CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Family Review

Family and its protective effect

PART 1

OF THE INDEPENDENT FAMILY REVIEW

September 2022

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Table of Contents

Foreword by the Children's Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza

I have dedicated my career to transforming the education of children across the country. Outstanding schools and teachers have the power to change the lives, outcomes, and success of children no matter where they grow up, no matter what circumstances they are born into.

I believe that family is the only other factor that can have that same or even more of a transformative effect. The influence of family reaches far and holds immense power. It is the prism through which we go on to discover the world, and the foundation for our path in life.

The last few years have been challenging for everyone and the pandemic has reaffirmed the importance of family and relying on their support during difficult times. Now, more than ever, it is vital that we understand, celebrate, and appreciate the importance of family in everyone's lives, especially children.

We know that if children have happy and supportive families, they are more likely to succeed later-on in life. They are more likely to have healthy relationships. They are more likely to have happy lives.

That is why, when the Government asked me to research what the modern family looks like, I didn't think twice. For the answer, I turned to families themselves. Families all across the UK and England told me what family means to them – about who is in their family, how their family shapes their lives, and where they turn to for support if they need it. It has been a privilege to hear their stories.

I am so proud of this Review. Our research has produced unique and comprehensive insight into family life today, drawing on novel qualitative and quantitative data and analysis.

I have heard about the power that family holds. A power that provides a shield from life's challenges – a protective effect against adversity. Families recognise it and those who work with them acknowledge it. And importantly, for the first time, this Review proves and quantifies exactly what the protective effect of family is.

The research shows it's more about the quality of family relationships than the composition or relative position of the family in society. It's about strong and lasting relationships, relying on each other, and spending time together. And believing you could rely on family in time of crisis is associated with

significantly higher overall well-being. Family can insulate us from the harshness of difficult times and so looking into the short term, and long term, we must protect it and support it in whatever ways we can.

For a lot of families, this protection and support will come from their own networks – parents, grandparents, friends. Families around the country told me how much they loved and valued their family, how important it was to them, and how much they cherished it.

Most families will choose to access professional services to support them at various stages of family life, like health care workers or post-natal care. We need to make sure that these services can be easily accessed by everyone and provide good quality care.

For a small percentage of families who are really struggling, protection and support may need to come from elsewhere. When strong and positive relationships – with professionals and peers - were in place, help was often welcome and valued with many services doing an exception job of supporting families. But I also heard of the challenges faced by those accessing support, from unnecessary barriers that brought stigma and complication, to high thresholds for help. This needs to change.

For children in care there must be no gaps in support. We must take our role as a corporate parent for children in care seriously. We must ask ourselves, would this be good enough for my child? And if the answer is no, then we must do better. Children in care deserve the same things as all other children - love, support, and long-lasting relationships. We need the services that support children in care to make this happen.

This ground-breaking research has provided us with a deep understanding what families look like. Their experience of family influences and impacts every part of their lives, inside and outside of the family home. For children it shapes their future. This is why, the Government needs to prioritise how they can put families at the heart of all of policy decisions. This is the moment to make a difference in every family's life.

Introduction to the Family Review

This is Part 1 of the Independent Family Review by the Children's Commissioner for England. It paints a unique and comprehensive picture of family life today. Through extensive quantitative and qualitative research, thousands of children and families have helped to shape this piece of work. It draws upon new and detailed analysis of existing data sets, conversations with experts and frontline workers, and a review of relevant literature including submissions from key stakeholders.

As part of Inclusive Britain – the Government's response to the 2021 Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities – the Children's Commissioner for England was asked to undertake this Review.[1] The purpose was to '*improve the way public services understands the needs of children and families, so every child has the best start in life and the opportunity to reach their full potential.*'[2]

The story that Part 1 of the Family Review tells is a complex one. Family life has changed significantly in recent decades, with an increase in co-habitation as an alternative to marriage, more mothers than ever in work and family composition that varies significantly according to region and ethnic background. There is also the emergence of blended families, formed as relationships shift and change, and an increase in children living across more than one household. Government data as currently collected has not kept pace with these changes, and what it tells us does not capture the dynamic and evolving nature of modern family life.[3]

Given the Children's Commissioner's specific duties towards non-devolved issues affecting all children, and their rights, across the United Kingdom, this Review addresses children's experiences and outcomes in families only where there is at least one child aged 18 or under. The Commissioner also has a specific duty towards looked after children and care leavers in England. The Review considers their needs, voices and experiences to age 25.

In contrast to the diverse, changing patterns of family composition, what family means to people today is shown to be remarkably consistent over time and across family groups. For families, it is defined through loving and strong relationships, through practical and emotional support, and through a life spent together – a positive vision of family strengths. Part 1 of the Family Review, for the first time, distils and quantifies the power that these core elements bring to create the protective effect of family. And it finds that it is at least as important as other, better-established factors, such as income, in its impact on well-being and long-term outcomes. This insight must inform policymaking. If family's influence can

be felt far beyond the reaches of home, as this analysis suggests, it must sit at the heart of policy across all Government Departments.

It must also guide how public services support families. But this is only one of the ways in which provision needs to adapt in the light of the findings of the Family Review. It needs to recognise and embrace the finding that families seek help first and foremost with their own networks. And just as families value the relationships between their members, they also value the ones they have with professionals too, and with the peers they meet through services. Often what families want is as simple as somewhere to connect with others who are in similar circumstances, in a setting that is local and accessible. Instead, some face unnecessary barriers, and fear the weight of stigma. This too needs to change if families are to access the help they need, in the form they want it.

The Family Review does not shy away from some of most challenging issue facing family policy. There are of course children who do not grow up with their birth parents, or their birth family. Within this is the small minority who grow up in institutional settings. For these children, family can be a particularly fraught and sensitive concept. These, of all children, need to feel the protective effect of loving relationships, strong support and shared experiences even if they are not found in a family setting. And there are some families who face challenges serious enough that no protective effect is strong enough to shield their members from harm, and the state must step in instead.

Part 1 of the Family Review focusses on what families look like in modern Britain, defines for the first time what exactly is protective about them, and what services are currently provided to those families who need them. Alongside this, it looks at the unique experiences of children for whom the state is their parent. There are recommendations for policy makers at the close of Part 1 of the Family Review, and a framework for answering them will underpin Part 2. In particular, a greater understanding is needed of some elements of support service provision, including how it is evaluated. Difficulties around data collection and data-sharing will also be addressed.

Alongside this, the Children's Commissioner wants to hear from even more children and families and will launch *The Big Summer Survey.* This will go to children across the country to complete in schools and feed in to Part 2 of the Family Review which will report on these findings, as well as exploring further how services can be designed to better support families' needs.

Executive Summary

The Family Review set out to understand children and families' perspectives on family life – from what family looks like in 2022 to the challenges facing families. A summary of the key findings is set out below.

Chapter 1 - Family in the UK and England in 2022

- Chapter 1 outlines family composition and formation across the UK and England. This is unique analysis by the CCo showing the current shape and size of households, change over time in family structure and an analysis of families by ethnicity, religion, socio-economic background, and local area.
- As of 2021, there are 8.2 million families with children in the UK[4] - 63% are married couples with children, 14% are cohabiting and 23% are headed by a lone parent.[5] CCo's analysis shows large variations in family composition by demographics such as ethnicity, local area, and socio-economic class.[6]
- There has been a slight decrease in married families in the last 20 years (from 65% in 2001 to 63% in 2021) and an increase in families cohabiting (from 11 % in 2001 to 14% in 2021).[7]
- An important change in family life over the last 20 years has been the steady increase in the employment rate for mothers (from 67% in 2002 to 76% in 2021). [8]
- Family composition is dynamic and can change over the course of childhood. Data from the Millennium Cohort Study shows that of children born in 2000-2001, 44% do not live with both biological parents throughout their entire childhood.[9]

Chapter 2 - What defines Family

- Chapter 2 outlines what families told us about their lives and their own families. CCo's brand new research including the Family Life Survey (FLS) and focus groups gives a comprehensive insight of children and adults views of family life.[10]
- The vast majority of children and adults were overwhelmingly positive about family, this was consistent across different family types, ethnic groups and local area.[11]
- When asked about what three words they first though of when they heard the word 'family', the top words for children were 'loving', 'happy' and 'home, for adults it was 'loving', 'home' and 'caring'.[12]

- In an open-text question on what family means to parents and children, the most common response was that 'family is everything'.[13]
- Four themes emerged through the FLS, focus groups and interviews: the emotional importance of connection within families; the importance of shared experience for family life; the unconditional support, both practical and emotional, from within families; and the strong, positive, and enduring relationships found in families. These factors were present in families of all shapes, sizes, and compositions.[14]

Chapter 3 - Children living away from their birth parents

- Chapter 3 looks specifically at children who are not living with their birth parents and what they think of family life. This includes children who are fostered or adopted, those who live in kinship care arrangements and those living in institutions. For children in care under Section 47 of the Children's Act 1989, the local authority is their corporate parent.
- Currently 80,850 children are looked after by the state in England. Of these children, 4,070 are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC).[15]
- Most children in care are living in foster homes (71%) although, 9% of children in care live in children's homes and 5% in unregulated accommodation, such as supported flats and hostels.[16]
- Children in some ethnic groups are over-represented in the care system and rates also vary significantly by local area.[17]
- Most children in care will have lived through difficult experiences with their birth parents, however in *The Big Ask*, 70% of children still said they were happy with their family life. However, they were more than twice as likely to be unhappy with their family life (14% compared to 6% for children not in care).[18]

Chapter 4 - Why is family so important: the protective effect

- Chapter 4 defines 'the protective effect' of families and outlines the benefit it provides to family, using unique quantitative and qualitative research and analysis.
- The protective effect is defined as – emotional connection: love and joy; Shared experiences of family life; Strong, positive, and enduring relationships and the ability to depend on one another for practical and emotional support.
- To demonstrate the protective effect, CCo looked at three outcomes: well-being of family members; long term outcomes of children and the ability of the family to withstand challenges.

- CCo analysis of *Understanding Society* shows that believing you could rely on family in time of crisis is associated with higher overall well-being. Among adults who can rely on their family 'a lot' if they have a serious problem, 80% are satisfied with life overall compared to 66% for those who can't rely on their family 'a lot' if they have a serious problem.[19]
- In CCo's FLS, families who felt they were spending the right amount of time with their children were happier than those who were spending too little time with their children.[20]
- New CCo analysis carried out, using data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE), found that getting on well with at least one of your parents is associated with higher hourly income at age 25. [21]

Chapter 5 - Challenges to family life

- Chapter 5 examines both the common concerns that can affect all families and then the much more serious challenges which can undermine one or more elements of the protective effect.
- Common concerns raised by many families throughout CCo's research were financial pressures and childcare.[22]
- The serious challenges examined are not an exhaustive list, some are more serious than others and most are on a continuum. The challenges covered include intense conflict within families, parental separation, mental and physical illness, parental alcohol or substance misuse, domestic abuse and child abuse and neglect. These issues are often more significant when they co-occur.

Chapter 6 - What services are currently provided to families

- Chapter 6 establishes what services are currently available to families and what families want from the services they access. It is a framing chapter for Part 2 of the Review.
- CCo's research showed that most parents would just turn to family or friends if they needed advice or support. CCo's FLS showed 78% of parents would turn to family and 51% would turn to friends. [23]
- There is substantial regional variation in access to services. For example, in London 94% of babies received their first check through the Healthy Child Programme, while 77% in the South-West did so. [24]
- CCo's research showed that parents and families would like services to be relational, accessible, welcoming and non-stigmatising and inclusive to all family members.[25]

Chapter 7 - Next steps

- This Chapter discusses the next steps of the Family Review and explains how Part 1 provides a framework to underpinning to Part 2.
- In Part 2 the CCo will review the Family Test to make sure it is fit-for-purpose. The CCo will conduct further research into family support and services to develop a high-level outcomes framework which is focused on family strengths.
- Alongside this the CCo will publish guidance on how to improve data collection and sharing. And will publish practical proposals to improve the integration of local services and will use the findings from Part 1 to inform work on defining disadvantage.

Methodology

This is a unique, comprehensive, research-led Review, which explores many areas of modern family life. The Family Review is grounded in parents' and children's voices and features brand new primary research. The Family Review draws upon research from a Literature Review, a Call for Evidence, commissioned surveys on family life and support, *The Big Ask*, analysis of existing survey and administrative data, a series of roundtables, focus groups, and interviews, and Calls to Action.

Literature Review and Call for Evidence

The Literature Review was compiled by reviewing the available data and research on contemporary family life, as well as the submissions from our Call for Evidence. The Call for Evidence received 70 submissions from parents, think tanks, charities, and researchers. Owing to the sheer volume of this field of evidence, this Literature Review provides an overview of relevant research and work. It does not include the office's own research.

Surveys on Family Life (FLS) and Family Services (FSS)

The Children's Commissioner's office (CCo) commissioned two nationally representative online panel surveys, the Family Life Survey (FLS, UK level) with a sample size of 3,300 parents and 2,300 children aged 8-17, and the second survey, the Family Services Survey (FSS, England only) with a sample size of 3,000 parents. The survey findings on family life are nationally representative for the UK by oldest child's age and gender, household region, and parental employment status, and includes additional boost samples for lone parents, parents from ethnic minority groups, and children eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). This survey also contained questions that were asked to children aged 8 to 17. The questions for both surveys were selected to fill gaps in the existing evidence on family life and family support services.

The Big Ask

The Big Ask is the largest ever survey of children, with over half a million responses. Launched by the Children's Commissioner in April 2021, ran for 6 weeks and was open to any child in England aged 4-17. It was a publicly available survey, and children's participation was anonymous and voluntary. *The Big Answer* summarises the responses from children aged 6-17. As part of the Family Review, we conducted additional analysis on the responses from children aged 6-17 and conducted new analysis on the responses from children aged 4-5. While the survey was not designed to be nationally representative, we have applied weights by age, gender, and local authority so that findings are more representative.

Additional analysis of government survey and administrative data

CCo conducted additional analysis using Office for National Statistics household-level Annual Population Survey (APS) to produce breakdowns of family composition by detailed ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status. All results of this analysis are weighted at a household level. The CCo also conducted analysis using Office for National Statistics birth-registration data, to produce breakdowns of family composition by local authority. CCo also conducted analysis using *Understanding Society* and *Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England*.

Focus groups, interviews, and roundtables

CCo conducted 23 focus groups and 35 interviews with 47 children and 120 parents and carers in a variety of family support settings, including Children's Centres, Family Hubs, Holiday Activities and Food Programmes, and voluntary-run support groups. These focus groups followed a set topic guide and discussions were usually recorded. CCo also held four roundtables, with Supporting Families keyworkers, Family Hub co-ordinators, policy analysts and researchers where we discussed a series of open-ended questions and recorded the discussion. The transcripts and notes from the focus groups, interviews, and roundtables were thematically coded in NVivo by social researchers.

Family profiles

CCo also collected 166 in-depth family profiles from families across the UK through in-person interviews, phone calls and an online survey. The calls and interviews followed a semi-structured format using a topic guide and parents were given the option to send a photo of their family as part of the profile. All members of the family were encouraged to take part, including children. These profiles highlight the themes that are discussed throughout the report and emphasise the experiences of families in their own words.

Call to Action

CCo launched two Call to Actions short free-text surveys: one to children and parents on what family means and one to parents of children under age 5 on family support. These gave children and parents across the country, who were not part of the formal research, a chance to contribute their perspective on what family means and on family services. The results are not nationally representative but key themes and quotes have been included in the report as themes raised were very similar to the more formal research findings.

Annexes and quotes

Please see separate Annexes for detail on the research methodologies used and more extensive research findings. Throughout Part 1 of the Family Review, quotes from the children, parents, and carers who contributed are included. Whether the participant was a child, mother, father, or carers is indicated after each quote. The age of the child is included when this was provided. Where quotes come from the Call to Action or Family Life Survey (FLS), these are denoted with the corresponding initials. When a quote is from a focus group or interview, we include the type of service or setting in which the focus group; or interview was conducted, for instance, playgroup or youth group. All names in case studies are anonymized.

Chapter 1 – Family in the UK and England in 2022

> **'Family is the most important thing in my life. When I had my children my whole life changed for the better, sometimes worst, but I couldn't think of my life without them now'**
>
> – Mum, Family Life Survey

1.1 Summary of Chapter 1

- This chapter draws on existing government statistics as well as CCo's new analysis of the Annual Population Survey (APS) and ONS birth registration data to give an overview of contemporary family life, how families differ in structure and composition, how family life has changed over the past two decades, and the challenges in capturing the complexity of family life with existing data.
- This chapter shows there are large variations in family structure by ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status and local area. Across all groups, the past two decades have seen a shift from marriage to co-habiting couples and an increase in mothers' employment rate.
- This chapter also shows that family composition often changes over the course of a child's life. Data from the *Millennium Cohort Study* shows that 44% of children born in 2000-01 didn't live with both biological parents throughout their entire childhood. [26]

1.2 Our research into family life in the United Kingdom

To understand how families can flourish and children can thrive, it is essential to first understand what family in the UK looks like today. For Part 1 of the Family Review, the Children's Commissioner set out to paint as full a picture as possible of how families fit together, how that varies across the country and between different communities and how this has changed over the past two decades. In doing so, it is apparent that while many elements of family composition are well understood and documented, there are also significant gaps in the data, which will impact both policymaking and service provision. It is difficult to support families without knowing who and what they are.

There is an important distinction between how families are captured in the data and how families define themselves, as explored in Chapter 2. In Government surveys, a 'family' is a married, civil partnered, or cohabiting couple with or without children, or a lone parent with at least one child, who lives at the same address.[27] The definition of 'lone parent' doesn't distinguish between families with a child who solely resides with and is cared for by one parent and families with a child who lives with one parent but is cared for by two parents.[28]

1.3 Overview of contemporary family life

1.3.1 Family structure

As of 2021, there were around 8.2 million families with children in the UK.[29] Of these, 63% were married couples with children, 14% were co-habiting couples, and 23% were headed by a lone parent (an adult not in a co-habiting or married relationship who has care of a dependent child).[30] The rate of lone parent households in the UK is much higher than in most European countries, where the average share of families headed by a lone parent is 13%.[31]

Around 90% of lone parents were women.[32] Lone parent families are more likely to be experiencing financial difficulties. In 2020, 49% of children living in lone parent families were in relative poverty after housing costs compared to 25% of children living in married or cohabiting families.[33]

1.3.2 Family size

In 2021, equal proportions of families with children had one or two children (42% each) and 15% have 3 or more children.[34] Cohabiting couple families and lone parent families tend to be smaller than married couple families. Around half of lone parents (52%) and cohabiting parents (50%) have only one dependent child, compared to 37% of married couples.[35]

Larger families are more likely to be experiencing financial difficulties. In 2020, 45% of children living in families with 3 or more children were in relative poverty after housing costs, compared to 35% of children living in families with 2 children and 19% of children living in families with 1 child.[36]

1.3.3 Working patterns

In 2021, most fathers (92%) and three quarters of mothers (76%) were employed.[37] Data from the Labour Force Survey shows that mothers are more likely to be working part-time (35%) than fathers (6%) and

that mothers are much more likely to report that they are not working because of looking after the family home (15%) than fathers (2%).[38] Lone parents are less likely to be employed with around 50% of lone mothers of a child aged 0 to 4 employed, rising to 75% when children are aged 5 to 16. [39]

1.4 How families differ

Outlined below is how families differ across ethnicity, religion, socio-economic status, and local area based on our research across the APS and birth registration data.

