felt that *“[schools are] **not welcoming of people who are not neurotypical**. [they] don’t take into account that some people work very differently”*

Amid the stories of frustrating experiences and obstacles, we also heard positive examples of an inclusive approach that had allowed children to participate more fully in life.

*“me and my sister were going on holiday to Turkey and we went down to the disability part in Gatwick Airport and **they were amazing with me**, they were, like, you can get on the aeroplane first and I was more comfortable doing that rather than just carrying on walking, ... it’s very hard for me to walk around for quite a lot, and that was amazing” - Niamh, 18 year old with SEND*

Another example was the ‘Sunflower Lanyard scheme’ that indicates a hidden disability such as autism:

*“I’ve got two at home and they are really good to use, **staff help me if I need anything**. It’s about hidden disabilities so if you wear it, staff can help you” - Niamh, 18 year old with SEND*

Equality



Just treat people with respect. Treat people with the respect that you'd expect to be given.



- Stella, aged 13-15, secondary school

Children we spoke to consistently mentioned equality, or the lack thereof. Whilst not every child had experienced inequality themselves, it was something they were concerned about.

Racism

*"Racism and people being about religions. **There's so much people being mean to Muslims now.** [...] Because of the terrorists and everyone's being really mean to them, but it's not their fault" - Stella, aged 13-15, secondary school*

And there should be consequences:

*"I think you could **worsen the consequence for being racist.** You've got some football matches. Let's say a fan is being racist. Not much is actually done about it. So I think they should actually be taken out of the stand or something" - Aaron, aged 13-15, secondary school*

Religious beliefs

*"Some religions don't accept each other. Some people think that one religion shouldn't exist. **But it's people's beliefs.** I think everyone should just agree and then everyone would be a lot kinder to each other" - Megan, aged 10-11, primary school*

Sexism and homophobia

*"I'd like to stop like sexism and homophobia because I feel like obviously if you're male or female, if you're born a male or born a female, I mean obviously you can decide to change gender. If not, I feel like, yeah, **I think putting people down because of their gender is a really bad thing to do in the world** and I think it would be great to stop it" - Harry, aged 12-13, secondary school*

Gender equality and gender pay gap

*"because **it's unfair when women do the same amount of work they're not still getting paid as much**" - Molly, aged 9-10, primary school*

*"**It should all be equal because you're working as hard as you can.** So it should be paid... Do you know what I mean?" - Zac, aged 9-10, primary school*

Whilst children thought that everyone should be treated equally and have the same opportunities – also mentioned with regards to job opportunities (section 2) – they also emphasised the importance of individuality:

*“Because they’d just be clones. Not everyone’s going to want the same thing [...] that’s just the way the world is. **You can’t expect everyone to be the same**”* - Sienna, aged 15-16, secondary school

*“People who are targeted are often people who are different from others. **Everyone’s different from others** like I am different from him and you and everybody, but people take it too hard and think that you should just behave one way”* - Yasmin, aged 11-12, secondary school

Children had concrete ideas about improving equality. Theo, for example, suggested donating more to charity:

*“Maybe **donate to charities** and stuff if you’ve got spare change or something. And people get equal rights”* - Theo, aged 10-11, primary school

Most suggestions focused on giving every person the respect they deserve. For the children we spoke to, the idea of everyone behaving the way that they would like to be treated themselves seemed basic and obvious:

*“If you want Earth to become a better place – let’s take racism for instance. You wouldn’t like it if people made comments on your religion, your race or how you look. You wouldn’t like that. So, **I don’t get why other people like to do it to others**”* - Chloe, aged 11-12, secondary school

Current affairs and politics



*Me and my sister, we also watch CBBC and there's Newsround on there. They're played in schools as well, and all that's on there is also global warming and Brexit, it's just... it's rubbish. [...] **it's rubbish to watch because it's all negative, it's too negative.***



- Zac, aged 9-10, primary school

Many of the children we spoke to followed the news, and were actively concerned about recent events. They mentioned Grenfell, the London Bridge attack, Brexit, the war in Syria, the Australian Bushfires and coronavirus. They pick up what is going on from the TV, from their parents and from school, but many also find out through social media and YouTube. Some children felt powerless about their voices not being heard by political leaders, as mentioned above on the environment. They also expressed frustration with the aggressive language that some politicians used:

*"Dumb people being in charge [...] **They just want to go to war. Every single time**" - Jacob, aged 11-12, secondary school*

*"How some leaders and prime minister and presidents **can be so loose with their tongue** and just cause so much problems" - Aaron, aged 13-15, secondary school*

*"**The idiots in power**" - Jack, aged 15-16, secondary school*

On the specific topic of citizenship, children from a migrant background felt that the Government should be doing more to help them:

*"Also **help us with citizenship**, because you can get in touch with very important people" - Usman, 10, child from a migrant background*

*"I would tell him, "Stop lying about Brexit, because if it's going to keep being delayed then why the rush. [...] **We are your future, so you might as well just help us and lessen the [citizenship] fee**" - Adebbe, 10 year old child from a migrant background*

*"it's the government's fault [that I am in this situation waiting for citizenship not able to afford what other children can afford], **it's not our fault, it's people who don't want to help.** You just feel pressure, really" - Zahira, 14 year old child from a migrant background*

In one of the groups (children aged 8-9, primary school), children discussed the voting age, with many – but not all – wanting a greater say in how they are governed:

*"I would personally change in the world **children not being allowed to vote for who they want as an MP** and what they believe in. Because it's not fair how it used to be that hundreds of years ago men could only vote, and now it's kind of the same, but children can't vote until they're sixteen or eighteen" - Hannah, aged 8-9, primary school*

*“I think it’s because sometimes **you won’t understand it and wouldn’t know who to vote for** and what if you vote for someone you shouldn’t vote for” - Dexter, aged 8-9, primary school*

*“I don’t know how old you’re meant to be, **but people twelve and over are allowed and trusted to walk out on their own and I think they can make their own choice**” - Summer, aged 8-9, primary school*

Feeling safe



Why am I living here because it's not safe?



- **Zahira, 14 year old from a migrant background**

Many of the children we spoke to were aware of crime, violence and gang culture, partly because of media coverage and social media, but also due to personal experience. Those who spoke about it gave the impression that it is a normal part of modern life.

*“There’s so much violence nowadays with all the gang stuff going on at the moment, there’s loads of stuff happening. **It’s literally so unsafe to go to certain places.** There’s a park near my house [...] six years ago it was fine. You could go there. You could stay there till seven. Now you can’t even stay there till four. People are getting stabbed, everything” - Oliver, aged 14-15, secondary school*

*“Because there’s a lot of stabbings going on, you’re scared that it could happen. Or robbery. **And you don’t feel like you can go out by yourself.** You have to be with someone” - Finn, aged 13-14, secondary school*

*“I was coming home from school, from Friday football club, and then after - I came home, I was coming home, and then after I saw some man in like a black hoodie. He was wearing all black. Then after, he just barged into someone, and the guy was like, “What are you doing?” And then they just started fighting. And then after, I saw him reaching into his pocket, and I was just running because I thought something bad was going to happen, so I had to run. Then after, the next thing, when I came back, I saw the police next to that place. And then after, **I’ve just been scared.** [...] The rest of my class, I think they worry about crimes, because at their age, they think that maybe they’re going to be involved in the crimes, since two young people have their lives taken away” - Joy, 10 year old child from a migrant background*

Children also tried to understand why crimes were happening:

*“Some people are just influenced to be like that. **Some people are poor.** They’ll rob houses and cars. People just want to steal it because they can’t be bothered to get a job, so they feel like they need to just invade people’s property to get it, which is not good” - Abigail, aged 15-16, secondary school*

Oliver, aged 13-15, described a vicious cycle of self-defence where people need to carry knives to protect themselves, making the risk of further violence more likely.

As well as being aware of crime around them, children talked about how they would protect themselves – such as being with someone else, using their phone, or walking fast. However, they also feel they shouldn’t have to take those precautions:

*“We shouldn’t have to. **Genuinely we shouldn’t have to. No one should.** But it still happens” - Oliver, aged 13-15, secondary school*

One girl questioned why she and her family would be allocated council housing when she felt it was not a safe place for her to live:

“Why am I living here because it’s not safe?” - Zahira, 14 year old child from a migrant background

One group of children from a migrant background knew someone at their school who had joined a gang and whom they believed had been killed. They talked about the risks of joining a gang, but also the power that gangs can hold over young people, co-opting them against their will:

*“[gangs] will see where you live, and then when you answer that, **they will give you drugs** and then they will keep you as a holder. And if a police sees you with that – if they know that you’re scared, yeah, they won’t question you that much. And then if the person sees that you told the police and they’ll come for you and they will attack you”* - Joy, 10 year old child from a migrant background

Their families had told them to stay away from gangs. Joy, 10, said:

*“My auntie told me that **it’s not good to join in gangs** because when you join in gangs, you are going to be involved in an incident, and when that incident comes”*

Adebe, 10, wanted to complete the sentence: *“They’re going to stab you”*

But Joy said: *“No, **you’re going to be involved for your parents**. And when your parents just find out, they might just be frustrated”*

Mental health



It's really important that you're not feeling bad about yourself



- Theo, aged 10-11, primary school

Children were very aware of mental health. In our survey (Part 1), the most common response on the question of what would most improve children's lives was: "if all children could talk to someone at their school if they feel worried or stressed to help them look after their mental health". This was chosen by 43% of 6-17 year olds (Table 1).

