

Witness Name: Rachel de Souza

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: CC/06 - CC/20

Dated: 31 July 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF DAME RACHEL DE SOUZA

I, Dame Rachel de Souza, will say as follows:

Personal Details

1. My name is Rachel de Souza. I was appointed Children's Commissioner for England on 1st March 2021. Prior to this, I co-founded the Inspiration Trust, a family of fourteen schools in East Anglia. The Trust was twice ranked as the nation's top group of comprehensive schools based on pupil progress at GCSE. In 2014 I received the honour of being appointed a DBE for services to education.
2. I welcome the opportunity to contribute to Module 8 of the UK Covid-19 Inquiry on behalf of the Children's Commissioner's office. This submission responds to the specific questions outlined in the Rule 9 Request and reflects the statutory mandate of the Commissioner's role to promote and protect the rights of children in England, particularly the most vulnerable.
3. The Children's Commissioner is a statutory role and is a corporation sole. The Commissioner is an office holder who holds a single term of six years. Reflecting this, as communicated to the Inquiry, it has not been possible in all cases to provide full answers to questions relating to the tenure of the previous Children's Commissioner, The Baroness Longfield CBE.

Significant Impacts of School Closures

4. It is important to note that I was not Children's Commissioner at the time of the first school closure in March 2020. These reflections are based on my role as a multi-academy trust CEO during the pandemic and insights gained since starting the role of Commissioner in March 2021.
5. I believe that children's mental health and wellbeing was one of the most significant impacts of school closures. In *The Big Ask* (CC/06 [INQ000570997]), I asked young people what they thought stopped children from achieving what they want when they grow up, or what they would change to make their lives better in future. When asked what they were worried about, children often used the words 'mental health'. Children told the office that the time away from school, their friends and teachers and the transition to an online world had led to feelings of isolation:

'I think that we all spend so much time on social media, worrying about how many followers we have, that we don't get enough time to just stop and do nothing, or go outside or spend more time with our families' – Girl, 12.

'I think that for some young people, the lack of confidence that they have affects their overall wellbeing, particularly during the pandemic where it is difficult to interact with people' – Boy, 13.

6. The office has published annual reports on children's mental health services since 2019/20 (CC/06a [INQ000649891]; CC/06b [INQ000649892]; CC/06c [INQ000649893]; CC/06d [INQ000649894]; CC/06e [INQ000649895]). I also published a blog post on the postcode lottery of these services in 2023 (CC/06f) [INQ000649896].
7. I remain deeply concerned about children's mental health. Nearly a million children had active referrals for children's mental health services in 2023-24, which is nearly 8% of all children in England. It is concerning that on average these children wait over a month to be seen, with many waiting far longer. But it is equally concerning that the numbers of children with this level of need continues to grow. It is essential that the wider societal determinants of children's poor health – such as poverty, inequality, and online (and offline) harms – are addressed.

"Lots of children have mental health problems in my age range and find it difficult to make friends due to covid." – Girl, 14

"Actually help kids with mental health problems instead of leaving them on a waiting list most of their teenage years." – Girl, 13

8. Children also told the office that they wanted opportunities to reconnect with their peers and to play and socialise. One of the most frequently used words in *The Big Ask* was ‘play’:

‘Because of Covid it stops children doing what they want to do like seeing their nana and grandad or playing with their friends at a park’ - Girl, 11

‘Children won’t be able to do much because of this pandemic and lockdown and children won’t really be able to meet friends and play like they did before this coronavirus’ - Girl, 9.

9. I have been particularly concerned by the rise in absences following school lockdowns. I calculated that 1.6 million children were persistently absent from school in 2021/22, in a blog published on the office’s website on 16 March 2023 (*New attendance figures for academic year 2021/22*).
10. I have carried out extensive work to understand the reasons for this increase in absenteeism (CC/07 [INQ000570998]). This research identified that the key drivers of absenteeism included: mental health and anxiety, a lack of support for children with special educational needs, challenges affecting children in their home life and a breakdown in habits around attending school regularly.
11. More generally, the sudden changes to children’s lives demonstrated two things. First, that their lives are uncertain. Even areas of their lives that feel unquestionable – going to school, seeing friends and family, their parents going out to work, suddenly came to a stop. We can’t overestimate the long-term impact that has had on children who lived through it.
12. Second, children saw the government take drastic action and create change. In *The Big Ambition* survey (CC/08 [INQ000570999]), children said clearly that they expect the government to do more for children and that they believe that it can do more – in part that is because they have seen the dramatic impact that policy change can have on their lives.

Government Action

13. I welcomed steps to mitigate the impacts of closures on children’s wellbeing and engagement with education such as provisions for schools to stay open for vulnerable children and the development of remote learning resources, such as Oak Academy.

14. However, despite these measures, there was not enough support or guidance put in place to ensure vulnerable children were able to attend school regularly during the pandemic. Some children who were identified as vulnerable already had absenteeism challenges and a history of disengagement. It was hard for school leaders to encourage these families to send their children in during a time of heightened concern around the spread of the virus and a lack of access to external support agencies.
15. Schools play a fundamental role in safeguarding and child protection. The decision to close schools led to a lack of oversight of some children in unsafe environments. The government's guidance on the pandemic and school closures did not provide sufficient advice around how to support children at risk of harm during the lockdowns.
16. The government also struggled to provide the laptops it pledged to schools to support children with online learning. In some instances, schools had to provide these devices themselves.
17. The national lockdown put immense pressure on some of the most vulnerable families and children and in many places, schools took on the responsibilities of poverty relief and social services, without the resource or guidance to do so.
18. There was also insufficient thought given to how to support children to return to school following the pandemic. The government did not take the growing absenteeism figures seriously enough and was slow to act to put in place extra support for children who had not returned to school.
19. The decision to close schools in March 2020 followed consultation with the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). While the government weighed up the impact of school closures on virus transmission, there was not a similarly detailed assessment about the impact to children's wellbeing, mental health or subsequent attendance.
20. Since the pandemic, I have sought to give children a voice to speak about their experiences of lockdown and the harms done to children and to share these views with relevant government Ministers.
21. I believe that the decision to close schools during the first lockdown was the right decision, but any future decisions about lockdowns need to be weighed

against the harms of children missing out on being in school. The pandemic showed us the extent to which being out of school can affect children's wellbeing, access to support, and academic success.