1.4.1 How families differ by ethnicity

CCo's analysis of the APS in 2020 shows that families of Asian descent, including those with Chinese, Indian, Bangladeshi, or Pakistani heritage are much more likely to be married. [40] In contrast, Black Caribbean and Black African families are significantly more likely to be lone parents. Figure 1 shows that 44% of Black African, and 57% of Black Caribbean families are headed by a lone parent.[41]

Figure 1: Family structure in England and Wales by ethnicity (2020)

Ethnicity (head of family unit)

White
White British: 22 | 59 | 19
White Irish: 20* | 63 | 17*
Other White: 17 | 68 | 16

Mixed or multiple ethnicities
White and Black Caribbean: 47 | 23* | 30*
White and Black African: 32* | 62 | 7*
White and Asian: 18* | 74 | 8*
Other Mixed / multiple ethnic background: 25* | 52 | 23*

Asian or Asian British
Indian: 11 | 87 | 2*
Pakistani: 19 | 80 | 2
Bangladeshi: 10* | 88 | 2
Chinese: 18* | 82 |
Other Asian background: 13 | 84 | 3*

Black, African, Caribbean or Black British
Black African: 44 | 49 | 7
Black Caribbean: 57 | 26 | 17
Other Black / African / Caribbean background: 47* | 52 | 2

Other
Other ethnic group: 20 | 74 | 6*

Share of families with dependent children (%)

■ Lone parent   ■ Married or civil partnership   ■ Cohabitating

*Estimates are considered unreliable and should be used with caution
Source: Annual Population Survey (2020)

There are also significant differences in family size by ethnicity, with 41% of Pakistani households with dependent children and 38% Bangladeshi households with dependent children having three or more children, compared to 14% of White family households.[42]

1.4.2 How families differ by religion

CCo's analysis of the APS in 2020 found significant differences in family structure by religion. Figure 2 shows that while the lone parent rate is similar across most religions, the marriage rate and cohabiting rate differs across religions. Among families who are not religious, 55% are married, compared to 91% of those who are Hindu.[43]

Figure 2: Family structure in Britain by religion (2020)

Religious affiliation (head of family unit)

	Lone parent	Married or civil partnership	Cohabitating
Sikh	13*	83	4*
No Religion	22	55	23
Muslim	18	79	2*
Jewish	14*	79	7*
Hindu	8*	91	1*
Christian	23	64	12
Budhist	19*	72	8*
Any Other Religion	28	60	12

Share of families with dependent children (%)

■ Lone parent　　■ Married or civil partnership　　■ Cohabitating

*Estimates are considered unreliable and should be used with caution
Source: Annual Population Survey (2020)

1.4.3 How families differ by socio-economic status

CCo's analysis of the APS in 2020 found significant differences in family structure by socio-economic status of the mother. Among mothers in the lowest socio-economic class (never worked, unemployed),

28% were in lone parent families and among mothers in the highest socio-economic class (Higher managerial and professional), 10% were in lone parent families.[44]

Figure 3: Family structure in the UK by socio-economic class (2020)

Socio-economic status of mother	Lone parent	Married or civil partnership	Cohabiting
Never worked and long-term unemployed	28	58	14
Routine occupations	29	46	25
Semi-routine occupations	30	49	21
Lower supervisory and technical	24	52	24
Small employers and own account workers	20	64	16
Intermediate occupations	20	62	18
Lower managerial and professional	14	71	16
Higher managerial and professional	10	80	10
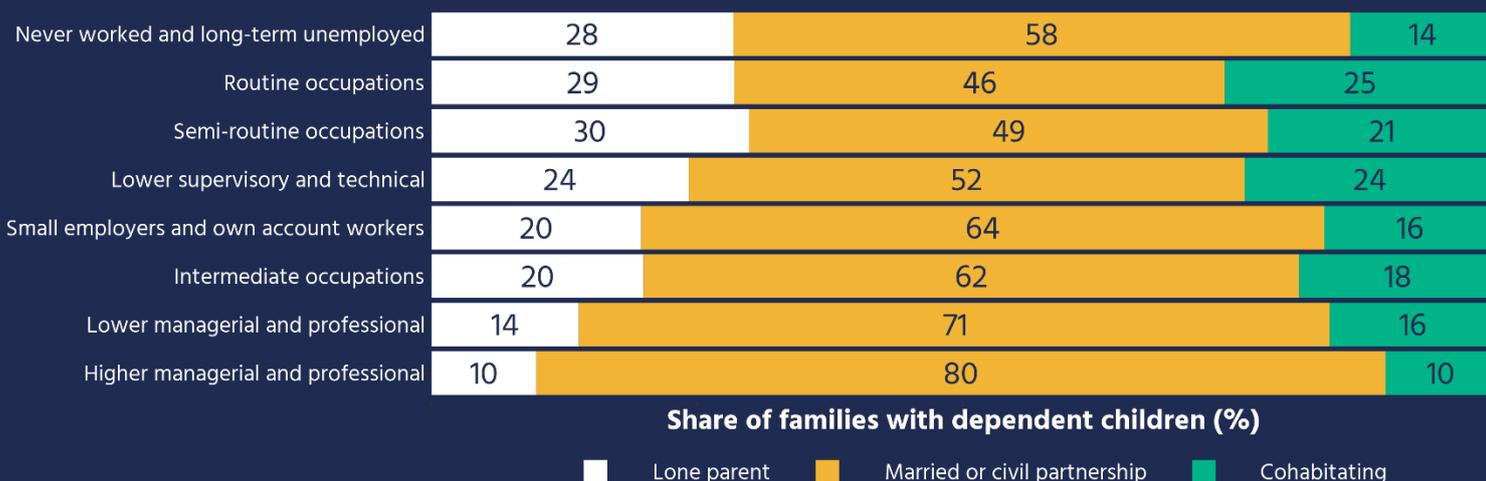
Share of families with dependent children (%)

Source: Annual Population Survey Household Dataset (2020)

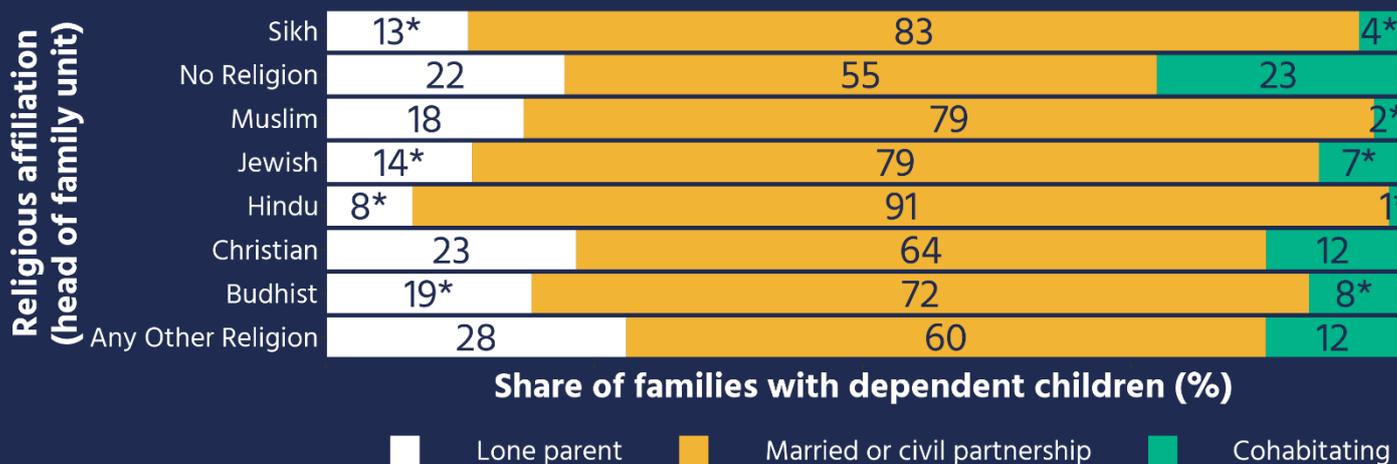### 1.4.4 Examining variation in lone parent rates and marriage rates

CCo used data on mothers' characteristics from the APS to model the likelihood of being in a lone parent family. This analysis shows that mothers' socio-economic status explains more of the variation in the lone parent rate than mothers' age, ethnicity, religion, education, or region. This set of characteristics together explains 8% of variation in lone parent rates. Of this 8%, 30% can be explained by socio-economic status, 27% by ethnicity, 25% by education, 8% by religion, 8% by region and 3% by age.[45]

CCo also used data on mothers' characteristics from the APS to model the likelihood of being in a married family. This analysis shows that religion explains more of the variation in marriage rates than mother's age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, education, or region. This set of characteristics together explains 14% of the variation in marriage rates.[46] Of this 14%, 20% is explained by differences in mothers' religion, 20% by differences in age, 19% by ethnicity, 18% by education and 17% by socio-economic status and 6% by region.[47]

1.4.5 How families differ by local area

CCo's analysis of the birth registration data in 2020 finds that family composition varies significantly by local authority. Figure 4 shows that the share of non-partnered births ranged from 5% to 31%. [48] Research from the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that of the differences in the non-partnered birth rate across local authorities, 35% can be explained by differences in the share of the local population unemployed and share economically inactive, 17% by differences in education, 6% by differences in age, and 6% by differences in ethnicity. [49]

Figure 4: Share of births to non-partnered mothers in 2020 by local authority in England and Wales
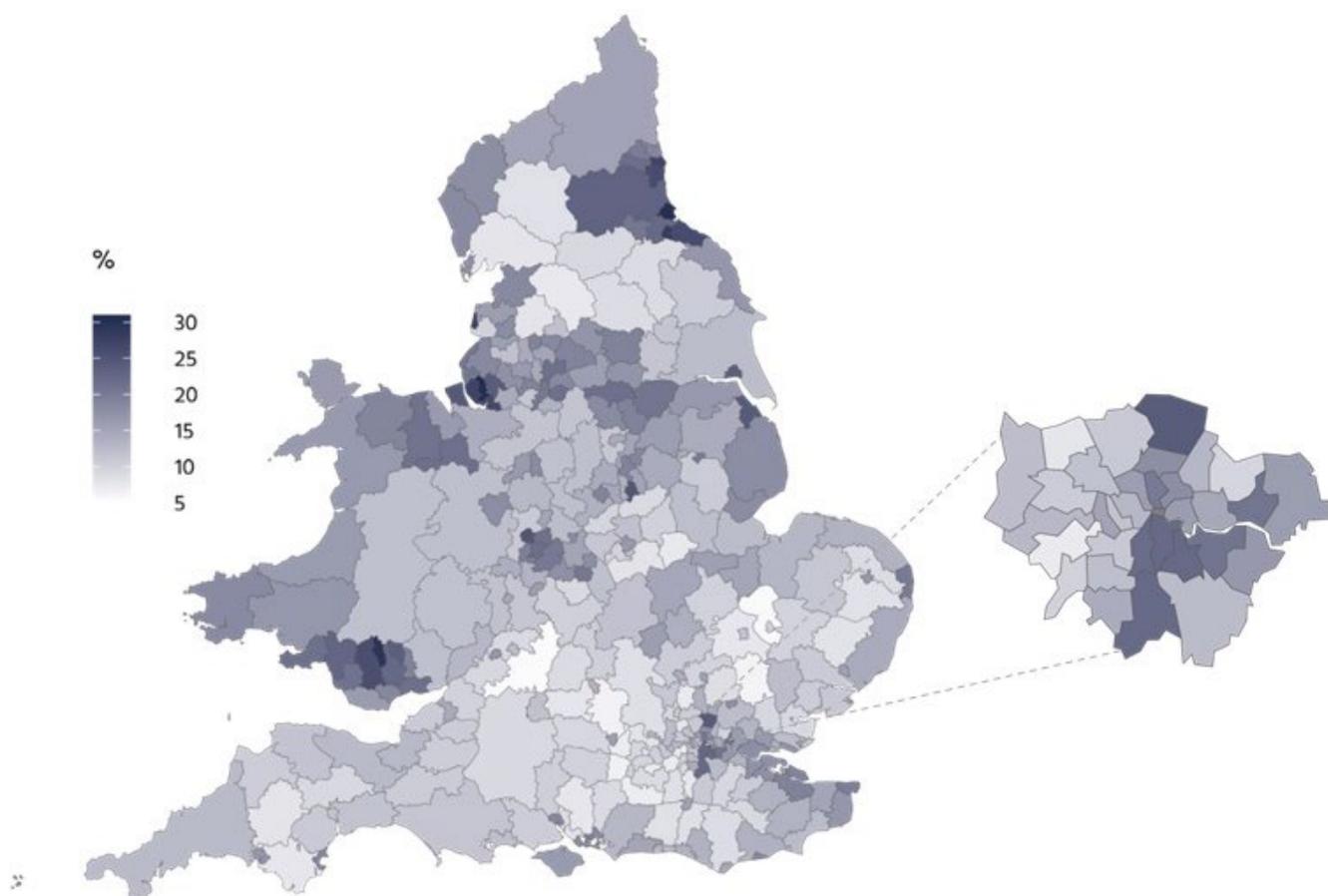
1.5 How family has changed over time

1.5.1 How family structure has changed over time

The share of lone parent families in the UK has remained remarkably consistent over the last 20 years, at around 25% of all families with dependent children.[50] There has been a slight decrease in the share of families that are married (from 65% in 2001 to 63% in 2021) and slight increase in the share of families that are cohabiting (from 11% in 2001 to 14% in 2021) – as more couples have decided to live together, either as a precursor to marriage, or as an alternative.[51]

There have been gradual changes in the age profile of families in England and Wales, as the average age of first-time mothers increased from 27 in 2000 to 29 in 2020.[52] The average age at marriage increased from 29 to 32 for women.[53] There has also been gradual decrease in family size over the past two decades, with the share of families with 3 or more children decreasing from 17% in 2001 to 15% in 2021.[54]

1.5.2 The changes in family life over time

One of the most striking changes in family life over the past two decades has been an increase in the employment rate for mothers, which has steadily increased almost 10 percentage points over the past two decades, from 67% in 2002 to 76% in 2021.[55] Over the same period there has been a slight increase in the employment rate for fathers, from 90% to 92%.[56]

Families are spending more time in the same location doing things alone ('alone-together' time). Time-use data shows that the average amount of time families spent in the same location but doing things alone increased from 95 minutes a day in 2000 to 136 minutes a day in 2015.[57] Of total family time per day (6.4 hours) in 2015, 2.4 hours are spent on mobile devices. [58]

Figure 5: Average daily minutes spent on childcare for parents living with children

	Men	Women
2014-2015	47	88
April 2020	90	102
March 2022	56	85

Source: Time Use Survey data, Great Britain
Note: Differences by gender not statistically significant in 2020 and 2022, differences between 2014-15 and 2022 not significant for men, between 2020 and 2022 and between 2014-15 and 2020 not significant for women

1.5.3 How the Covid-19 lockdowns impacted family life

Covid-19 related lockdowns had large impacts on how families spend their time. Figure 5 shows that the amount of time fathers spend on unpaid childcare almost doubled from 47 minutes a day in 2014-2015 to 90 minutes a day during lockdown but fell back to 56 minutes in 2022.[59] For some families, the additional time together had a positive impact on family life. Data from *Understanding Society* showed that 25% of parents reported that their relationship with their children had become better during the lockdown and less than 5% reported it became worse.[60]

Lockdowns particularly affected separated families. The Department for Work and Pensions analysis suggests that the percentage of separated families whose children who saw their non-resident parent frequently decreased from 55% before the pandemic to 45%.[61]

1.6 Capturing the dynamic nature of family life

1.6.1 How family changes over a family's lifetime

Family structure and composition often changes over the course of a child's life. Data from the *Millennium Cohort Study* - tracking a group of children from birth in 2000-01 to age 17 in 2018-19 - shows that 44% of children didn't live with both their biological parents throughout their entire childhood.[62] Data from *Understanding Society* shows that while at any one time around 25% of families are lone parent family, over a six-year period, around 33% of families have been a lone parent family.[63] In other words, parental separation is quite common, but parents can also get back together, or form new relationships.

1.6.2 The difficulty of capturing dynamic nature of family life in data

Put simply, the way data is currently collected struggles to demonstrate the complexity of some families' lives. The way information is captured on families tends to be around households, rather than the families and relationships within them. Additionally, snapshot data of how families live also fail to capture their dynamic and changing nature.

Consequently, there is a poor understanding of children whose care is shared between both parents, or a family where children are cared for by a relative or friend in a formal or informal kinship arrangement.

Similarly, it is difficult to ascertain how many families today are 'blended' – including step-parents, step-children, or other new relationships. The FLS found that 24% of children currently have a parent not residing at their main address.[64] However, data on non-resident parents and the living arrangements of children who spend time at multiple addresses is limited.

The 2011 census, the latest data that captures the prevalence of 'step' relationships, living between multiple households and kinship care, shows that about 10% of couple families with dependent children involve 'step' relationships,[65] about 3% of children are splitting their time between two addresses.[66] This was more common for children aged 10-14 (5%),[67] and about 1% of children (152,910) are living in kinship care arrangements whereby they live with extended family, either informally or through a legal care arrangement.[68]

While the 2021 census will be available soon, any attempt to develop a better understanding of families with different living arrangements must start with data which is now more than 10 years out of date.

1.7 What this means for families

The above outlines the composition of families across the country and how it is a dynamic, changing picture. Public services need to adapt to meet changes in family life. Policy makers need to understand the role of extended family, differences in family structure and composition across the country and that family situation can change over the course of childhood. The family profile below reflects the pressures facing modern families, and the dynamic nature of family life discussed in this chapter.

FAMILY PROFILE

I'm a mum to five children and we live with my husband and our cat. We're on our own really, all our extended family is in Ireland so staying in touch with them is a text message affair.

We are a close family, my husband works really hard, he's out from 5am to 7pm working as an Engineer in London. We've only got each other to depend on, we're all we've got.

I would love to do more stuff with the children but as things get worse and worse financially it's hard. I've had to pull them out of swimming. I wanted to pull them out of Scouts but the Scout leader and I worked out I can clean the Scout hut three times a week and they'll waive the fees for the kids.

The biggest challenge for us is bills. Nobody has seen this coming, how hard things are going to be coming up to the winter time, I'm scared for the winter months.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER
Family Review

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Chapter 2 – What defines family?

> **'The purpose of family is to love us. They give us all the love we need. They provide everything that we need. They look after us and help us to grow. They care for us and if we are upset, they look after us. They make sure that we go to school every day'**
>
> – Boy, aged 6-8, Call to Action

2.1 Summary of Chapter 2

- This chapter outlines what families told us about their lives and their own families. This draws upon evidence from:
    - CCo's Family Life Survey (FLS) of 3,305 parents and 2,209 children aged 8-17 across the UK. This offers a comprehensive insight into children and adults views of their family life.
    - To give depth to the insights gained in this survey, CCo carried out 23 focus groups and 35 interviews with children, parents, and carers across England. In these, we spoke with 47 children and 120 parents and carers who gave vivid accounts of their families, and unique insight into why these relationships are so important to them.
    - CCo also heard from 3,000 children and 700 adults though our first Call to Action, who answered the question: 'what does family mean to you?'
- Through combining this breadth of evidence four themes emerge: the emotional importance of connection within families; the importance of shared experience for family life; the unconditional support, both practical and emotional, from within families; and the strong, positive, and enduring relationships found in families. These factors were present in families of all shapes, sizes, and compositions. These factors mattered to families and helped to protect them from the challenges that can occur in daily life.

- This chapter also outlines how conceptualisations of families that are static and based upon households do not reflect the realities for so many people. Families are based upon the strength of connection, the offer and receipt of love and support, and the value attached to the relationship. People told us about the dynamic nature of their family, and time and time again we heard of the importance of extended family members for practical and emotional support.

2.2 Listening to families about what is important to their lives

Our exploration of family life in Chapter 1 illustrated the limitations in the way family is currently conceptualised. There is a reliance on household composition as a measure of understanding how families operate.[69] Instead, CCo set out to hear from families themselves about how they would define family and what family means to them. Part 1 of the Family Review seeks to understand what united families of different compositions, and enabled family to remain such a powerful force in response to a range of different challenges.

Our analyses paint a complex and dynamic picture of the different forms a family can take, and how they change over time. It also highlights the failings of existing data in fully capturing who and what families are. To understand families across the country, we need to listen to families themselves. It is through listening to the voices of children and young people, parents, and carers that we can really learn what family is, what it means, and how it is valued by those within them. This insight starts with who forms a family as this is conceived by family members themselves. But family is about much more than its individual members. Family is about the relationships between them, how these relationships work and how they change. Family is about support and unconditional love, of shared experiences, and facing adversity together. And by understanding what families look like, and what families do, we can understand the central importance of family to our lives beyond the time we spend with our families – it is everything, but it is also in everything. In this definition of family can be found its protective power, and its purpose as a foundation for life. It is this holistic understanding of family, as described by families themselves.

