

THE STATE OF GIRLS' RIGHTS IN THE UK 2024 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Plan International UK / Emma Trimble



For children and
equality for girls

Ella, 15, Blackpool

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“NO ONE LISTENS TO A YOUNG GIRL.”

Wherever girls are born or live, they **should be safe**. Every girl should feel safe, be able to live with joy, and aim high for their future.

Around the world, including here in the UK, girls are telling us loud and clear that they aren't experiencing the progress on gender equality that they've been promised. Many feel that their rights are under attack, while the anti-rights movement dedicated to "curtailing gender equality and human rights"ⁱ increases its activity around the world. We need bold action to challenge this movement. We cannot let another generation of girls grow up without realising equality.

Since 2007, Plan International have released our State of the World's Girls research annually. It is informed by adolescent girls and youth activists, in all their diversity, across the globe. This ensures that the research is evidence-based and focuses on issues that matter most to girls and young women.ⁱ

“The world that we are in is getting exhausting being a woman.”

(Survey Participant, 21, East Staffordshire)

In addition, since 2016, we have conducted research into how girls' rights are being realised in the UK.ⁱⁱ The conversation on gender equality, since our last State of Girls' Rights report in 2020, has continued and evolved, however major drivers of inequalities have held us back from making real progress. Global events, such as the Covid-19 pandemic and the cost of living crisis, have impacted the UK.

We've seen growing misogyny online in the 'manosphere', a deepening climate emergency, and a lack of funding for dedicated services for women. The regressive, well-funded and coordinated anti-rights and anti-gender movement is driving systemic attempts for global rollback on our legal rights, "curtailing gender equality and human rights" including limiting access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) services, "blocking access to financial assets, and condoning gender-based violence."ⁱⁱ

Only **5%** of girls and young women feel "completely safe" in public spaces, such as on public transport or on the street.

ⁱ www.plan-international.org/publications/state-of-the-worlds-girls/
ⁱⁱ www.plan-uk.org/act-for-girls/girls-rights-in-the-uk

“SOMETIMES PEOPLE LOOK AT ME AND SAY, ‘YOU CAN’T DO THESE THINGS JUST BECAUSE YOU’RE A GIRL’, WHICH I HAVE EXPERIENCED MY WHOLE LIFE.”

Tilly, 13, Blackpool



As a result, girls have been drawn to activism as part of important global social justice movements. These include Black Lives Matter, following the murder of George Floyd and the climate movement, through role models such as Greta Thunberg. Here in the UK, the murders of women such as Bibaa Henry and Nicola Smallman, Sarah Everard, Sabina Nessa and Brianna Ghey, have drawn girls to join the movement against gender-based violence.

Against this backdrop, we embarked on our largest ever exercise to talk to girls and understand their lives. We spoke to nearly 3,000 girls and young women aged 12 to 21 in England, Scotland, Wales,

and Northern Ireland - nearly three times more girls than in our 2020 report.

We held creative workshops to talk to girls and young women in detail about their lives. We expanded and refreshed our local authority Composite Index, looking at where in the UK it is toughest to live as a girl or young woman. We worked directly with girls in workshops and with our Youth Advisory Panel, which is the voice of young people at Plan International UK, to develop recommendations. Girls and young women told us that they are frustrated at being held back by restrictive stereotypes and unfair expectations. These impact every area of their lives and are felt more strongly as they get older.

OUR COMMITMENT TO ALL GIRLS

When we talk about and act for 'girls', we are including anyone whose gender identity is wholly, or in part, 'girl'. This includes cis or cisgender girls (whose gender identity corresponds to their sex assigned at birth), trans or transgender girls (whose gender identity does not correspond to their sex assigned at birth)⁹ and non-binary, gender fluid, and agender young people. We also recognise that work relevant to girls may also be relevant for trans boys, and gender questioning young people. The term 'girl' encompasses a wide diversity of experiences.

Joy despite adversity

“There’s days where I could be annoyed, angry, sad, stressed. I’m not happy every day. There are days where it can be rough for me sometimes.”

(Survey participant, 13, Belfast)

There are many sources of joy in the lives of girls and young women. Nearly nine in ten (85%) told us that they are happy to some extent. Relationships and friendships are the primary source of happiness for girls and young women (87%), followed by being

online (86%), and taking part in leisure activities (83%). Girls clearly value feeling connected as part of their community, whether in-person or online. Sadly, the joy and happiness that girls feel lessens as they get older.