In our conversations with children, they spoke about mental health awareness at school and knew peers who had experienced mental health difficulties. Some had suffered themselves and had been through counselling or were waiting for it. The experiences of those who had received support were mixed. Two young people, in a group of children with SEND and mental health conditions, felt that counselling hadn't helped them and had almost made it worse, whereas Amy found counselling very useful and liked someone listening to her confidentially:

*"The best thing about counselling is that when **they listen to you**, they take it in, they don't just like go and tell someone else straight after"* - Amy, aged 12-13, secondary school

Children and teens mentioned the poor availability of counselling services or the long waiting times:

*"Some of the things that I think could be improved around here would be **having a better access to things like mental health services**"* - Sean, 18 year old with SEND

*"I'd say **quicker access to counselling**, because I'm going through things at the moment, and it happened in 2017, and I've just recently received counselling after all this time. So I think people should get access to counselling faster, or even make more counselling things available for people. [...] the waiting list in our school was [...] three years, and three years waiting for counselling, that's somebody's life that could change within three years"* - Leah, 18 year old living with HIV

Lucy, an 18 year old young person with SEND and mental health issues said waiting longer for child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) can cause more anxiety than having the diagnosis of anxiety. Children also knew that if there was no help available for someone struggling with mental health, the consequences could be devastating. In a few of the groups, children knew someone who had committed suicide. They were also aware of how their mental health may affect them and others around them:

*"And then if you're really upset or angry then **you might take it out on somebody else by accident**. Then say that you took it out on your best friend then they might be annoyed at you and not forgive you for doing it"* - Theo, aged 10-11, primary school

Children also mentioned the importance of trust. Generally, at school, they found it difficult to open up to someone, partly because they felt it would be shared with other teachers and not stay confidential. Others said opening up about worries at school may be seen as attention

seeking:

*“Because students might act different around teachers so they don’t find out. Sometimes they just want it to be private, away from it, and don’t want anybody to take notice. [...] **Because some people think that they’re asking for attention**”* - Ameena, aged 11-12, secondary school

Or they might not open up at school because school counsellors were seen to help with things other than mental health. *“They only really help with toilet passes or time out cards, really, in my school”* - Farrah, 11, said. But there were also a few who had good experiences:

*“It depends what type of place you go to, what area you go to, because I think my school’s really good on helping me with my medical needs, my mental health needs. **If I need anything, my school will provide it**”* - Leah, 18 year old living with HIV

Without being prompted, children linked many other topics to the effect on mental health. For example, one girl linked a discussion around equality to mental health:

*“**Just stop everyone judging each other.** [...] Because it makes other people feel upset. That could be why some people are really shy, because they're scared of what people think. [...] Because it can affect people’s mental health. It can make them depressed. They can develop eating disorders and things”* - Zara, aged 15-16, secondary school

Children also mentioned the importance of self-esteem and how bullying could damage someone’s mental health by reducing their self-esteem:

*“Self-confidence is most important, because **if you don’t believe in yourself, you can’t really believe in anything else**”* - Luke, aged 12-13, secondary school

*“It [bullying] also makes them feel like they’re not perfect and like there’s something wrong with them. **Then they really don’t like themselves anymore**”* - Erin, aged 11-12, primary school

Bullying



They can just ruin someone's life so easily and it's just horrible to see it or experience it. Yeah, if I could stop it I definitely would



- Harry, aged 12-13, secondary school

In all our conversations, children wanted to stop bullying (Figure 13). Children recognised the grave impact that bullying can have and had seen these effects at school:

"It just makes you feel bad about yourself, makes you think that whatever they're saying is true and that what they're saying to you you deserve but you really don't. You deserve more than that" - Ayesha, aged 12-13, secondary school



Figure 13 "STOP Bullying", girl, 7-8

"And I think bullying is one thing I would change around the world because there are so many people who have committed suicide due to bullying" - Chloe, aged 11-12, secondary school

Children also emphasised that nobody was less worthy than anyone else:

"Not in our school but outside high schools, you see people with disabilities and stuff getting bullied because they're not perfect [...] I think everybody's perfect in their own way" - Mia, aged 10-11, primary school

Ideas of equality and allowing everyone to be themselves also appeared in the collages (Figure 14).

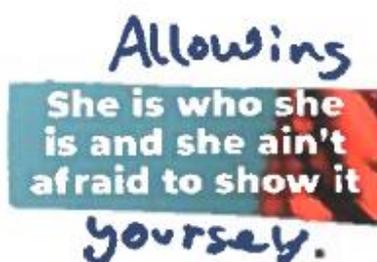


Figure 14 "Allowing yourself", girl, 11-13

One girl, aged 12-13, who had been bullied felt that the school had dealt with it well. After she had told her teachers, they expelled the bully from the sports team. However, in general, children felt that their schools could do more to address bullying:

*“Well, I mean they say they do as much as they can but it doesn’t really seem like it, like all they really do is tell them off or give them detentions but bullies in secondary school, they’re not really bothered about detentions, **they’ll just keep on doing it anyway**” - Harry, aged 12-13, secondary school*

At the same time, children tried to understand why someone would bully someone else:

*“Because **they’ve been bullied before** so they think it’s alright to do it to someone else to show them how they felt” - Mia, aged 10-11, primary school*

*“Then they **don’t feel good about themselves**. Maybe they’re jealous about someone else. And they might not have a good time at home or something. Their parents might always be arguing or something like that and maybe they just want to take it out on someone” - Theo, aged 10-11, primary school*

What makes children happy

What makes me happy



Stop depression and stuff which is caused by not being happy, and happiness is very key to success in life, you need to be happy to carry on



- Ahana, aged 15-16, secondary school



Figure 15 "Sports", boy, 8-9; picture chosen from magazine

Children mentioned a variety of things that make them happy: sports (Figure 15), pets, presents, holidays, playing computer games, having sleep overs, Christmas, birthdays.

Feeling good about yourself and little things, like a compliment, were also reasons to be happy:

"Someone compliments you, that makes you feel good about yourself. Or **even a smile**, if someone smiles at you it can make you feel so much better" - Luke, aged 12-13, secondary school

But what really stood out was spending quality time with friends and family (Figures 16-18) or "hanging out" (Figure 19); and this was often mentioned in connection with birthday parties (Figure 20), Christmas, holidays, and days off school.



Figure 16 "All the family together", girl, 7-8

*“Because **my whole family being there**. We stayed in this really nice house that had a swimming pool. [...] It was really fun” - Dexter, aged 8-9, primary school*



Figure 17 “friends”,
Girl, 8-9



Figure 18 “spending time and making memories with friends”, girl, 11-12; picture chosen from magazine

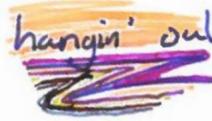


Figure 19 “Hanging out”, girl, 11-12

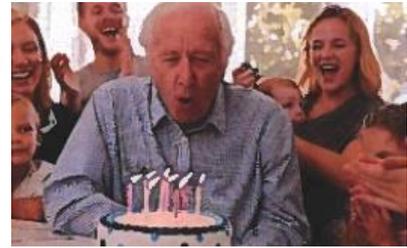


Figure 20 “birthday parties” girl, 11-12; picture chosen from magazine

Children also spoke about money making them happy, and money featured in their collages. As noted earlier, children told us that they need to make money to be able to “feed their kids” and build a life. At the same time, children noted that not everyone had money. Some mentioned their own experiences of living in households where money was scarce (see section 13). But other children who did have material resources talked about others who may not be as lucky as them. Luke wrote on his collage next to a photo of money:

*“If you get it, it makes you happy and **then you realise that not everyone has it**” - Luke, aged 7-8, secondary school*

Children linked feeling happy to good mental health. They understood the most extreme consequences of not feeling happy, and knew that being happy means not only looking but *being* happy:

*“Because **the more people who are happy, the less people who are committing suicide**. Because when someone commits suicide it’s making everyone around them feel sad” - Ameena, aged 11-12, secondary school*

*“not just looking happy but **being happy**” - Yasmin, aged 11-12, secondary school - Collage*

In groups with primary and secondary school children, children were attending in friendship pairs. In the beginning, they were asked to introduce their friend and what they liked about being their friend. Almost every child said they liked that their friend was funny. In a conversation about which movie would represent their ideal world, a girl said:

*“I know. **Fresh Prince of Bel Air**. Why **Fresh Prince of Bel Air? It’s just funny. It’s nice and warm**” - Chloe, aged 11-12, secondary school*

Children enjoy being carefree. But it is striking that many of the things that make them happy were felt to be out of reach for children in care (see next section) or living in poverty (see section 13), for example holidays, presents, and sleepovers.

Being in care



*I feel like **because we're all in care we can all speak on stuff that we can probably relate to***



- Caitlyn, 14, child in care

When we spoke to children in care, the presence of other children in care reassured them and allowed them to speak freely about their experiences of being in care.