2.3 How families described themselves in our research consistently across all groups

For Part 1 of the Family Review, CCo heard from families of different compositions, in various circumstances and facing a myriad of different challenges. CCo surveyed children and parents to ask what family meant to them through the FLS. For greater depth and insight, CCo carried out 23 focus groups and 35 interviews with children, parents, and carers across England. In these, CCo spoke with 47
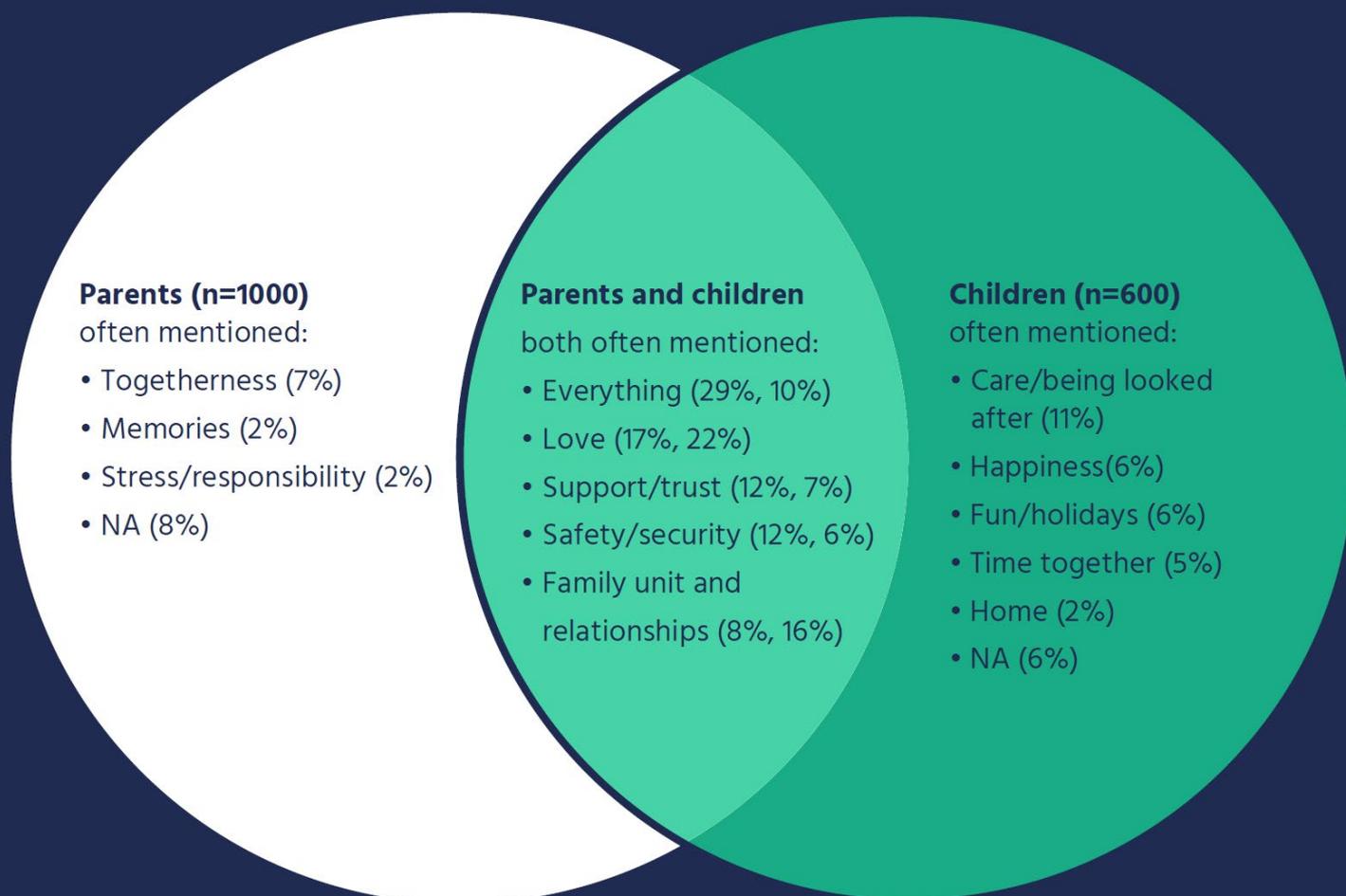
children and 120 parents and carers who gave vivid accounts of their families, and unique insight into why these relationships are so important to them. CCo also received 3,700 responses to the first Call to Action, predominantly from children and young people, who answered the question: 'what does family mean to you?'.

Looking across the evidence, when exploring what family means to participants, four themes emerged. Firstly, family is associated with emotions, which were overwhelmingly positive including love and joy predominantly, with some people associating some negative emotions, such as stress (mentioned by only 2% of a sample of 100 parents in FLS[70]). Secondly, family is defined by shared experiences and what people do for one another, not purely who is in the family unit. Thirdly, the unconditional support and depth of connection family offers, and the feelings of support, trust, and care all featured in adults and children's definitions of their family. Alongside this, was the sense that children knew and clearly defined the people they consider as important and a part of their family. Adults expressed the ability to choose who they keep connections with and who they draw support from, and this often extends beyond biological ties. Fourthly, the strong, positive, and enduring relationships in families emerged as a theme. These factors were important against a backdrop of the 'ups and downs' of family life being considered a normal, natural part of being in a family. The family is a place where the 'good days and bad days' of life are played out. These themes are explored in more detail below.

When asked which three words respondents first thought of when they heard the word 'family', parents and children across all ages, gender and ethnicities were likely to select similar words of positive sentiment.[71] For parents, the top three words were 'loving' (64%), 'home' (43%) and 'caring' (40%). For children (age 8-17), the top three words were 'loving' (63%), 'happy' (51%), and 'home' (48%). All of the negative options listed in the survey to describe family (stressful, struggles, pressure, breakdown, unhealthy and unsupportive) were selected by less than 7% of parents and less than 5% of children.

Figure 6 below depicts the key themes that emerged from the responses to the open question; 'What does family mean to you?' and how the themes from parents and children (age 8-17) intersect. There is a clear overlap in the themes mentioned, which complements what was found across the focus groups and interviews CCo conducted. No matter who they call family, parents, carers, and children alike paint an overwhelmingly positive picture of what family means to them, with fewer than 3% of the sample mentioning negative themes in their open-text response, such as 'stress/responsibility' (2% of adult sample) and 'annoying' (2% of child sample).[72]

Figure 6: Themes of the responses to a on what family means to parents and children in the FLS

Parents (n=1000)
often mentioned:
- Togetherness (7%)
- Memories (2%)
- Stress/responsibility (2%)
- NA (8%)

Parents and children
both often mentioned:
- Everything (29%, 10%)
- Love (17%, 22%)
- Support/trust (12%, 7%)
- Safety/security (12%, 6%)
- Family unit and relationships (8%, 16%)

Children (n=600)
often mentioned:
- Care/being looked after (11%)
- Happiness(6%)
- Fun/holidays (6%)
- Time together (5%)
- Home (2%)
- NA (6%)

Many of the themes mentioned by parents and children inter-link, as shown by the overlapping section of the diagram, combining to provide a rich understanding of what family means to parents and children. Family is multi-faceted – spanning love, support, and security – and stretches across different aspects of life, and over time: from time together in the present, memories of the past, and hopes and dreams for the future. For many, and particularly parents, family is everything. These core aspects are combined with the findings from the qualitative focus groups and outlined in more detail below.

2.3.1 The emotional importance of connection within families: love and joy

In focus groups and interviews, when asked who they considered their family, rather than just naming or numbering relatives, children and adults alike defined and described their family by the emotions evoked when thinking about those closest to them. People describe families in terms of the emotions that they associate with family – love, joy, a sense of families being 'everything' to them. Whether speaking with children at a summer holiday activity, fathers at a parenting group, or grandparent carers

at a kinship support group, expressions of love underpinned so many people's understandings of the term 'family'. As we heard from a young person at a youth group, he defined his family as: '*the people that you care about and love*' – Boy, 16, youth group. These themes were consistently mentioned in the FLS with 17% of the 1,000 responses we coded from parents and 22% of the 600 responses we coded from children using terms like 'love' when describing their family (see Figure 6). Love was also the most consistent theme that came from the Call to Action. As one mother described: '*My home, happiness and love and support that I receive. Family are my reason for living. I love my family so much. They bring me so much joy. I love being a part of a family and realise how lucky I am to be able to support and care for my family*' – Mother, Call to Action. Another mother said: '*Family is a secure based from which love is the foundation. You help and support each other*' – Mother, Call to Action.

Alongside this, children so often spoke about how their family meant 'everything' to them. This featured strongly in the FLS, with one child saying: '*My family means everything to me. Family is what holds me together each day. Although we have had fall outs we always come together*' – Boy, 10, FLS. Another child said: '*Everything rolled into one. Advice when I'm unsure, love when I need it with ongoing caring support 24/7*' – Girl, 13, FLS. This was also reflected in another girl's words who explained that family impacts every aspect of life: '*My family mean the world to me. They mean knowing I always have someone to love and care for me and supporting me in everything I do*' – Girl, 12, FLS.

Across other engagement, there was also a sense that family was more important than anything else, as one child said: '*family means more than anything to me and I would never choose anything over family*' – Young carer, Young Carers Festival. This sentiment was also spoken about by parents, as one said: '*Family is everything to me. Knowing that every morning I wake up next to my loving wife, I get to cuddle and kiss my sweetest children*' – Father, FLS. A young person in the Call to Action also spoke to this: '*Family to me means a group of people that show respect, loyalty and love and want the best for you*' – Boy, aged 13-17, Call to Action.

2.3.2 The importance of shared experiences for family life

When talking with adults and children about their family, something that stands out is that many people define their family through actions and the things they do together: '*Family is doing things together, spending time together – they [children] will always appreciate it*' – Mother, Children's Centre. Children frequently spoke of their family through activities: playing together, going on holidays, eating meals, reading together. For adults, these tangible experiences also featured in discussions of family life, but there was a greater reflection on memories and experiences from the past. As a father we met at a

parenting course said: '*it's your experiences together, what you have been through*' – Father, parenting course. In the sharing of life together there can be ups and downs but sharing experiences and shared lives are where these are played out. A mother in FLS described this sentiment: '*Family means that we share our lives together, good times and bad. We listen, we laugh, we argue, we forgive, we communicate. Family for me is warm, caring and protective. My children are safe when we're together. Family means creating a super strong support hub that lasts a lifetime*' – Mother, FLS.

As so many day-to-day experiences happen alongside family members, considering what families do together helps us to understand why the word 'everything' was so often used to describe family. Big or small, every day or more extraordinary, it is through doing things together that people know who their family is and these relationships are strengthened.

2.3.3 The unconditional support both practical and emotional from families

Support was a key word associated with family in the FLS (see Figure 6). When asked who gave them the most care and support, the overwhelming majority of 8–17-year-olds who took part in our FLS selected one of their parents (72% mother, 12% father)[73]. Therefore, unsurprisingly, receiving and offering support was frequently spoken about in focus groups and interviews.

Support could be practical, such as helping with homework or cooking food. Children spoke about ways they helped their family: caring for younger siblings, running errands or doing housework were all cited by children as ways they supported their family. This was particularly evident from the young carers we spoke with. However, support was more often spoken about from an emotional perspective, with family members named as those who could offer support in a way others could not. A mother at a youth group said: '*No one can support you more than family can*' – Mother, youth group. Moreover, this family support is offered freely, does not need to be asked for, and can be relied upon in times of need. Within focus group, adults and children often used examples of giving and receiving support as a way of defining who was or wasn't included in their family. A father at a parenting course said '*you earn the title 'family' by showing support*' – Father, at a parenting group. Giving and receiving support was felt to transcend biological connectedness, with actions being more of a determinant in family than biology. Another father we spoke to defined family as: '*Devoted people to one another and, yeah, support. Like family is not just blood, it's also who's there for you and that. Like I've got some really good mates that I class as family and then I've also got family that are blood related that I wouldn't class as family*' – Father, parenting class.

Children also spoke about their family, particularly their parents, as being a source of support to them. One girl told us in a focus group: '*your family is there to support you and understand you during hard times*' – Girl, 13, youth group. Giving children support, practical, but also emotional was mentioned by many parents as a key role and responsibility of parents. We also heard from foster carers about how they consider supporting the children and young people they care for to be a fundamental part of their caring role. In a focus group with foster carers, one carer told us that they felt their role as a foster carer was to: '*support their dreams and their ambitions and their aspirations*' – Foster carer, female, foster carer support group.

What distinguishes family from other types of relationships is the depth of the connection, and a sense of unconditional support. The ability of family to be relied upon, even if there were arguments or disagreements. When friendships provided this level of confidence, friends were often considered to be like family. A mother explained: '*My best friend, for example, she would go out of their way to help me with the kids, and we've been best friends since we were three, so she's more like my sister than she is my best friend. So, I'd say she is more than a friend. Just like we do everything together*' – Mother, Holiday Activities and Food programme. Children also articulated how it was the strength of relationships that defined their family rather than being biologically related, with one girl saying: '*Family is when a group of people love and care for each other and never let each other down. Whether they're blood related or not, they're still family*' – Girl, aged 9-12, Call to Action.

The sentiment of the unconditional support spanning all parts of life were reflected across families' testimonies. As one parent said: '*Family means providing emotional, financial and moral support to the people I love, no matter what*' – Mother, FLS. Another parent said: '*A very supportive resource that have a wealth of experience and are willing to help us at anything time*' – Father, FLS. There was also the sense of being everything to people, as a parent said: '*Family means being there for one another and being patient with the children and always meeting their needs*' – Mother, FLS.

2.3.4 Strong, positive, and enduring relationships in families

Trust, reliance and 'being there for each other' arose again and again when children spoke about their families. For children in our qualitative work, their parents and carers were looked upon as people they could trust and provided them with feelings, but also at times physical places, of safety. One teenage girl in the survey said: '*It's where my home is. I'm always safe with mam and dad*' – Girl, 15, FLS. A teenage boy in foster care described his family as: '*People I can trust and feel safe around*' – Boy, 14, Holiday

Activities and Food programme.

Parents too described their family as providing security to them, at times, reflecting on how this was in contrast to their childhood. As a mother at a group that supported families where a parent has mental health difficulties said: '*I think for me, growing up, I didn't really have the family security. So obviously when I started my own, got married and started my own family and I felt safe which I hadn't felt for a very long time*' – Mother, mental health support group.

People spoke about how, at times, family life can come with some difficulties. However, positive emotions associated with family and feelings of trust were enduring for many people, as one teenage girl in the Call to Action said: '*The integrity of a relationship. It is who you feel most safe with and trust the most. Family should be a constant, the love is always there despite anything else. It is genuine*' – Girl, aged 13– 17, Call to Action.

2.4 Why these factors mattered to families: insulating from the 'good and bad days'

Family life can be the place where the 'good days and bad days' of life are played out. But children spoke about how the factors above helped to provide a supportive network for them when navigating life. As one child said: '*I've made lots of stupid teenage mistakes, but my mum always helps me through them and she's always there for me and puts me first even when I don't want her to. She's the stability and feeling of feeling secure and unjudging*' – Boy, 15, FLS. Some families told of a more 'complicated' environment full of love but challenges too. As one parent said: '*It's complicated. I adore my husband and son, but our son is disabled, and life is full of battles. I win most of them, but they're still battles, and I wish I didn't have to fight every day for what some families take for granted...I am mostly happy, and I appreciate I am very lucky, but things are hard sometimes*' – Mother, FLS.

2.5 Families spoke about these emotional attributes underpinning a range of dynamic and changing family structures

As outlined in the preceding chapter, existing data collection methods and statistics too often oversimplify families, framing them as static and household based. By listening to families themselves we can create a more detailed and valuable picture. When we spoke to families, they outlined the common themes identified above applied to families of all shapes and sizes. It is clear from our research that family is dynamic, families care about the extended family and also see family as a network and relationship based. By allowing people to define family in their own terms, and as we have outlined so

often this is done through the strength of relationships and emotions associated with family, children and adults spoke of families that extended beyond biological ties, across households and even across countries.

2.5.1 The dynamic nature of family

There was a recognition that family changed and evolved as new members were born into it, as families separated, or when marriage occurred. For children sometimes a new sibling changed the family dynamic, as one girl said: '*When my sister was born my life changed in an amazing [way]. It was the same when I met my dad's girlfriend's little girl and my mam's boyfriends two boys. And in the last 2 years my life has changed a lot and now I have a family of 9 people (dogs included) and I love them all a lot*' – Girl, aged 9 – 12, Call to Action. Children also spoke about family members including those who had passed away, as one child said: '*Memories of people who have died and the things we did with them like holidays and day trips*' – Boy, 15, FLS.

Parents also spoke about how family changed over time as they built new lives. As one parent said: '*Family means the people I have shared my life with since I was born but also my new family I am establishing with my wife and daughter and maybe more children in the future. I see my immediate family as my team, and I strive for us to have lives that contribute something positive to our surroundings and to achieve*' – Father, Call to Action.

2.5.2 The role of the extended family

While some people conceived of their family as their nearest kin, those they lived with for example, others drew from a wider group, highlighting close bonds with members of their extended family. Some children described how they lived in multi-generational households, some adults spoke of their siblings who lived close by, and others talked about family that lived overseas. No matter their living circumstances, for many people we talked to aunties, uncles, grandparents, cousins, nieces and nephews, adult siblings, and other kin were included in their definition of their family. Rather than the biological relation, what was more frequently mentioned was the strength of the tie, the offer and receipt of love and support, and the value attached to the relationship. Being able to rely on extended family, either for practical tasks such as childcare, or more emotional support featured heavily when people spoke of their family: '*Family means caring and looking out for each other whether that be caring for grandparents, siblings or nieces and nephews. Family includes extensions of your own immediate family unit. Family to me can always be relied upon in a time of crisis and pull together. They are the first*

people I would call on for help' – Mother, Call to Action. The shared experiences of growing up together can also feature in family bonds: '*Family to me is people who love and cherish your existence and they may not be blood related, but they love you and help you create memories. Family are also people who are with you as you grow up and whom you can share a home with*' – Girl, aged 9-12, Call to Action.

In addition to extended family, so often people spoke of the close bonds they have with some friends, and when this relationship persisted over a long period of time, friends became to feel like family to them: '*I would say that family is more expansive than the people you live with. I have got some childhood friends, and them and their parents are called my aunt and uncle. So, I am not related to them, they are my dad's best friends, and their kids, so people I am really really close with I would also consider family. So yeah, I would say that family is quite extensive*' - Boy, 14, bereavement support group. Again, it is the strength and closeness of the bond between people that defines the familial relationship.

2.5.3 Families as a series of relationships and networks

From listening to children and adults talking about their families, who they define as family does not always neatly fit into boxes. Instead, it can be helpful to understand families as a network of family connections. This is particularly useful when considering the families of children living in kinship care arrangements or foster care, or who have been adopted. These are the families that are most difficult to identify with existing data. But in their understanding of who their family is, again it is the strength, or otherwise, of the relationships that provides definition. As one kinship carer said: '*I would class my relationship with my grandchildren, who we've had our twin grandchildren since they were five-months-old and they are now 23. The relationship is exceptionally close, really, really close. They're also close with my daughter, who was eleven when they were born. So, it instead of an Auntie-niece-nephew relationship, it's more like a brother-sister kind of thing*' – Kinship carer, female, kinship carer support group. These testimonies demonstrate the importance of this network of relationships for many families, as one child said: '*I'm cared for by my grandma and grandad. Having my half-sister and half-brother, my great uncle and my cousins - they're great*' - Boy, 17, FLS.

2.6 Family members define family differently to policy makers

As outlined in the previous chapter, most of current studies of family depend on an analysis which conflates family with households. Yet, a consistent theme to emerge from the research undertaken for this Review is the consistency with which family is defined as wider than households. A very small number of respondents conceived of their family as limited to their nearest kin, those they lived with

for example, the vast majority drew from a wider group, highlighting close bonds with members of their extended family. What mattered was the strength of the tie, the offer and receipt of love and support, and the value attached to the relationship.

2.7 What this means for families

This chapter outlines how families themselves speak about their family, what family means to them, and their lives. It draws upon evidence from focus groups, interviews, a survey on family life and a Call to Action. As reflected in the family profile below from a young carer, this chapter shows that families are united around what is important about family, its emotional importance, the unconditional support it offers, the importance of shared experience, the sense of belonging, and why all these things are important for insulating families from challenging times. Alongside this, it outlines that families are dynamic and changing environments, formed of a series of relationships, and also how important the extended family network is to families. Now, we want to understand even more from children about exactly why family matters to them and what their family and home environment is like, this will be important for services to understand and will also help to fill some of the gaps in the existing wider research in the area of family life. That is why, we will reach out to children across the country through The Big Summer Survey, to complete lessons on family life and hear from them directly. Below is a family profile which highlights what their family means to them, and what they value most about their family.