22. While I welcomed the Education Recovery programme's academic catch up initiatives, I raised concerns about the lack of action on issues relating to wellbeing, mental health and supporting children who had stopped attending school during the pandemic.
23. I worked with the Covid Educational Recovery Advisory Board and made recommendations for an extended school day to give children the opportunity to socialise and participate in clubs to support their wellbeing during the return to school.
24. I was also concerned that the Department for Education did not recognise the absenteeism data following the pandemic as being as serious as it was. Following the pandemic, I conducted the Attendance Audit to understand the scale and drivers of the absenteeism challenge. I also worked closely with the Secretary of State and the Department for Education through the Attendance Action Alliance, which was set up in December 2021. While this group was a welcome intervention, I believe it was not closely linked enough to the actions of frontline professionals to have an impact on improving school attendance following the pandemic.

Online Learning

25. While I have not conducted specific analysis about access to online learning during the pandemic, the responses to The Big Ask reveal some of the challenges children faced during this period. In their written responses to The Big Ambition, some children mentioned challenges around accessing online teaching and resources:

"No access to laptops or any other devices especially during covid-19" - Girl, 14

"Covid is a big one covid has stopped a lot of children my age or younger to progress and live their lives poverty is a big thing in England some families can't afford things like a laptop for home learning or an iPad." - Girl, 10

"When we had the covid 19 pandemic and we had to stay indoors it was scary. Then the schools started teaching online and my mum and dad could not afford to [buy] laptops so we had to study using old method of

books and then teachers would ring to know why we were not learning online and it was quite embarrassing then my parents bought 3 laptops which made me feel bad as they were struggling. I have missed out on learning and then people find it hard to get jobs and then house prices are so much. I can't see myself leave my parents house till after 50. I don't know what the future would look like. I wish I could start all over again.” - Girl, age unspecified.

26. 140 children mentioned ‘online learning’ in their responses to The Big Ask. Children told the office that they or their peers struggled to engage with online learning:

“When out of school and doing online learning no one attends the lessons” - Girl, 15

“The online learning effected a lot of people and might not know enough for secondary/gcse/a-levels and jobs might want more experience than this. they also might be worried if there is another pandemic because all most of us want is a normal school life again.” - Girl, 11

“The lack of learning because of lockdown since it is very hard to learn according to my experience in home learning (online learning)” - Boy, 9

27. While I have not published a report on the overall reflections of children on online learning, I have given evidence to the Education Select Committee on absenteeism where I told the Committee that online learning was not as good as face-to-face.

Attendance

28. I joined the Attendance Action Alliance in 2021. This group was set up to improve school attendance following the pandemic, with the Department for Education acting as secretariat. In the first meeting in December 2021, I detailed findings about school attendance from my survey The Big Ask. The Big Ask identified the following as key drivers of absenteeism:

- Lack of mental health and SEND support;
- Chaotic home lives;
- Bullying; and
- Other problems causing unhappiness at school.

29. In the same meeting, I also gave example case studies from the Help at Hand advocacy service about looked after children whose placements broke down and who were unable to secure a special school place during Covid.

30. I then conducted a deep dive investigation into the reasons why vulnerable children were not attending school, known as the Attendance Audit. This research was based on a survey of all local authorities in England and an audit of 10 local authorities' absenteeism support. The office spoke to nearly 500 people including over 300 children, over 40 parents and carers and around 100 professionals in local authorities, health, schools and family hubs.
31. The Attendance Audit further evidenced that children's reasons for missing school were often highly individual and complex. The report confirmed that many children were missing school because of unmet SEND, mental health needs, bullying or problems at home.
32. Throughout June and September 2021, I wrote letters and emails to relevant Ministers and MPs about the impact of Covid-19 on children. These emails were based on the findings of The Big Ask, the biggest ever nationwide survey of children and young people, launched in March 2021.

Key findings from The Big Ask include:

33. The Big Ask showed how much children had missed their school and teachers. When I took up post, the partial lockdowns were still in place. I therefore made the return to school a priority of my work by sharing back to school guides and conducting research on the causes of school absences.
34. Many children valued the opportunity to spend time with the families during the Covid-19 school closures, but for some families this exacerbated stresses at home. Parents of babies and toddlers told me that they struggled to access support and family networks during this time, and many felt isolated and stressed. This was one of the main impetuses for The Children's Commissioner's Family Review, which made a series of recommendations to government to strengthen the support families receive.
35. The lockdowns brought into harsh relief some children's experience of vulnerability and the fundamental role that schools play in safeguarding. The decision to open schools for vulnerable children showed the importance of school attendance with respect to safeguarding. It was clear that for some children staying at home was dangerous, which is why I have called for a fundamental reform of children's social care.

36. The pandemic moved most of children's lives online and exposed the need for greater regulation to protect children from online harms. This is why I have made online safety a core focus of my work and have engaged closely on the Online Safety Act.
37. During school closures, children's mental health deteriorated substantially. The Big Ask showed that 20% of children were unhappy about their mental health. I have continued to shine a spotlight on this issue in my annual mental health briefings.
38. I am deeply concerned about the longer-term impacts of the pandemic, especially those which are disproportionately impacting children from disadvantaged background.
39. I have carried out extensive work investigating the rise in children missing education and increasing absenteeism post-pandemic. I remain concerned that well over 100,000 children remain severely absent, and these children are disproportionately likely to live in the most deprived neighbourhoods or to have special educational needs. The drivers of post-pandemic absenteeism are complex and multi-faceted. In some instances, working from home led to issues to do with children's wellbeing and protection going undetected. In other instances, children welcomed the opportunity to learn from home, especially when they found the school environment challenging. It has since been difficult for schools to re-engage these cohorts.

Mental Health

40. In terms of mental health, the school closures affected children differently. For some children, the school closures and lockdowns led to the onset of new mental health problems, and for others it made existing mental health problems worse. Children speak about the negative effect of being cut off from their friends, support networks, and key health services - and the loneliness and isolation they experienced. However, it is worth noting that for some children with poor mental health, the school closures offered some respite. This seems to have been particularly the case for children whose poor mental health was linked to the school environment, such as experiences of bullying or unsupported special educational needs and disabilities.
41. I believe that the government did not sufficiently prioritise children's physical and mental health and general wellbeing in the period of school closures

and the national lockdown. Children told me that during this period they felt lonely and isolated. Children told me of the strain that the pandemic put on their mental health.

“Being away from people made me feel quite lonely” - Girl, 15.

“I’m part of the COVID lockdown generation [...] We expected some sort of response from the government/ health service but were let down - and continue to be, as still the majority of those people haven’t seen a professional. Please fix the healthcare crisis.” – Girl, 17

42. I believe that the government did not sufficiently prioritise children’s wellbeing and social and emotional health in the return to school.