*"It's not like you have to hide some of the stuff because we're **all in the same situation**, so you can talk about everything freely. [...] Everyone knows what your own situation is" - Mason, 11, child in care*

Outside of one of the groups, which met once a week, the children mostly chose to keep their identity as a child in care hidden, because they thought others would not necessarily understand their situation and might treat them differently. They felt others might judge them unfairly and make incorrect assumptions about their lives.

*"It's just not something that you want to really share because then people start making their **own judgement about you**. Saying your parents didn't want you and stuff. Not that that's the case" - Jackson, 11, child in care*

*"We had a comment once... **You don't look like you're in care**. Everyone was like, what are we supposed to look like then?" - Holly, 11, child in care*

*"They ask you a lot of questions and then they treat you differently. They don't know what contact is. **They don't understand the boundaries**" - Caitlyn, 14, child in care*

These children spoke about some of the boundaries and restrictions they face, which other children do not:

*"**You're cut off** because if my friends go out, they don't really have a time to be home. They do, not very late, but if I want to go out with them then I can't. I have a strict time to be home... If I ask my carer to go out for longer, she says no, you're pushing it. Otherwise I won't let you out again. Just accept what you're given. I don't really like it" - Layla, 14, child in care*

*"Being in care is like you have **so many boundaries**. If I was with my mum I'd still have boundaries but not as strict. My Wi-Fi getting cut off and stuff at a certain time. I don't really like that, but I don't get an option" - Caitlyn, 14, child in care*

Sometimes these rules would have a direct (although unintended) negative impact on their lives, in particular on their friendships. Caitlyn, 14, talked about wanting to go to a sleepover at a friend's house, but in the end decided it was easier to say no:

*"My carer would have to check with them everything before I go over there. That **makes the situation awkward** because if the friend that's having the sleepover, if he didn't want them to*

know that you're in care, then they're going to have to call their parents. People talk as well. Some people will tell everyone. Say you don't want to go through the process of the parents know, they'll think you're not their good friend" - Caitlyn, 14, child in care

Two of the children in this group wanted to understand more about the funding they believed they were due, and how it could be used.

*"My carer said to say as well this morning because I'm meant to still get a laptop. She said to say what had happened, so I asked my social worker and she said that she will ask the [local authority] and they said they can't get me one for some reason. They said to ask my school. I asked my school and the guy said that the school doesn't have funding for it, but they should use my pupil premium because I **haven't used any money from it**. I obviously have quite a bit of money saved up because I haven't used it at all" - Mason, 11, child in care*

*"in Year 5 or Year 6, I was supposed to get a laptop for school. They said they were getting the funding. Nothing. **I never got the funding**. I went to Iceland in Year 9 in February, they said that they were going to fund that. They never funded that...I know there's more money.... I want to know what's actually happening to that money" - Layla, 14, child in care*

*"I'm not saying that we should get that money handed to us, but we should have some sort of way of receiving it **for educational purposes**" - Mason, 11, child in care*

The children we spoke to felt a sense of impotence – bound by rules in which they have no say and not included in decisions that affect them. It seemed they often felt their lives were governed by a series of restrictions which they had no means of influencing – from curfew times, to the choice of clothes bought for them. There was variety in how many carers children had stayed with. When we spoke to one group of children in care, they all were settled with their current carers.

*"Since we came into care **we've been with the same carer**" - Mason, 11, child in care*

*"**This is my fifth**. I went in care six or seven years ago. I've been with this one for almost three years" - Layla 14, child in care*

Their experience of stability with social workers was different. Children in care told us about the constant upheaval of changing personnel and not always feeling informed when their social worker was leaving or being replaced. Some found their social workers ineffective, but there were also a few who had positive experiences with their social workers.

*"I've had **lots of different social workers**" - Maya, 11, child in care*

*"I've had quite a few. **They just leave**. Either they are leaving the borough or something. Then a new one comes" - Jackson, 11, child in care*

*“My social worker, I only ever see her ... if anything is wrong, she is not the person to go to. She has lots of other people to look after her. **She’s a little bit unreliable...**To be honest, I would rather not speak to her” - Caitlyn, 14, child in care*

*“She **doesn’t take into consideration what you’re saying**. She says she doesn’t come because our household is good. There is no overall problem, but I feel like it’s still her job to come” - Mason, 11, child in care*

*“My social worker helped me a lot. **My social worker is very good**” - Faven, 18, young person in care*

They also had different views on whether they should be living within their original local area. One boy told us that he would prefer to have gone further away so he would feel more removed from his previous life:

*“It would be **better to move further away** because you stay in the same area and it makes it seem like you’re closer to where you used to be” - Mason, 11, child in care*

Otherwise, children felt that the one thing that would help them the most would be to return home, but that was not possible for them:

*“Unless someone is depressed about it, I don’t think we can support someone who’s in care other than speaking to them. **There’s nothing you can do**. If they’re in care, they’re in care ... **They probably want to go back to their parents, but that’s not possible**” - Layla, 14 child in care*

Citizenship



I don't feel like I'm a normal child, because I'm in a position where I can't be a child



- **Zahira, 14 year old child from a migrant background**

Children from a migrant background discussed how citizenship felt like a means to participate in British society on an equal footing. When we asked children what citizenship means to them, they said:

“Having equal rights, [given] to immigrant children and parents, or single parents” - Farrah, 11

“Not being discriminated on certain things, like...I don't really remember what are the others but certain things, even though you have a British passport, you're restricted to certain things” - Zahira, 14

The children we spoke to felt the stress of waiting for citizenship to be granted. For some the right to become an equal and valued member of British society felt like a far-off aspiration. It can dominate family life, preoccupying parents and piling financial pressure on those often already living in poverty.

“Before any of this citizenship happened, you and your mum are having a fun time together. Like, you don't have to worry about anything. She has work, you have school, and then all of a sudden the citizenship problem just piles on her. She's going to be really stressed out [...] Before, my mum and me, we usually just had fun and things like that, but now we don't spend a lot of time together because of citizenship” - Adebe, 10

“She still has to pay for citizenship, and all the things we want for Christmas might not happen” - Joy, 10

“Whenever I came home from school, she would just be sitting there, doing her job, like just sewing clothes to earn extra money to pay for it, and then she would just be waiting there, like, am I going to get it or not, am I going to get it or not” - Usman, 10

Housing was also a pressing concern for the groups of children from migrant families we talked to. They told us about the substandard conditions of places they were living in and also about the upheaval of moving frequently. Zahira told us what the security of having a lasting home would mean for her:

“I also think that if money was an easy thing, I would get a house that I can actually live in and enjoy my childhood again” - Zahira, 14

Most of the children in our consultation saw a home that allows a child to enjoy their childhood as a basic right rather than an aspiration. But the conditions endured by children from a migrant background fall far short of even that modest ambition. For example, they told us about living in confined spaces and also sharing it with rats:

“The place that we're living in is kind of not good for us, because some parents are getting smaller children, and if we have a one bedroom apartment, sometimes it's not good” - Joy, 10,

*“If you are sharing a house with someone then **you won’t get enough privacy** and it’ll be too chaotic, and let’s say if two big families are in a small house together then you won’t be able to do things like a normal child would be able to do, like as you said, have your own room, do anything that you really want to do” - Farrah, 11*

*“I have lots of just **rats just run around the house** and everything, and it’s not really good for my little sister’s health, because she just loves to run around and pick everything up that she sees and put it in her mouth” - Adebe, 10*

*“I was thinking, **why is there a rat here?** So, I wasn’t scared but I was shocked” - Ahmad, 10*

Inadequate housing also created barriers to forming relationships with their peers, in the same way that children in care felt their friendships were being limited. Zahira said:

*“And if I had a house for myself, and my mother, I would bring a friend and we would go shopping and I would feel more safe about it because if they come over in my situation, the house is not proper... **you feel embarrassed because you don’t want anyone to know about your situation**” - Zahira, 14*

Not only are the homes these children live in painfully inadequate, they also change frequently. *“I’ve been in four houses”* Usman, 10, told us, and *“I’ve moved about seven times”* said Adebe, 10.

This repeated upheaval has repercussions for other aspects of their lives, especially school, as children were moved further away with longer journeys to school:

*“Every time you keep moving, it’s just harder for you because maybe one place that you lived, your school is close, and then if you just move far and your school’s still there, it’s going to be long, **it’s going to be a long journey**” - Adebe, 10*

*“I think it’s **quite a journey** because, you know, you get comfortable in one place and you have to move, it’s so annoying, and you know, you have to be going to school, it’s far away and you have to be taking buses when you can walk and it just is complicated in the end” - Zahira, 14*

*“By the time we would get here, most of the day is gone, so it was just wake up, school, sleep, routine, so it was kind of hard because **you would miss out on a lot of stuff**” - Saeed, 11*

Partly because of this, children felt a sense of not belonging, of otherness:

*“I’m not one of the normal British kids because I’m from another country and I don’t feel like I’m a normal child, because **I’m in a position where I can’t be a child**, I have to be doing things that children don’t do, which are helping with chores, doing this, and that” - Zahira, 14*

Just as some of the children in care we spoke to questioned what happened to the funds intended to support them, there were children from a migrant background who questioned the cost of a citizenship application, and feel they have a right to know where their money goes:

*“We have to pay like £1000, but...the Government has to only pay like £300 and he gets all of the change, which is like £700....**they’re taking our money and they don’t tell us what they’re using it for**” - Usman, 10*

Poverty



I feel unaffordable



- **Zahira, 14 year old child from a migrant background**

The challenges faced by those living in poverty were raised by some children when asked what they would like to change about the world. Freddie, 8-9, for example said he wanted “*cheaper prices [...] because the people who are poor have to save up*”.