FAMILY PROFILE

Living in our house now we have mum, my step-dad and me, the youngest sibling of four, but I have 3 older brothers and their partners and nieces and 1 nephew. We have 2 working dogs that live with us also, I have a set of grandparents and aunt and uncle. And I don't have contact with my dad's side of the family.

The thing I value most in my family is probably when we get to spend time together as we don't get to very often as a whole family. We are a close family and always take care of each other when we need it.

I am a young carer for my mum. One of the things I find difficult is probably mum being ill, whenever she goes into hospital especially as its always hard to see her there and find out what's going on and also when I have to leave her to go to school.

I think that, with my caring role, knowing that my brothers are always there to take me in if mum's in hospital or I can just talk to them and they know how I feel as they were young carers for mum when they were my age. I find that, yes, it can help talking to other young carers but you only know that someone understands if they're a sibling or someone who is caring for the same person as you. I also get support from Centre 33, Caring Together and some support from school but mainly it's one of the other organisations coming into school. In my opinion the support services I use are great, they always do everything they can to help us and they give us a chance to have a break.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER
Family Review

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Chapter 3 – Children living away from their birth parents

> **'From what I've experienced you can choose your family, I feel very lucky to have people that didn't even know me to take me in from my actual family, it was a godsend that saved mine and my sister's lives'**
>
> – Care-experienced male, Call to Action

3.1 Summary of Chapter 3

- As set out in previous chapters, children grow up today in families that take many and varied forms. For a small minority of children, however, this will not be with either of their birth parents or may not be in a family setting at all. For children in care under Section 47 of the Children Act 1989, the local authority is their corporate parent.

- This chapter will draw on government statistics on children in care, data from *The Big Ask*, and case studies from CCo's Help at Hand service to look specifically at these children, including those who are fostered or adopted, those who live in kinship care arrangements and those living in institutions. [74]

- No matter what their circumstance, children in care told us they value the same things in family as others do – relationships, love, support, and a place for shared experiences.

3.2 Why children come into care and an overview of their characteristics

There are some children for whom it is in their best interests to be removed from their birth parents. Their needs, welfare, and well-being must always be paramount. Currently, 80,850 children (0.7% of children) are looked after by the state in England, a figure that has slightly increased (by 1%) since 2020.[75] Of these children, 4,070 (5%) are unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). [76]

The majority of looked after children have come into care as a result of abuse or neglect (66%) or family dysfunction (14%). Other reasons include parental or child disability, a family reaching crisis point, or 'absent parenting'. [77]

The majority of children in care as of March 2021 are over 10 years old (62%), with 5% under 1 year, 14% 1-4 years old and 19% 5-9 years old. [78] Of the children in care as of March 2021, 70% have had one placement over the course of a year, 21% have had 2 placements over the course of a year and 9% have had 3 or more placements. [79] Among those who left in care in 2021, 20% had been in care for less than a month, 68% had been in care for between a month and two years and 12% had been in care for over 2 years. [80]

Children in some ethnic groups are over-represented in the care system. The share of children in care who are in the White Irish Traveller/ Gypsy/ Roma ethnic group is 4.7 times the share of children in the population in this ethnic group. [81] Children in the Mixed Other, Mixed White/Black Caribbean and Black African ethnic groups are also over-represented (3 times, 1.9 time and 1.6 times the share of children in the population).[82]

The rate of children in care varies significantly by local area. In 2021, the rate of children in care ranged from 24 per 10,000 children (0.2%) in Wokingham to 210 per 10,000 children (2.1%) in Blackpool. [83] According to Department for Education analysis, after controlling for child, family and neighbourhood characteristics, the predicted probability of being in care ranges from 0.5% to 1.5% by local authority.[84]

The Children's Commissioner's office has a specific duty to have regard to children in care and supports them directly through our advocacy and advice service, Help at Hand.

3.2.1 What children in care think about family life

Most children in care will have lived through difficult, frequently traumatic, experiences, often while with their birth parents. However, in *The Big Ask*, 70% of children in care said they were happy with their family life. It is noteworthy, though, that they were more than twice as likely to be unhappy with their family life as other children who responded to *The Big Ask* (14% compared to 6%).[85] It is difficult to differentiate from these responses whether children are referring to their birth families or homes while in care.

A childhood in care does not mean entering adult life with a different understanding of what family means. What adults who grew up in care told us matches what we heard from those who did not. As a care-experienced mother told us in the Call to Action: '*Family is feeling secure, safe and loved. It covers belonging with the parents/carers and siblings (all siblings, whether step or foster etc) that you grew up with, and all the surrounding relations around that core group. It also covers birth relatives that you*

may not see all the time, or may not be able to see, for whatever reason as your blood relations, they will always be part of your family too' – Mother, Call to Action.

Although children in care no longer live with either of their birth parents, research highlights that many continue to have a relationship with them, and that recognising this membership of multiple families can help children develop a sense of identity, make sense of their past and help manage issues of loss and separation.[86] Some children in care express a strong desire to see more of, or return to, living with their biological family. One girl said she wanted *'to live with my mum and dad and see them more'* – Girl, 7, *The Big Ask*.

For another teenage girl in *The Big Ask,* what was important for her was to not be defined by her status as a looked after child or to be considered vulnerable because of her family background: *'For young children in care, we are classed as "vulnerable" and of course there are vulnerable people in vulnerable situations…I feel like children in care are treated differently to people who live with their biological family. But we are the same as other young children'* – Girl, 14, *The Big Ask*.

3.3 Children living in a new family

While children in care may not live with their birth parents, the vast majority of them still live in a family setting – be it with adopted parents, in foster care or in kinship arrangements. Some of these children see themselves as living in a family just like any other – those who have found permanent and stable arrangements. Nevertheless, many of these children will have experienced very difficult situations early in their lives and may well need additional support to help them cope with these adverse experiences.

3.3.1 Adoption

In 2021, 2,870 children were adopted from care in England, with an average age at adoption of 3 years and 3 months.[87] In terms of ethnic group, White children in care were more likely to leave care to be adopted (15%) than Black children (2%) and Asian children (2%).[88]

Some adopted children described family in terms of who they loved and who they could rely on. One young person explained, '*Family is something that helps you out, is always there for you and makes sure your needs and wants are met with the up most care. Family in my world isn't by blood – but by love. Family has been a big part of who I am today. And without being adopted I don't want to even think of where I would be today'* – Young person, Adoption Support Group.

3.3.2 Foster care

Around three quarters (71%) of children in care are living in foster homes.[89] Of the placements that ended in 2021, two-thirds had lasted under a year. [90] Many foster children form loving and trusting relationships with their foster carers and go on to experience long-term placements. This brings a much-wanted sense of security and permanence to the children concerned. As one girl said she would like to *'always live with my foster mummy and daddy forever until I'm old'* – Girl, 6, *The Big Ask*.

Being care experienced means family can encompass a network of different relationships, that includes foster and birth family members. A sense of love and support underpins these relationships. One teenage girl said: '*I am in care, I know I will have a better chance for myself, because my foster carers work hard to help me and promote my relationship with my birth parents…. I love my foster carers, they treat me like their own but still support me loving and accepting my parents'* – Girl, 14, *The Big Ask*.

However, others go through repeated moves, with the instability and disruption that can bring. Around 10% of children in care who had a first placement in foster care had to move home two or more times within the year 2018/19. [91] This highlights the need to recruit more people willing to provide children with loving and stable foster homes, and for increased support to be provided to these families.

3.3.3 Kinship care

In kinship care arrangements, a child may remain within their birth family, but not with their birth parents, or they may live with a friend. This could be either in an informal arrangement, under a Special Guardianship Order, or placed with kinship foster carers by the local authority.

Chapter 1 sets out the difficulties in establishing how many children live in kinship care. Not only is the best available data out of date, but it fails to capture the wide range of informal kinship arrangements that exist. The 2011 Census suggests there were 152,910 children in kinship care in either informal or legal care arrangements.

Research by the charity Kinship indicates that, while children in kinship care have poorer outcomes than other children, they have better outcomes than those in local authority care.[92] This may demonstrate the positive impact of remaining close to the birth family network. However, many children who live with kinship carers may well have had a very difficult start in life, and they and their carers can have ongoing challenges.

Kinship care

Sarah, 62, cares for her 4 grandchildren aged six to thirteen after the death of their mother. She is the sole carer for the children, and she discussed the difficulties of adjusting from the role of grandmother to 'mother'. Her grandchildren have ongoing emotional and behavioural challenges relating to their family history.

In outlining her family, Sarah told us:

'There's just myself looking after the four grandchildren. I'm doing my best. I'm 62 years old and I spend my day just driving around dropping the children off at school. They're all at three different schools now, cause my grandson's having to go to a specialist school and he only goes for two hours a day. And there's no life for me, I just literally look after my grandchildren and it's awful because I want to be happy with them. I want to be the grandmother I used to be, but I'm now their mam.'

Becoming a kinship carer can often occur suddenly, and through extremely difficult family circumstances. Sarah's story demonstrates how she and her grandchildren have had to adjust their relationships with each other, whilst navigating the extremely upsetting death of Sarah's daughter. Sarah explained that she doesn't feel she has been able to grieve the death of her daughter:

'I'm still grieving, in fact, I haven't grieved for my daughter. I haven't had a chance because I've been too busy fighting for my grandchildren and looking after them.'

Sarah had to move home in order to have enough space for all four children.

Sarah explained how she has had many negative experiences with services:

'To be honest just everything, I mean, every authority I've dealt with has been a shambles...'

which has exacerbated the challenges she and her grandchildren are facing. Sarah has found support and mutual understanding through a local group of kinship carers, but she continues to have struggles adjusting to her role as a kinship carer and meeting the needs of her grandchildren:

'So now I'm on my own, there's no respite, no nothing. And even friends and family have all moved on. You know, I'm 62, my friends don't want a lot of kids hanging around when I'm going anywhere, so I'm a lone person trying to do my best.'

3.4 Children living in institutions

A significant minority of children in care live in institutions, with 9% in children's homes (secure or residential) and 5% in unregulated accommodation, such as supported flats or hostels. [93] The Children's Commissioner is committed to ensuring that no child grows up in an institution. That every child has the opportunity to flourish in a family environment.

From these children, their views on growing in the care of the state were less positive. They provide an insight into lives missing the core components of family identified in Chapter 2, such as love, strong relationships, and support. A teenage girl living in unregulated accommodation described the experience as: '*a load of different people of different ages thrown into a house. Even though there's people with you that can be so isolating. You're young and living with literal strangers and there was nothing to bring us together*' – Girl, 16, *The Big Ask*.

Another teenage girl, living in a mental health ward said: *'I've been in the system for so long that getting let down has become normal'* – Girl, 17, *The Big Ask*. As of 2019, just over 10% of children in care experienced multiple placements moves over the course of a year. Over a three-year period, more than half (52%) of children in care experience at least one home move and 3 in 10 experience multiple (two or more) moves. [94]

3.5 Challenges faced by care leavers when becoming parents

In *The Big Ask*, 29% of children in care said that starting their own family is something important to them (compared to 26% of children overall). [95] However, children in care who become parents face specific challenges, illustrated in the case studies above. Children with parents who were in care are more likely to be in care themselves. 40% of mothers who have had more than one child removed from their care were care-experienced. [96]

Children living in institutions

Kathrin is a 16-year-old child in care, who spent almost a year in a secure children's home due to concerns about her self-harm, drug use and violent behaviour, which were linked to early childhood trauma.

Kathrin made progress in the children's home, which she explained was mainly due to her positive relationships with staff there. Nevertheless, her social care team felt she hadn't moved on enough from her previous behaviours and told her she would need to leave. Kathrin felt that her attachment to the staff was not being considered, and the prospect of moving was a significant setback to her mental health. Kathrin's advocate contacted the Children's Commissioner's Help at Hand team, who asked the local authority to consider her wellbeing, and the importance of stability and positive relationships. It was agreed that her move would be put on hold, and staff from her current children's home would work with the team at the proposed new home, so she could have a positive transition over several months, continue her progress and ultimately move out of a secure setting.

John was in care from a young age. He has ASD and learning difficulties, and he moved around a large number of children's homes because none could meet his needs.

He was finally placed long-term in a specialist home for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, which was a long way from his local area and family. However, after a difficult start, John made great progress and formed positive relationships with the staff and manager of the home, and with another child living there.

When he turned 16, his local authority wanted him to move to a semi-independent setting closer to his home area, so he could rebuild his relationship with his family and prepare for adulthood in the community.

John was not happy about moving and the staff who knew him felt this would need a slow and carefully managed transition, with a more supportive setting than semi-independent accommodation. The Children's Commissioner's Help at Hand team assisted John and his care staff in asking for this, but unfortunately it didn't happen, and John was moved against his will. He struggled in the new setting due to his needs and lack of trust in the staff.

After several incidents, he was ultimately moved back to a different children's home in his area and had to rebuild relationships again, which is not easy for him as an autistic young man. John will need social care services for the rest of his life, and it will be vital for him to have the right support in his home, from people he trusts, as well as help to rebuild his connection to his family in a positive way, so that he can benefit from lifelong support and a sense of belonging.

Children in care who became parents

Danielle came into care at 16 and had a difficult time, with a lack of stability and support from services.

After she moved on to independent living in social housing, she was not offered any training to manage her daily life, responsibilities, or finances, even after becoming a mum at 18 and later having a second child.

She stayed with her children's father, but the local authority were concerned about their parenting ability and both children had child protection plans from birth. Tragically, Danielle's first child died unexpectedly, and her second baby was then immediately removed.

Danielle's mental health challenges made it difficult for her to engage with the professionals supporting both her and her children, which had an impact on assessments of her parenting ability, and her opportunities for contact with her child in care.

When Danielle got in touch with the Children's Commissioner's Help at Hand team, she had not been offered any bereavement therapy to address her trauma at losing a child and having her second child removed.

The team assisted her to make a formal complaint about the local authority's failure to provide the support she needed as child in care and care leaver, which could have made a huge difference to her potential to have a positive family life.

Josie was placed in temporary accommodation by her local authority's homelessness service when she left care at 18.

The one-bedroom flat was in a poor state of repair and, despite Josie having two children soon afterwards, she was still living there four years later.

Josie had kept in contact with her birth family, who supported her with the children, and she went to work part-time to improve her family's situation. However, this caused some short-term problems with her benefits and rent, due to the high cost of the accommodation.

The landlord used this as an excuse not to complete repairs, and the severe damp in the flat had a significant impact on her children's health, which sometimes prevented them from attending nursery.

Despite being proactive and making numerous complaints, Josie was not moved by the Housing Service, and the Leaving Care Team ended their support, as they said she was doing well overall.

After being offered two unsuitable properties, one in an area where she had previously suffered abuse, Josie contacted the Children's Commissioner's Help at Hand team, who supported her in getting a leaving care personal adviser and ultimately moving to more suitable accommodation. However, this is not permanent affordable housing, which Josie feels would give her more stability and the independence to build a positive future for herself and her children.

3.6 What this means for families?

Children growing up in care value much the same things in family as other children do – love, strong and lasting relationships, certainty and stability, and support. However, these children face additional barriers to finding these key elements in their family life. These challenges start with the removal from their birth parents and continue with any further disruption to their family arrangements. For those children who live in institutional rather than family settings, it is even less likely they can lay claim to these core components valued in family. But, as we set out in the next chapter, these elements are important and powerful. All children must be able to find love, stability, strong relationships, support, and time together within a family, being in care is no reason for a child to not have this experience and the protective effect that family provides.

This means that those working with and for children need to look beyond rigid and linear processes and cold statistics on service delivery, towards the subjective experience of children in care, do they feel that they have at least one meaningful relationship with an adult in their lives, who they trust and who cares for them. When CCo asked children through the survey on family life, what family means they didn't measure their family through the number of adults that they have contact with and how frequently, they talked about the intangible, about love, togetherness, and support. While these emotional experiences cannot be manufactured, the system can be re-thought to prioritise creating the opportunity for children to develop the relationships that provide these emotional benefits. This means that when identifying a home for children in care the objective must be for that child to be able to build a family there, with relationships around them that are loving and lasting. Children in care need lasting foster placements with support after a child turns 18, a significant reduction in the number of moves between homes and schools that children experience, greater recognition and support for kinship carers and putting children's voices and experience at the centre of evaluations of the effectiveness of children's social care services.

To truly address the outcomes of children in care, the system needs to provide support long before a family is in crisis. In Chapter 6, CCo explores the services that are offered to families. Strengthening family support and ending the cycles of abuse and harm that lead to multiple generations being placed in care is essential for improving outcomes not only for children in care but also children in need and children at the edge of care. Below is a family profile which reflects the importance of kinship care and the practical support a family would like to receive.

FAMILY PROFILE

I have been married to my wife for 23 years, and we are kinship carers to our grandson, who we've had for over three years. My wife is disabled, so I have been caring for her for 13 years.

Communication is that what makes life tick. If you don't communicate, you don't talk. If you don't talk, you're split. That's important because it can be difficult caring for children, and the stress and strains of today's environment.

We have found being a kinship carer for our grandson difficult because, as a parent you get responsibility for them as standard, but we had to ask if we could go get a haircut or if we could take him to certain places. When we were first asked to look after him, we were driving 200 miles a week to take him to school and back, and getting no financial assistance in that, or for food and clothing. It does take a toll on you financially.

It's also the practical things you need support with too – he was hitting and kicking us and calling us names because of the trauma he's been through. Luckily we've since had some emotional support from school and some financial support through the Council, but ideally we'd like to be treated as equal to parents in the eyes of social services.

I feel that the way society, particularly the media, treat kinship carers is bad –they make us out to be parasites always calling for more support. But we're not, we're trying to care for loved ones. If we didn't they'd cost more money to the state being in care. Children need investment and it just doesn't feel like the Government is doing that.

We access support through a local kinship support group so I've met a lot of people from different backgrounds which has been helpful. It's being able to talk to people going through similar things and be given advice about it. It's reassuring hearing from people who tell you that it gets easier.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Chapter 4 – Why is family so important: the protective effect

> **'Family to me is the structure that holds everything together, they are there to support you bit also allow you to make mistakes and figure things out, they will be there even when they are annoyed/ upset. Unconditional love'**
>
> – Mum, Call to Action

4.1 Summary of Chapter 4

- This chapter explores what is broadly defined as 'the protective effect' of families and outlines the benefit it provides to family. This is done by combining quantitative and qualitative research.

- There is extensive evidence to support the notion that families offer a protective effect. This depends more on the quality of family relationships than the composition or relative position of the family in society. Strong families, even without extensive economic means, can provide insulation against external challenges such as poverty.

- Analysis of family life has not tended to use the word love, which represents a gap between how families themselves and how they are conceptualised by policy makers. Instead, we have to rely on evidence, which looks at the importance of a close emotional connection both for the well-being of children and parents, and for a child's long-term outcomes. This is demonstrated through key parenting behaviours which are shown to support emotional development, academic outcomes, and the ability to face adversity.

- The analysis demonstrates a strong correlation between close familial relationships and both immediate well-being and children's long-term outcomes. The CCo's analysis enables us to look at the strength of family relationships of children aged 13 and link this to earnings at age 25. Getting on very well with either of your parents at age 13 is associated with 2% higher wages at age 25.

- Being able to rely on family if facing a serious problem is a strong indicator of well-being for adults, and this holds regardless of income or ethnicity. Within families where there is this high level of trust, overall well-being is broadly similar across the bottom 6 income deciles. This means that among adults that can rely a lot on their family, overall well-being is similar across income groups.

- Little attention has been paid to the value of spending time together as a family. This is associated with higher levels of well-being amongst adults, but there is little evidence of the impact on children or understanding of the different types of activity. To start to investigate this, for Part 2 of the Review, the Children's Commissioner will be engaging with children through schools to understand how they spend time with their families.

- Overall, too little attention has been paid to the things which families say matter: relationships, trust in one another, love, and time together, in the research into family life. Our evidence shows that these factors have significant short-term and long-term impacts, and should be considered alongside considerations of family composition, ethnicity and income when understanding determinants of well-being and life chances.

4.2 Defining the protective effect of families

In the previous chapters we examined how family was defined by the relationships between its members. The core elements of family life in the UK are love, strong and enduring relationships, and the ability to depend on one another for emotional and practical support. All of these are forged through shared experiences. Family members told us, consistently, that these core elements give rise to an incredibly powerful effect which underpinned their sense of self, and confidence in the world. This reflects a strong theme to arise from our roundtables with frontline professionals, that families exert a 'protective effect' on their members, even in the face of adversity. This is a term that arises in some of the literature on families, to suggest that being in a strong family can insulate family members from some of the challenges which are normally associated with poor outcomes.