Decision-Making, Reopening Schools, and Monitoring During the Second School Closures

Consultation on Grades Calculations in March 2020

43. The previous Commissioner was not formally consulted by the government in March 2020 regarding the decision to calculate children’s grades for national exams using an algorithm and standardisation process. The office was not involved in discussions surrounding the design or implementation of the grading algorithm, nor was it approached for advice on its impact on children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Exemption of Children from the Rule of Six in September 2020

44. In September 2020, the previous Commissioner campaigned for children to be exempted from the Rule of Six restrictions, citing the following rationale:

- **Social Development:** The restrictions disproportionately impacted children’s ability to interact with peers and maintain social connections.
- **Mental Health:** Isolation from friends and activities contributed to increasing rates of anxiety and loneliness among children.
- **Advocacy Efforts:** Engaged with government officials to propose an exemption for children (*Childhood in the Time of Covid*).

Monitoring and Assessment During January 2021 School Closures

45. The previous Commissioner conducted or participated in the following assessments:

- a. Safety: Monitored safeguarding referrals, which declined during closures, raising concerns about vulnerable children becoming “invisible” to services.
- b. Physical and Mental Health: Collected data showing increased stress, anxiety, and isolation among children, particularly those in disadvantaged households.
- c. Attainment and Development: Reported on the widening attainment gap, exacerbated by disparities in access to quality remote learning.
- d. Digital Access: Advocated for expanded laptop schemes and internet access, but highlighted ongoing gaps in digital inclusion.
- e. Internet Use: Identified risks associated with increased unsupervised internet use, including exposure to harmful content.
- f. Impact on Vulnerable Children: Detailed how closures disproportionately affected children in care, those in poverty, and those with SEND.

Overview of Issues Facing Children’s Social Care as of January 2020

46. In January 2020, children’s social care in the United Kingdom faced significant challenges, many of which were exacerbated by the onset of the pandemic. Key issues included:
- Rising Demand: Increasing numbers of children in need of social care services, particularly those exposed to the “toxic trio” of domestic abuse, parental substance misuse, and severe parental mental health issues.
 - Resource Constraints: Local authorities reported funding pressures, workforce shortages, and limited capacity to meet growing demand.
 - Service Disparities: Variability in the quality and availability of services across different regions, with disadvantaged areas often facing the greatest challenges.
 - Vulnerable Children’s Needs: High numbers of children at risk of harm due to inadequate early intervention and support mechanisms
47. There were well known problems in children’s social care in January 2020. The Conservative manifesto for the 2019 General Election promised an independent review of children’s social care, which was eventually launched in January 2021. The House of Commons Library research paper from 2021 provides a useful summary of the state of the sector at the time. (CC/12 [INQ000571003])

Help at Hand

48. My independent advocacy team ‘Help at Hand’ had continued to operate and had communications with local authorities to raise concerns about the care of some children throughout the specified period. Help at Hand is an

advice and assistance service for children in care, children living away from home, children with a social worker, and care leavers.

49. Help at Hand made representations for children with disabilities who were living at home and whose support outside of family had suddenly stopped or reduced dramatically, causing significant pressure on the family and; children who were living away from their families and were no longer allowed contact because of covid related restrictions. Help at Hand always fought for these children's best interest to be given primacy.
50. From January to December 2020, the Help at Hand service received 966 enquiries, the majority of which concerned children in care and care leavers. The issues raised by these children and young people were disparate and varied but included being forced to move from a happy foster home, being restrained inappropriately while in care, feeling isolated in mental health hospital or secure children's homes, not having enough information about their rights, or being faced with homelessness. Some of these problems had been further exacerbated by the pandemic.
51. The team provides support ranging from information and general advice, to direct assistance and representation for children and young people whose rights have been breached. As part of their representations, they contact a wide range of professionals and agencies, including social workers and team managers, directors of children's services, regional NHS chief executives, prison governors and officials in the Department for Education and the Home Office.
52. The previous Commissioner made personal representations on behalf of 48 children in 2020, and the team were able to completely or partially resolve the problem in 80% of cases they took up. (CC/13 [INQ000571004])
53. From 1st March 2021 to 31st August 2022, the Help at Hand service received 1,254 enquiries. I wrote directly to senior managers on behalf of 53 children. Where Help at Hand intervened, 77% of cases were resolved or partially resolved. (CC/14 [INQ000571005])

Guidance

54. In May 2020, the previous Commissioner was invited to contribute to the Department for Education's guidance for Local Authorities and providers of

children's social care services. Her comments were returned along with a supporting document outlining the overarching stance of the office at the time, both of which are attached to the statement the office previously submitted to the inquiry. Upon publication on 06 May 2020, DfE confirmed to the Commissioner which of the recommended amendments had been applied.

55. It is important to note that in June 2020, permission was granted for an expedited judicial review of DfE's removal and dilution of children in care's legal protections in response to the impacts of Covid-19. The request, brought forward by Article 39, was granted partly on the basis that DfE failed to consult bodies representing children in care, including the previous Children's Commissioner, before making the changes to these legal protections. In November the same year, the court ruled unanimously that the Secretary of State for Education acted unlawfully in failing to consult the Children's Commissioner for England and other children's rights organisations before removing vital safeguards for children in care.

56. The office was concerned about the shift in many cases to social worker visits being conducted with children and families virtually. The timescales for social workers to visit children in care were relaxed, along with timescales for care review meetings, independent visits to children's homes and Ofsted inspections. This was an area of concern.

The Short and Long-Term Impacts of the Pandemic on Children

Education

57. In the Big Ambition survey, which had 253,000 responses from children and adults on their behalf in England, keywords related to Covid-19 were mentioned in around 700 or 0.4% of written comments. The most commonly mentioned keywords in written comments related to education, with some children talking about missing education during the pandemic and the impact this is still having on their progress.

"Due to covid I missed a whole year's education and even though we get help sheets, the pass rate being 11% further proves how difficult it was. I am nervous for my real ones next year because of this extremity" – Girl, 15.

58. The office's work on absenteeism and children missing from education commented on the impact of covid (CC/15 [INQ000571006]). The

Attendance Audit stated that the pandemic had led to worsening mental health which was impacting school attendance.

59. The pandemic has also exacerbated some children's underlying problems – such as mental health needs and difficult family circumstances, which means it is more important than ever to get children the right support. Over the last two years, there has been a sharp increase in the number of children experiencing mental health problems. The NHS Mental Health of Children and Young People in England survey shows that before the pandemic, in 2017, 1 in 9 children had a probable mental health disorder. That had jumped to 1 in 5 by the latest survey in 2023. Inclusion managers and learning support workers interviewed as part of the Attendance Audit said that they have noticed this increased prevalence of mental health need in their work.
60. My 2024 report, *Lost in transition*, (CC/16 [INQ000571007]) stated that some parents had decided to home educate after seeing their children learn at home during the pandemic. They observed that their children preferred learning online and that they were less anxious when their schools returned under social distancing because they were working in smaller groups under the Covid bubble system.
61. I am aware of published time series data such as the Early Years Foundation State Profile and have occasionally commented on trends in this, such as in a blog post from 25 November 2022 *entitled Latest early years foundation stage results*, available on my website, but have not carried out any studies on the impact of the pandemic on child development.

