



STRATEGIC PLAN 2012 - 14

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WHO WE ARE

The Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) is England's only statutory independent champion for children and young people. Our statutory duty is to promote awareness of the views and interests of children. Pending legislative changes, we are charged by the Secretary of State for Education to promote and protect children's rights as recommended by the Dunford Review.

We press for the best interests of children and young people to be the paramount consideration in all decisions that affect their lives. We say what must be said, to those with the power to change things for the better.

OUR VISION

A society where all children and young people are respected and their rights are realised. They shape decisions made about their lives. Supported by adults who champion their rights, they achieve their potential. They are safe, loved, educated, and healthy. They have access to high quality support, especially if they need extra help. Free from all discrimination, they live in homes and communities where their rights are fulfilled, they learn to value and respect those around them and take on responsibilities as citizens. Their lives are developed to the full.

OUR MISSION

Using our powers and independence, we protect and promote children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). We champion children's and young people's roles as active, responsible citizens through our work and influence. We challenge adults to ensure that in all decisions about their lives, children and young people's views are asked for, listened to and acted upon. Children and young people recognise that the Office and its work champions their interests and rights. We press English society to ensure positive change for all children and young people, speaking out especially for those whose voices are otherwise not heard.

OUR VALUES

Participation – ensuring that children's voices are listened to, particularly those whose voices are otherwise least likely to be heard, and that their views are taken into account in decisions concerning them.

Positive in promoting the UNCRC - We work to fulfil our

purpose, with a sincere desire for better outcomes for all children and young people. We are positive, responding to new challenges and opportunities, taking responsibility for our work.

Strategic and objective – We know the big picture. We think about how best to make an impact, basing our work on rigorous analysis of the evidence; remaining free of political partiality working in the spirit of the Paris Principles and General Comment No 2 of the UNCRC.

Equality – the Office values diversity and respects the dignity of every person with whom we engage. We acknowledge, champion and celebrate diversity, difference, tolerance and open mindedness. We recognise the multitude of views and perspectives held by children, young people, and those who influence their lives.

FOREWORD

I am delighted to present this Strategic Plan for 2012-14 and the 2012-13 Business Plan that details the first year of work within it.

We, the Office of the Children's Commissioner, are twenty three committed experts led by me as Commissioner, and including the Deputy Commissioner and three Directors. We champion, protect, promote and defend the rights, views and interests of England's almost 12 million children and young people.

As the only statutory body undertaking this crucial role for all children with a particular focus on the otherwise-voiceless among them, we have unique powers. These include the legal right of entry into any setting where children are deemed cared for. We listen to children, finding out directly from them about their lives and concerns. We report to the adult world on their realities, especially where they need additional support. When we launch a formal Inquiry, everybody from whom we seek evidence must respond. When we publish a report, the Government and other statutory bodies must do the same. All our achievements for children and young people in England have been and will continue to be delivered in the context of a declining financial settlement.

Our enduring promise to children and young people is that we will continue to promote and protect their rights, in a climate of mutual respect and responsibility.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'ME Atkinson', with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Dr Maggie Atkinson
Children's Commissioner for England

INTRODUCTION

This Strategic Plan 2012-14 sets out how we will use the Children's Commissioner's powers and independence to promote, protect and realise children and young people's rights. We cannot predict the legislative process for the creation of a new Commissioner and Office, but are working on the basis that Office of the Children's Commissioner (OCC) will exist for at least another two full financial years.

You will find a full programme of work in this Strategic Plan, challenging Government and statutory agencies to tackle persistent rights' breaches and violations against children and young people in England. This a continuation of both unwavering pressure on, and constructive policy and practice advice to the Government and statutory agencies, seeking to end all persistent violations of children and young people's rights in England. We do this by working in active partnership with a wide range of organisations, groups and individuals.

In the plan below we set out those who we have worked with over the past 12 months as a guide to our continuing and growing influence and commitment to work effectively for change.