For the purpose of Part 1 of the Family Review, we are interested in three outcomes, which together we take to demonstrate a protective effect over families:

1) The well-being of family members

2) The long-term outcomes of children

3) The ability of the family to withstand challenges which are normally associated with poor outcomes

In short, CCo is investigating the degree to which families can support one another's immediate happiness, support positive longer-term outcomes, and insulate one another from external challenges.

4.3 Analysing the strength of the protective effect

The Children's Commissioner's office is basing our analysis on the definition of family life that came from our work with families. In the previous chapters we heard from family members that four key things defined family life.

1) Emotional connection: love and joy
2) Shared experiences of family life
3) Strong, positive, and enduring relationships
4) The ability to depend on one another for practical and emotional support

In this chapter, we analyse each in turn to examine whether there is evidence to show they support a protective effect of family over its members. These elements are difficult to measures and capture through surveys. We have analysed existing research across multiple fields and combined it with bespoke analysis of the UK's major panel survey, *Understanding Society*. We supplement this with new research on the long-term impacts based on new analysis of the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, which has allowed us to link family relationships in childhood to adult earnings.

4.4 Demonstrating the power of the protective effect

4.4.1 Why the emotional connection between families is important for the protective effect

Across all our work with family members the importance of love, joy and happiness have been a prominent theme. This has been true for both children and parents, for families of different compositions and ethnicities, it remains true for families in the most challenging situations.

The FLS finds that among children who were happy with their family relationships, 65% chose the word 'loving' when asked to pick three words that describe family (compared to 40% for those were unhappy or neutral about their family relationships).[97]

Yet traditional work with families rarely assesses these emotions or discuss the primary importance of love. As a result, there are very few indicators of love or emotional connection within the numerous

surveys of families that undertaken. This is outlined in more detail in the Literature Review.

4.4.2 Why strong, positive, and enduring relationships support the protective effect of family life

Part 1 of the Family Review was able to draw upon an extensive body of research which has demonstrated the importance of strong inter-familial relationships between children and parents, in terms of happiness and well-being. For example, analysis based on the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) shows that how close a child is to their mother or father is a strong factor in determining the child's overall happiness with their family life.[98] The average life satisfaction score among girls who were extremely close to their mother was 7.9 out of 10, compared to the average life satisfaction score of 4.4 out of 10 among girls who were not close to their mother.[99] Crucially, a close relationship is found to be significantly more important than how often families argue.[100] Demonstrating the point made throughout our qualitative work that generally the strength of family bonds endures through disagreements. There is also strong evidence to suggest that the quality of relationships between family members is more important for well-being than family structure. Research from the Children's Society based on their *Good Childhood* study found that family relationships explain a 20% of variation in subjective well-being, while family structures accounted for just 2%.[101]

There is a range of research that suggests the quality of relationships within families, particularly between parents and children, can have important effects. Recent research from the Department for Education shows that higher levels of 'warmth' in child parent relationships were associated with better outcomes on a child's Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Score.[102] Evidence from the MCS suggests that good parent-child relationships resulted in children being less likely to develop behavioural problems[103]. There is evidence that the quality of these relationships can help to develop a child's resilience when confronted with adversity[104], and even affect their long-term physical health[105].

Data from the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) shows that children with good relationships with their parents at the age of 13-14 had about a third higher odds of passing at least 5 GCSEs, compared to children with poor relationships with their parents and controlling for gender, parental social class, and ethnicity.[106]

For Part 1 of the Family Review, we have been able to extend the research on attainment to connect the strength of family relationships with earnings at age 25. To do this used the LSYPE as above, allowing us to track nearly 5,000 young people from childhood into adulthood. The Review finds that controlling for

household socio-economic status, household type, gender, and ethnicity, getting on well with at least one of your parents is associated with higher hourly income at age 25.[107]

4.4.3 Why being able to rely on your family in times of crisis supports the protective effect of family life

A key theme to emerge from the qualitative engagement with families is a sense that the support offered by families can be relied upon at a time of crisis. When a similar level of trust can be placed in family friends, they are often considered as family. Yet there is limited research undertaken on the strength of trusting relationships, and what this means for families. Families have been surveyed on this in three waves of the *Understanding Society* panel survey, one of the most established in the UK. Specifically, they were asked 'How much can you rely on family if you have a serious problem?' For Part 1 of the Family Review, CCo analysed the results to this question and the results show how vitally important this feeling of trust is for families.

Firstly, these analyses found that most parents (57%) do feel that they can rely on family members 'a lot' if they have a serious problem. This holds across all ethnic groups and income groups. Figure 7 shows that across income deciles (from 1, the lowest income decile, to 10, the highest) respondents within lower income deciles felt they could rely on family more than those within a middle income deciles.
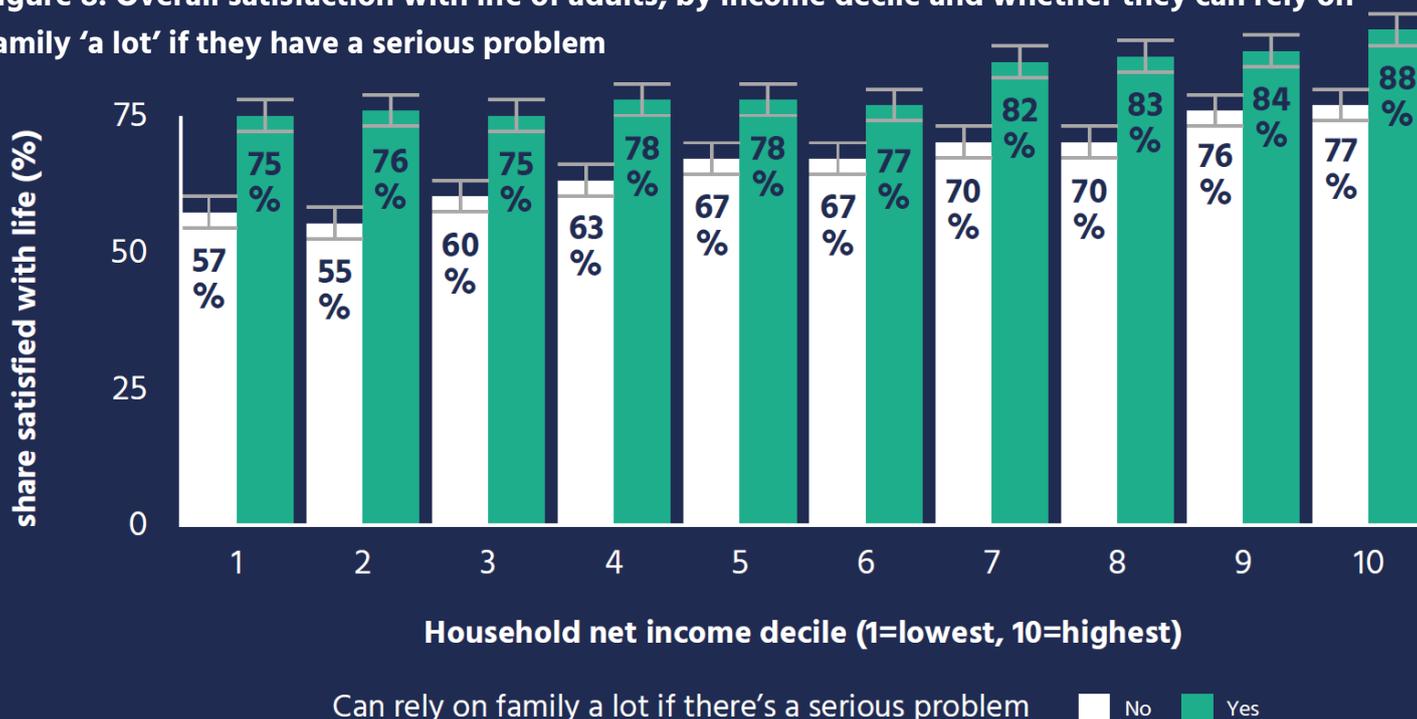
Figure 7: Share of adults who believe they can rely on family 'a lot' if they have a serious problem
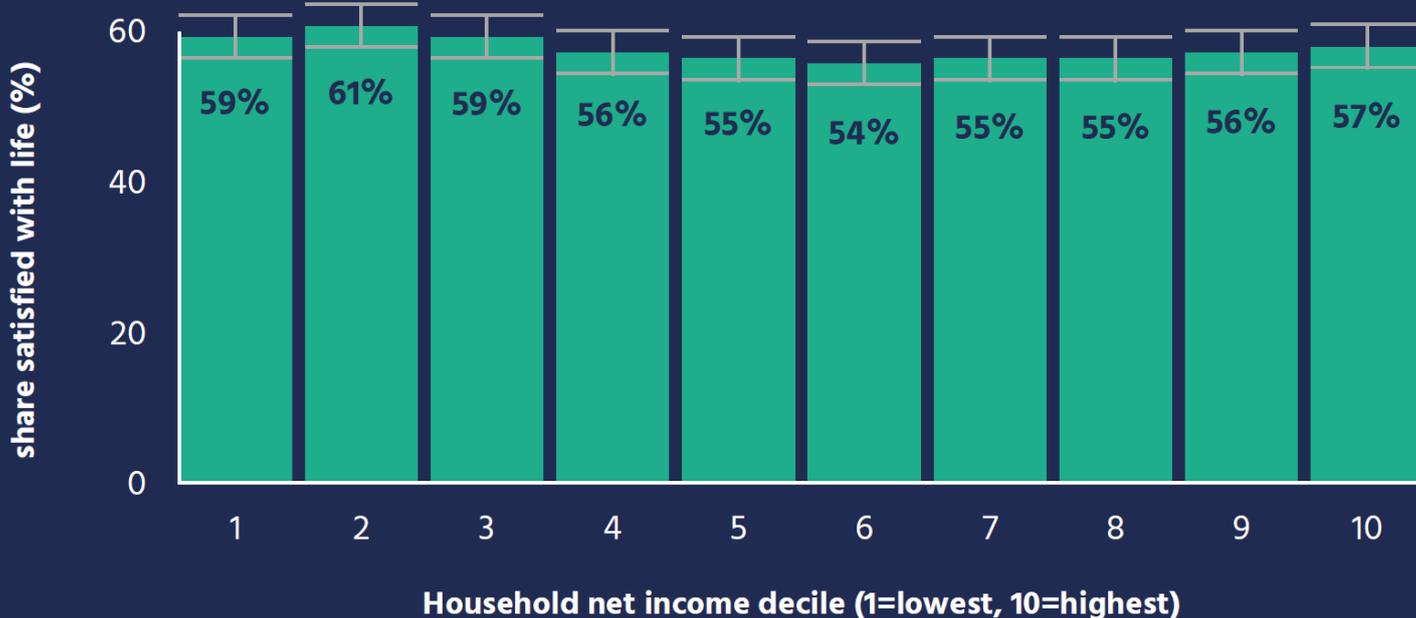
Source: Understanding Society, Wave 11 (2019–2020)
Number of observations: 27953, 95% confidence intervals in grey

Secondly, analysis of *Understanding Society* shows that believing you could rely on family in time of crisis is associated with higher overall well-being. Among adults who can rely on their family 'a lot' if they have a serious problem, 80% are satisfied with life overall compared to 66% for those who can't rely on their family 'a lot' if they have a serious problem. Being able to rely on your family is particularly important for lower income families. Specifically, we find that for families who do believe they can rely on family in a crisis, there is little difference in overall well-being across the bottom six income deciles. But where families do not believe they can rely on the support of family, the impact of lower income on overall well-being is exacerbated. This is depicted in Figure 8, which shows CCo's analysis of the *Understanding Society* survey and respondents who said they could rely on family 'a lot' if there was a serious problem. It shows that over well-being is lower if you cannot rely 'a lot' on your family across all income deciles, compared to those who can rely on their family 'a lot'. In the lowest (1) income decile (household net income less than £15,000), 75% of those who could rely on their family 'a lot' were satisfied with their life overall. By comparison, 57% of respondents in the same income decile who could not rely on their family 'a lot'. In the middle (6) income decile 77% of those who could rely on their family 'a lot' were satisfied with their life overall. This is compared to 67% of respondents in the same income decile who could not rely on their family 'a lot'. The gap was smaller in the highest (10) income decile, where 88% of those who could rely on their family 'a lot' were satisfied with their life overall compared to 77% of respondents in the same income decile who could not rely on their family 'a lot'.

Figure 8: Overall satisfaction with life of adults, by income decile and whether they can rely on family 'a lot' if they have a serious problem

Can rely on family a lot if there's a serious problem ☐ No ☐ Yes

Source: Understanding Society, Wave 11 (2019–2020)
Number of observations: 27953, 95% confidence intervals in grey

Finally, CCo found that whether someone believes they can rely on their family can change over time. For this Review, we were able to examine the responses of the same adults over 9 years. As demonstrated in the Figure 9 below, the strength of trust in family can change over time. This is consistent with the message we received from families about the dynamic and evolving nature of family relationships. Figure 9 shows that less than a quarter of those who could not rely on their family at all in 2011 still felt they were in that position 3 years later and 9 years later. This also shows that for about half of people who said they could rely on their family a lot in 2011, they were still in that position 3 years later and 9 years later.

Figure 9: How much can you rely on your family if you have a problem? 2011 vs 2014 vs 2020 for the same cohort of people
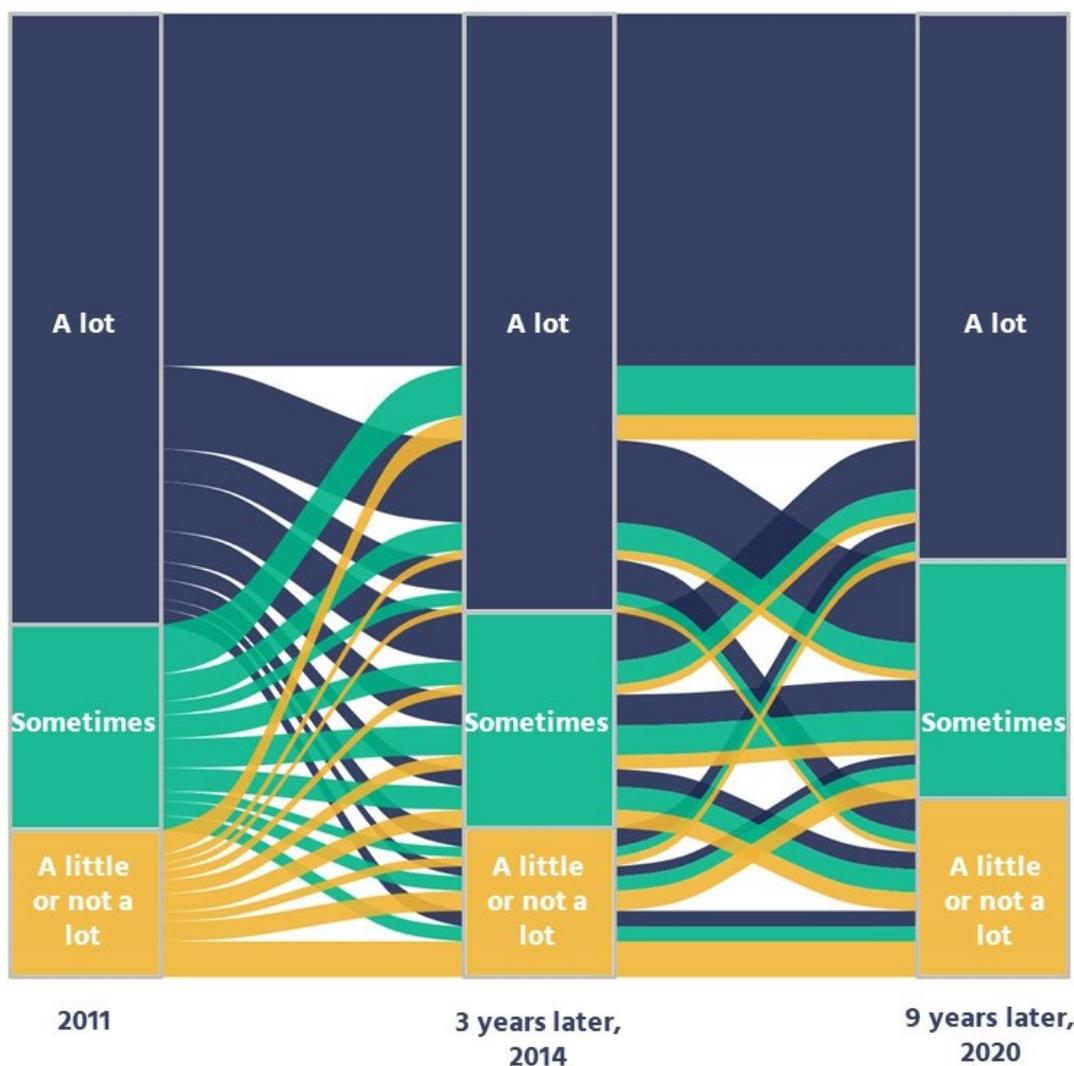
Source: Understanding Society

4.4.4 Why shared experiences support the protective effect of family life

Throughout Part 1 of the Family Review, CCo has heard from families about the importance of shared experiences and how they provide the basis through which familial relationships are forged. This was common to all groups and across children and parents. Sometimes this was special occasions, such as holidays, sometimes it was regular routines. Yet, across our Literature Review, we found little focus on the importance of time together for family outcomes. Correspondingly, there is little data captured about how families spend their time. Based on what we do have available, we see a clear correlation between families being able to spend quality time together and better well-being. For example:

- In CCo's FLS, children of parents who felt they were spending the right amount of time with their children were happier with their family life than those whose parents felt they were spending too little time with their children or were spending too much time with their children.[108]

- In *The Big Ask* survey of children aged 4-5, children were asked to pick the things they most enjoy doing at home. Among children who most enjoyed playing with their family, 90% of their parents were happy with their child's life overall compared to 78% for parents of children who didn't pick this option.[109]

- Research using the time-use survey in the UK shows that controlling for the types of activities people are doing throughout their day, spending more time with family is associated with higher well-being among parents.[110]

- The *Understanding Society* panel survey has included questions to families about how often they eat dinner together. In families that eat dinner together at least six days a week, 75% of parents were happy with their life, while in families who didn't, 70% of parents were satisfied with life overall.[111]

While interesting, these figures do not enable us to understand the importance of time together for supporting and sustaining families. Notably, there is limited data from a child's perspective, and very little information on the types of activities families do together, and the value they bring. For Part 2 of this Review, we will be asking children through schools how they spent the summer holidays and their free time, what activities they did with their parents and how they felt about these.

4.5 What this means for families

These findings demonstrate the link between the strengths of family highlighted in Chapter 2 – love,

shared experiences, practical support, and strong relationships – and higher well-being among family members and better outcomes for children. The family profile below reflects the key findings of this chapter, that family provides an important, insulating effect against the challenges that can face families.

FAMILY PROFILE

I live with my husband and our two boys aged 6 and 8. My parents, brother and sister and the nieces and nephews are nearby, so we're a close family. I am a stay-at-home mum, I'm the one that does everything around the house – cooking, cleaning, school run. My husband does go to work, and to be fair he does things around the house if he needs to, so the roles are pretty even.

We're there for each other, like you should be. I'm the first one to offer if other people in the family need help with childcare. My mum has a caravan in Wales, so she'll take the boys for a week and that's my time, which is great.

The main challenge we've had is that we don't drive, so we're stuck in this area. We use the lake and park because they're accessible, but they've been doing them up over the summer so we've not been able to go. There's also some gang issues in the park.

We use Middleport Matters a lot. It's great for the children and I also use it a lot too because they do so much – boxing, female and male wellbeing – things for all ages. It's just really good.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER
Family Review

Chapter 5 – Challenges to family life

> **'I think I have a good family. We argue sometimes but we all love each other. Sometimes [it] is hard as we can't afford much things but my mum and dad always try and make sure we have everything. Family holidays are my favourite memories'**
>
> – Boy, 17, Family Life Survey

5.1 Summary of Chapter 5

- In this chapter, CCo draws on the FLS, the Literature Review, and qualitative research, to examine the common concerns that can affect all families and the issues which can undermine one or more elements of the protective effect. They are a disparate set of issues, each of which can inhibit one of more elements of the protective effects - emotional connection, shared experience, practical support, and strong relationships - identified in the previous chapter.

