

# Ambitious for Children

Children's Commissioner for England's five year commitments

**2015-2020**

# About the Children's Commissioner for England

Anne Longfield took up the post of Children's Commissioner for England on 1 March 2015. Her role was established under the Children Act 2004 and strengthened by the Children and Families Act 2014.

The Commissioner has responsibility in law for promoting and protecting children's rights in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. This includes listening to what children and young people say about things that affect them and encouraging adults making decisions to always take their views and interests into account.

The Acts which frame the Commissioner's work make her responsible for working on behalf of all children in England and in particular, those whose voices are least likely to be heard. She is expected to have a particular focus on the rights of children in the new section 8A of the Children Act 2004 and other groups of children who she considers are at particular risk of having their rights infringed. This includes those who are in or leaving care or living away from home, and those receiving social care services.

The law says that the Commissioner must represent children in parts of the UK outside England on issues that are not-devolved to the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. These include immigration, for the whole of the UK, and youth justice, for England and Wales.

The post of Children's Commissioner was created following a recommendation in the Inquiry into Victoria Climbié's death and requests from a number of children's sector charities to do so. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that countries should ideally have an individual such as a Children's Commissioner or Ombudsman responsible for children's rights.

# The Children's Commissioner 5 year priorities



**We all have a part to play in being ambitious for children. From the security, love and guidance we provide as parents and carers, to the supporting role of the extended family. From the responsibility we have to our local communities, to our place in wider society, we all have a role to play in making**

**the country a great place to grow up in and we all reap the rewards from doing so. Our experience of growing up matters and our childhood shapes every aspect of our future lives.**

Children and their parents tell us that in many ways life has become much more complicated – 24-hour communication and the internet have upped the pace and pressures from the consumer world, changing family relationships and patterns of work have had a major impact.

We are split on our views on how this has effected childhood. A recent YouGov survey conducted for the Children's Commissioner found that whilst almost a third of us feel it has got better, a substantial 45% feel the quality of life for children have got worse. The continuous availability of the internet and social media is seen as a negative effect on childhood for two thirds of us and only one in eight of us feel it has been beneficial.

However, whilst the context of childhood is changing, a recent Children's Commissioner survey of over 700 children and young people found that the things children and young people value remain constant. For almost half – one of the most important aspects of childhood remains having someone to care for them. Half say that being able to play (and not have the responsibilities of adults) as being one of the best things about being a child and around a quarter say its friendships and socialising (including on social media).

Children also have clear messages for us all about what would improve childhood. More freedom and independence to make their own decisions and be who they want to be without judgement is a priority for half. Just under half think that school could be improved, including having less homework so that all their free time is not taken up. Children are clear that they want fewer exams and tests and better classes and lessons that not only teach them about particular subjects, but also life skills and prepare them for adult life. And just under a third of children and young people say that childhood would be better if they were respected, had their views heard and taken seriously.

These messages must inform our thinking in all that we do.

Of course, most children and young people are resilient and adept at adapting to change, be it for better or worse. They have continued to thrive despite the increasing complexity of life. But we should also recognise that the quickening pace of change is relentless, and is set to continue to be so. The impact of many of these changes, and those that are yet to come remain unknown. As we look to the future, and the world our children of tomorrow will inhabit, we need to think more carefully about the challenges we will be asking them to face.

For some children, the challenges they face are already too much to overcome without our help. The long shadow of poverty, the troubles of children in, or leaving care; the trauma for children who are harmed or neglected; the challenges for children who have a long-term health condition or who are disabled. The needs of children who are in trouble with the law or who are in the immigration or asylum system are similarly undeniable.

As a nation we worry about the world in which we are raising our children but are rarely confident enough about stepping in to shape the society we want our children to grow up in. Over the next five years I will advocate for positive change for all children and particularly those who are most disadvantaged. Every child has a right to the best childhood possible.

I will be ambitious for children and I ask you to be so too. I want us to understand better the importance of children's experience as they grow up to build a society which values childhood and respects their rights as individuals. We all have a duty to help children flourish and we all have a duty of care to prevent and protect children from harm. These are my commitments over the next five years.

