



Max Colson

Good morning everyone and thank you so much for that introduction and to Waddesdon School and all the schools who performed today, you are amazing.

Now there's a bit of a theme going on today. I was taught by nuns too, Gillian. My nuns were at St Bede's Comprehensive, Scunthorpe, I'll never forget them, they've made me who I am. But more than that – I was a teacher and headteacher for 31 years, before I took the role of Children's Commissioner, and I started my career in a Church of England school, in Sir John Cass Red Coat School in Stepney. And I stand here in awe of all you do, but more than that – I think we need to recognise that the fact we're talking about flourishing in school, we owe to the Church of England. The actual school system in this country was set up by the Church of England before there was a state school – before the state school system they were all church of England schools, and that is the reason we don't just do academics – it's the reason that we've always had a strong pastoral focus, ethos focus, and we are trying to, in the whole of our education system and have always since the 19th century, attempted to develop the whole person, all their talents, and all of them, their spirit and their soul, too. So it's a real, real pleasure to be here to speak to you, to speak to people as passionate about education as I am. What a wonderful focus of the day. So what I wanted to bring in my few minutes is what children have told me they think they need to flourish.

So when I came into the role in 2021 we were just coming out of lockdown. And I had just started as Children's Commissioner and I launched The Big Ask survey to find out from children what they needed to thrive or to flourish, what were the barriers in their way, and what did they want and hope and dream for their futures as they grew up.

Now I really wanted to get to everyone, so I went round the country, I visited youth prisons, schools, I went to every single bit of the country, but to get to really make my survey thrive, I got a really fantastic person you'll all know, Marcus Rashford, and got him to launch it with me. We ended up getting half a million responses, 557,077 – I owe a lot of them to Marcus. That's 6% of all 4 to 18 year olds. Responses from every single bit of society, wherever children are, every single local authority. It's the largest survey response not only in England but in the world, apart from the US census of children of that age.

So it was the scale of the response, as well as the honesty and the insights children have shared with us that made it so significant. And I think what we got are genuine and reliable insights into the lives of children in England. From every single parliamentary constituency and schools. School leaders, if you want to know, we've got it by postcode, so we can actually cut the data for you for your areas and share that, just ask, it's there for you.

We had responses from thousands of children in care. Young carers. 2,800 Gypsy Roma children, 94,000 children with additional needs.

I watched them, because lots of them put it on Twitter, whole classes pouring their hearts into their survey, or doing it in their bedrooms at night,

and really responding.

And the amazing thing, amazing for me, because people often asked me what surprised you - is, that across age, whether they're a boy or girl, family, income levels, ethnicity, location, vulnerability, what children told me they wanted was consistent – a good home life, a good education, a job, enough money, friends, to feel well, to be part of a community, fairness, a good environment, the same responses.

What I did find was that this generation of children are civic-minded, social and outward-looking. They care about their local areas desperately.

And they want to play. Play was the biggest word used in the survey. They want things to do. Nobody asked me for another shopping mall to go shopping in. They want activities that are affordable, fun and sustaining. In Luton they wanted cricket competitions, they wanted community competitions up in Gateshead. They wanted stuff to do. They want their lives outside of home and school to be made safer. And they want to be treated fairly.

And they want to feel, something that we can feel here today, they wanted to feel part of something larger than themselves - a caring community.

And I have learnt so much from them about how important their physical environment is – so is their online community. That's why I have made the Online Safety Bill such a focus of my work over the last few months. There is so much potential for good in the online world for children, but I can hear the words of children coming out of lockdown and saying, 'get me off this labyrinth that's social media, and get me out to play'. The safety and strength of those communities – online and off – have profound effects on children, particularly their physical and mental health.

Children told us how much they cared about their physical and mental health, and they're really smart, they see them as being interlinked.

When I was that little convent schoolgirl, I had no idea about my own mental health, didn't even think about it.

Whilst most children told me they were are happy, some were really struggling. 1 in 5 talked to me about being worried about their mental health or their mental wellbeing, and I think that was about coming out of isolation, not having seen friends and families. They were so happy to be back and you'll be pleased to know: school, that's where they wanted to go. They wanted to go to school, and they told me they love their teachers, and they wanted to play with their friends and get back. That's what they wanted.

But there is particular concern with the mental health of teenage girls aged 14 to 17 - nearly twice as likely than boys to be unhappy with their mental health. Now we could say it was ever thus, but actually I think with the added complications of the online world, I think there's something serious there.

Children told me they wanted simple things to help – someone to talk to when they are worried and before things got worse, and where they wanted to have those conversations, you will know: it's at school. They look to school for the support that they need, to teachers that they trust,

and that's where they wanted to be signposted or seek help. And that's why I've always been a real fan of the longer school day.

I spoke to Sarah-Jane Marsh, a neuroscientist in Oxford, about how can we get children's mental health better - is there any real evidence? She said a small number of really strong peer relationships and spending time with their peers is the single most important and only causal factor that they can show of good mental health in 10 years' time.

That's why we need to be at school, we need to be playing.

Jobs and Skills was another theme.

On jobs and skills, the main thing I want to hammer home is there is no shortage of ambition amongst England's children. I met the next Elon Musk, I met the next two prime ministers, this is a generation that's ambitious and it wants to get on in life. But having a good job was the top choice when children were asked for their priorities for the future.

74% of children told me, 'I want a great job'. And those great jobs, lots of them are like, 'in my local area I want to learn a trade, I want to get an apprenticeship', as well as those big ones. So really important.

When I went around the country, I met our next generation of doctors, teachers, computer scientists, inventors and entrepreneurs.

They want more advice and support to succeed in their chosen careers. They want to know more about vocational careers. About 30% of the respondents: 'Tell us more, we want to know about jobs, we want to know how to get them'. And what we need to ensure now, is that all young people, especially the disadvantaged, have the means to make that success happen.

And I think the more we can create parity of esteem for non-university routes, the greater the share of aspirational job opportunities for England's children, the greater the self-esteem in each child who might not want to access university, or be able to, and the greater the sense that our local economies can provide fulfilment, purpose, and a sustaining culture.

I think Gillian spoke better than I did on that one.

So, school. Education was a huge – I mean, children spend most of their time at school. It will come to no surprise to you about how important education was to children. Children love their teachers. They told me so. I have the data. They recognise the transformative power of education; they see it as the thing which will help them achieve their ambitions and live the lives they dream of. As one child I spoke to said: "People don't realise how much education is important for life in general. [...] if they don't learn in school, they might not be able to enjoy life to the fullest".

I've got 250,000 text responses from children talking about school and how important it is, and the themes are the same: they want schools to be

places where they can learn about life skills, relationships and how to set themselves up for the future, and a place to turn to for help if things are difficult for them at home.

School leaders, teachers, all of you here today play such a vital role in giving children the confidence and skills to thrive. From the everyday words of encouragement, the moments of connections with pupils, to developing innovative learning and engaging imaginations.

You are at the heart of your communities. Trusted by families. And you reach those that nobody else can. Children told me they don't want to 'go' anywhere else for help, they want help to meet them where they are. And mostly, this means in schools. They want you to understand their needs – they know you do, and for you to be able to guide them in support.

And that's why – and I'm not going to overtalk about it – but that's why I've been absolutely obsessed about attendance, finding children who are missing at school and getting them back. And I know you are all aware of the wider issues there, but again that's a major obsession. We need our children in school to get the support they need, to get the education they need and for the future and I will not stop till they're back. It's really important to me.

Nearly to the final themes but the family came up as a huge theme in terms of response.

For a child to flourish – in their education, in any aspect of their life – family is fundamental. If you had asked me all the way through my 30-year career, the single thing that could transform a child's life, I would always have said education. I was an academy principal, I set up the first free schools, because I believed education in disadvantaged areas could really change everyone's lives. I still do, but I now think there is one thing that is even more important. And that's the family.