- Some of these issues are outright harms to children and other family members, including domestic abuse, child abuse and neglect. Most, however, are factors which undermine the protective effect, but do not negate it completely.

- Often these are common issues, facing many families, which only become significant when they are either particularly acute or combined. In most situations, they highlight the overall value of having the support of a family.

5.2 The most common challenges facing families

While most families we surveyed had a positive view of their family life, throughout our research many families also mentioned the pressures they faced. The most common worries were financial, due to the increase to the cost of living, and concerns about childcare, particularly for families with very young children.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

5.2.1 Financial pressures and the cost of living

Many families that we spoke to, or surveyed as part of the research, mentioned worries about financial pressures for their family and the increase to their cost of living. As one mother explained in the FLS, *'Family is the most important thing, but it is a daily struggle to make ends meets to keep a family healthy and give them everything they need. As a single parent on a low income, it's difficult to cope especially with no support from the other parent. Benefits are not enough to cover the cost of living'* – Mother, FLS.

In the FLS, CCo asked parents how hard it is to 'make ends meet'. 38% of parents said it was fairly difficult or very difficult to make ends meet. [112] By comparison, 24% of adults without children said it would be 'very or fairly difficult'.[113]

CCo's analysis found that lone parents and households with more than two children were significantly more likely to find making ends meet difficult, compared to households with two parents and households with one or two children. [114] An Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) review of families and inequalities states that research over decades has shown that children growing up in economically-deprived families have poorer later outcomes.[115]

However, the same IFS review found that family and parenting can have a protective effect on children's outcomes against poverty. [116] Most children in the poorest households (58%) where there was a high level of positive parenting had a 'good level of achievement' in the first year of school. [117] This compared to 19% of children in the poorest families who received low quality parenting. [118] These findings suggest that parenting can play an important role, and has a protective effect, in mitigating some of the impacts of poverty. [119]

5.2.2 Childcare

Across the FLS and focus groups and interviews, families often mentioned childcare as a pressure on family life, particularly the need to juggle childcare with work life and other commitments. These pressures varied over the course of a year and was understandably higher during school holidays. A mother in the FLS said: *'Happiness, support, togetherness, fun. Negative - juggling work with childcare'* – Mother, FLS. A father said of his family: *'Family has totally changed who I am for the better. I live for my family. I have re-assessed my work/ life balance to spend more time at home. Family is sharing amazing experiences together'* – Father, FLS.

In the FLS, parents were asked about the share of childcare tasks in the household. Sixty-two percent of parent respondents said they were the primary provider of childcare to the children in the household, and 28% said childcare was shared between them and another parent. Parents who were married were most likely to say they share childcare (35% shared). Mothers were more likely to select themselves as the primary childcare provider (75% of mothers said this) than fathers (29% of fathers). Fathers were most likely to say childcare was shared equally (49%).[120]

Parents were also asked which forms of childcare they had used in the past year, 53% had used some form of childcare, rising to 60% for families where the oldest child was under 5. Regionally, households in the London were most likely to use childcare (66%, compared to 40% in the East of England). Households of a higher socio-economic grade were also more likely to use some form of childcare (60%) compared to 43% for lower socio-economic households. Thirty nine percent of households where the eldest child was aged 0-3 used a nursery, creche or playgroup in the past year, but when the oldest child was aged 4-11, households were more likely to use grandparents or other relatives for childcare, than for other age groups.[121]

5.3 Challenges that can undermine the protective effect

Some families face challenges that undermine the protective effect of family. Some are much more serious than others, for example domestic abuse is much more serious that parental conflict, and most are on a continuum. However, sometimes these challenges can overlap. In all cases, children's well-being, safety and welfare are paramount and should be prioritised. This certainly is not intended to be an inclusive list of all issues and will include things that families can navigate and overcome with the right support. The CCo has heard many stories of families experiencing and overcoming these hurdles and where the child's outcomes and experiences are improved by the insulating effect of family.

5.3.1 Intense conflict within families

Twelve percent of children experience parental conflict, defined as 'conflicts that occur between parents or carers that are frequent, intense and poorly resolved.' [122] Studies have shown that children who experience parental conflict are at a higher risk of problems with their behaviour, self-esteem, anxiety, academic progress, physical health, and social relationships. These problems can individually or cumulatively affect children's outcomes.[123] Family relationship difficulties are the most cited presenting problem in the NHS' psychological therapy services for young people. In a sample of over 42,000

children, family relationship difficulties were cited by professionals in 52% of cases.[124] Intense conflict within families can undermine the protective effect. Arguments about money and domestic responsibilities are among the biggest sources of family conflict as they can add to emotional pressure.[125]

5.3.2 Parental separation

'Family is mummy, she looks after me and I know she loves me even if my dad does not. I don't need my dad I just need my mummy because she is the best. She is kind and gives me lots of cuddles. She tells me I can do anything I want to if I work hard for it' – Girl, 11, FLS. Research has shown that children whose parents separated are more likely to be disadvantaged across a range of outcomes including emotional well-being and education.

This impact is similar across different socio-economic groups. However, the picture is nuanced because it is hard to separate the conditions that lead to the separation with the separation itself. It could be the disruption and conflict before the separation that can lead to poorer outcomes. The impact of parental separation depends on the level of parental conflict. Studies have shown that where parental conflict was high, young adults had better outcomes if their parents separated. Where parental conflict was low the reverse was true.[126]

Strong family relationships have a protective effect on the impacts of parental separation and divorce. A survey of parents who have been through separation shows the importance of the wider family as extended family was the most frequently cited source of support (30%) followed by family mediation (28%), while some parents (20%) turned to online digital support.[127]

5.3.3 Mental and physical illness

In 2019-2020, about a third of children in England lived with at least one parent experiencing symptoms of anxiety or depression.[128] Perinatal mental illness (psychiatric disorders prevalent between pregnancy and a year after delivery) affects up to 27% of new and expectant mothers and is more likely to in areas of high deprivation. Ten percent of new fathers were also found to be affected by mental health difficulties in the perinatal period. [129] As the office heard from one mother: *'To me family means my kids, and making sure they are all happy and healthy, they are my life. It also means painful memories, abandonment, and betrayal from other family members. Being brought up by a mum with serious mental health problems and undiagnosed bipolar and a dad who emigrated to a different country when I was a baby was difficult and affected my mental health, so family also means healing, and maybe one day forgiveness'* – Mother, FLS.

Mental health is a spectrum, and a lower-level mental health problem may have very little impact on the parent child relationship. However, mental health is considered a crucial determinant in children's mental health, and whole family mental health is crucial for improving children's mental health. In 2020, 30% of children with a parent who had experienced psychological distress had a probable mental disorder, this compares to 9% of children whose parents were not experiencing psychological distress.[130] Children can become isolated due to the responsibility of caring for a parent with a mental illness and this can have an impact on children's mental health.[131]

As there's a link between mental illness and family functioning, mental illness in the family can undermine its protective effect. The NHS Digital survey of young people in 2021 found that among 11–16-year-olds, those with probable mental disorder were twice as likely to report problems with family functioning.[132]

As well as mental illness, many children live with and care for parents or family members that have physical illness or disability. Parents that are undergoing treatment or spend time in hospital may be away from home for large periods of time and are therefore less able to support children in day-to-day life.

The 2011 Census identified nearly 166,000 young carers in England (aged 5-17).[133] Young carers are considered children under 18 that undertake caring responsibilities for a family member who cannot cope without their support, due to illness, disability, or addiction. These young people often provide a combination of emotional support, physical care, managing finances and undertaking practical and household tasks, such as cooking and shopping. Being a young carer can have a substantial impact on children's lives. CCo have focussed closely on the importance of attendance at school. Part of that work focussed on the challenges young carers faced in particular on this group of children attending regularly. The Children's Society also report that 27% of young carers aged 11-15 either miss or have educational difficulties at school due to their caring responsibilities, yet 39% of young carers said that their school was not aware of their caring responsibilities.[134]

When speaking with young carers at the Young Carers Festival 2022 about their family, these young people spoke about family in much the same way as other children, such as the strong emotions associated with family, the giving and receiving of emotional support and the importance of shared time together. However, young carers also mentioned their caring responsibilities as part of this. As one

young carer said: '*When I heard the word family, I feel sad because being a young carer comes with many responsibilities including being the strong one*.' Another young carer explained that: '*I feel good because I know I try to help mum as best as I can.*'

Despite the challenges that young carers face, they are resilient and determined. The Carers Trust survey of young carers reported that talking to family and friends and their education played an important role in their lives, with 24% of young carers said studying is a coping mechanism for them.[135]

5.3.4 Parental alcohol or substance misuse

There were approximately 478,000 children in England living with a parent with alcohol or drug use dependency in 2019 to 2020 (approximately 4% of all children in England).[136] It is estimated that parents make up around half of people starting alcohol and drug treatment each year. However, data shows that most alcohol dependent parents (80%) and parents who are dependent on heroin (60%) are not receiving treatment.[137]

Children with a parent or carer with substance misuse problems can experience negative outcomes.[138] Substance misuse often coexists with other family stressors, such as housing or financial instability, parental physical and mental health difficulties, and crime. There is strong evidence that the harm to children comes from the compounding impact of parental conflict and substance misuse on parenting practices and family functioning. Negative outcomes identified in studies can include cognitive and language development delays and children are also more likely to sustain an accidental injury. Older children's educational outcomes may also be affected.[139]

5.3.5 Unstable accommodation and homelessness

Housing tenure and conditions have been connected to inequalities in young children's cognitive development. Features of low-quality housing, such as overcrowding, damp, or non-decent housing may significantly affect parents' and children's lives and therefore their outcomes.[140] In 2020-21, there were 1.3 million households with dependent children living in the private rented sector.[141] Privately rented housing is less secure, has the highest rates of non-decent housing and has high rates of overcrowding.[142]

5.3.6 Refugees

A group that are more likely to be homeless or living in unstable accommodating are refugee and

migrant families particularly soon after they arrive in the country. The instability associated with financial insecurity and poor housing can be extremely challenging. In a 2017 survey conducted by the Refugee Council, over half of respondents reported difficulties opening a bank account.[143]

5.3.7 Domestic abuse

Concerns about domestic abuse towards the parent is the most common factor identified at the end of Children in Need assessments, affecting 168,960 children in England in 2020-21.[144]

Young people who lived through domestic violence between their parents at age three reported 30% higher than average antisocial behaviours at age 14. [145] Domestic abuse can also destabilise a child's life, as they may need to move home multiple times to stay safe, disrupting their schooling and friendships. Research found that children who experienced domestic abuse faced barriers to accessing support. [146] Services to support these children were often based upon time-limited funding, meaning services provision was precarious. Access to services was also dependent on parents' engagement. The research also highlighted that coercive and controlling dynamics were not considered enough in work with children, despite these forms of abuse having a significant effect on children.[147]

5.3.8 Child abuse and neglect

'As a child I was abused and neglected. All I ever wanted was a family. Therefore, my partner and our children mean everything to me. I have always been determined to give them the love and stability that I never had' – Mother, FLS.

For some children, family sadly does not provide the love, support and protection we have described above – in fact, it is itself the source of trauma. There are 219,190 children in need in England (1%) because of abuse or neglect, with 50,010 children on child protection plans meaning that they are at risk of suffering significant harm. [148] The impact of child abuse and neglect on children is profound, and associated with worse mental health, educational outcomes and social outcomes.[149] Sometimes it will be possible to work with families to keep the children safe, but for many of these children it will be necessary for them to live away from home in order to stay safe.

5.4 What this means for families

While each of the issues in the chapter can have a significant impact on children and their families, these issues are often more significant when they co-occur. For example, research has highlighted the impact of a combination of mental illness, parental alcohol or substance misuse and domestic abuse on the instance of child abuse and neglect leading to children needing to be taken into care.[150] The causes and best responses are complex and will depend on the family and their circumstance. Most of the issues identified here are more pervasive than we might imagine. As exemplified in the family profile below, these are challenges that large numbers of families are facing, and we should therefore acknowledge this in our discourse about family life.

When adults engage with support services, for example drug or alcohol treatment programmes or adult mental health services, they are often treated as individuals, without a focus on their wider family life. This means services are not taking into account the impact of a person's condition on their wider family, nor are they recognising the particular role the wider family is taking to support these individuals, or where this support is lacking. This is partly because of a lack of join up between social care services for adults and children. Understanding that people exist as part of families, and not as isolated individuals has the potential to transform our public services and is something that will be examined more in Part 2 of the Review. Below is a family profile which reflects the challenges families face in 2022.

FAMILY PROFILE

I am a mother to two children aged 8 and 1. We live with my partner and our dog. We work well as a team, if there was an emergency situation we'd cope well I think.

The cost of childcare is our biggest financial struggle at the moment. The cost of a 9-5 for my 1-year old is about to go up, and those hours don't cover my shift. I work longer hours than that, so I have to pay extra for wrap-around care. On top of that I also have to pay for my 8-year old to have breakfast and after-school activities. It's not cost-effective for me to work but I want to so I can contribute to society.

The problem is we're not eligible for any help with childcare, so I have to rely on my parents and the children's grandparents. If I didn't work I could claim benefits and help with childcare, but if I didn't work I wouldn't need childcare so that defeats the object.

My eldest has a pupil premium – which gives her access to free school meals, money off school trips and the holiday club. That's been so good for her, as it means she has structure in summer holidays and she's made friends.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Chapter 6 – What services are currently provided to families?

> **'The staff were very nice. Everyone around was very welcoming since the first day. […] Especially [for] socially awkward people who have trouble communicating'**
>
> – Boy, 16, youth group

6.1 Summary of chapter

- This chapter draws on several sources of research to establish what services are currently available to families and what families want from the services they access. The sources include results from CCo's Family Life Survey (FLS) and initial results from CCo's Family Services Survey (FSS) conducted to inform Part 1 of the Family Review, findings from the focus groups, interview and roundtables with parents, families and sector-based professionals that were conducted to inform the Review and where relevant, research from organisations working to support families.

- In this chapter, CCo explores where families are most likely to turn for help, demonstrating that the primary source of support is family itself. Families may need help from services when their needs cannot be met within their own family.

- This chapter explores what families want and need from services. Some of these are basic issues about knowing what services exist and making sure that they are available and accessible to all. But there are also key themes about how they want services to operate. CCo finds that family support needs to be based on the very same protective elements that family itself can provide – strong, supportive relationships, that are caring and non-judgemental, that are stable and long-lasting, and local.

6.2 Where do families turn when they need help or support

Through CCo's research it was clear that families' preferences for getting help is to turn to their own networks – wider family, close friends but also platforms which connect families in similar situations including social media and online forums. Families describe multiple kinds of help they receive 'informally', including high levels of practical help such as informal childcare. In the FLS, 33% of parents said they had asked a grandparent, another relative, friend or neighbour for help with childcare.[151]

Families, particularly parents, take supporting and sustaining a family very seriously. Parents were asked who they would turn to if they needed help with any aspect of family life (Annex survey 1). CCo found that the majority of parents are open to support, and only 7% of parents said they would not look for any help at all in any aspect of family life. [152]

There was an overwhelming preference for the advice and support of family, which was selected by 78% of parents, and friends (51%). After these close social networks, only 20% of parents said they would turn to health services. Only 12% of respondents said they would seek help through support forums, 12% through social media, 11% via community services and 10% through local authority or council services. [153]

Not all families feel that they can turn to family or friends for help. Only 15% of parents said they would not turn to their friends or family for support with family life. Of these parents, 48% said they would not seek help at all, 22% would turn to social media, including social media support groups, 17% to health services, 15% to council services, 15% to support forums and 9% to local community services. [154]

But for those who do not have extensive support networks, who are socially isolated, or who need or want more help than their family can offer more formal sources of support are required.

6.3 What services are currently available to families?

Given how crucial support services can be to some families, it is important to understand what support is currently available to families. As illustrated in the tables below, there are many different forms of support offered to families, split between universal and targeted and specialist services. Some services are provided by the state in the form of government entitlements, others are provided by the voluntary sector, and some are paid for by families directly. When it comes to voluntary, and paid for services in particular, there is no central oversight of what is provided. Part 2 of the Family Review will look at how oversight, accountability and availability of services can be made more cohesive and family centred, as

well as providing solutions for how families can better navigate what is available to them locally. However, it should be noted that the quality and effectiveness of these services can vary greatly. In Part 2 of the Review, the quality and effectiveness of what works to support families will be explored.

	Universal services or entitlements	Targeted services or entitlements
Financial support for families with children	N/A	Child Benefit (HMRC) Maternity and Other Parental Pay Benefits (BEIS) Married Couples Allowance (HMRC) Parental Bereavement Leave (DWP) Child Tax Credit (HMRC) Child Maintenance (DWP) Universal Credit Child Element (DWP) Adoption Support fund (DfE) Foster Care Allowance (DWP)
Children with SEND and parents with disabilities	Education, Health and Care Plan (DfE) SEN Inclusion Fund (DfE) The Local SEND Offer (DfE) Special Educational Provision (DfE)	Young Carer's Assessment (DHSC) Disability Access Fund (DfE) Short Break Services (DfE) Disability Living Allowance (DWP)
Childcare	15-hours childcare for 3 and 4 year olds (DfE)	15-hours childcare for 2 year olds (DfE) & 30-hours childcare (DfE) Childcare Grant (DWP) Flexible Support Fund (DWP) Tax Free Childcare (HMRC) Universal Credit Childcare Element (DWP) Childcare Element of Working Tax Credit (DWP)
School and training	Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (DfE) Primary Education (DfE) Secondary Education (DfE) Further Education (DfE) Higher Education funding (DfE) Apprenticeships (DfE) National Careers Service (DfE)	Virtual School Heads (DfE) Pupil Premium (DfE) Parents Learning Allowance (DfE) Kickstart Scheme (DWP) Supported Internships (DfE) Traineeships (DfE) Period Products Scheme (DfE) Free School Transport (DfE)
Parental Relationships	Relationships and Sex Education (DfE)	Reducing Parental Conflict (DWP) Domestic Abuse Support (HO) Family Courts (MoJ)
Parenting	Family Hubs (DfE) Children Centres (DfE)	Early Help Services (DfE) Supporting Families (DLUHC) Children's Social Care (DfE) Children's Homes (DfE) Kinship Care / Special Guardianship (DfE) Foster Care (DfE) Adoption Services (DfE) Children and Family Courts Advisory and Support Service (MoJ) Family Courts (MoJ)
Health	Start4Life (DHSC) Change4Life (DHSC) Healthy Child Programme (including midwifery and health visiting) (DHSC) Mental Health Support Teams (NHS) School Nursing/ School Health Team (DHSC) National Child Measurement Programme (DHSC)	Family Nurse Partnership (DHSC) Children and Young People's Mental Health Services (NHS) Perinatal Mental Health Support (DHSC)
Food provision	School Fruit and Vegetable Scheme (DHSC) Nursery Milk Scheme (DHSC)	Healthy Start vouchers/ Digital Cards (DHSC) Free School Meals (DfE) Holiday Activities and Food Programme (DfE) National School Breakfast Programme (DfE)

Note: The Government department responsible for each entitlement is in brackets. DHSC - Department of Health and Social Care, DfE - Department for Education, MoJ - Ministry of Justice, HMRC - HM Revenue & Customs, BEIS - Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, DWP - Department for Work and Pensions, HO - Home Office

	Universal community-based services	Targeted community-based services	Paid-for services
Financial support for families with children	Websites about budgeting and financial assistance e.g., Money Saving Expert	Charities providing grants to low-income families, e.g., Family Fund and Family Action	N/A
Children with SEND and parents with disabilities	Charities supporting families with children with disabilities e.g., Contact	Charity funded respite care (The Respite Association)	Private physiotherapy and other physical treatments Private child needs assessments Social, emotional and behavioural development activities
Childcare	N/A	N/A	Additional childcare Early education, including additional language learning
School and training	Community run after school activities e.g., football	Charities supporting disadvantaged children's literacy e.g., the Children's Literacy Charity Charities working to improve children's engagement in school, e.g., School Home Support	Private tutoring companies Summer camps and after enrichment activities Sports activities (for example swimming and football)
Relationships	Charity run relationship support advice lines accessible to all e.g., Support Line	Couple parenting courses – e.g. Schoolchildren and their Families, Family Foundations Relationship Counselling e.g. Relate Domestic Abuse services – e.g. Refugees	Paid for couple counselling Private family therapy for complex family needs
Parenting	Informal local networks of parent/ infant playgroups Charity run parenting support lines – eg NCT, La Leche	Charity home visiting services – eg HomeStart Charity run parenting courses	Private antenatal classes Private playgroups
Health	Community run mental health support groups (e.g., coffee mornings) Mental Health support lines, e.g., Mind	Children's counselling services e.g. Place2Be Charity run perinatal mental health support (e.g., PANDAS Foundation UK)	Ante-natal classes (eg NCT, Bump and Baby Club) Breastfeeding support groups
Food provision	Community run gardens	Food Banks Charities supporting adults with disabilities to access food delivery services	N/A