Health

62. My annual mental health briefing for 2022-23 (CC/17 [INQ000471283]) speculated that Covid could be a factor explaining the increase in probable mental health conditions among 8- to 25-year-olds, from about 1 in 8 (12.5%) in 2017 to 1 in 5 (20.3%) in 2023.
63. The office's 2024 report on waiting times for neurodevelopmental disorders (CC/18 [INQ000571009]) involved interviews with parents, one of whom described the impact of the pandemic on their child. They requested an expediated assessment and the child received a virtual assessment (due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions) within 2 months, however the child was not initially diagnosed as autistic (which her parent felt was due to the inadequacy of the online assessment). After around 16 months the girl was

re-referred due to ongoing concerns from school. The child waited another 6 months for a face-to-face assessment, this time receiving an autism diagnosis. The parent felt that their child experienced a deterioration in her health and wellbeing during her waiting time for assessment that may have been avoided or better managed had their child been diagnosed earlier.

Children in Deprived Areas

64. Wherever possible, I analyse the different experiences of children in low-income families and living in deprived areas compared to other children. That includes looking at associations between child characteristics or outcomes and free school meal eligibility, deprivation decile or quintile of child's local area, and other proxies for deprivation and low income. I have not carried out specific work on the impact of the pandemic on this group.
65. Analysis of The Big Ambition survey noted that among the 100 most common words used in written comments by children were: need, money, poor, homeless, cheap, afford, food, and price. The office has not carried out work directly analysing the regional impact of the pandemic on children in different places. A number of studies by the office have included maps or commented on postcode lotteries but these have focused on particular themes such as mental health provision.

Children's Use of Technology

66. Children's use of technology increased during the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. Technology provided children with a means to access education and to socialise during the pandemic, with many children turning to tech to play games, keep in touch with friends and have fun when their offline ability to do so was limited. It enabled children to continue to access schoolwork through video lessons. Access to the internet also enabled children in care to keep in touch with social workers at a time when many in-person visits dropped off. Despite these benefits, some parts of the online world – in particular social media - were described by children at the time as an unsatisfying substitute for the real-world society of other people. Children were clear about how the time away from school, their classmates, their friends, and the transition into a largely online world affected them:

"I think that we all spend so much time on social media, worrying about how many followers we have, that we don't get enough time to just stop and do nothing, or go outside or spend more time with our families" – Girl, 12

67. The risks that existed online prior to the pandemic were still present during and afterwards, and as technology rapidly evolved to meet the rising demand for digital services, more risks of harm evolved too.

Children with Disabilities

68. My 2023 report *We all have a voice: disabled children's vision for change* commented on the impact of the pandemic. (CC/19 [INQ000571010])
69. Children, parents and professionals have highlighted just how profound the effect the pandemic and lockdown has been on disabled children. In The Big Ask survey, children were asked a single open text question which was thematically analysed to highlight some of the most common themes. One of the topics children with SEND were more likely than children without SEND to bring up in their written comments was the pandemic (13% vs 9%).
70. Previous research by the office highlights that despite children with an EHCP being classified as “vulnerable” and allowed to attend school during lockdown, only 6% of children with EHCPs attended school on average from the start of the first lockdown in March 2020 until the end of May 2020 (*Childhood in the time of Covid*).
71. Research into why those children eligible to attend school during this period cited in *We all have a voice: disabled children's vision for change* did not suggest that parents thinking it was “too risky” to send their child to school was the most common factor. It may also reflect a continuation of a pre-pandemic trend, with children who already felt their needs were not met in school continuing to stay at home.
72. However, many families struggled to meet the needs of children with EHCPs at home. Very few parents have the specialist skills needed to effectively teach their children, meaning that progress previously made was lost. The pandemic also meant that children were not accessing other vital services, such as healthcare. Emergency legislation during the pandemic meant that councils and local health bodies were only required to make “reasonable endeavours” to deliver these services.
73. Statutory timescales for assessing and issuing EHCPs were also temporarily relaxed through the 2020 Coronavirus Act, which contributed to the backlog in children's needs being identified and them getting help.

74. While some children and parents found the lockdown a welcome respite – with school not always an inclusive place that supports children in the way they need, for many neurodiverse children and children who were already struggling with their mental health, the pandemic and lockdowns exacerbated their social anxiety, with children struggling to return to school where before they were able to, or even to leave the house.

Children in Secure Settings

75. In my report on the educational journeys of children before and during their time in secure settings, some staff members at secure settings noted to the office that during covid, children were separated into small groups of 3-4 and prohibited from interacting with children from other groups to limit the spread of covid. This separation created an internal 'gang culture' as rivalry and animosity developed between groups. This has persisted until now, making education more difficult to deliver within these intricate dynamics and restricted associations between children. A lot of work was being done to repair relationships between the children.

76. Staff members also noted that covid restrictions increased these children's lack of access to education in the community, with staff noticing children entering secure settings having longer periods of missing education and lower levels of education.

Vulnerable Children

77. In addition to the work outlined above that looked at specific vulnerable groups – defined during the pandemic as children in need, children with an EHCP, and children otherwise identified as vulnerable – the office has looked in detail at children facing a range of risks and vulnerabilities. For instance, that has included:

- a. Analysis of the mortality risk of children in need in England (CC/20 [INQ000571011]) exploring whether children in need face higher, lower or similar risks of death due to abuse, neglect or intentional injury than other children. This analysis is based on a previously unpublished cut of National Child Mortality Database data, but due to small numbers (child deaths are rare, and only around 2% of child deaths are due to abuse, neglect or intentional injury) the analysis covers all available years of data so cannot comment on time trends or the impact of the pandemic.

- b. In May 2024, I published a report on children's experiences of accessing safety and justice as victims of sexual abuse. While it was not specified that children's experiences of abuse or seeking support fell exclusively within the period of the pandemic, some did. A key theme to emerge was children waiting an incredibly long time for the investigation of the crime to progress. For the minority of children whose cases were taken on by the CPS, there were subsequent long waits for their case to reach court. While the impact of the pandemic on court delays was not explicitly examined, it is likely this was a contributing factor. With many left unsupported during this wait, children were at increased risk of poor mental health, inability to attend and engage with school, and further harm.

78. Since the pandemic the office has been examining the support children receive in the earliest part of the child protection system – looking at children in need plans as a vital early statutory intervention.