*“I had another idea about something that might be good to stop, well, not stop but, poverty because there’s loads of really rich people and **it’s not fair if there’s tonnes of rich people and if everything could be like equal to everybody it would be better** because it would probably cause less conflict as well”* - Evie, aged 12-13, secondary school

Some also linked poverty with homelessness – “*if they were poor they wouldn’t have a home*” (Daisy, 8-9, primary school) – and others cited homelessness as a problem that needed to be tackled:

*“**Help homeless people**”* - Erin, aged 10-11, primary school

*“I’m thinking about **making people get off the streets quicker**, because it’s going to be harder for them to get shelter since winter is coming”* - Joy, 10 year old child from a migrant background

Money, and the problems caused by a lack of it, featured consistently in our conversations with children. Finlay, 17, who had been in prison, emphasised poverty as the reason for “*why people get involved with bad things*”. When we spoke to children from a migrant background, the strain of living with poverty on a daily basis became clear. The extra costs of school such as trips, equipment or charitable donations were not mentioned by children in primary and secondary schools. But in our conversations with children from migrant families, as well as children in care, these costs become a flashpoint, combining poverty with stigma and a sense of not belonging. These children spoke about being unable to take part in activities because their parents could not afford things or because of boundaries on their lives. Some children had been unable to join their class on a school trip, which stuck with them as an uncomfortable experience:

*“You ask your mum can you go but they can’t afford it, and everyone in your whole class is going, like **you’re the only one that’s not going**, you’ll kind of feel sad and upsetand people will be asking you are you going to and you wouldn’t be able to answer, or some people would maybe lie, but really they know they’re not going. It really hurts them”* - Arman, 12 year old child from a migrant background

*“When they are doing trips and it’s really expensive, I think parents, they should speak to...all the parents and make a notice saying **if you’re going through something, like hardship or something, they will have to pay less or the deposit so they don’t have to pay really fast and if it’s a deadline they can go over the deadline, they don’t have to worry**”* - Zahira, 14 year old child from a migrant background

Saeed told us about the far-reaching consequences of not being able to have the right

equipment at school:

*“if you have to get a calculator for a test, and it has to be a proper calculator, a scientific calculator, and you’re just like, how am I going to get it? And you’re just trying to look for somebody to borrow it off. I think that it would be hard because maybe you don’t have enough money to buy the calculator, you fail your test and you don’t pass and **then everything is just less because of that one calculator**”* - Saeed, 11 year old child from a migrant background

Similarly, Zahira felt that her school expected all pupils to be able to make a charitable donation, and that she would get in trouble for not doing it:

*“teachers ... they often want you to do a charity donation, like £1, or something, but at the same time **you’re suffering yourself**, so I don’t understand, like I tell them, oh, I can’t afford this, you’re going to go in detention”* - Zahira, 14 year old child from a migrant background

When speaking about their financial difficulties, children were also very aware of the pressures on their parents to make money. Sometimes, as noted above, this was interlinked with the stresses of gaining and affording citizenship:

*“When [my dad] comes back from work, he is tired, and also when I go to school, he has to take care of my baby brother, and it’s stress for him. And when my baby brother wants to play, he has to sleep, and then my baby brother just has to watch TV, which is not good for him because he doesn’t like it. He just likes to play around. And also my mum, she goes to work for four hours, two hours to go on the bus [...] to come back. She does cleaning, so she cleans like a five floor building, and then after, she has to come back and she still has to like make food for my dad, and then my dad’s just like stressed out on the chair, and they’re always just like moody all the time. **We just have to keep quiet, not like ask for gifts, because that would just stress them out even more**”* - Ahmad, 10 year old child from a migrant background

*“It’s kind of hard because it could go wrong, maybe you don’t get to do your homework or something like that because you’re helping at home, and you get in trouble at school and then **you won’t be able to explain to them the situation**”* - Saeed, 11 year old child from a migrant background

Whilst many children felt they were not able to speak openly about these issues, Zahira had decided for herself to tell people if she couldn’t afford something:

*“I was like my parents can’t afford it. Are you joking? And I was, like, no, and then simple, I’m not embarrassed to say, **I just tell people how it is**”* - Zahira, 14 year old child from a migrant background

During our conversations with children who had experienced poverty, it became very apparent how different their experiences were from children who did not have to worry about money. As noted above, other children told us about enjoying time with their families on holiday being able to relax away from the stress of their day-to-day lives, and the happiness this brought. Children living in poverty realised how they had different experiences to some of their peers at school:

*“Makes you ask yourself questions like **why can’t I do this, why can’t I go on vacations** because it’s too expensive”* - Zahira, 14 year old child from a migrant background

As with children in care, children who had experienced poverty spoke about stigma associated with not being able to afford the same things as other children – and how others might not be able to relate to their experiences:

*“They think that you’re just a normal child and you’ve got a fake smile on your face, you go to school every day and **you cover the emotion** and you don’t really explain yourself to them because you feel insecure about what you’re going through and it’s really hard because people take it a different way and they’re not in the situation you’re going through and they just think, oh, you’re a normal person, you don’t need help because you already have help, you know, you look suitable, you have these clothes, but behind the scenes, they don’t know where those clothes come from. They can come from charity shop, it could come from these places that they give charitable things, they don’t know”* - Zahira, 14, child from a migrant background

Children had suggestions for small things that could make their lives easier. They were not asking for big hand-outs, but food was a priority, indicating that hunger is a daily risk:

*“I think there should be, like, a place where you’re able to go and let’s say you need money for food and simple provisions, **you can get it without having to worry about maybe how quick you have to pay it back**”* - Saeed, 11, child from a migrant background

*“it’s good if there is a free food service or prices are lower, so you could find more food, and maybe not worry about going home and being hungry, maybe you could just eat, you know they’ve eaten for the day in school, they **wouldn’t have to worry about going home and finding something to eat or being starving**”* - Saeed, 11, child from a migrant background

Youth justice



*Unless you meet good friends in there, [...] **you're on your own**. That's one place where you're in it, **you survive by yourself**. That's why it's so sad for people in there who are vulnerable, who are weak and that, you get me? It's just not a nice place for them*



- **Finlay, 17, working with a Youth Offending Team**

As part of our consultation we spoke to 30 boys (aged 14-16) who were in prison, as well as six young people working with Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), who were referred to us by their YOT workers. They told us about their experiences of the criminal justice process, from being arrested and sentenced through to custody and then rehabilitation. When speaking about being arrested, they commented on the police cells they had to sit in before being charged:

"It's just cold and freezing and the blankets have got holes in them, like it's been stitched or something. On some hard rough, not even beds, just bolted to the wall" - Toby, 16, YOT

Ben, 17, spoke about long delays in the judicial process that increase the likelihood of multiple convictions and tougher sentences:

"Some of the charges from like 3 years ago I'm still waiting to get sentenced in 6 days for them in court, so I've been waiting all this time, it's been getting adjourned....none of them was in the last year, most of them was like 2 year ago, a year ago, 2 ½ year ago, some of them were 3 years ago when I was 13, some of them was when I was young, they just piled them up"- Ben, 17, YOT

Those who had been in prison questioned the purpose of some of the harsh conditions they faced. Finlay, 17, for example, said:

"There is a lot of factors that make it ten times worse, like the guards, they don't have to be so rude, they don't have to be so cheeky, the other people. It's small things like that, innit? Food as well, the food's so shit" - Finlay, 17, YOT

Boys aged 14 to 16 who we spoke to in prison generally felt that they often weren't given the opportunity to give their side of the story whenever an incident had happened. They felt staff often made assumptions about what had happened and didn't listen to them. One young person felt prison was counter-productive, both on an individual level and for society. The experiences behind bars can set a young person's life trajectory, and boys spoke about how difficult it is to resist negative influences while in prison:

"Jail is not the place to send kids, it does not help, you send them to a fucking camp or something and they've got to learn how to cook and learn how to get a job and stuff like that but do not send a kid to jail, all that's going to do he's going to go to jail he's going to meet different connections from all across the country there, you're going to be having fights every single day it's just going to make kids worse. There's only two ways it goes: you either come out a shell of a person who's is expecting for everybody to call them a little shithouse when they're walking down the street, cos that's how it was for the last however long you were in jail, because

they didn't do the fighting. If you don't do the fighting you're made to eat shit sandwiches and drink piss [...] Or you could go the other way and you're fighting every single day, potentially like getting stabbed 3 or 4 times while you're in there. **It's a downward spiral.**

"Just think yeah you send a 17-year-old to jail you're saying, 'You're in your cell for 22 hours a day.' Let's say there's an argument with someone on the yard the day before that, you're gonna be sat in your cell thinking, 'I'm gonna batter that man when I get out of here, he's chatting shit about me, he's making me feel low and that', you're thinking for 22 hours you're going to get at him and you're gonna batter him. What you're doing, you're coming out, **that fight is going to be the most exciting thing for you in your whole week, that's the only rush you're going to get.** [...] and what does it do to kids when they get out, they go to jail when they're 15 when they're about to go to college and they miss a critical part, miss a critical stage, come out when they're 17 they've got nothing. And you get £20 when you leave, that's it for a taxi, how you gonna eat the next day and then the next day? No-one's helping you get a job, where you going to live? What you gonna do? You gonna do the same shit" - Toby, 16, YOT

At the same time, there was acknowledgement that prison can be a deterrent:

"I mean, it does **teach people a lesson**, innit? That's what it's there for, innit, so you don't come back" - Finlay, 17, YOT

For the boys who had been to prison and were now working with the YOT, there was a clear sense that they were on their rehabilitation journey and that working with the YOT was a catalyst for that change:

"When I was coming out of prison, yeah, **I knew what I needed to do.** Like I had a long-term plan, [...] when I get out, this is what I want to do, this is what I need to do, this is how I need to do it and this is where I'm going to go and that" - Finlay, 17, YOT

"Yeah, rehabilitated. There's no other word that you would describe someone that's come **from somewhere dark**, [...] and come back into society, [...] and trying to get back to normal" - John, 16, YOT

"I mean, **things wouldn't change in my life if I didn't come here** [...] But I mean, it is part of the process [...] of getting rehabilitated and coming here and that, chatting to someone" - Finlay, 17, YOT

But the decision to step away from crime, and an old way of life, can also be prompted by other, more personal changes.

"I was doing everything you can think of: selling drugs, robbing houses, robbing people, everything, **I was far gone and obviously the second I found out about [my son], I've not done anything, not a thing, not sold a drug, not stepped on the streets that I once called my home where I lived and where I chilled**, I haven't been near it within a mile, been over for my little boy. So the rehabilitation part had already been done for me, **I didn't want that no more**" - Edward, 17, YOT

However, the restrictions placed on young offenders in rehabilitation have consequences that are also seen as counter-productive. As with the children in care we spoke to, there is a sense of powerlessness among these young people - living by rules they had no say in designing, and not being listened to possible repercussions:

*“My tag’s too short; I understand I done bad shit and I deserve to be on tag, but it’s too short, I’ve not got a life, I’m sat at home bored out me head on tag and what’s that gonna do? **It just makes me smoke loads of weed which doesn’t help does it?** [...] I wouldn’t mind if you said, “You’ve gotta come 2-3 times a week,” but not every single day. If I didn’t come here I would have to come here at 3 o’clock, now I’m on 7/7 tag, now I’m not originally from [here], takes me an hour and a half just to get to my estate where my friends are, so if I come here at 12 o’clock and I’m here until 2 o’clock and I go to my estate on there for 4, I’ve got an hour and a half and I’ve got to come home...**It’s gonna make me go and breach on tag and then when I’m in court it won’t be seen like that, it will be seen as you breached your tag**” - Toby, 16, YOT*

Schools



*People should just come out of school a bit **more prepared for the real world** and stuff. It won't hit as hard. They'll actually know what to expect and how to handle it*



- **Adam, aged 15-16, secondary school**

Most children we spoke to were in mainstream education and split across primary and secondary schools. A very important part of school life was seeing and making friends, but also extra-curricular activities – and when these didn't exist, or were cancelled, children mentioned that:

*"I'm actually really excited [about going to secondary school] because there are more sports to choose from to do after school. In our school we don't really have much. **There's nothing really to do after school**" - Mia, aged 10-11, primary school*

*"Sometimes you go there and **someone will tell you it's not on** and you don't know the reason" - Alfie, aged 11-12, secondary school*

Some children also had a clear understanding of what they felt was the purpose of education:

*"**You can also feel happy** because you know you're going to get money at the end of the day because they're teaching you to get a good life and to get a good job" - Lola, aged 9-10, primary school*

"My parents want me to have a good job, so do I" - Zac, aged 9-10, primary school

Others also set out why they felt doing well at school was important for their futures:

*"**You can get jobs quicker as well, with more opportunities.** With them grades then you can go further with them, rather than having basic grades and then having to go search for ages getting a job" - Annie, aged 14-15, secondary school*

However, others felt that what is taught in school is of little use afterwards, and had ideas of how to make education more practical and more relevant to them:

*"I just think the **education system's stupid** because sometimes they don't teach you the right things and they should teach you **more life skills** like how to manage all your bills and stuff or other things that you could go into rather than learn how to plot a graph, because I don't really know when you're going to need that" - Adam, aged 15-16, secondary school*

A number of children felt that schools focussed too much on punishing small misdemeanours (such as uniform breaches) in an unnecessarily harsh way:

*“Our school as well, **they seem to care more about what shoes, or trousers and skirts and stuff that you're wearing rather than your education.** So they'd rather like stick you in isolation for a day for not having the correct shoes on, which makes your learning worse than actually caring about your learning” - Jack, aged 15-16, secondary school*

Children generally wanted schools to understand what they might be going through personally:

*“**Have them listen to you and be less harsh because our school is very harsh.** They will take everything to the next level. Know what it's like to be put into someone else's shoes and not act as if they'd never do that if they were in the situation when they probably would, everybody probably would” - Layla, 14, child in care*

Whilst some children liked going to school and included school in their collages about what makes them happy (Figure 21), others we spoke mentioned feeling stressed or under pressure at school – because of class-based reward systems, homework, or tests and exams. This starts as young as 8 or 9, before secondary school:

*“I'm **really scared** because at the end of this year we have a test on our times tables and I don't know all of my times tables” - Hannah, aged 8-9, primary school*



Figure 21 "School", girl, 8-9

*“It seems nowadays, like our generation, you have to get this grade in order for you to become whatever you want. **If you don't get this grade then you'll fall to the bottom of society**” - Clarissa, 15 year old living with HIV*

*“They [teachers] **can stress you out.** If you've got a big exam coming up they'll tell you every assembly how long you've got and the closer you get to it, the more stressful it is. Say for exams, they're already saying to us, 'You've got eighteen months, so be prepared,' and **it's just so stressful**” - Aaron, aged 13-15, secondary school*

*“**Easier grade boundaries.** So not as hard to get a certain grade. You're trying to achieve a seven, but it's really hard to get a seven. But to get into certain places [...] you have to get a seven in science. But if that's something you want to go onto and you can't end up doing it because you don't pass it's an opportunity being missed” - Stella, aged 13-15, secondary school*

Stress



*Knowing I've got a lot of work to do, but not knowing how to do it. [...] I tend to stare at my book for a while and then realise I probably should text my friend if they know what to do with it. [...] **It just stresses me out and I worry about it too much***



- Sienna, aged 15-16, secondary school

Stress was a recurring theme in what children spoke about – stress at school, the stress of poverty, or the stress of gaining citizenship. The sincerity of these stresses, of growing up feeling stigmatised, “unaffordable” and not belonging, has been described above. Children worry about the environment and the future of the planet, and the will and ability of politicians to improve things. They worry about crime and feeling safe. And children also knew about the stress facing grown-ups, in particular related to working life, that may still be ahead of them:

*“Get rid of some of the stress people have by **changing work hours** and how much you need to do and encouraging people to actually find good things”* - Ahana, aged 15-16, secondary school

Sometimes, stressful issues that children told us about may seem small - such as the boy who did not have the calculator that was required from this school (section 13), and the consequences of that. Or, in another conversation with children in a residential school a carer speaking on behalf of Frances, who is non-verbal, told us that “*she doesn't like having her hair brushed*” and that this is what was causing her stress in the mornings. But these worries that might make an adult smile, can potentially be an everyday worry for a child:

*“Yeah, two girls fight over me. **Loads of girls fight over me. Three girls**”* - Max, aged 7-8, primary school

Given the frequency with which children mentioned stress in the focus groups, we decided to carry out another survey of children (aged 8-17) focussing specifically on stress. We report here results from 764 preliminary qualitative responses to the following questions:

- “What makes you feel stressed?”
- “How does being stressed make you feel?”
- “What do you do to feel less stressed?”

For full details of the questions see Appendix 2.

What makes you feel stressed?

The most frequently mentioned words were school (150), work (96), exams (88) and tests (32), homework (81), people (56), friends (41), pressure (28). Children connected a lot of their stress to their workload at school and one child wrote for example:

*“The stress of exams and the need to succeed in order to get where I want, it seems the system becomes harder to pass and **only the more privileged children get further in their education**”* - Boy, 17

And some reported the “*expectation to do well*” as cause for their stress. Feeling stressed about their friends, children wrote:

*“Ppl not being nice and **not having any friends**”* - Girl, 11

*“**If my friends are rude and call me names**”* - Boy, 8

*“**If my friends are kind of leaving me out and not getting me involved**”* - Girl, 8

Others wrote “*bullying*”. But mentioning friends also related to being worried for their friends:

*“**If my family isn't happy or my friends are not happy**”* - Girl, 9

Children also feel stressed about “*being told off*” or “*getting into trouble*”. Five wrote “*life*” in general. A few children also reported that their parents made them feel stressed, or their family situation or people having passed away. A few reported the coronavirus as a reason to feel stressed. Other children were stressed about money and “*paying the bills*”.