We will continue broadly to cluster our work using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) reporting framework as follows:

- UNCRC implementation focusing on supporting the creation of a stronger more independent Children's Commissioner for England [UNCRC Articles 4 and 42]
- UNCRC General Principles championing the best interests, equality, voice of the child and their right to optimal development [UNCRC Articles 2, 3, 6 & 12]
- Safeguarding children, care and family ensuring children and young people are protected from abuse and neglect [UNCRC Articles 9,19, 20, 25 and 37]
- Health, well-being and poverty focusing on poverty and the impact of NHS reorganisation [UNCRC Articles 6, 24, 26 and 27]
- Education - highlighting the impact of exclusions (permanent, fixed term and unlawful) [UNCRC Articles 2, 28 and 29]
- Protection vulnerable groups with a focus on children in youth justice, sexual exploitation; asylum and immigration. [UNCRC 22, 34,37 and 40]

In pursuit of improving outcomes for all children, particularly when they are marginalised and vulnerable, we will use the Commissioner's powers to the full to achieve fulfilment of their rights. We will therefore focus on the following priorities:

1. Tackling inequality and child poverty through promoting and realising children's rights
2. Protecting children and young people from exploitation and abuse
3. Running a highly efficient and effective organisation that maximises the resources we have to help children and young people

These are underpinned by a set of strategic aims and key projects outlined in the plan below.

The Government must keep the promises made in 1991 when the UK signed and ratified the UNCRC. The Convention applies to all under-18s regardless of personal circumstances or likely prospects. We have a particular focus on the substantial

minority of England's children whose voices are otherwise never heard. We urge services for children to operate from the child's perspective. We encourage adults to work to improve the life chances of our children. We are mindful of our responsibilities under the Public Sector Equality Duties and are committed to addressing the inequities faced by children and young people. Equality information and evidence relating to children and young people in England will be published alongside our Business Plan 2012-13. Sometimes society, policy makers and the media struggle to accept our calls for change. We will continue to celebrate and praise good practice where we find it and will continue to challenge where improvement is needed so that all our children and young people are able to thrive.

For more detail, please read our new Business Plan 2012-13 which contains our detailed work programmes and the outcomes we are driving to achieve.

OUR TOP ACHIEVEMENTS 2011/12

In the past year we have had significant impact on policy and practice in many areas, resulting in real improvements in children's lives and circumstances. Highlights include:

1. Our School Exclusions Inquiry was the first ever Inquiry launched by a Children's Commissioner for England using her powers under the Children Act 2004. The Children's Commissioner's School Exclusions Inquiry report *"They Never Give Up On You"* was launched in Parliament on Monday 19th March and was hosted by Charlotte Leslie MP, member of the Education Select Committee and Baroness Estelle Morris, former Secretary of State. It finds most schools work hard to cater for troubled students. However, for the first time on record, schools have admitted illegally excluding children. The report also shows that a Black boy from an African Caribbean background, who has special educational needs (SEN) and is also from a low income household, is 168 times more likely to be permanently excluded from the same school than a White female classmate, who does not have SEN and comes from a more affluent household. The Inquiry attracted significant national attention, including in both Houses of Parliament and all media channels. The Children's Commissioner is working with Government and statutory bodies on following through the recommendations.
2. We launched our second major Inquiry exercising the Commissioner's powers under the Children Act 2004 to investigate Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups (CSEGG). This two-year Inquiry aims to throw light on the scale, scope, nature and extent of the sexual exploitation, victimisation and abuse to which some girls and boys in England are subjected by street gangs and loosely formed groups. Current research indicates that up to 10,000 children may be affected. We will publish an interim report in autumn 2012. A second year's work will follow to develop recommendations on improvements for all concerned.
3. The Department for Education invited us to take the lead in gathering children and young people's views for the Munro Review of Child Protection. As well as gathering their views, our Principal Policy Advisor for safeguarding played, and has since continued to play, a vital role in the Review process and its outcomes and has sat on the Children and Young People's Sub Group of the Review.
4. The Home Secretary acknowledged our centrality to changes in statutory authorities' dealings with families whose asylum claims fail, meaning they face removal from the UK. A new family removal process has been introduced meaning that children and families now spend a minimum amount of time in family accommodation prior to deportation. Their rights are overseen by an independent panel whose judgements about their removals are binding on the UKBA.
5. We uncovered the "Gentleman's Agreement" between England and France which since 1995 had entailed unaccompanied children arriving in the UK and