79. Despite children on child in need plans making up the largest group of children supported by children's social care in England, the support they receive is poorly monitored and the progress made by families on child in need plans is hard to track. Last year driven by the lack of available data and understanding on who these children are, my office published 'Children on child in need plans'. This report highlighted substantial variation in the use of these plans among different groups of children and across local authorities in England. In November last year, in the second part of this work, the office drew on a sample of child in need plans collected under I's statutory powers, to examine the contents of child in need plans, look at whether the plans achieve the outcomes they set out to, and to assess how families' progress is measured. Both reports set out the need for bold reform for children and families, beginning with clear national thresholds of need to guide practice in local authorities and a national outcomes framework that assesses the effectiveness of the help given to families so we can avoid a postcode lottery.

Final Statement

I began my term as Children's Commissioner nearly four years ago, on 1 March 2021. I had spent the first stages of Covid-19 leading a multi-academy trust, and so saw the impact of the pandemic on children first hand. When I began my role, there was no doubt that I needed to make recovery from Covid-19 central to my work, with a particular focus on vulnerable children.

That is why at that crucial moment, I wanted to hear directly from children about life in England and what their own aspirations for their post-pandemic futures were. I knew that it was essential for policy makers, parliamentarians and decision makers at every level to be able to hear directly from children, so that their needs would be front and centre in the conversation about recovery.

In my first month, I launched a project with the objective of taking stock of where we were, and how we could support children in recovering from the pandemic. At the heart of this was The Big Ask survey. This survey was completed by 557,077 children in England – an unprecedented number for a survey of this type. It provided an incredibly rich source of information about what children wanted prioritised as they emerged from the shadow of Covid-19. I used this survey and children's voice to form all my early conversations with policymakers and Government, making it clear that children's needs must be at the heart of the recovery.

This survey formed the foundation of all the work that I have done since then. I continue to focus my work around seven pillars, which emerged as most important to children – Family, Community, Children's Social Care, Health, Education, Jobs and Skills, and a Better World. The Big Ask culminated in policy recommendations to improve children's lives post-pandemic, which were sent to all officials, Ministers, and Parliamentarians in relevant roles before the Spending Review in Autumn 2022.

In September 2023, in anticipation of the General Election, I thought it was crucial to hear directly again from children, young people, and parents across the country. This is why I launched The Big Ambition survey, which received engagements from 367,000 children and adults. This included responses for around 39,500 children with a special educational need and/or disability, and almost 14,000 children with a social worker. Around 390 children who responded were living in secure settings and around 300 in mental health hospitals. I received responses from every local authority in England, and from children of all ages, who told me what they wanted for the future, their hopes, dreams, and aspirations in a post pandemic world.

One thing that children have told me clearly is that they don't feel listened to by those in power. That was true during the pandemic and is all too often true of policy and decision making more generally. One lesson that we should hear loud and clearly from the experience of the pandemic is the need for decision makers to do a much better job of listening to children and speaking to them directly.

During the pandemic, children saw the power that the government has to change lives, and witnessed the ability of government to affect radical change. This inspired a belief that governments can and should change policies and laws to make their lives better.

With the responses from The Big Ambition and The Big Ask, alongside my other surveys, visits and focus groups, I have engaged with over a million children since taking up my post. I have made it my mission to amplify these voices, and all of my work serves as a call to action on their behalf: for the government to commit all of their energy and effort to improving the lives of children and making this the best country in the world in which to grow up.

The submission provides an overview of my work in the round. However, the full catalogue of all the office's work and my policy asks are available on my website. All my work is informed and complemented by visits that my office and I make to talk directly children across the country to hear their voices directly, and, in particular, to ensure that we are representing the rights of the most vulnerable children, such as those in care or secure settings. These children continue to feel the impacts of the pandemic more tangibly than others, and I am committed to protecting and promoting their rights.

My work since I began my term as Commissioner will always be rooted in ensuring children's voices and needs are at the centre of policy. I have made, and continue to make, representations to Ministers, officials, parliamentarians openly and transparently in the media and on my website throughout my tenure.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed:

PD

Dated: _____ 31/07/2025 _____

Annex - Communications

Government Communication

1. The below summary of communication with the UK Government was included in the office's previous submission to the Inquiry, INQ000281428. Any relevant attachments have previously been submitted.
2. Covid-19 Committee meetings

The office holds information about the following Covid-19 Committee meetings happening with UK Government. The office does not hold full agenda items discussed at all meetings.

Date	Meeting
30 March 2020	Meeting on Vulnerable Children Cabinet Office/ Government Departments
1 April 2020	General Public Sector Ministerial Implementation Group Cabinet Office/ Government Departments
17 April 2020	General Public Sector Ministerial Implementation Group Cabinet Office/ Government Departments
23 October 2020	Covid-19 Operations (52) Cabinet Committee Meeting Cabinet Office/ Government Departments

3. Ministerial Meetings

The office information about the following key meetings discussed between the UK Government and SCS below. The office does not hold full agenda items

discussed at all meetings.

Baroness Longfield CBE Meetings	
Date	Meeting
15 January 2020	National Stability Forum (Chair: Director General for Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group)
23 January 2020	Secretary of State (DHSC)
30 January 2020	Deputy Director, Independent Education Division (DfE)
30 January 2020	ALB CEO Network Meeting (DfE Permanent Secretary)
4 February 2020	Minister for Digital & Broadband (DCMS)
4 February 2020	Home Secretary
11 February 2020	Secretary of State (DfE)
13 February 2020	Permanent Secretary (DfE)
4 March 2020	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
4 March 2020	Lord Chancellor
18 March 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
20 March 2020	Directors, Children's Social Care (CSC) Strategy & Care System and Director Children's Social Care (DfE)

23 March 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
27 March 2020	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
30 March 2020	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
30 March 2020	Minister of State (Youth Justice – MoJ)
02 April 2020	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
03 April 2020	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
07 April 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
09 April 2020	Permanent Secretary (MoJ)
14 April 2020	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
16 April 2020	Covid-19 Update with ALB CEO's (DfE Permanent Secretary)
16 April 2020	Director General, Schools (DfE)
24 April 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
05 May 2020	Director General, Serious & Organised Crime Group (Home Office)
06 May 2020	Minister of State (Youth Justice – MoJ)
06 May 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)

07 May 2020	Covid-19 Update with ALB CEOs (DfE Permanent Secretary)
07 May 2020	Permanent Secretary (DfE)
11 May 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
13 May 2020	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
13 May 2020	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
01 June 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
11 June 2020	Covid-19 Update with ALB CEO's (DfE Permanent Secretary)
17 June 2020	Director General, Serious & Organised Crime Group (Home Office)
18 June 2020	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
18 June 2020	Minister of State (Youth Justice – MoJ)
24 June 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
25 June 2020	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
30 June 2020	Minister of State (Youth Justice – MoJ)
02 July 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
08 July 2020	Vulnerable Children National Board (Chair: Director General for Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group)

09 July 2020	Minister of State (Youth Justice – MoJ)
15 July 2020	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
21 July 2020	Director General, Schools (DfE)
22 July 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
30 July 2020	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
31 July 2020	Vulnerable Children National Board (Chair: Director General for Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group)
11 August 2020	Minister of State (Minister for School Standards) (DfE)
21 August 2020	Covid-19 Update with ALB CEO's (Permanent Secretary DfE)
02 September 2020	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
04 September 2020	Director, Strategy (Vulnerable Children lead) (DfE)
10 September 2020	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
16 September 2020	Introductory Meeting Permanent Secretary (DfE)
25 September 2020	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
01 October 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
01 October 2020	Minister for Safeguarding (Home Office)
09 October 2020	Permanent Secretary (DfE)

20 October 2020	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
20 October 2020	Secretary of State (DfE)
26 October 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
02 November 2020	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
04 November 2020	Policy Advisor to the Secretary of State for Education
09 November 2020	Vulnerable Children National Board (Chair: Director General for Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group)
24 November 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
25 November 2020	Permanent Secretary (MoJ)
26 November 2020	Minister for Rough Sleeping & Housing (MHCLG)
02 December 2020	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
03 December 2020	Minister for Welfare Delivery (DWP)
04 December 2020	Permanent Secretary (DfE)
10 December 2020	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
15 December 2020	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
16 December 2020	Director General, Covid-19 Response and Schools Recovery (DfE)
18 December 2020	Director, Strategy (Vulnerable Children lead) (DfE)

21 December 2020	Minister of State (Youth Justice – MoJ)
29 December 2020	Director General, Covid-19 Response and Schools Recovery (DfE)
06 January 2021	Minister of State (Youth Justice – MoJ)
07 January 2021	Permanent Secretary (DfE)
11 January 2021	Permanent Secretary (DfE)
12 January 2021	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
14 January 2021	Permanent Secretary Stakeholder Group (PSSG) (DfE)
21 January 2021	PSSG (DfE)
28 January 2021	PSSG (DfE)
01 February 2021	Vulnerable Children National Board (Chair: Director General for Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group)
01 February 2021	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
01 February 2021	Education Recovery Commissioner (DfE)
04 February 2021	PSSG (DfE)
18 February 2021	PSSG (DfE)
22 February 2021	Secretary of State (DfE)
23 February 2021	Minister of State (Youth Justice – MoJ)

24 February 2021	Director General, Covid-19 Response and Schools Recovery (DfE)
24 February 2021	Permanent Secretary (MoJ)
25 February 2021	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
26 February 2021	Minister of State (Youth Justice – MoJ)
26 February 2021	PSSG (DfE)

Dame Rachel de Souza Meetings

Date	Meeting
01 March 2021	Secretary of State (DfE)
01 March 2021	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
03 March 2021	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
05 March 2021	Special Advisor to the Secretary of State for Education
10 March 2021	Permanent Secretary (DfE)
17 March 2021	Directors for CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
19 March 2021	Director General, Covid-19 Response and Schools Recovery (DfE)
19 March 2021	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
22 March 2021	No 10 Deputy Chief of Staff and Special Advisor
24 March 2021	Education Recovery Advisory Committee
25 March 2021	Policy Advisor to the Secretary of State for Education

30 March 2021	Leadership Team meeting with ALB CEO's (Permanent Secretary DfE)
31 March 2021	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
13 April 2021	Vulnerable Children National Board (Chair: Director General for Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group)
14 April 2021	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (MoJ)
14 April 2021	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
15 April 2021	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
16 April 2021	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
16 April 2021	National Schools Commissioner
20 April 2021	Education Recovery Commissioner (DfE)
20 April 2021	Education Recovery Advisory Committee
21 April 2021	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
22 April 2021	Director, Equality Hub (Cabinet Office)
28 April 2021	Secretary of State (DHSC)
29 April 2021	Secretary of State (DWP)
05 May 2021	Permanent Secretary (MoJ)
07 May 2021	Permanent Secretary (DHSC)
18 May 2021	Director, Strategy (Vulnerable Children lead) (DfE)
18 May 2021	Secretary of State (DfE)

18 May 2021	Leadership Team meeting with ALB CEO's (Permanent Secretary DfE)
24 May 2021	Minister for Digital and Culture (DCMS)
25 May 2021	Director General's (DfE)
26 May 2021	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
02 June 2021	Minister of State (Minister for School Standards) (DfE)
03 June 2021	Director General, Covid-19 Response and Schools Recovery and Director, Education Recovery (DfE)
07 June 2021	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
08 June 2021	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
08 June 2021	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group and Director, Strategy (Vulnerable Children lead)
08 June 2021	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for the School System) (DfE)
10 June 2021	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
14 June 2021	Director General, Covid-19 Response and Schools Recovery (DfE)
15 June 2021	Minister for Crime and Policing (Home Office)
17 June 2021	National Economy & Recovery Taskforce (Public Services) (NERT PS Committee) (Cabinet Office)
21 June 2021	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)

22 June 2021	Secretary of State (DfE)
24 June 2021	PSSG (DfE)
24 June 2021	Director General, Schools (DfE)
28 June 2021	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Safeguarding) (Home Office)
29 June 2021	Deputy Director, SEND Review (DfE)
05 July 2021	Secretary of State (DfE) and Home Secretary
05 July 2021	Secretary of State (DfE)
06 July 2021	Leadership Team meeting with ALB CEO's (Permanent Secretary DfE)
06 July 2021	Minister of State (Minister for School Standards) (DfE)
8 July 2021	PSSG (DfE)
13 July 2021	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Rough Sleeping & Housing) (MHCLG)
15 July 2021	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
16 July 2021	PSSG (DfE)
19 July 2021	NERT PS (Cabinet Office)
22 July 2021	VCYP Programme Board meeting (Chair: Director General for Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group)
23 July 2021	PSSG (DfE)
26 July 2021	Permanent Secretary (DCMS)

28 July 2021	Secretary of State (DfE)
04 August 2021	Update from JCVI on the vaccination of 16 and 17-year-olds
05 August 2021	Treasury
12 August 2021	PSSG (DfE)
17 August 2021	Head of Education, Policy Unit, No10
24 August 2021	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
24 August 2021	Leadership Team meeting with ALB CEO's (Permanent Secretary DfE)
26 August 2021	PSSG (DfE)
02 September 2021	PSSG (DfE)
07 September 2021	Cabinet Secretary
14 September 2021	Director of Policy Unit, No10
15 September 2021	Secretary of State (DfE)
16 September 2021	PSSG (DfE)
17 September 2021	Permanent Secretary (DfE)
20 September 2021	ALB CEO's (Permanent Secretary DfE)
22 September 2021	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for the School System) (DfE)
23 September 2021	Secretary of State (DWP)
28 September 2021	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Safeguarding) (Home Office)

28 September 2021	Director General for Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
28 September 2021	SEND Review Steering Group (DfE)
30 September 2021	PSSG (DfE)
11 October 2021	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group and Director, Strategy (Vulnerable Children lead)
12 October 2021	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for the School System) (DfE)
12 October 2021	LT Meeting with ALB CEO's (DfE Permanent Secretary)
12 October 2021	Director of School Strategy and System Reform (DfE)
18 October 2021	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Children and Families) (DfE) Minister of State (Minister for Security) (MoJ)
04 November 2021	PSSG (DfE)
09 November 2021	Permanent Secretary (DfE)
16 November 2021	Secretary of State (DHSC)
16 November 2021	PSSG (DfE)
17 November 2021	Deputy Director, SEND Review (DfE)
17 November 2021	Director General, Covid-19 Response and Schools Recovery (DfE)
17 November 2021	SEND Review Steering Group (DfE)
18 November 2021	Secretary of State (DCMS)

22 November 2021	APPG Childcare and Early Education
22 November 2021	Secretary of State (DfE) Schools White Paper
23 November 2021	Minister of State (Minister for Higher and Further Education) (DfE)
24 November 2021	VCYP Board meeting (Chair: Director General for Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group)
30 November 2021	LT meeting with ALB CEO's (DfE Permanent Secretary)
30 November 2021	Secretary of State (DfE)
30 November 2021	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
30 November 2021	Deputy Director, SEND Review (DfE)
6 December 2021	Deputy Director, SEND Review (DfE)
6 December 2021	APPG Health & Care Bill
8 December 2021	Secretary of State (DfE) Schools White Paper External Advisory Group
9 December 2021	Permanent Secretary (DfE)
9 December 2021	Attendance Action Alliance Meeting (Secretary of State DfE)
9 December 2021	Chief Medical Officer (DHSC)
13 December 2021	PSSG (DfE)
14 December 2021	Director General, Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group (DfE)
16 December 2021	Send Review Steering Group (DfE)
20 December 2021	LT meeting with ALB CEO's (DfE Perm Sec)

10 January 2022	Deputy Director, SEND Review (DfE)
11 January 2022	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for the School System) (DfE)
13 January 2022	Minister for Children and Families (DfE)
18 January 2022	Attendance Action Alliance (Minister of State, Minister for School Standards) (DfE)
18 January 2022	LT meeting with ALB CEO's (DfE Permanent Secretary)
18 January 2022	Secretary of State (DfE)
18 January 2022	APPG Commerical, Sexual Exploitation
19 January 2022	Schools White Paper External Advisory Group (Minister of State (Minister for School Standards) (DfE)
24 January 2022	SEND Review Steering Group (DfE)
25 January 2022	Directors, CSC Strategy & Care System (DfE)
26 January 2022	PSSG (DfE)
27 January 2022	Secretary of State (DfE) SEND Review Update
1 February 2022	Minister of State (Crime and Policing) (MoJ)
2 February 2022	VCYP National Board (Chair: Director General for Children's Services, Communications and Strategy Group)
7 February 2022	Minister of State (Minister for Care and Mental Health) (DHSC)
9 February 2022	Secretary of State (DfE) Schools White Paper External Advisory Group

17 February 2022	Briefing on JCVI updated advice on Covid-19 vaccines for 5–11-year-olds (DfE)
21 February 2022	Director General, Covid-19 Response and Schools Recovery (DfE)
22 February 2022	Minster of State (Minister for Equalities) (DLUHC)
22 February 2022	Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for the School System) (DfE)
23 February 2022	National Expert Steering Group on Domestic Abuse (Parliamentary Under Secretary of State) (Minster for Rough Sleeping & Housing) (DLUHC)
24 February 2022	Attendance Action Alliance (Minster of State, Minister for School Standards) (DfE)

4. Select Committees

Myself and the previous Children’s Commissioner provided oral or written evidence to a range of Select Committees between January 2020 and February 2022 which are as listed:

Anne Longfield		
Date	Select Committee	Topic
15 April 2020	Home Affairs	Covid-19 & Vulnerable children, Domestic Abuse, Babies
30 April 2020	Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government	Written evidence Impact of Covid-19 on homelessness and the private rented sector

3 June 2020	Education	Disadvantaged Gap and Covid-19
10 June 2020	Public Services	Lessons from Coronavirus
23 June 2020	Joint Committee on Human Rights	Written evidence - key rights issues facing children during Covid-19.
2 July 2020	Public Services	Written evidence Lessons from Covid-19
14 July 2020	Justice	Youth justice and Covid-19
30 September 2020	Women & Equalities Committee	Children being disproportionately impacted by Covid-19
6 October 2020	Education	Accountability Hearing
6 November 2020	Education	Written evidence – Elective Home Education
9 December 2020	DWP	Food Poverty
6 January 2021	Education	Written evidence – prison education
21 January 2021	House of Commons Petitions Committee	Child food poverty
23 March 2021	Health and Social Care	Children's mental health
13 October 2021	Public Services	Role of public services in addressing child vulnerability

Dame Rachel de Souza		
Date	Select Committee	Topic
15 December 2020	Education	Pre appointment hearing
23 March 2021	Health and Social Care	Children's Metal Health
13 October 2021	Public Services	Vulnerable Children & their families
11 January 2022	Education	Children's Homes

5. Written correspondence

The list of written correspondence between the office and the UK government relating to the response to Covid-19 is below. To note, most of these letters are publicly available on the website, and have been previously submitted the Inquiry.

Baroness Longfield CBE Letters

16 March 2020; Letters to the Permanent Secretaries for the DfE and MHCLG regarding Covid-19 and children in care.

19 March 2020; Calling on the Chancellor for emergency support for families during the Covid-19 outbreak.

24 March 2020; Anne Longfield's letters to the Secretary of States for MHCLG, the DfE and DWP regarding the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on children and families.

25 March 2020; Calling on the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice to ensure the rights of children in custody are upheld during the coronavirus outbreak.

26 March 2020; Requesting additional safeguards to ensure that children's rights and best interests are upheld during the coronavirus outbreak.

27 March 2020; Our letter to the Home Secretary regarding the crisis facing migrant families with children in the face of the Covid-19 outbreak.

08 June 2020; Our letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding free school meals during Covid-19.

13 July 2020; Putting children at the heart of scientific advice on Covid-19.

12 August 2020 (update to 26 March 2020); Update on our letter regarding detaining children on public health grounds.

Dame Rachel de Souza Letters

30 June 2021; Letter to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

21 September 2021; Emails sent to all MPs, Minister and Secretaries of State sharing the results of The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

23 September 2021; Letter to the Secretary of State for Education regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

23 September 2021; Letter to the Minister of State (Minister for Care & Mental Health) regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

23 September 2021; Letter to the Minister of State (Minister for School Standards) regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

23 September 2021; Letter to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

23 September 2021; Letter to the Lord Chancellor and Deputy Prime Minister regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

23 September 2021; Letter to Minister of State (and Minister for Afghan Resettlement) regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

24 September 2021; Letter to the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Children and Families) regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

24 September 2021; Letter to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

24 September 2021; Letter to the Minister of State and Minister for Equalities (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

24 September 2021; Letter to Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for Apprenticeships and Skills) regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

24 September; Letter to Parliamentary Under Secretary of State (Minister for the School System) regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

11 October 2021; Letter to the Minister of State for Disabled People, Health and Work regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how

Covid-19 has affected them.

11 October 2021; Letter to the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

19 November 2021; Letter to Chief Medical Officer regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them and how the OCC work together in relation to the impact on children and young people.

21 December 2021; Letter to the Shadow Secretary of State for Education regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

21 December 2021; Letter to the Shadow Secretary of State for Work and Pensions regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

21 December 2021; Letter to the Shadow Secretary of State for Justice regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

21 December 2021; Letter to the Shadow Secretary of State for Health and Social Care regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them.

6. Views on the government's consideration of children were also raised through published blogs and statements on my website, though these were not sent directly to any member of government.
7. Following the closure of educational settings in March 2020, the government published guidance on safeguarding in schools, colleges and other providers on 27 March 2020. The office wrote to DfE with additional considerations that should be made when schools updated their child protection policies, as the guidance stopped short of practical, specific

recommendations.

8. On 31 March 2020, the office wrote to the Minister for Children and Families with comments on the free school meals guidance which was updated the same day. The previous Commissioner's particular views centred around the Easter holiday, food for children in further education, and universal infant free meals. There is no record of a response and it is unclear whether these comments were addressed.
9. On 14 May 2020, the previous Children's Commissioner's colleagues reached out to the Director's for Children's Social Care at DfE, in response to the extension of shielding advice to the end of June 2020. The guidance at the time prevented looked after children (LAC) in private placements from seeing their parents under any circumstances, and the office had received information that this was becoming very distressing for some children involved. The office received assurance that the Department would look into the issue raised, however it is unclear how this progressed.
10. On 21 May 2020, the office again reached out to DfE about the educational provision to vulnerable children and those of keyworkers who were at the time still attending school. It was raised that these children were not receiving teaching or supervised school work, and were instead simply being looked after in school, with the risk that they could then fall behind their peers who were receiving schooling at home, or have to complete set schoolwork at home in the evenings to catch up. It is unclear how, or if, this was progressed.

Chief Medical & Scientific Advisers

- 11.30 June 2020; Letter to Chief Scientific Adviser on scientific advice and public health guidance on COVID-19. (CC/09 [INQ000571000])
- 12.8 July 2020; Letter from Government Chief Scientific Adviser and Chief Medical Officer replying about scientific advice and public health guidance

on COVID-19 for children. (CC/10 [INQ000239696])

13. 19 November 2021; Letter to Chief Medical Officer regarding The Big Ask and what children have said about how Covid-19 has affected them and how the office can work together in relation to the impact on children and young people. (CC/11 [INQ000571002])

14. 9 December 2021; Meeting with Chief Medical Officer, agenda not held.

Children's Commissioners for Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

15. Quarterly meetings are usually held between Is for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, as well as the Commissioners for Ireland and Jersey, which form the BINOCC (British and Irish Network of Ombudsman and Children's Commissioners) membership. Informal meetings via phone would also take place between individual Children's Commissioners, however, these were not usually recorded.

Meeting Summaries

16. 28th April 2020

Discussed the impact of emergency legislation on children. Concerns were raised over policing, social care regulations, and vulnerable children's welfare. School attendance varied, with low numbers in Scotland and special schools struggling in Northern Ireland. Technology access remained inconsistent. Free school meals (FSM) distribution varied by nation, with Northern Ireland achieving 99% coverage. Concerns included summer school openings, online school safety, and COVID-19's impact on children.

17. 8 September 2020

Covered Covid-19's impact, including poverty, education, exams, and self-isolation policies. Scotland announced £100 million in poverty relief, Wales and Northern Ireland committed to extending free school meals, and

England focused on poverty intervention. Exam cancellations raised concerns over fairness and mental health. Remote learning improved in most areas, but self-isolation policies remained strict.

18.25 January 2021

Covered safeguarding, Brexit, school reopening, exams, and child poverty. Concerns were raised over unregulated online schools, lack of DBS checks for tutors, and safeguarding loopholes. School reopening varied. Safeguarding referrals increased in England but not elsewhere. Exams were replaced by centre-assessed grades, except in Ireland. Child poverty strategies differed by country, with England focusing on maintaining the £20 Universal Credit uplift. A joint letter on school staff vaccinations was discussed.

19.22 June 2021

Covered safeguarding, UN reporting, Covid-19 recovery, education, child poverty, and vaccinations. Concerns about unregulated online schools persisted in England and Wales. Covid-19 recovery plans varied, with Scotland and England facing school closures. Jersey struggled with low vaccine uptake. Education discussions focused on exam results, mental health, and school re-openings. Vaccinating children remained contentious, with varying national approaches.

20.14 September 2021

Discussed UN reporting, COVID-19 recovery, Universal Credit, immigration, and strategic litigation. Concerns over vaccinating 12–15-year-olds and school absences were raised. Wales highlighted issues with free school meal distribution.

21.15 November 2021

Covered Covid-19's impact on children, UNCRC reporting, Universal Credit,

and joint working. Education concerns included lower attendance, grade inflation, and increased home education. Mental health cases rose, with long CAMHS waiting lists. UK pupil vaccination rates varied, with Wales and Scotland leading. Child protection cases remained lower than expected, looked-after children numbers increased.

22. 10 February 2022

Discussed Covid-19 recovery, UNCRC reporting, Universal Credit, human rights, and joint working. Concerns included school attendance, mental health, and long COVID. Exams continued with adjusted content. Vaccination rates varied, with England at 50% and Scotland/Wales above 80%.