How does being stressed make you feel?

Of those who replied in open text, some of the most frequently mentioned words were angry (136), sad (123), anxious (72), upset (62), worried (44), tired (32), annoyed (29), scared (29), sick (24).

Some children also used a combination of words to express how they felt. For example, in addition to being angry, some children reported to feel other emotions: “*angry, worried, sad*” wrote a girl aged 9, “*Angry, very emotional, cut-off, alone*” a girl aged 12, and “*angry, scared, like the world isn't worth it*” a girl aged 16. A boy aged 13 wrote “*Angry annoyed. That people don't care about me*” and “*angry and sad like my head is exploding*” a girl aged 9. The same was the case for other emotions. For example, whilst some children wrote “*anxious*” as their overwhelming emotion, a boy aged 13 wrote “*Anxious and pessimistic, I feel like everything is going to go wrong*”, “*Anxious and like I want to self confine. Embarrassed and I become loud*” a boy aged 12, or “*Horrible, I feel completely out of control. I hate it a lot. It makes me feel really anxious*” a girl aged 15.

“*Horrible*”, “*bad*”, “*nervous*”, “*restless*”, “*unhappy*”, “*agitated*”, “*tearful*”, “*sweaty*”, “*panicky*”, “*demotivated*” and “*irritated*” were other words that children used to describe their feelings. Children also report feeling stressed as “*not being good enough*”.

*“It makes me feel very scared of the future (that I won't be able to cope or that I won't have a good one due to bad exam results) and **fearful that I am not good enough.**”* - Girl, 16

Some children turned to metaphors to describe their feelings:

*“Like I wish I had the vocal chords that **I could scream so loud that the sound of my screech tells my story while deafening everyone on the planet**”* - Boy, 15

*“**Like I'm under the sea and can't breathe**”* - Boy, 12

*“**It makes me feel like I have butterflies in my stomach**”* - Girl, 11

What do you do to feel less stressed?

For those children who chose the open response option, some of the most frequently mentioned words were “play” (10), “watch” (9), “room” (6), “sleep” (6), “talk” (4), “cry” (3) and “dance” (3). Children reported watching TV, or watching things online; talking things through with their parents; dancing; sleeping; staying in their rooms and rest; crying; and playing – musical instruments, video games, or with Lego or toys. One mentioned baking and one going for long walks.

Listening



And they'll put everything down and they'll face you and that way we know that people are listening

- Dylan, aged 7-8, primary school



Children want to be listened to. When that happens, they feel good.

"It's a good feeling" - Sean, 18 year old with SEND

In certain circumstances, knowing an adult in authority has listened can have a huge impact on a child. Edward, 17, working with a YOT told us how having a judge who listened directly to him changed the course of his life:

*"I stood up and said my piece about how my life was and how it is now and how much I've changed and obviously I think she listened, she said, "You've got ISS [Intense Supervision and Surveillance], 3 years of it, 6 months tag " she gave me everything she could but I should have went jail you know what I'm saying? No doubt about it, I should be in jail but that's why I **appreciate the justice system because it gave me a chance at life**, cos if I had went and my son was being born and that my head would have gone. So they gave me a chance [and my son] I appreciate that... [...] So it was a big wake up call"* - Edward, 17, YOT

Ben told us about how he felt that his positive relationship with a judge helped him in getting a chance at life:

"If it weren't for this judge I think I would be doing years in jail" - Ben, 17, YOT

Ben said he could tell the judge liked him when he started telling him about his life. He had started the conversation with the judge by sending him a letter he had written with his solicitor when he was let out on bail for the first time.

Children felt they could tell when an adult is listening - the adult responds, makes good eye contact or actually takes note of what the child says:

*"He looks at me and **he ignores everyone else and he just listens** to the person who's speaking"*
- Joseph, aged 9-10, primary school

*"I felt listened to when my mum took me to the social worker to do something with my dad to do with him, and I **felt listened to because she was writing everything down** that I wanted to happen"* - Sarah, aged 9-10, primary school

*"When **they have eye contact with you**"* - Zoe, aged 8-9, primary school

"You ask them a question, when they're actually talking back" - Dexter, aged 8-9, primary school

Children are also aware when they feel that an adult is *not* listening:

"not just saying 'yeah yeah yeah'" - Zoe, aged 8-9, primary school

*“They listened but they replied with, like, uh-hum. I mean, I guess that could be listening too. But to me, **if you’re just going to reply with an ‘hmm’, then not really**” - Ameena, 11-12, secondary school*

*“They could be listening to you. **They’re listening but they’re also looking at their phone**” - Ella, aged 7-8, primary school*

*“Say if you’re trying to talk to them and they’re on their phone, **if they’re not responding to what you’re saying, they’re probably not listening**” - Theo, aged 10-11, primary school*

Children feel frustrated and belittled when they feel they are not being listened to:

“if you’re telling them something and then you want them to listen to you if they just don’t do anything about it then it annoys you” - Abigail, aged 15-16, secondary school

*“When they go yeah, yeah, yeah **over the top of your voice and then walk away**” - Daisy, aged 8-9, primary school*

*“I’ve had conversations with loads of adults, like family members, teachers, **and it’s really frustrating when they’re so set in their ways that they won’t listen to what we have to say, and then they complain all the time that we’re trying to get them to understand our point of view but they’re so adamant on their own. It’s really hard because it’s as if they still see us as children. Even though we may have all these experiences, they still see us as these little children that are still growing up, don’t understand the world properly**” - Clarissa, 15 year old living with HIV*

Some children told us that when adults act on what the child has said to them, they feel listened to. Similarly, children wanted adults to explain to them why something was or wasn’t happening, and to respond either way.

*“Their response really, **what they do about it**. If I ask for something that has to do with my future, if they try and do something about it then I know they’ve listened, but if they just leave it to the side then they’d probably just be like, ‘Oh, they’re children, they don’t know what they’re talking about’” - Olivia, aged 12-13, secondary school*

*“I’ve got a career advisor type thing but they’re just always saying, they come and chat shit, **write a few words down and nothing ever happens**” - Toby, 16, YOT*

*“if it doesn’t happen, **that explanation of why it can’t happen is really important**, you know... saying, okay, so you wanted this but unfortunately we’ve not been able to do this, this is why, and to show that actually they were listened to but there are reasons why that couldn’t happen” - Sean, 18 year old with SEND*

If children are not involved in decisions that affect them, it can create a feeling of powerlessness (as with children in care). Children also told us that sometimes they could be wary of speaking to adults, unsure of whether adults will listen or how they will react:

*“When my parents are angry with my sister I don’t really talk. Wait until it’s all over then I talk to my dad. [...] Because they get really furious. **So then I know if they talk to me they’ll get angry with me**. [...] Yeah, they’ll speak to me in an angry voice, and I don’t like that” - Zac, aged 9-10, primary school*

“When you tell someone, it’s like the worry disappears. But you also feel like if you tell someone, it’s like they’re going to get angry because you’re telling them and then they have something to worry about. So, you’re kind of scared to tell them” - Erin, aged 10-11, primary school

But other children felt it was important they could speak out and be listened to, and knew what they needed to make that happen:

*“You **have to make a bit of noise** so then they would actually listen and they’d say, ‘Stop’ and then they’d say, ‘Well, you’re not listening to me. So I had to make the noise’”* - Joseph, aged 9-10, primary school

*“**Get more people with you** so you have a bigger voice that will be heard”* - Stella, aged 14-15, secondary school

Part 3 - How does it feel to be...

The experiences of the most vulnerable children in society need to be heard. As part of our consultation, we have written some snapshot accounts of our conversations with particular groups of vulnerable children, to provide an insight into their lives and tell their stories.

...a child with a special educational need or disability?

Sometimes Jonah, 18, feels that having a disability makes him invisible. *"I've been having bad days when I've been out in my chair, I've had people literally step over my footplates to get in front of me. It's like, hang on a second...so people's attitudes can be really horrible sometimes".* Robin, 17, agrees. She rarely gets the help she needs to travel independently. *"It does say on buses that if a wheelchair user requires a space ... I was recently on a bus where a bus driver did say, sorry, there's a wheelchair, you're going to need to move your pram, love, however often they don't bother because they don't want the argument with the other guy".* And even if the space is free, *"[to] try and get into that space, you have to do like a six-point manoeuvre to be able to get into the wheelchair space, because there's a pole in the middle of it"* points out Jonah.

Niamh, 18, has just done her first independent train journey. *"I went to Brighton on the train all by myself to meet my sister and she was crying her eyes out when she saw me. She said, you've done it."* It's a huge sense of achievement for her. And, she says, when others listen, and make adjustments to help, it's game-changing, *"we went down to the disability part in Gatwick Airport and they were amazing with me, they were, like, you can get on the aeroplane first and I was more comfortable doing that rather than just carrying on walking, I've got hypermobility, all my joints don't lock, and it's very hard for me to walk around for quite a lot, and that was amazing."*

Niamh's rare syndrome means she does face challenges when it comes to her mobility. But she has no issue with hard work. Yet she's struggling to find paid employment. *"I don't have a job but I would love to get a job and be paid rather than people saying, oh, you've got to do voluntary work, [...] I would love to contribute to things."* Georgia, 17, faces the same barriers in *"employment opportunities, there's nothing out there for people like me"*. She has ambitions to help others with mobility issues; Elliott, 14, wants to sell plants; Michael, 21, would like to work in a café or a care home; and Cameron, 17, wants to be a scientist. But Jenny, working with some of these young people, says *"going from voluntary work to being paid, I think for some of the young people that I've met through the years, that's what they find the most difficult. [...] I've had quite a bit of feedback from young people saying that they've attended interviews but they're always knocked back. [...] I think one of the barriers is a lot of employers don't know how to make reasonable adjustments, and like a lot of them say they're not insured."*

George, 18, loves football. He goes to local matches, and then writes up match reports. Some of them have been published – but he's never paid. Again, he can only do this as a volunteer, but he wants the recognition of a fee, and to have his own income.

Lucy, 18, knows of *"one place that is disability aware - they employ people specifically with learning difficulties. There should be more places like that."* Connor, 21, works there – he's one of the luckier ones, *"I make drinks, I serve customers, I do washing up, drying up. Every Friday I do deep clean. Working there is good."*

...a child in care?

Layla feels like she faces a lot of limits in her life, but she has no say in them. *“You’re cut off because if my friends go out, they don’t really have a time to be home. They do, not very late, but if I want to go out with them then I can’t. I have a strict time to be home”*. Her friend Caitlyn agrees. *“Being in care is like you have so many boundaries. If I was with my mum I’d still have boundaries but not as strict. My Wi-Fi getting cut off and stuff at a certain time. I don’t really like that, but I don’t get an option”*. She would love to go to a friend’s house for a sleepover, but then her friend’s parents would need to be DBS-checked. *“My carer would have to check with them everything before I go over there. That makes the situation awkward because if the friend that’s having the sleepover, if he didn’t want them to know that you’re in care, then they’re going to have to call their parents. People talk as well. Some people will tell everyone. Say you don’t want to go through the process of the parents know, they’ll think you’re not their good friend.”* It leaves her feeling isolated.

When it comes to the financial support children in care are due, Layla feels they’re kept in the dark. *“In Year 5 or Year 6, I was supposed to get a laptop for school”,* she says. *“They said they were getting the funding. Nothing. I never got the funding. I went to Iceland in Year 9 in February, they said that they were going to fund that. They never funded that...I know there’s more money...I want to know what’s actually happening to that money.”* Caitlyn’s brother Jackson feels the same. *“I’m meant to still get a laptop...I asked my social worker and she said that she will ask the [local authority] and they said they can’t get me one for some reason. They said to ask my school. I asked my school and the guy said that the school doesn’t have funding for it, but they should use my pupil premium because I haven’t used any money from it. I obviously have quite a bit of money saved up because I haven’t used it at all.”*

Caitlyn has been lucky with her carer. *“Since me and my brother came into care, we’ve been with the same carers for seven years”*. Layla is on her fifth carer but has been with them for three years now. Caitlyn and Jackson have stayed in their local area since going into care, but he would rather move away from their old life: *“It would be better to move further away because you stay in the same area and it makes it seem like you’re closer to where you used to be.”*

Caitlyn’s experience with her social worker has not been so positive. *“If anything is wrong, she is not the person to go to. She has lots of other people to look after her. She’s a little bit unreliable...To be honest, I would rather not speak to her.”* Jackson agrees *“She doesn’t take into consideration what you’re saying. She says she doesn’t come because our household is good. There is no overall problem, but I feel like it’s still her job to come”*. Only Holly has a strong, supportive bond with her social worker.

Maya has had to contend with *“lots of different social workers”*, and Mason has *“had quite a few. They just leave. Either they are leaving the borough or something. Then a new one comes”*.

Caitlyn has never found it easy to talk to her social worker, but Jackson has a personal mentor at school: *“they’re called a designated teacher. Every young person should have a DT”*. Layla finds her school *“very harsh”*, what she wants is to *“have them listen to you ... know what it’s like to*

be put into someone else's shoes and not act as if they'd never do that if they were in the situation when they probably would, everybody probably would".

The other children in the group understand. They all meet once a week, and it feels good to talk to others who are in the same boat. *"I feel like because we're all in care we can all speak on stuff that we can probably relate to"* says Caitlyn. Mason adds *"it's not like you have to hide some of the stuff because we're all in the same situation, so you can talk about everything freely. Everyone knows what your situation is."* Outside of the club, Caitlyn doesn't tell many people she's in care. *"They ask you a lot of questions and then they treat you differently. They don't know what contact is. They don't understand the boundaries"*. Mason agrees *"It's just not something that you want to really share because then people start making their own judgement about you. Saying your parents didn't want you and stuff. Not that that's the case"*.

...a child in the youth justice system?

Finlay spent a year in prison. It was *“shit, very shit [...] there’s not one good thing about it. Actually, no, there was. Every Tuesday, we used to play football on the astro. Other than that, nothing else.”* Twice a week he was routinely put into 24-hour lock-up because of how the prison is being run, so was Ben *“At one point I was in my cell for 23 hours 40 minutes a day every day and then just come out for 20 minutes, 10 minute shower, 10 minute phone call, but they’ve got phones in cells now so you don’t even come out for 20 minutes sometimes”*.

Finlay sees himself as a survivor: *“That’s one place where you’re in it, you survive by yourself. That’s why it’s so sad for people in there who are vulnerable, who are weak and that, you get me? It’s just not a nice place for them, innit?”* Toby agrees. There are only two options in prison according to him – victim or fighter. *“There’s only 2 ways it goes: you either come out a shell of a person who’s is expecting for everybody to call them a little shithouse when they’re walking down the street, cos that’s how it was for the last however long you were in jail, because they didn’t do the fighting. If you don’t do the fighting you’re made to eat shit sandwiches and drink piss, you are literally. [...] Or you could go the other way and you’re fighting every single day, potentially like getting stabbed 3 or 4 times while you’re in there. It’s a downward spiral.”*

And, he says, the fighting is difficult to resist. *“Just think yeah you send a 17-year-old to jail you’re saying, ‘You’re in your cell for 22 hours a day.’ Let’s say there’s an argument with someone on the yard the day before that, you’re gonna be sat in your cell thinking, ‘I’m gonna batter than man when I get out of here, he’s chatting shit about me,’ [...] What you doing, you’re coming out, that fight is going to be the most exciting thing for you in your whole week, that’s the only rush you’re going to get. Let’s say you have a fight when you’re drunk you get a rush innit, adrenaline, so when you’re fighting that’s the only good thing that you’re getting out of it and what does it do to kids when they get out, they go to jail when they’re 15 when they’re about to go college and they miss a critical part, miss a critical stage, come out when they’re 17 they’ve got nothing. And you get £20 when you leave, that’s it for a taxi, how you gonna eat the next day and then the next day? No-one’s helping you get a job, where you going to live? What you gonna do? You gonna do the same shit.”*

Money is the key, agrees Finlay, *“Poverty’s the main reason, yeah, why people get involved with bad things and that. [...]. You need money, innit? That’s the main reason why people do crimes, innit, for money, innit? Everyone knows that.”*

Edward avoided a prison sentence. He feels the justice system did right by him, thanks to a judge who listened. *“I wrote a letter to the judge cos I thought fuck this. [...] and I stood up and said my piece about how my life was and how it is now and how much I’ve changed and obviously I think she listened, she said, ‘You’ve got ISS [Intensive Supervision and Surveillance], 3 years of it, 6 months tag,’ she gave me everything she could but I should have went jail you know what I’m saying? No doubt about it, I should be in jail but that’s why I appreciate the justice system because it gave me a chance at life, cos if I had went and my son was being born and that my head would have gone. So they gave me a chance and [my son] and I appreciate that.”*

[...] 'You will be given one more chance,' you know what I'm saying? So it was a big wake up call."

Now, he's working with a Youth Offending Team, as part of his rehabilitation. So are Toby, Ben and Finlay. *"Yeah, it's alright"* says Finlay. *"I mean, things wouldn't change in my life if I didn't come here, innit? But I mean, it is part of the process, innit, of getting rehabilitated. [...] There's no other word that you would describe someone that's come from somewhere dark, yeah, and come back into society, yeah, and trying to get back to normal, innit?"*

...a child from a migrant background?

"Before any of this citizenship happened," says Adebé, 10, "you and your mum are having a fun time together. Like, you don't have to worry about anything. She has work, you have school, and then all of a sudden, the citizenship problem just piles on her. She's going to be really stressed out." Adebé's friend Usman, 10, agrees. "Whenever I came home from school, she would just be sitting there, doing her job, like just sewing clothes to earn extra money to pay for it, and then she would just be waiting there, like, am I going to get it or not, am I going to get it or not."

Citizenship is a big deal in the lives of Adebé and Usman. Their parents want to belong, but to the children, it mainly seems to bring stress. And the cost of citizenship adds to the pressure. *"She still has to pay for citizenship, and all the things we want for Christmas might not happen"* says Joy, 10. Money is already scarce, and poverty means missing out, says Arman, 12. *"You ask your mum can you go [on a school trip] but they can't afford it, and everyone in your whole class is going, like you're the only one that's not going"*. For Saeed, 11, poverty can have far-reaching consequences. *"If you have to get a calculator for a test...maybe you don't have enough money to buy the calculator, you fail your test and you don't pass and then everything is just less because of that one calculator"*. And for Zahira, 14, poverty can sometimes go unnoticed to others. *"They think that you're just a normal child and you've got a fake smile on your face, you go to school every day and you cover the emotion and you don't really explain yourself to them because you feel insecure about what you're going through... They just think, oh, you're a normal person... you look suitable, you have these clothes, but behind the scenes, they don't know where those clothes come from. They can come from charity shop, they don't know."*

Zahira thinks *"if money was an easy thing, I would get a house that I can actually live in and enjoy my childhood again."* She's embarrassed by the conditions she lives in, *"the house is not proper... you don't want anyone to know about your situation"*. Adebé worries about where she lives now. *"I have lots of just rats just run around the house and everything, and it's not really good for my little sister's health, because she just loves to run around and pick everything up that she sees and put it in her mouth"*. She's been moved seven times. *"Every time you keep moving, it's just harder for you because maybe one place that you lived, your school is close, and then if you just move far and your school's still there, it's going to be long, it's going to be a long journey"*. Joy faces a similar daily journey. *"I knew it was a long time. And when we were going, I always get tired, even my brother, and then we will just fall asleep, and then my mum will just wake us up on the bus."*

Recently, Joy saw a fight near her home. *"I was just running because I thought something bad was going to happen, so I had to run. Then after, [...] when I came back, I saw the police next to that place. And then after, I've just been scared."* Even when coming to school, Usman does not necessarily feel safe. *"There's another school I know, they have security outside. They have like two security men outside their school and a few inside their school, so that they know that the children are safe. Maybe we could have that?"*. Zahira asks, *"why am I living here because it's not safe?"*

Conclusions

All the children we spoke to had a lot to say about their lives. They were articulate, thoughtful and had ideas for new solutions to some of the issues they were raising. Many are preoccupied with the threat from climate change; others find stress in everyday life that should be carefree; all of them think about mental health and wellbeing. Their pastimes are radically different from those of only a generation ago, thanks to the growth of social media.

Adults need to listen to their concerns, whether over the environment, the lack of equality in society, or increasing pressure in schools. And, as the children told us themselves, listening means responding and acting on those concerns, even if just to reassure and inform, but ideally to bring about change.

For children living with additional challenges – living in care, with disabilities or special needs, or poverty – the message is even more stark. Many of them feel stigmatised and unable to participate fully in life. They have plenty to say about what is difficult in their lives, but feel like no one is really listening. We need to listen.

Appendix 1: Methodology

Talking to children

We spoke with 137 children between December 2019 and March 2020. We talked to many different groups of children, many of whom tend not to be heard, including disabled children, children with care experience, children who have been in the criminal justice system, and children from a migrant background. We spoke to children all over England, in both rural and urban settings. The below table shows who we have spoken to.

Table 1 *All names were changed*

Groups	Group of children	Participants	Girls	Boys	Ages
C1	Primary school	6	4: Lola, Molly, Sarah, Katie	2: Joseph, Zac	9-10
C2	Primary school	4	3: Mia, Erin, Megan	1: Theo	10-11
C3	Secondary school	6	3: Ameena, Yasmin, Chloe	3: Daniel, Jacob, Alfie	11-13
C4	Secondary school	6	4: Ahana, Zara, Abigail, Sienna	2: Adam, Jack	15-17
C5	Primary school	6	4: Zoe, Summer, Hannah, Daisy	2: Freddie, Dexter	8-9
C6	Secondary school	6	3: Stella, Annie, Ruby	3: Oliver, Aaron, Finn	13-15
C7	Secondary school	6	4: Olivia, Evie, Amy, Ayesha	2: Luke, Ryan, Harry	12-13
C8	Primary school	6	4: Sophie, Scarlett, Ella, Tania	2: Dylan, Max	7-8
C9	Children from a migrant background	4	2: Joy, Adebé	2: Usman, Ahmad	10
C10	Children and young people with SEND	8	2: Robin, Niamh	6: Rob, Jonah, Sean, David, Leo, George	17-21
C11	Children from a migrant background	7	3: Zahira, Farrah, Asma	4: Saeed, Arman, Sohail, Rashid	8-14
C12	Children and young people in the youth justice system	2	0	2: Finlay, John	16-17
C13	Children and young people in the youth justice system	1	0	1: Ben	17

Groups	Group of children	Participants	Girls	Boys	Ages
C14	Children and young people in the youth justice system	2	0	2: Toby, Edward	17
C15	Children and young people in the youth justice system	1	0	1: Matthew	16
C16	Children with SEND; children with mental health issues	7	2: Lucy, Georgia	5: Michael, Connor, Elliott, Nathan, Cameron	14-21
C17	Children in care	6	4: Caitlyn, Layla, Holly, Maya	2: Mason, Jackson	11-14
C18	Children with disabilities	2	1: Frances	1: Tim	10; 15
C19	Children and young people living with HIV	9	5: Jennifer, Poppy, Clarissa, Chelsea, Leah	4: Lionel, Jim, Corey, Callum	15-18
C20	Children in custody	30	0	30	14-16
C21	Children in care	12	4: Talia, Abby, Josey, Elsa	8: Faven, Senait, Yonas, Yusef, Samuel, Mike, Dawit, Osman	15-21
TOTAL		137	52	85	7-21

Whilst we set out with the intention to conduct focus groups, as the above table shows, in some of the 'groups' we spoke to one young person. Some of the groups were attended by parents and youth workers. Two researchers from OCC were present at each group.

We gave space for the children and young people to speak about their own experiences and what was on their minds. Whilst we brought to each focus group a topic guide asking children when they feel listened to, what they'd like to see changed and what makes them happy, much of these conversations was led by what the children wanted to speak about.

Focus groups C1-C8 – those children in primary or secondary schools – were conducted on our behalf by 'Opinium'. In these groups, children were asked to craft collages from magazines that they were provided with, free to add as much writing as they wanted and paint themselves, about 'what makes you happy' as they were talking. Impressions from these collages are included in the report. All the conversations were transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Analysis

All the transcripts were analysed by two researchers from OCC, who devised a structure for this report based on the issues that emerged across the groups. Many of the issues that children raised overlap. This report's structure was devised carefully aiming to give the reader the best possible sense of what children shared; whilst also explicitly linking some of the sections. All the children's names have been changed.

Appendix 2: Survey questions

We asked two questions on a survey that was run by the research firm YouGov. From 2nd to 24th December 2019 1,924 children across England aged 6-17 responded to two questions:

- **For this question, please choose up to 3 answers. Please think about children your age...Generally, which THREE of these do you think would MOST improve children's lives in the UK?**

The answer options were:

- a. If all families were given help when they are finding things difficult
- b. If every child received love, care and support even if they have done something wrong
- c. If children were never expelled from school (i.e. told to leave school and not come back)
- d. If all children could talk to someone at their school if they feel worried or stressed to help them look after their mental health
- e. If children with special educational needs or a disability could get the help they need to stay in school
- f. If schools taught children how to use the internet safely
- g. If schools stayed open in the evening, at weekends and during holidays to provide a safe space for activities and play
- h. If children could feel safe in their local parks and streets
- i. If there were police officers and/ or youth workers in every school
- j. If politicians set up a group to only work on things for children
- k. Something else
- l. I don't know
- m. Nothing would improve children's lives in the UK (nothing would help make them better)
- n. Nothing needs to be done to improve children's lives in the UK (children's lives are already good)

- **Out of these, what THREE worry you the most? (If nothing worries you, please select the "nothing worries me" option)**

The answer options were:

- a. Not feeling safe generally (such as online, at school, at home)
- b. Feeling stressed and/ or sad
- c. Feeling unhealthy
- d. What I look like
- e. What's going on online (such as on Instagram, Snapchat or online games)
- f. Being or feeling pressured to do well at school
- g. Having enough money and food
- h. Being treated differently because of who I am/ how I look/ what I believe in
- i. The environment
- j. The condition of the home I live in
- k. Something else
- l. I don't know
- m. Nothing worries me
- n. I don't want to answer

We carried out a second survey on in March 2020 asking up to 2,000 8 – 17 year olds questions about stress specifically. At the time of writing we had received responses from 764 children. Some of the qualitative responses to our survey are included in this consultation. Full results will be reported in forthcoming publications.

- **For this question, please type your answers in the box... What makes you feel stressed?**
- **For this question, please type your answers in the box... How does being stressed make you feel? Being stressed makes me feel...**
- **For this question, please choose up to three answers. If you do nothing really to feel less stressed, please select the ""I do nothing really"" answer. Which THREE of these do you do MOST often to feel less stressed**
 - a. I talk to someone else about my worries
 - b. I do yoga or meditate
 - c. I go outside or play sports
 - d. I go on social media or play online games
 - e. I listen to music or read a book
 - f. I hang out or play with my friends, family or pets
 - g. I do something creative, such as arts and crafts
 - h. Something else
 - i. I don't know
 - j. I do nothing really to feel less stressed



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