That is why I was so pleased to be commissioned by Government to undertake my Independent Family Review. I wanted to understand what family was like in 2022, which is when I did it, after the lockdown, what families look like, and to examine in detail the impact they have on children and on our lives. So we did comprehensive research-led Review, used new data, and it proved - for the first time ever, using data – that family has a 'protective effect'. That a strong, loving family can cast a protective net around its members, helping them all to thrive, stopping problems from turning into crises. When someone is facing a challenge – and we surveyed adults, nationally representative, right across the country – if they could turn to a family member in time of need, their overall wellbeing – if they just believed they could – whatever income decile, they were happier and their wellbeing was higher than those who could not.

78% percent of people said that they would turn to family in a crisis, that's where they want to go first, that's where they want to go first with needs.

We need to celebrate, understand, and invest in families. When families invest in themselves and spend quality time with each other, children and parents' well-being is higher. Children are happier and more successful as adults if they are happy at home.

If they're closer to their parents they do better in exams. We use the millennial cohort data. Not only do they do better in their exams if they have a good relationship with their parents, at least one parent, they earn more at 25. It's remarkable. The evidence is there.

So having a stable, loving home, in whatever form that takes, is linked with children's future success. Their happiness. And their ability to form good relationships.

One twelve-year old girl perfectly encapsulated that. When asked what she appreciated about family, she said: 'My family mean the world to me. They mean knowing I always have someone to love and care for me and support me in everything I do'.

But we also found that sometimes, things get too much for families to cope with alone. For the most part parents, and wider family, love their children and want to do their best for them. But they can be overwhelmed – perhaps by their own childhood experiences, or poor mental health, or financial stress - and find themselves unable to provide the care they want to. And when these problems become too great for families, they turn to services.

And what I want is when that happens, for services to be there to meet them, and support them like a family would – without judgement, with love, and for the long term. A relational, loving experience.

And schools play an important part of that. You are right at the heart of the trusting community relationships where families will turn. You are able to deliver support, broker trusted relationships and provide the continuity that families so desperately want.

I would love to see the local authorities wrap their services around your schools, so that actually families can meet and get their needs met where they trust, with people they trust.

I just want to mention children in care because they're a special group of children for me. Family came up as equally important for children in care. They want the same things which many other children take for granted: a stable, nurturing home with loving relationships at their heart.

Yesterday I published a report about how 1 in 3 children in care with siblings are separated. It's just not good enough. Children in care often tell me how important their brothers and sisters are.

I want to see a children's social care system that puts children, and their needs, at its heart. I am so excited about the children's social care implementation report that's coming out – so we can actually really get moving on this. I'm really excited to see that strategy.

Interestingly, children in care told us that what they want for their future is family, too, so really ensuring every child in care has a loving home experience is what we should be trying to do.

So in conclusion, my mission, as Children’s Commissioner, is to make England the best place to grow up in the world. This means the ambitions of every child being matched by the support around them – by their family, school and, where needed, being able to access brilliant services wherever they grow up in the country.

It’s up to us to lead by example and to deliver for them so that they can have the childhood they deserve.

And I’m going to end with a quote from The Big Ask – the final paragraph. It should be the voices of children that end, shouldn’t it?

When we asked children what was holding them back in England in 2021, a 16-year-old boy told us something sad: ‘The social stigma of children from lower class backgrounds trying to achieve something bigger than themselves.’

I’ll read that again. Children from lower class backgrounds trying to achieve something bigger than themselves.

We should tell him of course there is nothing bigger than the lives of children. So – not to scorn ambition – we could try to build something equal to it.

We all know where that work starts – in homes, and schools. What I hope now is that we are back in classrooms, and those empty corridors are full again, we can make life in schools like the ideal of family so many children seemed to seek in The Big Ask - where nothing feels like a trade-off or a compromise, because they are held together by something greater. Because they are places of love.

Thank you.

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