Note: The tables above aim to provide an overview of some of the entitlements and services that are available to families but is not intended to provide a comprehensive list of all the types of support families receive

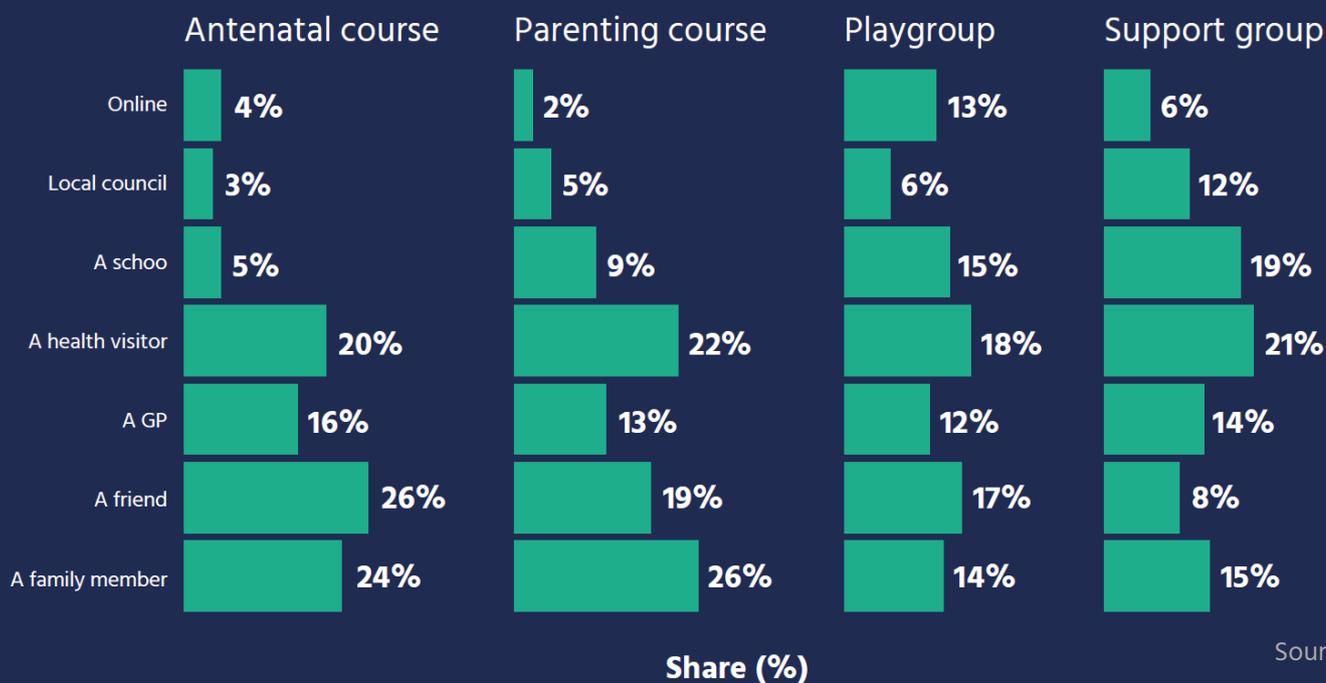|	Universal community-based services	Targeted community-based services	Paid-for services

6.4 What do families want from services?

CCo asked families directly what they want from the services that are provided for them. The themes presented in this section will shape the principals that will underpin the Commissioner's plan for family services that will be presented in Part 2 of the Family Review. At a fundamental level, parents wanted to know what was available, and for services to be there when they needed them. When they accessed these services, what they valued was something that felt similar to family – which was caring, based on relationships, and worked with their existing networks.

6.4.1 Accessible services

A basic requirement parents had of services was to know what was available, as they often told us they struggled to find help that was right for them. Every area is required to have a Family Information Service which will often include a website. [155] This may not include all the voluntary provision and does not even necessarily cover the myriad state-funded services above.[156] CCo's research suggests that awareness of the Family Information Service was low. [157] Many people said that they had found out about services through word of mouth and were missing a central place where they could find out about the different services they could access.

To understand this further, CCo asked parents how they heard about certain state-provided services through the FLS. Of the 105 parents that had only accessed a family hub in the past 5 years, 35% of parents told us they had heard about the family hub(s) via word of mouth, while 30% had heard through a local authority website and 20% had heard through social media. [158] While this demonstrates further the importance of family networks, it also suggests that more formal channels of information are not getting through to all parents – even those who do make use of services. The CCo asked about additional services in the Family Services Survey (FSS), which found that families were often more likely to go to families and friends to find out about these services as well (Figure 10). [159]

Figure 10: Among parents who access a specific service, where did they hear about it?

	Antenatal course	Parenting course	Playgroup	Support group
Online	4%	2%	13%	6%
Local council	3%	5%	6%	12%
A schoo	5%	9%	15%	19%
A health visitor	20%	22%	18%	21%
A GP	16%	13%	12%	14%
A friend	26%	19%	17%	8%
A family member	24%	26%	14%	15%

Share (%)

Source: FSS

But even if parents know what is out there, there might not always be the appropriate service available. Availability varies significantly depending on local service configuration and prioritisation and the differing contributions of the voluntary and community sector groups. While this enables local services to meet local need, it can also create a postcode lottery of support. An Action for Children nationally representative survey found that 22% of parents with children of early years age (0-5 years old) said that a service not being available to them was a barrier they faced to accessing the support they needed. This number rose to 27% of parents since the onset of the pandemic.[160]

There is significant variation around the country when it comes to accessing services - for example, while 94% of babies in London received the first check they are entitled to as part of the Healthy Child Programme, only 77% of those in the South-West did so.[161] There is much less information available about the usage of charitable and non-statutory services, so to address this gap CCo asked parents around the country about services they had accessed recently. There was notable variation around the country when it came to accessing services (Figure 11).[162] While these figures do not tell us the reason that support was not being accessed, it does demonstrate that families in some areas of the country are much less likely to be getting help.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Figure 11: Regional variation in share of parents with a child age 5 and under accessing services

Source: FSS
*Estimates unreliable due to sample size

This variation in availability was noted by participants in focus groups, who told us about the long waiting times they were facing to see general practitioners or more specialist services like mental health support. A parent who we met at a family hub told us for example: '*Another thing is mental health, the only support my kids get…is in school and there's only one lady there to help. She's lovely, but there's only one of her and 500 kids so I often think my kids probably don't deserve her help as much as other kids so maybe they shouldn't go. But maybe a service to give tips and tricks on kids worries*' – Mother, Family Hub. Health services were also frequently brought up by new mums. They felt there was a lack of information on parental mental health and a lack of post-natal care.

Accessing the right services was particularly challenging for some families with specific needs who required specialist types of support. A parent CCo met at a support group for children with SEND explained: '*If you have a child with a disability or additional needs, nobody ever sits you down and says at the beginning – 'This is where you need to go to. This, this and this' and it's 'By the way, you'll have to go into a mainstream nurse because there is nothing specific available.' You find that out when you're already on that journey so then you're all of a sudden thinking what? What do I do? Where do I go?*' – Mother, support group.

Coin Street Neighbourhood Centre

The Coin Street Neighbourhood Centre is run by Coin Street Community builders, which is a social enterprise on London's south bank.

They own several housing co-operatives, commercial properties, sports facilities and the neighbourhood centre. The money they make from their commercial enterprises is all re-invested into the community, although the neighbourhood centre also receives some council Children's Centre funding.

The centre itself hosts a nursery, activities for under-fives, out of school care and youth clubs, family support workers, training spaces, midwives, health visitors and training and employment opportunities. They run sessions within the purposebuilt spaces in their centre, as well as in parks and gyms that they own in the development.

Although they are not a designated family hub, their approach is similar in design. Services are co-located to improve joint working, and they aim to work with the whole family, and to stay with them throughout their live and on to the next generation. Their ethos is to work alongside families, helping to empower them to make their own choices and remain 'in the driving seat'.

Many families from Afghanistan were placed in hotels nearby, so a priority for the centre in recent months has been to work with these families, and support them to deal with the trauma that they have faced.

One mother who had made use of the centre as she was recovering from post-natal depression, told us how important it was to her. When she later became homeless as she had no recourse to public funds, she turned to the centre first for help because as she put it:

> **'I didn't know what to do, but this place felt like home.'**

They advocated for her and supported her to get housing. Professionals working in the centre told us that the centre aims to replicate the kind of help you get from a family – always there for you, without judgement, and invested in you doing well.

Similar difficulties were faced by kinship carers trying to access the support they needed. One kinship carer at a support group told CCo: '*As kinship carers we step in to do the right thing, we're advised by the local authority, we're advised to go for SGO [special guardianship order] to secure things for the children and that's what we want... However, the moment we sign the SGO to do the right thing, everything's taken away from the children as well as from ourselves support wise. And it's a massive problem in the kinship world.*' – Kinship carer, female, kinship carer support group.

6.4.2 Welcoming and non-stigmatising

Families wanted to access services where they felt they were genuinely welcome, valued, and able to get help. Good relationships with the professionals at these services was the essential component in making parents feel comfortable and supported – for some, replicating the kind of caring relationships within a family.

One mother at a baby and toddler group told us that the professionals were a huge source of support after she suffered from post-natal psychosis: '*They're here because they really want to be [...] supportive and non-judgmental professionals who feel like family to you [...] if you go out into society, or sometimes even your own family, the advice is pull yourself together [...] they told me how to interact with my child*' - Mother, playgroup.

This welcoming approach is particularly important for some groups. CCo's FSS found that that 19% of the parents who chose not to visit a playgroup told us it was because they didn't feel they would fit in. [163] Recent research from the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) has found this is particularly pronounced amongst some ethnic minority communities.[164] This can be driven by a feeling that the services are not tailored to their needs and that existing interventions lack sensitivity which can make certain groups feel unwelcome.[165]

As one mother at a baby and toddler group explained: '*Cultural differences. Language barriers. See my husband is from Bangladesh and we have 2 kids. I try to invite some of the mums and aunties on his side of the family to come but they might not want to come unless they know someone else is going with them. They like to travel in groups. Also, some of them might not speak English that well and feel self-conscious about it*' – Mother, playgroup. We also heard from members of staff that there are language barriers for families that they try to break by employing staff from within the community.

Little Village Baby Bank Tooting

Little Village's aim is to encourage communities to share all the things that babies and children under five use, and to make sure that all parents have what they need to look after their children. In 2021 they supported 6,463 children across eight hubs, with a team of part-time staff and volunteers.

The baby bank collects donations from families in the area, as well as some donations from businesses, in order to support parents who are struggling.

They particularly focus on low income families, lone parents, and refugee families. Families need to be referred by a professional, such as a health visitor or GP, and then come in for an appointment.

They are offered a cup of tea, and a member of staff sits down to work out what it is that they need. The baby bank is set up to look like a shop, with only high quality, second hand goods offered, so that parents and children can browse the aisles – which helps parents to see that there is nothing shameful about accepting this help.

Children can even get their feet measured and choose their first pair of shoes. They also deliver larger items such as cots and buggies if families prefer.

The average value of a 'newborn bundle' which contains everything a family might need – a cot, buggy, clothes, nappies and so on – is estimated to be £1,100. They also provide essential post-partum toiletries for mothers, such as maternity pads and breast pads.

Their aim is to make sure that parents feel welcome and supported, and not judged. Their approach, as one volunteer said is not to focus on what is going wrong but:

> 'to find out what they need to be successful with their parenting.'

Parents also told us how important it was for services to feel non-judgemental, and not to create a sense of shame for asking for help. Some services, particularly those targeted at specific issues, can bring with them stigma. Often, services are designed for those with a 'problem' or who are 'struggling'. This could leave families feeling that in some way they had to acknowledge a failure or weakness before being able to access help. Research from Action for Children of parents of children aged 0-18 makes it clear that feelings of apprehension about accessing services is widespread. When asked about barriers to accessing support since the onset of the pandemic, 22% of parents said they were *'afraid of being judged for asking for help or support'* and another 21% said they were *'embarrassed about looking for help.'* [166] Some families also told us that they worried social services would get involved when they accessed services and would rather stay away from support for this reason. For example, a parent who we met at a family hub suggested an awareness campaign around what social services do: '*But maybe some sort of campaign could be good to reduce the stigma around social services as they don't have to always be seen in a bad way. They can do a lot of good, but people are scared of them*' – Mother, Family Hub.

6.4.3 Supportive of peer relationships

Beyond the wider network of family and friends, parents find help and support from their peers, particularly ones in similar circumstances or facing the same challenges.

Families told the office there is comfort and reassurance in shared experience. A mother at a Home-Start group said: '*When you feel like you're doing it badly, you are not the only one*' – Mother, Home-Start. For a parent or carer to meet others at similar stages of life, or facing similar difficulties, is to realise they are not alone in their challenges. As one worker at a playgroup said, creating a space for peer support is in reality a fairly simple offer – but it can have a significant impact: '*Community groups are not anything particularly extravagant – just a groups of mums coming together and the children playing with some toys on the carpet, but it is life-changing for mums like her as it allows her to leave the house, make friends, and not feel as anxious and lonely*' – Staff member, playgroup.

Not only is this a powerful antidote to isolation, but it is also a friendly forum for advice and support, shared by those going through the same experiences. A mother at a playgroup said: '*People are in the same situation [here] you get tips and hints.*' – Mother, playgroup. Sometimes, these groups that are nothing extravagant, are crucial to people's well-being and mental health. The office has heard from people whose mental health had improved when they were able to attend their local baby and toddler

Peer support at baby and toddler groups

Maria is in her 20s. She lives in England as a single mum with her 2 daughters. All her other family members live abroad.

We met Maria at a baby and toddler group. She really valued coming to this group – not only for her children but also for her own mental health. She had suffered from post-natal depression after her first pregnancy and felt she needed to leave the house. She said, 'I didn't want to be at home, every time I was at home the depression used to get bad'.

Maria feels very strongly that there needs to be more antenatal support for mums. She said that during her first pregnancy, she 'was just concerned about the baby but not about my personal wellbeing.'

After giving birth to her first daughter, she felt like she wanted to commit suicide. She then did her own research, 'and then I found out about [local baby and toddler services] […] if it wasn't for these [services], my depression would be very bad'.

We met Arya at a different baby and toddler group. Arya has 3 children aged 3, 6 and 9.

Similar to Maria, she also finds community groups, like the baby and toddler group she was attending, really important for the parents' confidence, and for preventing parental loneliness, especially for first time mums. Groups like this help parents develop routine and a sense of community. 'This service made a massive difference […] Something to build my whole week around […] When you feel like you're doing it badly, you are not the only one. […] the services that are available need to be shouted about.'

Also the group's organisers made Arya want to come to the group. '[The group leader] has always gone above and beyond.'

Talia is the mum of a 3 year old son. We met her at a baby and toddler group where she has been coming every week since he was born.

Talia suffered from post-natal psychosis. 'I completely lost my sense of self', she said. '[The baby and toddler group] has been a lifeline […] The only way I knew how to cope was to lay down on the floor [when I first came here].' She explained that staff supported her in a non-judgemental way that was really important to her. '[The baby and toddler group was a] force of guidance for my children's lives […] [t]hey told me how to interact with my child. [It was] supportive and non-judgmental professionals who feel like family to you […] if you go out into society, or sometimes even your own family, the advice is pull yourself together […] I was at loss of what I should introduce my child to at what stages.' Talking about similar services she said, they 'might not be clinically equipped but provide respite and relief.' Similar to Arya, she also really values the people and volunteers at the group. She said, 'they have the right approach, committed to service in the community. They're here because they really want to be.'

If she could ask for something, she would ask for the group to run more frequently as it gives her structure. She said: 'If this group could run twice a week or on the weekends, that would be amazing […] People who lack structure and routine, they need that, that's me. I need that structure' or, 'a schedule of activities, days out […] not just coming once a week, more like a continuity, a programme to take part in, a monthly schedule.'

groups, when they were together with other families where parents suffered from poor mental health in a safe environment and fathers told us that their confidence had improved when they were able to come together with other fathers in a parenting course.

As one mother who CCo met at a support group for parents with children with SEND in the early years told us: *'I really feel like I found my people. I felt really isolated, stuck in this stress constantly that nobody else could understand like, all the appointments, all of the battling for everything. And they like totally get it'* – Mother, support group.

6.4.4 Inclusive of family

Families want services to understand that they exist as part of a family unit, and that any help they are offered must understand that. This means understanding the strains and demands that come with being part of a family – both practical and emotional – and appreciating that solutions to 'individual' problems can be rooted in the family, whether that is in improving family relationships and dynamics, or drawing on practical support. There is evidence to suggest that bringing in wider family members can help address problems – whether that is through systemic family therapy for substance misuse or providing more practical assistance such as respite care.

As a professional working with families affected by substance misuse explained: '*I think a whole family approach is a very promising one. So, you work with the whole family, you try and deal with, you enable the user with the drug or alcohol problem you enable them to recognise what they are doing to the family, to deconstruct the family if you like, to damage the family'* – CEO of an organisation working with families affected by substance misuse.

For support services, this means having to take a 'whole family approach' so that different services are not trying to support different family members in isolation, but that families' problems are seen in the round, and the solutions are worked on collectively.

However, there was also acknowledgement that services are not always set-up to allow this. This is something that the Commissioner will be seeking to address in Part 2 of the Family Review.

6.5 What this means for families

First and foremost, families want to seek help and support within strong, supportive relationships. For most, this means they will turn initially to their own network of family and friends. But when they look beyond this, a strong bond with a relevant professional and volunteer is the best start to receiving

support that is meaningful and helpful to them. Access to peer groups of families in similar circumstances can develop a further network of support, and a rich source of advice and help.

People want services that are open and accessible, that make them feel welcome and feels like a home from home. They don't want to be judged for asking for help, or to be viewed as failing. So much of what families want comes down to empathy, understanding and feeling genuinely listened to. Yet, many families, as highlighted in the family profile below, face challenges to accessing the support they need from the services available to them.

As mentioned, Part 2 of the Family Review will consider how to create a network of services that is centred around the principles presented in this section. Informed directly by the voices of the families CCo heard from, a plan for how to ensure that services that prioritise strong and supportive relationships and are accessible to families in their varying forms will be presented. Below is a profile of a family which shows the challenges families face and who they turn to for support.

FAMILY PROFILE

I am a married mother of an adopted 8-year old boy. I lost two children to stillbirth and miscarriage.

It is challenging having to parent therapeutically all the time, and trying to get an EHC plan that includes funding for everything necessary.

We have access to a specialist occupational therapist who deals with his sensory processing disorder, but we have to travel 70 miles each way once a fortnight for input, which is not provided through the EHC process.

Overall, I feel lucky that we have a great occupational therapist, good post-adoption support, and a strong professional network. It also helps that I work in the same field, so I know how to push for the right support.

My experiences have helped me identify other children who I work with who probably have sensory processing difficulties and how to deal with these.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER
Family Review

Chapter 7 – Next Steps

Part 1 of the Family Review makes the case for a profound change in the way Government thinks about families. It shows that families can be a powerful force for good, and that ways that public services should work for them. This kind of systemic change is slow and often complex to achieve, and the message we have repeatedly heard from professionals working with families is that they acknowledge the benefits of working in different ways, but often encounter systems which are hard to reform. This section sets out some of the changes needed for this to happen, and outlines actions to support these changes that the Children's Commissioner will undertake in Part 2 of the Family Review. Some of these are changes to the way Government works at the highest level, while some are more detailed recommendations about how to implement the changes to public service delivery that families want.

7.1 A positive and ambitious vision for loving and prosperous families

The Children's Commissioner's Family Review has confirmed how important families are to children's outcomes. When they are working well, they are a source of strength, protection and love that allows their members to flourish, even in adversity. Government should therefore be unashamed about wanting to support and strengthen families. To do this will require an updated understanding, based on the Family Review, of what is important about families. Government should pursue a positive vision for family life, with a clear objective for all families to be loving, supportive and prosperous. This will require changes to the way public services are delivered, to ensure that all families can get the kind of help they need to reach this goal. But it will also require broader changes to public policy. Prosperous families, able to support themselves and others are the foundation of a successful society and a thriving economy.