6. Significant changes in the secure estate have arisen from our 2011 report 'I think I must have been born bad – Mental health and emotional well-being of young people in the youth justice system'. These covered management, leadership, and the living environment across the children's secure estate. OCC has intervened to change practices in several individual institutions. These have included the complete redecoration of one whole YOI; recruitment of child and adolescent trained mental health professionals employed; ending of "no hugging" rules during visits; the cessation of routine strip searches; and a review of both the timing of meals and the quality and quantity of food. OCC is continuing to work with Government Departments on improving general policy and practice in these areas.
7. Amplify, the Children's Commissioner's children and young people's advisory group, was influential in Reg Bailey's 2011 review of the commercialisation of childhood, "Letting Children be Children." Amplify also won a Diana Award for this work.
8. In November 2011 the four UK Children's Commissioner's issued a hard-hitting mid-term report on the UK State Party's progress since 2008 in fulfilling its responsibilities under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child to assess how well it is implemented across the country. We noted progress in some areas of children's lives such as in the treatment of child seeking asylum, but also noted our continuing concerns on disability, youth justice, participation in decision making and poverty. We also highlighted our serious concerns over the likely and continuing impacts of the Government's Spending Review and welfare reforms on the needs of vulnerable children
9. On the 11th November 2011, tens of thousands of children and organisations all over England participated in the Children's Commissioner's Takeover Day giving children and young people opportunities to influence the adult decision making world through Article 12 of the UNCRC. Our Takeover Day, now having taken place five times, has found a firm and established place in the work of children and young people's services in increasing and embedding participation and involvement by children and young people in the adult decision making worlds of the media, a wide range of cultural and other organisations, businesses and public life.
10. Our first Child Rights Impact Assessment had a significant impact on parliamentary debates on the 2011 Welfare Reform Bill. We have continued to influence key parliamentary debates and policy on a range of issues including the Family Justice Review; the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders (LASPO) Bill; the Education Acts of 2010 and 2011 and the proposed reforms to the NHS.

2012 - 2014

HOW WE HAVE IDENTIFIED OUR PRIORITIES

As a small organisation with limited resources our work focuses on realising our statutory remit to promote the views and interests of children and young people, with particular regard to groups of children who do not have other adequate means of making their views known. We also use our powers, influence and expertise to promote and protect children's rights as defined by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Within this framework our projects over the coming years will reflect:

- concerns raised by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in their concluding observations in 2008;
- the views and experiences of children and young people collected by the Office of the Children's Commissioner and others;
- evidence from academic research and children's services of where children's rights are not promoted and protected;
- the impact of previous work carried out by our Office, together with the capacity and expertise within the organisation;
- issues where the OCC can make a significant difference through the use of its statutory remit and powers; and
- work that will not duplicate that of other statutory bodies charged with undertaking work on the issues concerned.

OUR THREE STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

We will promote and protect children's rights by:

1. Tackling inequality and child poverty through promoting and realising children's rights
2. Protecting children and young people from exploitation and abuse
3. Running a highly efficient and effective organisation that maximises the resources we have to help children and young people

OUR STRATEGIC AIMS

SP1: Tackling inequality and child poverty through promoting and realising children's rights

- 1.1 Improve outcomes for children by recommending to Government, how best to close the gaps between children who are and are not excluded from school, consolidating the School Exclusions Inquiry in a second year's investigation.(Article 28)
- 1.2 Undertake a number of Child Rights Impact Assessments to ensure legislation promotes children's rights and highlight potential violations. (Articles 3, 4 & 12)

- 1.3 Report the voices and concerns of children and young people, through Amplify (the Children's Commissioner's children and young people's advisory group), Children's Commissioner's Takeover Day, and the active participation of children and young people in all our work programmes. (Article 12)
- 1.4 Challenge Government on child poverty, especially for groups most at risk of experiencing problems resulting from legislation and reduced financial support for key services. (Articles 26 & 27)
- 1.5 Challenge the NHS through the Children's Outcomes Framework Strategy, to ensure reforms consider children and young people as a population with a right to a voice in how their needs are met. (Article 24)
- 1.6 Support and challenge Government's views on the UK's progress on the UNCRC, to be reported to the United Nations at some time from early 2014 onwards.
- 1.7 Strongly encourage Government to fulfil its responsibilities under the UNCRC by ensuring it makes the Convention more widely known, and is paid due regard in all new legislation, starting with the Queen's Speech in 2012. (Articles 4 and 42)

SP2: Protecting children and young people from exploitation and abuse

- 2.1 Expose the scale and extent of the serious and largely hidden issue of child sexual exploitation and make recommendations to address and resolve this problem and safeguard the victims. (Article 34)
- 2.2 Secure children's safety in places where they are deprived of their liberty through a programme of announced and unannounced visits, under our membership of the UK National Preventive Mechanism. (Articles 19, 39, 37 & 40) ¹
- 2.3 Expose the extent of neuro-developmental disorders among children in the youth justice system. (Articles 2, 24, 37, 39 & 40)
- 2.4 Monitor the new system of family removals when asylum claims fail. (Articles 22 & 25)
- 2.5 Improve outcomes of children living in environments where substance abuse and domestic violence are issues, by investigating children's experiences. (Article 19 7, 33)
- 2.6 Challenge poor practice in relation to safeguarding of older children through evidenced based research. (Article 19 & 24)
- 2.7 Investigate good practice concerning child protection in secondary schools, picking up on concerns about the role of schools in child protection and their ability to work with children's services. (Article 19 & 24)

SP3: Running a highly efficient and effective organisation that maximises the

¹ The UK's National Preventive Mechanism (NPM) was established in March 2009 under the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (OPCAT). A United Nations (UN) treaty, OPCAT was ratified by the UK in 2003. OPCAT requires the UK to have in place a 'national preventive mechanism' to visit all places of detention and monitor the treatment of and conditions for detainees. The NPM consists of 18 existing bodies throughout the UK, which are independent and have the right regularly to inspect all places of detention. It is coordinated by HM Inspectorate of Prisons and reports to the UN treaty body.

resources we have to help children and young people

- 3.1 Be accountable, transparent and have robust governance arrangements.
- 3.2 Demonstrate good value for money, maximising resources for OCC programmes and projects working directly with children and young people.
- 3.3 Advise Government on the creation of a new Office of the Children's Commissioner for England (OCCE), charging Government to fulfil its promise to create a strengthened, more independent, fully resourced Paris Principles compliant Human Rights Institution for children and young people. (Articles 4 and 42)
- 3.4 Produce a Safeguarding Policy, procedures and training programme for OCC staff.

BUDGET AND RESOURCES 2012-14

The Department for Education has confirmed a 2012-13 budget of £2.5m. We are currently unaware of what the grant-in-aid allocation, and therefore the budget, will be for 2013/14.

HOW WE WILL DELIVER AND MEASURE OUR STRATEGIC PRIORITIES AND AIMS

We will work in the spirit of the Dunford Review 2010. Following this review and in line with our ambition to operate as a National Human Rights Institution for children and young people, we will continue to use internationally recognised standards in the UN's Assessing the Effectiveness of National Human Rights Institutions to frame how we both work, and measure our impact.

As we did in our Business Plan 2011/12, we will use four themes to measure our performance: Statutory Inquiries, Advice and Influence, Outreach and Engagement and Organisational Efficiency and Effectiveness. This will show clearly our impact, outlining how far Government or other relevant bodies accept, reject, adapt or ignore our advice or recommendations for children and young people, and illustrating the effective running of the Office of Children's Commissioner.

Further measures specific to individual projects will be published in our annual Business Plan and reported in our Annual Report. These will reflect the obligations and actions required by a range of institutions, communities and individuals who have a role in ensuring children's rights are realised (Article 5 and 19 of the UNCRC).

HOW WE WILL DELIVER OUR STATUTORY DUTIES

Participation:

We have a statutory duty to involve children and young people across all areas of our

work. We will support children and young people to have a real impact on the development and implementation of policies locally and nationally by being active, engaged and valued participants in the work of the Office of the Children's Commissioner at all levels. We are committed to enabling children and young people to participate in our work, from a strategic level through to their involvement in individual projects. We value the experience and contribution of every child and young person we work with. Their experience and contribution are central to our work.

Our young people's advisory group, Amplify, will continue to play an active role in contributing to strategic decisions, including our business planning process and providing views on a number of our programmes and projects. Several members will turn 18 in the coming months and we will recruit to fill their seats.

Further details of how we will involve children and young people in our work will be set out and published in an OCC Participation Strategy.

Partnership:

The delivery of our vision and mission for children is predicated on working collaboratively with others. We will continue to forge and maintain strong partnerships with children, young people, parents and carers, Government (both local and national), Parliamentarians, statutory and voluntary sector stakeholders, academia, the legal sector, other partners and the media to promote, protect and realise children's rights.

We will continue to work with a range of stakeholders over the coming years who will help us realise our objectives. In doing so The Children's Commissioner, Deputy Children's Commissioner and staff of the Office of the Children's Commissioner contribute to debates and policy in all areas that could affect children's well-being. We regularly address conference and other gatherings, give evidence in Parliament and elsewhere, and engage with a wide range and large number of stakeholders. Much work in these settings is out of the public gaze but is influential, driving positive change for children. Given the work is ongoing rather than directly concerned with programme delivery, it is listed below to aid readers' understanding of all we do.

During 2011/12 the OCC has been a member of, contributed to and/or participated in the following groups, alliances and networks:

Advocacy Consortium	Alliance for Child Centred Care	Anti-Bullying Alliance
Bradley Group (successor body to Health and Criminal Justice National Advisory Group)	British & Irish Network of Ombudspersons for Children (BINOCC)	Children's Improvement Board (Local Government Association)
Children's Workforce Development Council	Cultural Learning Alliance Advisory Panel	Department for Education Research group
Department of Health's Children's & Young People's Health Outcome Strategy Forum	Directors of Agency Communications	Equality and Human Rights Commission – various groups including International Treaties Monitoring group
European Network of Ombudspersons for	Family Justice Council, including the sub-	Government Communications Network

Children (ENOC)	committee for children and safeguarding	(Cabinet Office)
Health and Social Care Bill	Children's Cross Sector Group	Home Office Ending Gang and Youth Violence Team Expert Advisory Panel and working group
Home Office Sexual Violence Forum	Inter-disciplinary Alliance for Children (IAC)	Mayor of London's Violence Against Women and Girls Panel
Ministerial Board on Deaths in Custody	Munro Review	National Asylum Stakeholder Forum (Children's Sub-group)
National Participation Forum	National Preventive Mechanism for the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention Against Torture	National Children's Bureau
Office of National Statistics – Children's Well-being Steering Group and working group	Participation Works	Refugee Children's Consortium
Rights Of the Child UK (ROC) Coalition	Social Work College; Standing Committee for Youth Justice	Strategic Legal Fund for refugee children and young people
The Immigration Law Practitioners Association Refugee Children Project	UNICEF (OCC is a member)	United Kingdom Children's Commissioners' Communications & Participation Panel' and Policy group

The Children's Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner and a number of the OCC's expert staff speak at and lead sessions in conferences and at other events. We have copy published in professional journals, other influential publications and in the media. Over 4,600 people/organisations follow our Twitter feed (figure at 4.04.12) and the Commissioner's weekly blog is widely read. We are approached directly for our advice and expertise by policy makers and practitioners across England.

Promotion:

We have a statutory duty under the Children Act 2004 to promote awareness of the views and interests of children and to ensure that children are made aware of the Children's Commissioner's function and how to communicate with her. We will do this by proactively engaging with children in all our business areas, including use of the right of entry to speak with children deprived of their liberty.

We promote and protect children's rights by bringing their views, recommendations on their best interests and empirical evidence of their circumstances to policy and decision-makers, including central and local Government, Parliamentarians in both Houses, the media and our partner/stakeholder organisations, and international Treaty bodies responsible for monitoring human rights. This will include ongoing work to engage and inform international human rights bodies, including the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, at an international level.

We will always place children's safety and welfare first and foremost so that no child is put at risk by sharing their views or experience with us.

Publication:

In compliance with our statutory duty to publish reports on any matters or research undertaken and the consequent responses we will always publish our research, recommendations and investigations in appropriate formats to ensure accessibility for all our stakeholders (child or adult). The Children Act 2004 places a reciprocal duty on Government departments to respond to our reports and recommendations. All responses to our recommendations, our annual business plans and end of year Accounts will be published on our website.

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