Children rely on us to make it happen.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Anne Longfield". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

# 1. Understanding & celebrating childhood

**Children and young people have a unique and expert perspective on their own lives. That's why they are at the heart of the five year priorities – influencing and shaping everything the Children's Commissioner will do.**

Children and young people are active participants in all that the Children's Commissioner does. But the Commissioner wants to go further than this, bringing the voice of children to the public debate and encouraging all those who have responsibilities for children to build a better understanding of their lives and views into decision making. Most of all its about acting on what we learn to improve and change what we do. From children's charities to those making decisions about children's welfare in the local authority or court, the Children's Commissioner wants children to be seen, heard and better understood. Children account for almost 25% of our population today and 100% of our future.

**Children have already shaped the Children's Commissioners' priorities for the next five years:**

Amplify and Young Amplify, the Children's Commissioner's young advisory group have supported all our work and will continue to do so including important work on mental health which will make a major contribution to a wider national push on the issue. Young Amplify began a national dialogue around what it means to feel safe which will influence our wider work around online safety and relationships and sex education.

We have established Young Expert Groups which inform and influence our work, enabling children to be the experts they are in things that matter to them to directly influence decision makers. We have also worked with hundreds of children and young people in partnership with organisations in our participation network and groups that directly support children and young people from a range of diverse backgrounds. Every one of our policy proposals has been informed by children and young people themselves and this will continue.

We have used our unique powers to meet with and listen to children and young people in and leaving care. We have also visited children in custody, in residential homes and in asylum centres to hear about their experiences and treatment and recommend changes to improve their wellbeing in response. We have also begun a work experience programme which enabled young people to help deliver some of our work whilst gaining crucial skills for future employment. These programmes will continue and expand over coming years.

**Over coming months, children and young people will be working with staff to develop all aspects of the five year priorities into a working plan to truly promote and protect children's rights.**

## **We will design a new digital settlement led by children**

Childhood has been transformed by technology. It has happened swiftly, in a creative but socially and legally disorganised way. The potential for creativity, for knowledge and innovation is immense. But it carries challenges with it which are unprecedented.

The Children's Commissioner is therefore planning to establish a new Taskforce in autumn 2015 as a first step to examine and explore children's experiences, ambitions, needs and concerns about the digital world and examine and challenge the industry response.

Over the next five years, we aim to put forward a clear mandate for change which has been driven and informed by children and young people themselves. It will aim to secure a new digital settlement for children that promote and protect their rights into their digital future.

- 80% of 15 year olds have a smart phone – a powerful mobile computer
- 80% of three to four year olds have access to the internet
- The average 11 year old boy has viewed pornography
- Four of the five most popular channels on YouTube are aimed at children

***Enriching childhoods will be a theme that runs through the five year period. Beginning with a series of activities with our young amplify group, the Commissioner will be leading a national debate about childhood today. A media focused 'Curating Childhood' project will begin later this year to map children's images of their experience of childhood and the world around them.***

## 2. Being ambitious for every child in care

**There have been important improvements for children in care and care leavers: changes in government policy enabled young people to stay with foster carers beyond the age of 16 and residential care was reviewed following a recommendation from the Children's Commissioner.**

Despite improvements, the quality and stability of provision for children in care remains too variable across the country. The gap in attainment and wellbeing between children in care and those who are not is still too wide.

Most children come into care as a result of abuse and neglect and so have experienced trauma and loss. For most, care does a good job and is able to offer greater security and stability than their birth parents. However, some children do not find the stability they need in the care system and many can remain very vulnerable because of their life experiences. Some are less likely than other children to achieve academic success or build resilience through stable relationships and may have problems with crime, drugs and with their mental health.

### What we know

- At any one time there are around 70,000 children in care of local authorities in England around 75% of whom live with foster parents
- There are approximately 2,000 unaccompanied asylum seeking children in the care system
- Nearly 68% of looked after children have special educational needs
- Looked after children have poorer educational attainment than non-looked after children

***Nearly 3,000 children in care took part our first State of the Nation report this month giving their views about all aspects of their lives.***

Despite recent improvements, the instability of placements, a high turnover of social workers and a requirement to leave care too early remain the experience for too many children in care. Too many children are not consulted about decisions about them and are not able to understand or influence what happens to them. Many more struggle to ever understand why they came into care in the first place with few being offered the therapeutic support and care needed to recover from past harm and build emotional resilience for the future.

Over the next five years, the Children's Commissioner wants to build on improvements to date to secure a seismic shift in ambition for all children in care which puts the voice of the child, continuing and constant relationships and a focus on recovery at its heart. Ensuring that children have consistency of support from social workers and extending support for all children to the age of 25 is essential, however a commitment to guarantee all children the therapeutic support needed to build a confident future could be transformative. **These are the goals of the Children's commissioner.**

### What the Children's Commissioner aims to achieve

- **Stability, recovery and relationships will be placed at the heart of support for children in care**
- **Children will influence all decisions that are made about them and all decisions will be fully explained to them**
- **Support for all care leavers will be extended up to 25 years of age**
- **Continuing and consistent relationship with someone who is there into adulthood**
- **Children will keep their social worker for longer through their time in care**
- **Children will be guaranteed therapeutic care to help them recover from past traumas**

# 3. See a major reduction in children being harmed

Thirty years ago children were twice as likely to die from harm as they are today but child neglect and sexual abuse are now the most important issues that society faces. One child per week continues to die at the hands of another person, around 600,000 have been or are being sexually abused and 1.2 million have experienced neglect. Vulnerable children are at risk of exploitation and grooming.

With so many children being harmed through neglect and sexual abuse and exploitation, it is not surprising that the issues are rarely out of the news. The headlines of sexual abuse and radicalization show how vulnerable children are at risk. Over recent year the deaths of many children at the hands of their family members has shocked us and led to examining every element of our public services.

The Children's Commissioner's post was created following the Inquiry into the terrible case of Victoria Climbié in a lasting commitment to give children a voice. Whilst major gains have been made, too many children remain unprotected, with the adults around them failing to see or act on the abuse they are experiencing.

In five years' time we want to be able to say that statutory authorities, charities and communities in England are truly doing all they can to protect children from harm.

## What the Children's Commissioner aims to achieve

- **Preventing and protecting children from harm will be a national and local priority**
- **There will be a new alignment of services and professionals around vulnerable children including the police, health, schools and local authorities**
- **Our pioneering approach to child-centered prevention and protection will be common place in every area**
- **Children who have been abused or neglected will be able to expect support to recover**
- **Children will know where to go for help when it's needed**

*We are championing approaches to help children and young people recognise and tell about abuse and neglect and will disseminate this widely to practitioners and professionals.*

## What we know

- One child dies at the hands of another person each week
- One in six is exposed to violence in the home
- There are hundreds of cases of child sexual exploitation going through the courts with broad agreement that much more remains undetected
- 600,000 have experienced or are being subjected to sexual abuse
- Violence, abuse and neglect are not restricted to particular social classes or groups of people – any child can become a victim
- One in 12 children deliberately harm themselves (and 25,000 of them are hospitalised each year because of this)
- One in 10 has experienced neglect.

***We have developed an innovative approach to child-centred protection called See Me Hear Me. Over the next five years we will be asking local authorities to adopt the approach, backed up by training and support for professionals to always put the child at the heart.***

### **What children and young people tell us**

- They may not recognise that they are being abused or exploited
- They find it very difficult to and often do not tell anyone about abuse or neglect so adults must get better at spotting and acting on the signs
- If they do feel able to tell about abuse or neglect, they do not know who to turn to for help and their past attempts to seek help will influence the likelihood they will do so. They needed to develop trust with a supportive adult.

***Our 2013 inquiry into child sexual exploitation raised national recognition of the need to tackle child sexual exploitation and has resulted in significant progress***

***We will continue this momentum with our new inquiry into child sexual abuse linked to the family environment.***

***Young people who had been sexually exploited told us they would have benefited from good relationships and sex education in school. The Children's Commissioner wants to see PSHE in school on a statutory basis.***

# 4. See sustained action to reduce inequalities for children

Despite enormous gains for some children, the fact remains that children in England grow up in a society that is still deeply unequal. One in four are living in poverty; an estimated 500,000 families are 'just coping,' and whilst reducing, 940,000 young people still face an uncertain future without employment or training.

Disadvantage casts a long shadow over children's lives – it affects their experience of school and educational outcomes, their ability to participate in their local community, the opportunities they enjoy throughout childhood, their health and ultimately life expectancy. The most disadvantaged children – those with multiple inequalities - are the most vulnerable to adversity and have the least ability to overcome them. The fact remains that children who are in trouble with the law have faced the highest levels of disadvantage as they grow up.

The vulnerabilities of children who enter the country as unaccompanied asylum seekers often escaping terrible experiences at home are particularly severe and they need our protection and support.

The Children's Commissioner is determined to change the odds to help children overcome disadvantage.

***Over the coming year, we will be developing a national resource of facts, trends and insights into all aspects of children's lives to inform opinion makers and decision makers and raise awareness of childhood today.***

***We will be extending our advice and support service to offer more help for children in care and care leavers. In five years time we want all children in care to be able to rely on the service with online information, advice and support.***

***We want to see radical improvements to children and young people's health over the next five years, especially around mental health. We remain concerned about growing levels of anxiety, self-harm and cannabis use for children and young people, and the significant inequalities in children and young people's health.***

## What the Children's Commissioner aims to achieve

- **A new commitment and sustained action to reduce inequalities for the poorest children**
- **A shift to early intervention to help children early before problems escalate**
- **Improved health support in the early years and a greater role for school nurses for older children**
- **The protection of children's best interests in custody and support to enable them to positively move forward**
- **Better early help for children experiencing anxiety, low self-esteem and depression**
- **Children's raised awareness of the dangers of use of cannabis, legal highs and alcohol**
- **The protection and support for children who are unaccompanied and seeking asylum**

***We want to see improved outcomes for children in the youth justice or asylum systems. Local authorities have a statutory obligation to protect and promote the welfare of these children and although some do so successfully, failures to focus on the child; poor leadership; poor staff training and support; and failure to share information remain.***

### **What we know**

- 2.7 million children are living in poverty
- One in three of boys in custody have spent time in care
- Children in custody are far more likely to be from ethnic minority groups
- Children from some minority groups such as white working class boys achieve far less at school than others.
- 1000 children entered the country as an unaccompanied asylum seeker last year

### **What children and young people tell us**

- Children place a high value on family and other positive relationships with friends, carers and professionals
- Children want to be able to access to good quality and relevant education as a priority
- Health is a critical issue for children and they would like a particular focus on good quality mental health services
- Children want support and advice services to help them to achieve their hopes and dreams. These need to take account of the unique needs of children with disabilities and children who are in care and care leavers

***We want to see new investment in children in the poorest areas of the country to turn around the odds through practical support such as children's centres to help children and their parents escape poverty.***

***The welfare of unaccompanied asylum seeking children remains a concern. We will continue to examine their treatment by the authorities and work to ensure they get the support they need.***

***The number of children in custody has declined but there are still a disproportionate number of children in the youth justice system who have been in care, are disabled, come from poor families and have mental health problems.***

# 5. See a machinery of Government that best helps children flourish

**Children's lives don't fit the rigid structures of government and departmental policies however well-intentioned they may be. As a result, policies often struggle to make the impact they should have.**

Governments – national and local – and their partners often struggle to meet the needs of children in an interconnected way. Too many of their decisions discount the interests and overlook the views and needs of children.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is the most widely ratified human rights agreement on the planet – all but the USA have signed up to it, with the UK doing so in December 1991. Much has improved for children in England since the UNCRC was introduced but basic elements of children's views and rights remain unmet.

It is the views of children about every aspect of their lives and experiences that lead to the best policies and practice that works.

## **What the Children's Commissioner aims to achieve**

- A national stocktake of investment and commitments for children from across all government departments
- A high level government strategy for children
- A Cabinet post for the Children's Minister
- A national children's test with assessment to ensure the best interests of children are taking into account when all policy is made
- Action to ensure that children's best interests are considered in all policy making by ratifying children's rights within law
- Undertake Child Rights Impact Assessments on areas of concern

## **What we know**

- Children's views are often overlooked when making policy
- Children are uniquely vulnerable – that's why they are afforded an important set of rights
- The Human Rights Act provides important protection

## **What children and young people tell us**

- They want to have a say and do not understand how decisions can be made which affect them without it
- They want support to be joined up
- They want to know their complaints and feedback are acted on if things go wrong
- They believe all children have a right to be treated fairly

***Our participation programme that puts children in charge will be developed into a national Takeover Challenge to put children at the heart of decision making - from the whitehall to the town hall - from the green room to the board room.***



# Ambitious for children means:

- Valuing childhood and making decisions as a society that reflect that
- Understanding that children are vulnerable members of society and fulfilling our duty of care to ensure their health and wellbeing
- Using our resources wisely to provide the best support possible to enable children to flourish
- Giving children the springboard they need as they move into adult life
- Believing that all children are capable of greatness

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Promoting and protecting children's rights