7.2 Consideration of family across policy making

Achieving genuinely transformational change will require Government to use family as the paradigm through which it addresses some of the biggest challenges facing society and the economy. Family should be central to the priorities of every Government Department. At present, too many initiatives are expressed in terms of households, when a focus is needed on the specific needs of children with families. Family policy should not be restricted to any one Department or policy area.

In Part 2 of the Family Review, the Children's Commissioner will carry out work on the Family Test. The Family Test is a framework for policy makers across Government to consider systematically the impact of policies on family. The insights from the Family Review highlight that this Test needs to be revised to reflect families' needs. CCo will work with Government to understand how it can be used most effectively and consider ways it can be used in the design, implementation and commissioning of services at both national and local level.

7.3 Implementing improved public service design

7.3.1 Designing services that families want

Part 1 of the Family Review has shown what it is that families really value in support services they are offered. They want services that are easy to find, and available when they need them. They want to be able to access those services without fear of judgement, or shame, but in the knowledge that everyone can need help at some point. They want those services to be welcoming, caring, and to offer genuine help. They want services to understand that all families are embedded in wider networks of support and seek to complement and empower these networks. It requires public services currently aimed at individuals to consider the importance of the family, both in supporting the individual and in the way they the wider family may itself benefit.

For Part 2 of the Family Review, CCo will carry out further research and analysis on family support and services to inform this redesign. This will comprise of: additional analysis of our survey on family services, evidence from our Literature Review on services, qualitative analysis from focus groups and interviews, and analysis on informal caring arrangements using data from the Family Resources Survey. The office will also be engaging further with children through schools and asking them how they spend time with their families and where they might seek help when they are worried about their family.

7.3.2 Services working together to achieve families' goals

Part 1 of the Family Review has shown that strong families are those which have strong relationships, which in turn provide both love and practical support. At a delivery level, public services should be explicitly pursuing these positive outcomes. However, too often services are working to different objectives based on their work with an individual, rather than seeing the family as a whole. There have been moves towards changing this model of working – in the Supporting Families programme, and local

level family outcomes frameworks – but more is needed. CCo will undertake the following steps to help services work together to achieve families' shared goals, and overcome the barriers to doing so:

In Part 2 of the Family Review, CCo will develop a high-level outcomes framework which focuses on family strengths – the research into family support services suggests that evaluations of services are often focused around the avoidance of negative outcomes. Further, outcomes are measured at the child or parent level rather than the family level. All public services should be working to support a positive conception of family life, which looks to work with families to develop their inherent strengths and promotes positive and tangible outcomes for families. A shared outcomes framework can help bring cohesion to a currently fragmented range of services offered to families; ensure alignment between the ends families seek for themselves and the outcomes services strive for and improve the efficacy of services provided.

In Part 2 of the Family Review, CCo will publish guidance on how to improve both data collection and data-sharing between agencies working with children and families - there is a clear need to be able to better connect services around families and see families as units not a collection of individuals. At a local and national level, data does not often capture the full family unit if the family lives across more one household. To better connect services also requires better data sharing between agencies working with families. This is a sensitive and complex area, but we will explore how it can be done better, with a focus on enabling better operationality of data at a frontline level.

In Part 2 of the Family Review, CCo will outline practical proposals to improve the integration of services at a local level - a consistent theme to emerge from Part 1 of the Family Review was a lack of information about what was on offer for families; this was in part because the offer to families is fragmented and highly localised. This stems from a failure to assign clear responsibility for co-ordinating the family offer at a local level, meaning families often fall between the gaps. This will set out proposals for how the statutory bodies responsible for the services families need can better join up.

7.4 Beyond the Family Review: defining vulnerability and disadvantage

The Children's Commissioner is committed to carrying out further work on defining vulnerable and disadvantaged children. The research collected through this review identified various important factors that can lead to children, and their families, being more disadvantaged. Particularly where these factors may be overlapping. Through our Call for Evidence, we heard from organisations that represent and help

particularly vulnerable groups of children, such as children of prisoners. The Children's Commissioners will use this to inform further research and policy work in this area. [167]

Conclusion

In the UK today, family has absolute primacy. Family, and its importance, is the unifying factor. It matters to everyone, across geographic, ethnic, and socio-economic lines. There is little that correlates more with a child's happiness than how happy they are with their family. Little that better predicts their outcomes and chances of success. For children to grow up to be adults that are happy, healthy and contribute to society, there is nothing more important to focus on than family. This Review demonstrates how family remains a core pillar to people's lives.

Part 1 of the Family Review sought to bring fresh, new analysis to the intangible. A rigorous, robust lens to the emotive and ephemeral. To understand who and what family means in the UK today, by asking children and their families directly. And by undertaking new research and analysis on the data that exists. Data that is currently incomplete precisely because the notion of family today is not properly understood. Data that focuses on households rather than families. That neglects the dynamic and complex nature of families today.

Family is protective. And now, this Review proves the correlation between love, strong relationships, time together, having people to rely on, and later success in life. The way these bonds insulate you when things get tough.

Part 1 of the Family Review has used this lens of protection to begin mapping the impact on the way services that support and strengthen families are designed, delivered, and evaluated. Families say that when they need help and support, they first turn to each other. When families need or want more formal help and support, though, they want those services to feel familial. They want to form trusted relationships with professionals that have the longevity required to see them through. To be local, and to come to them, when and where they need them. To be compassionate, flexible, and trusting. To be invested in them as families, not just individuals or 'service users.'

When speaking to families about family, two things came up often. The word love, and that family is everything. Children told us about how much they needed their parents, carers, and wider family. That they want their parents to love and care for them. That they teach them how to be people. It is now time for those making decisions about children and families, their needs, and futures, to give them the same primacy they give each other. How to do this will be explored further in Part 2 of the Family Review. In the meantime, families need to be at the heart of the new Government. A focus on family is an investment in today, and in tomorrow.

Acknowledgements

Centre for Policy Studies

Centre for Social Justice

Child Bereavement Network

Child Poverty Action Group

Children Heard and Seen

Children's Society

Coin Street

Coram Voice

Daniel's Den

Department for Culture, Media, and Sport

Dean Bank Primary School

Demos

Derbyshire Children's Services

Department for Work and Pensions

Early Intervention Foundation

Education Policy Institute

Fabian Society

Fairness Foundation

Family Action

Family Fund

Family Hubs Network

Family Lives

Family Nurse Partnership

Fatherhood Institute

For Baby's Sake

Open University

Our Time

Parents Against Child Exploitation

Parent Infant Foundation

Parenting Apart

Paths Through Change

Peeple UK

PIMS-TS Family Support Group UK

Place2Be

PROGAR

Reform Advocates

Resolution Foundation

Reunite Families UK

The Royal Foundation

Safer Communities Alliance

Save the Children UK

Sheffield Hallam University

Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre

Sibs - for brothers and sisters

Small Steps Big Changes

Sport England

Spurgeon's Children's Charity

STEER Education

Supporting Families: Bracknell Forest,

Fostering Network

Froebel Trust

Future Men

Gaskell Primary School

Gingerbread

Hackney HAF

Home for Good

Home Start UK

The Hubb Foundation

Independent Carers

Institute for Fiscal Studies

Institute of Health Visiting

Institute for Public Policy Research

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Kinship

Cambridgeshire, Cumbria, Durham, North Tyneside, Sheffield, Salford, Staffordshire, Lincolnshire, Warrington, Westminster, Nottinghamshire, Bristol, Essex

Surrey County Council Children, Families and Lifelong Learning Directorate

Tavistock Relationships

Thomas Coram Research Unit

Triple P UK

University of Bristol

University College London

University of Exeter

University of Sussex

WhatWorks

Young Carers' Festival

Youthscape

CCo would also like to thank all of the individuals who contributed to this report and shared their family stories and experiences. CCo received many more Family Profiles than were able to be published. While there is not capacity to share all of these Profiles, they have informed the research and narrative of this report.

[1] Office of the Children's Commissioner's Family Review: terms of reference. 2022. Link

[2] Office of the Children's Commissioner's Family Review: terms of reference. 2022. Link

[3] For example, the Labour Force Survey.

[4] Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and Households*. Link

[5] Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and Households*. Link

[6] CCo analysis of the Annual Population Survey 2020. See Annex – Additional Analysis – for further information.

[7] Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and Households*. Link

[8] Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and the Labour Market*. Link

[9] Kiernan, K., Crossman, S. and Phimister, A. 2022. 'Families and inequalities.' *IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities*. Link

[10] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[11] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[12] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[13] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[14] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[15] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[16] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[17] Department for Education. 2022. *Ethnicity and Children's Social Care*. Link

[18] Children's Commissioner for England. 2021. *The Big Answer*. Link

[19] University of Sheffield. 2018. *Family Portrait: Single Parent Families and Transitions Over Time*. Link

[20] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[21] CCo analysis of LSYPE data. See Annex – Additional Analysis – for further details.

[22] CCo analysis of focus groups and interviews conducted for the Family Review. See Annex- Focus Groups.

[23] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[24] Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. *Child and Maternal Health Statistics*. Link

25 CCo analysis of focus groups, interviews and roundtable conducted for the Family Review. See Annex – Focus Groups.

26 Kiernan, K., Crossman, S. and Phimister, A. 2022. 'Families and inequalities.' *IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities*. Link

27 Office for National Statistics. 2022. Families and households statistics explained. Link

28 Office for National Statistics. 2022. Families and households statistics explained. Link

29 Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and Households*. Link

30 Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and Households*. Link

31 Eurostat. *Household Composition Statistics*. Link

32 Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and Households*. Link

33 Department for Work and Pensions. 2021. *Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2020*. Link

34 Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and Households*. Link

35 Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and Households*. Link

36 Department for Work and Pensions. 2021. *Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2020*. Link

37 Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and the Labour Market*. Link

38 Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and the Labour Market*. Link

39 Office for National Statistics. 2021. *Families and the Labour Market*. Link

40 CCo analysis of the Annual Population Survey 2020. See Annex – Additional Analysis.

41 CCo analysis of the Annual Population Survey 2020. See Annex – Additional Analysis.

42 CCo analysis of the Annual Population Survey 2020. See Annex – Additional Analysis.

43 CCo analysis of the Annual Population Survey 2020. See Annex – Additional Analysis.

44 CCo analysis of the Annual Population Survey 2020. See Annex – Additional Analysis.

45 CCo analysis of the Annual Population Survey 2020. See Annex – Additional Analysis.

46 CCo analysis of the Annual Population Survey 2020. See Annex – Additional Analysis

47 CCo analysis of the Annual Population Survey 2020. See Annex – Additional Analysis.

48 CCo analysis of the Annual Population Survey 2020. See Annex – Additional Analysis.

49 Kiernan, K., Crossman, S. and Phimister, A. 2022. 'Families and inequalities.' *IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities*. Link

50 Office of National Statistics. 2021. *Families and Households*. Link

51 Office of National Statistics. 2021.*Families and Households.* Link

52 Office of National Statistics. 2020.*Births by Parents' Characteristics* . Link

53 Office of National Statistics. 2019.*Marriages in England and Wales* . Link

54 Office of National Statistics. 2021.*Families and Households* . Link

55 Office for National Statistics. 2021.*Families and the Labour Market* . Link

56 Office for National Statistics. 2021.*Families and the Labour Market* . Link

57 Killian Mullan and Stella Chatzitheochari. 2019. 'Changing Times Together? A Time-Diary Analysis of Family Time in the Digital Age in the United Kingdom.'*Journal of Marriage and Family* . 1-17. Link

58 Killian Mullan and Stella Chatzitheochari. 2019. 'Changing Times Together? A Time-Diary Analysis of Family Time in the Digital Age in the United Kingdom.'*Journal of Marriage and Family* . 1-17. Link

59 Office of National Statistics, 2022. Estimates for time spent by employed parents carrying out their daily tasks 2021. Link.

60 Understanding Society. 2020.*Parents Report Stronger Relationships with their Children during Lockdown* . Link

61 Department for Work and Pensions. 2022.*Parental Conflict Indicator* . Link

62 Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2022. 'Families and inequalities.'*Deaton Review* . Link

63 University of Sheffield. 2018.*Family Portrait: Single Parent Families and Transitions Over Time.* Link

64 CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey – for further details.

65 Office for National Statistics. 2011.*2011 Census analysis: How do living arrangements, family type and family size vary in England and Wales?* Link

66 Office for National Statistics. 2011 'Dependent Children Usually Resident in England and Wales with a Parental Second Address.'*Census 2011* . Link

67 Office for National Statistics. 2011 'Dependent Children Usually Resident in England and Wales with a Parental Second Address.'*Census 2011* . Link

68 Office for National Statistics. 2011. Census*2011* . Link

69 Office for National Statistics. 2022.*Families and households statistics explained* . Link

70 CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey

71 CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey

72 CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey

73 CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

74 Office of the Children's Commissioner.*Help at Hand* . Link

[75] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[76] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[77] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[78] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[79] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[80] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[81] Department for Education. 2022. *Ethnicity and Children's Social Care.* Link

[82] Department for Education. 2022. *Ethnicity and Children's Social Care.* Link

[83] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[84] Department for Education. 2022. *Drivers of Activity in Children's Social Care*. Link

[85] Children's Commissioner for England. 2021. *The Big Answer*. Link

[86] Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. 2020. *Contact between children in care or adopted and their families: six key messages from research*. Link

[87] Department for Education. 2021. Children Looked After in England including Adoption. Link

[88] Ethnicity Facts and Figures. 2021. *Adopted and Looked After Children*. Link

[89] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[90] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[91] Children's Commissioner for England. 2020. *Stability Index 2020*. Link

[92] Sarah Wellard, Sarah Meakings, Elaine Farmer, and Joan Hunt. 2017. *Growing up in Kinship Care: Experiences as Adolescents and Outcomes in Young Adulthood*. Link

[93] Department for Education. 2021. *Children Looked After in England Including Adoptions*. Viewed August 2022. Link

[94] Children's Commissioner's Office, Stability Index 2019. Link

[95] Children's Commissioner for England. 2021. *The Big Answer*. Link

[96] Broadhurst, K., Mason, C., Bedston, S., Alrouh, B., Morriss, L., Mcquarrie, T., Palmer, M., Shaw, M., Harwin, J. and Kershaw, S. 2017. *Vulnerable Birth Mothers and Recurrent Care Proceedings*. Link

[97] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey – for more details.

[98] The Children's Society. 2018. *Good Childhood Report*. Link

[99] The Children's Society. 2018. *Good Childhood Report*. Link

[100] The Children's Society. 2018. *Good Childhood Report*. Link

[101] The Children's Society. 2018. *Good Childhood Report*. Link

[102] Melhuish, E and Gardiner J., 2022, 'Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to age five years' Link

[103] K. Tamura, J. Morrison, and H. Pikhart. 2020. 'Children's Behavioural Problems and its Associations with Socioeconomic Position and Early Parenting Environment: Findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study.' *Epidemiology and Psychiatric Sciences*. 29. Link

[104] Center on the Developing Child. 2015. 'Working Paper 13: Supportive Relationships and Active Skill-Building Strengthen the Foundations of Resilience.' *Harvard University*. Link

[105] Center on the Developing Child. 2020. 'Working Paper 15: Connecting the Brain to the Rest of the Body: Early Childhood Development and Lifelong Health are Deeply Intertwined.' *Harvard University*. Link

[106] Rothon, C., Goodwin, L. and Stansfeld, S. 2012. 'Family social support, community "social capital" and adolescents' mental health and educational outcomes: a longitudinal study in England.' *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*. 47:5. 697-709.

[107] CCo analysis of LSYPE data. See Annex – Additional Analysis.

[108] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[109] CCo analysis of *The Big Ask*, see Annex – *The Big Ask*.

[110] Giacomo Vagni. 2022. 'From me to you: Time together and subjective well-being in the UK.' *Sociology*. 56: 2. 262-279

[111] CCo analysis of Understanding Society. See Annex – Additional Analysis.

[112] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[113] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[114] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[115] Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2022. *Families and Inequalities*. Link

[116] Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2022. *Families and Inequalities*. Link

[117] Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2022. *Families and Inequalities*. Link

[118] Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2022. *Families and Inequalities*. Link

[119] Institute for Fiscal Studies. 2022. *Families and Inequalities*. Link

[120] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[121] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[122] Department for Work and Pensions. 2022. *Parental conflict indicator 2011 to 2020*. Link

[123] Early Intervention Foundation. 2016. *What works to enhance interparental relationships and improve outcomes for children?* Link

[124] Professor Miranda Wolpert, UCL. Outcomes for children and young people seen in specialist mental health services. Link

[125] Institute for Public Policy Research. 2013. *Raising a family.* Link

[126] Booth, A., & Amato, P. R. (2001). Parental predivorce relations and offspring postdivorce well-being. Journal of Marriage and Family, 63(1), 197–212. Link

[127] Fegans. 2021. Divorce 1000: Hearing the voice of 1000 parents with lived experience of separation and divorce. Link

[128] Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, Statistical commentary: children living with parents in emotional distress, March 2022 update. Link

[129] NHS England. *Perinatal Mental Health*. Link

[130] NHS Digital. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021 - wave 2 follow up to the 2017 survey. Link

[131] NHS Digital. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2021 - wave 2 follow up to the 2017 survey. Link

[132] Where family functioning is based on responses to four questions about whether 'We confide in one another,' 'We feel accepted for what we are,' 'There is lots of bad feeling in the family,' and 'We avoid discussing our fears and concerns,' NHS Digital, Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2021.

[133] Department for Education, 2016. *The lives of young carers in England: Qualitative report to DfE*. Link

[134] The Children's Society, 2020. *Hidden from view: The experiences of young carers*. Link

[135] The Carers Trust, 2020. *My future, my feelings, my family*. Link

[136] Children's Commissioner for England. *CHLDRN – Local and national data on childhood vulnerability*. Link

[137] Public Health England, 2021. *Parents with alcohol and drug problems: adult treatment and children and family services*. Link

[138] Department for Work and Pensions, 2021. *Examination of the links between parental conflict and substance misuse and the impacts on children's outcomes*. Link

[139] Public Health England. 2018. *Addressing the impact of non-dependent parental substance misuse upon children*. Link

[140] Shelter. Full House? How Overcrowded housing affects families. 2021. Link

[141] Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities. 2021. *English Housing Survey 2020-21 Headline report*. Link

[142] Department for Levelling Up, Housing, and Communities. 2021. *English Housing Survey 2020-21 Headline report*. Link

[143] Refugee Council. 2017. Refugees without refuge: Findings from a survey of newly recognised refugees. Link

[144] Department for Education. 2021. *Characteristics of children in need: 2020 to 2021*. Link

[145] Action for Children. 2019. *Support for children affected by domestic abuse*. Link

[146] Action for Children. 2019. *Support for children affected by domestic abuse*. Link

[147] Action for Children. 2019. *Support for children affected by domestic abuse*. Link

[148] Department for Education. 2021. *Characteristics of children in need: 2020 to 2021*. Link

[149] National Library of Medicine. *Consequences of Child Abuse and Neglect*. Link

[150] ADCS. 2016. *Safeguarding Pressures Phase 5*. Link

[151] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[152] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[153] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[154] CCo's Nationally Representative Survey on Family Life. See Annex – Survey.

[155] Section 12 of the Childcare Act 2006. Link

[156] Section 12 of the Childcare Act 2006. Link

[157] CCo's analysis of focus groups. See Annex – Focus Groups.

[158] Action for Children. 2021. *Barriers to Accessing Early Years Services for Children*. Link

[159] CCo analysis of FSS. See Annex – FSS (Forthcoming)

[160] Action for Children. 2021. *Barriers to Accessing Early Years Services for Children*. Link

[161] Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. *Child and Maternal Health Statistics*. Link

[162] CCo analysis of FSS. See Annex – FSS (Forthcoming)

[163] CCo analysis of FSS. See Annex – FSS (Forthcoming)

[164] Early Intervention Foundation. 2022. *Improving the way family support services work for minority ethnic families*. Link

[165] Early Intervention Foundation. 2022. *Improving the way family support services work for minority ethnic families*. Link

[166] Action for Children. *Parenting Through the Pandemic*. Link

[167] Children Heard and Seen. Link

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER