



Office of the Children's Commissioner

Research Strategy
May 2014

About the Office of the Children's Commissioner

The Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) is a national public sector organisation led by the Children's Commissioner for England, Dr Maggie Atkinson. We promote and protect children's rights in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and, as appropriate, other human rights legislation and conventions.

We do this by listening to what children and young people say about things that affect them and encouraging adults making decisions to take their views and interests into account.

We publish evidence, including that which we collect directly from children and young people, bringing matters that affect their rights to the attention of Parliament, the media, children and young people themselves, and society at large. We also provide advice on children's rights to policy-makers, practitioners and others.

The post of Children's Commissioner for England was established by the Children Act 2004. The Act makes us responsible for working on behalf of all children in England and in particular, those whose voices are least likely to be heard. It says we must speak for wider groups of children on the issues that are not-devolved to regional Governments. These include immigration, for the whole of the UK, and youth justice, for England and Wales.

The Children and Families Act 2014 changed the Children's Commissioner's remit and role. It provided the legal mandate for the Commissioner and those who work in support of her remit at the OCC to promote and protect children's rights. In particular, we are expected to focus on the rights of children within the new section 8A of the Children Act 2004, or other groups of children whom we consider 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 Bill also allows us to provide advice and assistance to and to represent these children.

Our vision

A society where children and young people's rights are realised, where their views shape decisions made about their lives and they respect the rights of others.

Our mission

We will promote and protect the rights of children in England. We will do this by involving children and young people in our work and ensuring their voices are heard. We will use our statutory powers to undertake inquiries, and our position to engage, advise and influence those making decisions that affect children and young people.

Our research aims

The Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) will have a robust evidence base to promote and protect the rights of children and young people and to influence policy and practice.

Our strategic research objectives

In promoting and protecting the rights of children and young people, the OCC will ensure that all work produced and decisions made are founded on a robust evidence base. In order to achieve this, the strategic research objectives are:

- to produce high quality research and evidence that makes a contribution to achieving the fulfilment of children's rights and improving outcomes for children and young people
- to develop a robust evidence base to influence policy and practice
- to make sure the views and experiences of children and young people are reflected and their best interests are safeguarded in line with our participation strategy and safeguarding policy
- to promote a rights-based approach to research and protect children's rights through research and practice undertaken
- to ensure all research commissioned or produced in-house is ethical, rigorous, valid, reliable and value for money.

The OCC must have particular regard to children within section 8A and other groups of children who the Commissioner considers to be at particular risk of having their rights infringed. Our remit extends to young adults aged 18-24 for whom a local authority in England has exercised its care leaver functions under the Children Act 1989. Our work across all five of our strategic priorities will reflect the Children Act 2004 (as amended in Children and Families Act 2014), the Children Act 1989 and other legislation of relevance as well as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child's (UNCRC) general principles, which state:

- the Convention applies to everyone whatever their race, religion, abilities, whatever they think or say and whatever type of family they come from (Article 2)
- all organisations concerned with children should work towards what is best for each child (Article 3)

- all children have the right of life – governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily (Article 6)
- children have the right to say what they think should happen, when adults are making decisions that affect them, and to have their opinions taken seriously (Article 12).

In 2013–14, we gathered a strong evidence base utilising robust qualitative, quantitative and/or mixed methods and measures capturing, promoting and protecting the rights and views of children and young people.

Our research informed the findings of two Inquiries, the publication of 16 reports, the production of seven films and the development of 16 consultation responses. In 2014–15, the OCC aims to enhance its research activity by implementing the principles found within this strategy and develop and strengthen our evidence base line with the business plan.

Children's rights, ethics and quality assuring our work

All research we undertake or procure will adhere to the highest ethical principles. In developing our ethical standards, we have considered those set out by others¹ in addition to the principles found in our participation strategy and safeguarding policy. These are outlined below in order of prioritisation.

Article 3: Best interests of the child

- **OCC research will be of benefit to children** – the OCC will seek to ensure that research procured or undertaken maximises the benefits to children and young people. Careful consideration will be given to all research plans to assess whether the research is of benefit to children and young people and what impact the research process will have on their safety and wellbeing.
- **OCC research will always respect for the rights of children and young people** – projects and research will promote children's rights. No activity or project that breaches, or supports others in breaching, children's rights will be undertaken.
- **OCC research will continually consider reflective and reflexive practice and quality assurance** – due consideration will be given to the role and impact the researchers will have on the research process and the research participants. In addition, all research that is undertaken and/or procured will continuously be reviewed and assessed for quality assurance, as well as, whether the research is being undertaken ethically, effectively and is meeting the strategic and research objectives and guidelines. Information and guidance will continually be developed as the OCC's research advances to inform project management.

In addition, at the end of the research process we shall review practice and the research process to learn from this process to improve our approach and to reflect on whether future work needs to be undertaken. Where children and young people have been involved, their feedback will be sought and children and young people will be informed of the outcome of their feedback.

- **The research that the OCC procures and produces will be reliable and valid.** In maintaining validity and reliability in research, the OCC will seek to ensure that:

¹ the Declaration of Helsinki, Shaw et al (2011), Graham et al 2013, Tyler et al (2013) and the NSPCC (2013).

- the most accurate conclusions are drawn from our evidence
 - our findings can be generalised beyond our studies and/or research
 - all research measures and evidence base utilised are the most appropriate to meet the research objectives and the concepts which are being researched
 - if our study and/or research were to be replicated, it would generate the same results.
- **OCC research outputs will contribute to recommendations for action that promote the rights and views of children and young people.** Research outputs will also be used to inform the development of recommendations for policy and practice. All recommendations made by the OCC will be evidence based and will reflect the views and voices of children and young people. The implementation of our recommendations will also be monitored and followed-up.

Article 12: Respect for views of the children and young people

- **The voices of children and young people will be heard** – children and young people have the right, under the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child to be listened to when decisions that affect them are made. To support this right, the Office the Children’s Commissioner involves children and young people in the design and delivery of projects wherever possible. Children and young people’s views must be represented accurately and faithfully and, where possible, by them directly. The OCC will check, wherever possible, that we have understood what they have told us and report back to them on work to which they have contributed.
- **Informed consent, voluntary participation and feedback** – gaining informed consent of participants is central to any project or research process undertaken. Those who participate in research or projects must understand exactly what this involves. They have the freedom not to participate and to withdraw at any time without negative consequences. OCC will provide feedback to all children and young people who contribute and support our work.

Consent must be negotiated appropriately with regard to the age and understanding of those involved. OCC general principles are:

- a child or young person’s consent is always required
- if the child is 15 years or under, the consent of a parent/carer is also required
- when the young person reaches the age of 16, they can consent on their own behalf and do not need the consent of

a parent/carer (although we would always prefer to have parental/carer consent and support where possible).

- **OCC research outputs will provide an accurate account of children and young people's voices, our research methods and findings and are disseminated effectively.**

Research that is procured will:

- have the research outputs agreed at the beginning of the project and will only change subject to approval by the OCC
- be the intellectual property of the Office of the Children's Commissioner
- will be published in line with the procurement manual, our branding, house style and report writing guidance and subject to agreement by the OCC.

All research outputs will be compliant with the OCC's strategic objectives and our communications strategy. The OCC will ensure that all research outputs, whether undertaken in house or procured, will accurately reflect the research process, evidence gathered and our findings. Research findings will be disseminated according to the communications plan, intended impact and subsequent outcomes. The OCC will also produce a child and young person's friendly version of our research output that is accessible to all.

In addition, the evidence we collect and our findings will be used to develop recommendations for policy, research and practice to address gaps and limitations identified in the research. They will also be used to inform consultation responses, enquiries from the media and wider public, external meetings and representation, as well as presentations in conferences and/or other events that are of relevance to the findings and the recommendations made.

- **Article 19: Protection from harm**

OCC research will promote wellbeing, ensure safety and avoid harm – all OCC projects and activities, including research and participation, work to ensure as far as we can do so, the safety and wellbeing of children and young people. Children and young people should feel protected and supported when they are engaged with us. The OCC will recognise the potential for risk or harm arising from our work and strive to prevent this from occurring. These efforts will apply to all children and young people with whom we engage in any capacity.

'Harm' refers to any negative impact on an individual's mental, emotional or physical wellbeing. It can also arise from and include

causing people distress, embarrassment or humiliation, anxiety or loss of self-esteem. In avoiding harm, we include a responsibility for the physical safety of those involved in a project or activity.

The ethical approach and requirements for supporting children and young people involved in all project and research work for OCC will be expected to be detailed in tender documents. In respect of safeguarding, these will attend to such issues as:

- arrangements for support and accompaniment for young people taking part in an activity
- the management of interviews and group sessions which may lead to distress for children and young people; including debriefing and checking at the conclusion of the session.
- access to people and organisations offering advice and support to young people.

- **Article 16: Right to privacy**

Ensuring confidentiality and effective data storage and handling – the privacy of participants in research and the information collected on individuals must be maintained and respected in all cases except where there are child protection concerns. Project leads and researchers are responsible for ensuring that information about the child will not be passed on unless there is a concern that this child or another child are being harmed or are at risk of harm. This explanation of our policy must be given to children and young people at the earliest and most appropriate point of contact.

Consent will always be sought from participants involved in the research. When necessary and/or requested, the anonymity of participants in projects and research must be protected and respected, and, data protection procedures adhered to.

Transcribers and translators must be subject to a confidentiality agreement. Relevant checks (Disclosure and Barring Service etc.) will apply to all temporary staff and contractors, in addition to all employed staff. (See Staff Handbook and recruitment policy).

All data and information will be stored and transported with upmost security. This includes storing and moving electronic data in encrypted software and/or with password protection, drives and/or devices where appropriate. If the data is not electronic, where appropriate, it will be stored and transported in lockable units.

Maintaining and protecting the confidentiality of individuals when conducting any large scale data captures is of the upmost importance to the OCC. Data handling processes are subject to careful planning

and are underpinned by privacy impact assessment(s) and risk management accreditation processes. This ensures they are compliant with the required national standards including those outlined in the Data Protection Act (1998), Human Rights Act (1998) and Article 8 of the European Commission on Human Rights. (ECHR)

- **Article 2: Without Discrimination**

Promoting equality and diversity – in accordance with UNCRC Article 2, all research and projects must be developed and conducted with respect and regard to similarities and differences across individuals and groups: these would embrace age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, disability, religion, culture, language and personal and family circumstances. This means that those engaged in research and other projects must endeavour to avoid prejudice, stereotyping, exclusion and discrimination against children and young people and that information, communication and participation is made accessible to all children and young people and their needs.

We work to avoid the further marginalisation of under-represented groups and seek to actively remove barriers that might prevent their participation and facilitate their meaningful engagement with our work. This will be done through considered planning and support for individual and group needs and working in partnership with organisations with specialist knowledge and experience.

How the OCC will involve children and young people in research

Whenever children and young people work with or reach out to us, we want them to be safe, feel secure and trust that the OCC will do whatever we can to create a listening, accessible, supportive and welcoming environment and protect them from harm.

The OCC will create a climate of mutual respect, where children and young people feel that they are included, and will be listened to, and where their concerns about their welfare will be taken seriously.

We actively seek to involve children and young people in planning and developing our projects and activities, the execution of research and as participants of research. This helps develop their own skills. Our aim is to have, and to be seen to have, the very highest standards in involving and safeguarding children and young people in the OCC's research process.

The OCC will involve children and young people in the research process through one or more of the following approaches:

- as research advisers
- as researchers
- as participants.

In involving children and young people in this process, the OCC will ensure that the guidelines above, as well as those set out in the participation strategy and the safeguarding policy are adhered to.

In 2014–15 the OCC will seek to explore and promote effective approaches in involving children and young people in research.

Children and young people who advise research

Research undertaken and/or procured by the OCC will include children and young people in an advisory capacity, unless deemed inappropriate or unsafe. This will include the following:

- setting up a children and/or young person's advisory group for the project and/or research
- have children and/or young people represented in the project and/or research advisory/reference group

- consult children and/or young people regarding our research development, process and/or outputs.

Children and young people who are research participants

The OCC will ensure that all research undertaken and/or procured which involves children and young people will be compliant with the guidelines set out in this strategy, our ethical guidelines (highlighted below), our participation strategy, the safeguarding strategy and our reward and recognition guidance.

Children and young people who are researchers

When involving young researchers², careful consideration will be given to the impact on and benefit for the young researchers and the research, as well as the ethics, support and resources available to support this process. When involving children and young people as young researchers, in line with the ethical standards, safeguarding policy and participation strategy, the OCC will consider the following:

- the recruitment process for young researchers, including relevant checks (Disclosure and Barring Service etc.)
- the role and function of all young researchers
- how information and communication can be child and young person friendly and accessible to the individual needs of young researchers
- the need for training and/or guidance for young researchers regarding the principles set out in our research strategy, participation strategy and safeguarding policy
- the need for training and/or guidance and support regarding research design, research methods including data collection and analysis, and report writing
- the need for supervision and support to young researchers throughout the research process
- the involvement of young researchers in compliance with the participation strategy, safeguarding policy and the guidance on reward and recognition
- what procedures will be in place for following up on the research and capturing what has been learnt from the process

Reward and recognition

² Young researchers can be aged up to 25 years old

All recognition, certification, incentives and rewards will be considered and applied in compliance with the guidance for recognition and reward of participation.

The following diagram illustrates how the OCC plans on delivering its research objectives.

Aim

The OCC will have a robust evidence-base to promote and protect the rights of children and young people and to influence policy and practice.

UNCRC

Article 3: Best interests of children and young people

Article 12: Respect for views of children and young people

Article 19: Protection from harm

Article 4: Protection of rights

Article 16: Right to privacy

Article 2: Without discrimination

Standards

- OCC research will be of benefit to children
- OCC research will continually consider reflective and reflexive practice and quality assurance
- The research that the OCC procures and produces will be reliable and valid
- OCC research outputs will contribute to recommendations for action that promote the rights and views of children and young people

- The voices of children and young people will be heard
- Informed consent, voluntary participation and feedback
- OCC research outputs will provide an accurate account of children and young people's voices, our research methods and findings and are disseminated effectively

- OCC research will promote wellbeing, ensure safety and avoid harm

- OCC research will always respect the rights of children and young people

- Ensuring confidentiality, and effective data storage and handling

- Promoting equality and diversity

Objectives

- high quality research and evidence that makes a contribution to achieving the fulfilment of children's rights and improving outcomes for children and young people
- develop a robust evidence base to influence policy and practice
- the views and experiences of children and young people are reflected and their best interests are safeguarded in line with our Participation Strategy and Safeguarding Policy
- promote a rights-based approach to research and protect children's rights through research and practice undertaken
- all research commissioned or produced in-house is ethical, rigorous, valid, reliable and value for money

Each project will follow the research design diagram below in its development, in order to consider the methodological, ethical, logistical and budgetary requirements to achieve the project aims and objectives. In procuring research the OCC will ensure that all procured research is compliant with our procurement manual.



In the planning process and throughout the research process, the OCC will assess what outputs each piece of research will produce and the short-term and long-term impact it intends on having in terms of recommendations to policy and practice and/or to raise awareness.

Adopting the most appropriate methods of data collection and analysis to reflect and fulfil the research objectives

The OCC data collection powers are used judiciously in accordance with Part 6 of the Children and Families Act 2014 and in a coordinated manner which does not duplicate existing national data collections and that qualitative and quantitative research undertaken and produced by the office utilises and builds on the existing evidence base. In addition, the OCC will run the Care Monitor which will collect children and young people's views and experiences of being in care.

A data collection plan will be developed on an annual basis. This will enable the collation and coordination of the OCC's data requirements and set out any planned use of data collection powers for the financial year based on the project and policy priorities set out in the business plan. Where possible the office will seek to obtain data from existing national data collections first to minimise duplication and resource implications on those local agencies which collected it. Should a bespoke data collection be required, the OCC will endeavour to consult with the relevant central government department(s), professional bodies and individual organisations to ensure oversight and provide opportunity to comment and contribute to plans as they develop. The OCC however ultimately reserve the right to issue any data collection within its remit and powers as set out in the Children and Families Act 2014 which it considers to be in the best interests of children and young people

In collecting and analysing data, information and evidence, the OCC will seek to adopt and implement the most appropriate and effective measures that will not only optimally fulfil our research objectives and intended outcomes but also reflect children and young people's views and the OCC's strategic priorities and resources. If using technology in collecting, analysing and communicating data, due consideration will be given to the appropriateness of those tools and methods and how they comply with our ethical framework, safeguarding policy and their level of confidentiality. These approaches will only be considered and applied if they meet the strategic and ethical requirements and guidelines. The OCC will also continually explore, assess and develop internal guidance on research design and different methods and methodologies that can inform and improve the OCC's work.

Identifying promoting and disseminating rights-based approaches

In order to keep informed of relevant evidence, data and developments in the field of research oriented at the promotion and protection of children's rights related to our policy areas, the OCC will set up targeted research networks which include key research experts across different sectors specialised in key policy and/or research areas. The research network will also be consulted in the scoping, development and undertaking of consultations, projects and research. In addition, information will be disseminated through the research networks.

In 2014/2015 the OCC will also seek to explore the best approaches to ensure that OCC's ethical standards is adhered to in research undertaken and/or procured.

Have expert reference/advisory or project planning groups or individuals that support and advise the research process

The OCC and/or the commissioned projects will seek the advice and support of experts in the field. This will either be done through the project advisory group, by setting up a research advisory/reference group or by consulting key experts individually. The functions of their role will be drawn up in the terms of reference (ToR) of the project and/or research.

In 2014-2015 the OCC will seek to build knowledge on rights-based approaches to research, policy and practice.

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