# Children’s wellbeing outside school calls for urgent systemic reform



A comprehensive survey conducted by the Children’s Commissioner for England has underscored the pressing challenges that schools face beyond the classroom, particularly issues such as poverty, mental health, housing instability, and the prolonged waiting times for mental health support. The findings emphasise that while effective teaching remains crucial, it cannot on its own address the complex needs many young people face outside school. Dame Rachel de Souza, the Children’s Commissioner, highlighted that children’s wellbeing is often hindered by factors like living in temporary accommodation, domestic abuse, bereavement, and having caring responsibilities, which schools are increasingly expected to manage but without adequate external support.

The landmark survey, which gathered responses from 86% of state-funded schools and colleges across England, revealed that mental health services are the foremost concern among school leaders. Around 70% of primary schools and nearly 80% of secondary schools flagged access to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) as a critical challenge. Despite an increase in mental health difficulties among pupils, many schools still lack sufficient in-house provision; fewer than half of primary schools and less than two-thirds of secondary schools have access to mental health practitioners or counsellors. Yet, a significant majority of schools expressed a desire to expand such specialist roles, underscoring the gap between the need for support and current resource allocation.

Beyond mental health, issues such as poverty and housing instability also feature prominently as concerns for schools. Half of secondary school leaders and 40% of primary school leaders identified poverty as a significant worry, while housing problems affected 27% of primary schools and 15% of secondaries. Online safety, sexism, and misogyny in schools also emerged as notable concerns for many secondary school leaders, who in some cases rank these above curriculum-related issues. Challenges in funding were also widely acknowledged, with more than half of schools pointing to financial constraints affecting their ability to meet educational health and care plans (EHCP) requirements and support for pupils with special educational needs.

The Children’s Commissioner’s broader body of work provides vital context to these school-based findings. Recent reports consistently highlight the vulnerability of millions of children across England. More than two million children live in families affected by severe poverty, domestic abuse, parental mental health problems, or substance misuse, while approximately 800,000 have significant mental health conditions. Alarmingly, tens of thousands of children live in high-risk environments, requiring state intervention or growing up in circumstances that expose them to risks such as gang involvement and exploitation.

The pandemic has exacerbated these vulnerabilities, as revealed in reports showing that developmental delays affect many young children, and mental health crises have surged. Nearly 60,000 children were referred for urgent mental health concerns in 2023-24, with 50,000 still awaiting treatment by March 2024. This situation is complicated further by stark regional disparities in access to services, often dubbed a postcode lottery of care, with some areas spending less than 1% of their budget on children’s mental health. These gaps emphasize the urgent need for a robust, comprehensive strategy to expand mental health provision and wraparound services for children and their families.

In response to these findings, Dame Rachel de Souza has called for a radical shift to prioritise services outside the classroom that can address the root causes impacting children’s ability to thrive in school. She asserts that such services have long been neglected compared to the education sector and are crucial to closing gaps in attendance, engagement, and attainment. This viewpoint is echoed by school leaders, who, while committed to supporting their pupils, express frustration at being asked to fill systemic gaps without adequate resources and external support mechanisms.

Educational and governmental leaders urge significant investment and reform. Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the school leaders’ union NAHT, stressed that behaviour and attendance issues are frequently driven by factors outside schools’ control, such as poverty and mental health challenges, which require timely expert intervention. Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson echoed these concerns, highlighting government efforts to embed mental health support in every school, expand free school meals, and reform children’s social care through forthcoming legislation. She emphasised the ambition of creating an inclusive education system where no child’s future is limited by their background.

Overall, these reports and survey findings paint a vivid picture of the multifaceted challenges facing children and schools in England today. They show an urgent need for joined-up action that brings together education, health, housing, and social services in a coordinated approach to ensure that every child can access the support they need both inside and beyond the classroom.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/mental-health-and-poverty-among-issues-worrying-school-leaders-outside-classroom-2P3SSUDZKRJQFN5LZCPC27OK4E/), [[2]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/building-back-better/), [[6]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/news/shocking-report-by-childrens-commissioner-reveals-millions-of-children-in-england-living-vulnerable-or-high-risk-lives/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/mental-health-and-poverty-among-issues-worrying-school-leaders-outside-classroom-2P3SSUDZKRJQFN5LZCPC27OK4E/), [[5]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/childrens-mental-health-services-2023-24/), [[7]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/news/childrens-mental-health-report-warns-chasm-remains-between-what-services-are-available-and-what-children-need/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/mental-health-and-poverty-among-issues-worrying-school-leaders-outside-classroom-2P3SSUDZKRJQFN5LZCPC27OK4E/), [[6]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/news/shocking-report-by-childrens-commissioner-reveals-millions-of-children-in-england-living-vulnerable-or-high-risk-lives/), [[2]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/building-back-better/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[3]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/news-and-blogs/press-notice-childrens-commissioner-calls-for-urgent-action-to-tackle-waiting-times-and-inequality-in-mental-health-care-for-children/), [[5]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/childrens-mental-health-services-2023-24/), [[7]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/news/childrens-mental-health-report-warns-chasm-remains-between-what-services-are-available-and-what-children-need/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/mental-health-and-poverty-among-issues-worrying-school-leaders-outside-classroom-2P3SSUDZKRJQFN5LZCPC27OK4E/), [[4]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/a-head-start-early-support-for-childrens-mental-health/), [[7]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/news/childrens-mental-health-report-warns-chasm-remains-between-what-services-are-available-and-what-children-need/)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/mental-health-and-poverty-among-issues-worrying-school-leaders-outside-classroom-2P3SSUDZKRJQFN5LZCPC27OK4E/), [[3]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/news-and-blogs/press-notice-childrens-commissioner-calls-for-urgent-action-to-tackle-waiting-times-and-inequality-in-mental-health-care-for-children/), [[5]](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/childrens-mental-health-services-2023-24/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/mental-health-and-poverty-among-issues-worrying-school-leaders-outside-classroom-2P3SSUDZKRJQFN5LZCPC27OK4E/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/mental-health-and-poverty-among-issues-worrying-school-leaders-outside-classroom-2P3SSUDZKRJQFN5LZCPC27OK4E/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/building-back-better/> - The Children's Commissioner for England's report, 'Building Back Better', highlights the increased vulnerability of children due to the pandemic. It reveals that 2 million children are in families affected by severe poverty, domestic abuse, parental mental health issues, or parental substance misuse. Additionally, 800,000 children suffer from significant mental health conditions, and 82,000 five-year-olds failed to meet half of their expected development indicators in 2019/20. The report calls for a comprehensive strategy to support these children and families effectively.
3. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/news-and-blogs/press-notice-childrens-commissioner-calls-for-urgent-action-to-tackle-waiting-times-and-inequality-in-mental-health-care-for-children/> - The Children's Commissioner for England's press notice emphasizes the urgent need to address waiting times and inequalities in children's mental health services. It reports that nearly 60,000 children were referred for mental health crises in 2023-24, with 50,000 still waiting for treatment by the end of March 2024. The notice highlights significant regional disparities in access to services and calls for renewed focus and investment in children's mental health services through the NHS 10-Year Plan.
4. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/a-head-start-early-support-for-childrens-mental-health/> - The Children's Commissioner for England's report, 'A Head Start: Early Support for Children’s Mental Health', advocates for early intervention in children's mental health. It stresses the importance of supporting families from the beginning to help children form healthy attachments and providing a safe, supportive environment in schools. The report also calls for easy and early access to mental health support, integrated within schools, homes, and communities, to prevent issues from escalating.
5. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/childrens-mental-health-services-2023-24/> - The Children's Commissioner for England's report on children's mental health services for 2023-24 highlights the persistent challenges in meeting children's mental health needs. Despite increased investment and more children receiving help, many still face long waiting times, with nearly 270,000 children waiting for support and almost 40,000 waiting over two years. The report calls for a comprehensive plan to ensure every child receives timely and appropriate support.
6. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/news/shocking-report-by-childrens-commissioner-reveals-millions-of-children-in-england-living-vulnerable-or-high-risk-lives/> - The Children's Commissioner for England's report reveals that millions of children in England are living in vulnerable or high-risk situations. It estimates that over half a million children are so vulnerable that the state has to step in, and 670,000 children are growing up in 'high risk' family situations. The report also highlights that 800,000 children aged 5 to 17 suffer from mental health difficulties, and tens of thousands are involved with gangs.
7. <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/news/childrens-mental-health-report-warns-chasm-remains-between-what-services-are-available-and-what-children-need/> - The Children's Commissioner for England's report warns of a significant gap between the mental health services available to children and what they need. It highlights that more children are seeking help, but the government has yet to provide a comprehensive plan for services in every area. The report also points out that most areas are spending less than 1% of their budget on children's mental health services, leading to a postcode lottery of care.