- While 12% of girls aged 12 to 16 are “completely happy” in life, this declines to 8% of 17 to 21 year olds.
- Being “not very happy” or “not happy at all” increases from 10% to 15%.

The pressure of gender norms

Our report finds that girls across the UK are angry and frustrated about the state of gender equality in the UK. Girls’ happiness declines as the reality of the pressures, norms, and limitations they experience are realised. Society has been telling girls for years that they can be anything, but they are still held back by outdated stereotypes and unfair expectations. These expectations and informal rules of what it is to be a girl or woman shape how girls and young women are expected to behave. Girls and young women who reject or do not conform to these expectations may face exclusion, criticism, discipline or violence for rejecting the ‘right’ way to act.

- Nearly half of girls and young women agree that expectations about how girls and women should act and what they should be hold them back (47%).
- This worsens with age with 40% of 12 to 16 year olds and 54% of 17 to 21 year olds agreeing that these expectations of them hold them back.

Girls and young women have told us more clearly than ever that these attitudes, behaviours, and expectations placed on them are a part of their daily lives. Many girls told us they struggle with being told they can be anything, because society is failing them by not enabling them to build the lives they want. They are acutely aware of the restrictions and limits of a society. This puts pressure on girls to look and act a certain way. The girls and young women we spoke to were aware of this pressure on body image but could not see

ways around this. Girls told us they are left unable to meet societal expectations and are held back by expectations on them to conform. This is even more pointed in the lives of girls from diverse communities. This was felt across many areas of their daily lives and imagined in what their futures might be like as women. Societal norms are not changing fast enough, leaving girls afraid for the future as they navigate growing up whilst feeling unprepared and undermined.

47% of girls and young women agree that expectations about how girls and women should act and what they should be hold them back.

As much as 44% of girls and young women felt that the way they look holds them back - this rises from 38% of 12 to 16 year olds to 51% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Feeling unsafe and misogyny

All genders are affected by gender inequality and patriarchy. Patriarchy is the system of social norms that privileges men or boys at the expense of women and girls, gender non-conforming people, LGBTQ+ people, people living with disabilities, men and boys and others who do not, or cannot, conform to patriarchal norms.

We know from our work globally that these systems of power disadvantage girls, who face specific challenges because of their age and their gender. Around the world, girls are denied an education, the right to make informed choices about their body, or if, whether, and who to marry - just because they are girls. Girls are often exposed to physical, sexual, emotional, and economic violence in

all spheres of life - including in their homes, schools, and public spaces. This violence perpetuates structures of power and control. And girls who are minoritised may face higher restrictions and violence for failing to conform.

Girls in the UK are not immune to this. Our conversations with girls, about their rights, takes place against a backdrop of increasing misogyny in the public sphere. High-profile figures, such as Andrew Tate, are driving hypermasculinity, particularly online.

56% felt that “education to change the attitudes and behaviour of boys and men towards women” would help them feel safer and more protected.

The girls that participated in this research feel at least somewhat or mostly safe in most areas. Only 5% of girls and young women feel “completely safe” in public spaces, such as on public transport or on the street. Only one in ten (9%) feel completely safe in online spaces, and 11% feel completely safe in leisure spaces. As children move into adolescence and navigate an increasingly complex world, the risk they may be victimised increases and may take different forms.⁴

- 56% of girls said they felt that “education to change the attitudes and behaviour of boys and men towards women” would help them feel safer and more protected. This rose from 51% of 12 to 16 year olds to 62% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Cost of living and employment

Around the world we continue to feel the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, whilst experiencing increasing conflict and crises, and dealing with the climate emergency. All of which are contributing to the major cost of living crisis we see in the UK and globally, where women and girls are disproportionately impacted.

The cost of living crisis, feeling unprepared by their education, and a employment market rife with sexism, were principal concerns for many of the girls who participated in this research. Just 54% of girls and young women agree that their education has, or is, preparing them well for their future.

- 54% of the girls and young women we spoke to feel they have the same educational and employment opportunities as boys or men their age. This declines from 58% of 12 to 16 year olds to 52% of 17 to 21 year olds.

This is particularly challenging for girls and young women from marginalised communities and those who are starting to live outside the family home and supporting themselves financially. Girls are worried for their future as they step into the world of work. 15% of 12 to 16 year olds are not happy with current or future job prospects, rising to 36% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Growing up in a cost of living crisis has fundamentally affected girls. A quarter of girls and young women (25%) told us they have experienced food poverty over the previous year. The food they bought didn't last and they didn't have the money to buy more. Older girls we surveyed were three times more likely to have experienced food poverty.

- 11% of 12 to 16 year olds stated they didn't have money to buy more food at some point in the previous 12 months. This rose to 35% for 17 to 21 year olds.

Uncertain and anxious

“Life can be stressful and sometimes frustrating. It feels like the future is uncertain.”
(Survey participant, 17, South Northamptonshire)

Girls told us they feel “uncertain” and “anxious” about their future and the future of the world. This is a concern shared with many young people that Plan International engages with around the world. In this research, 53% of girls and young women said they were uncertain and 52% said they were anxious about their future.

Tired of empty words and commitments, girls want to see real, tangible change in their lives. However, our research shows that girls have little faith and trust in politicians and institutions to make change on vital issues like gender equality, a fairer society, and the climate emergency, a reality. One in five (20%) say they do not trust the police. Only one in six (16%) trust politicians, whilst three in five (60%) say they do not trust politicians at all.

52% of 17 to 21 year old girls and young women are happy with the protection of our natural world.

- Only 49% of girls and young women are happy with the protection of our natural world - 31% of 12 to 16 year olds are unhappy, rising to 52% of 17 to 21 year olds.
- Inequality in society is a source of unhappiness for 51% of girls, rising from 41% for 12 to 16 to 62% for 17 to 21 year olds.
- Distrust in politicians increases with age, from 49% of 12 to 16 year olds, up to 70% of 17 to 21 year olds.
- Distrust in the police increases with age, from 15% of 12 to 16 year olds, up to 24% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Where you live and who you are still matters

Our report continues to find that outcomes for girls still vary dramatically, depending on where they live. Our research revealed that North East Lincolnshire is the toughest place to be a girl in the UK. There is a clear pattern that girls in communities with high levels of deprivation⁵ will encounter more barriers to getting ahead in life.

Our research points to deprivation as a source of these barriers, but also structural failure from central and devolved government in supporting girls to live healthy lives, have fair access to the education they want, and feel safe in their communities. Cuts to local services, which girls and young women draw on, are being felt across the UK. Looking solely at economic deprivation does not show us the full picture of a girl's life.

Most challenges are experienced more keenly by girls in certain communities. LGBTQ+ girls, girls of colour, girls with disabilities, girls whose first language isn't English, neurodivergent girls, girls who live with one or neither parent, young carers, girls living with mental health conditions, and girls with other long term health conditions all told us of the greater challenges they face, across all the dimensions we looked at in this survey.

We need to see change

Girls want to be part of creating change. Around the world, girls and young women are standing up for their rights. They are at the forefront of social and gender justice movements, both online and offline.⁶ They are campaigning for their rights and those of future generations, including here in the UK, and want their voices to be heard.

Just over a quarter of girls we spoke to want to be more involved in campaigning (26%). We need politicians across the UK to respond

to the challenges facing girls today, with clear action, direction, and strategy. Answering these challenges must be done through a gender-based lens, to remove the barriers girls face and to build towards equality, grounded in accessing their rights.

- 20% of 12 to 16 year olds and 32% of 17 to 21 year olds want to become more involved in campaigning and activism.

Girls are raising their voices and saying, 'no more'. No more harassment. No more abuse. No more violence. They are tired of feeling like they do not have control over their bodies and their lives. Girls are standing up and challenging the current state of the world. We must stand with them.

32% of 17 to 21 year olds want to become more involved in campaigning and activism.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNT

Key takeaways from our State of Girls' Rights 2024 research with 2,963 girls and young women in the UK, aged 12 to 21, across the different themes we investigated.

CHAPTER 1: JOY AND HAPPINESS

Relationships and friendships are the most important source of joy for the girls and young women who participated in this research. However, as they get older, girls and young women find less joy and hope and experience more anxiety and uncertainty about the future.

- Happiness**
- 85% of girls and young women described themselves as happy, to some extent.
 - The proportion of girls and young women who are unhappy rises from 10% of 12 to 16 year olds up to 15% of 17 to 21 year olds.
 - The main sources of happiness are relationships and friendships (87%), online life (86%), and participation in leisure activities (83%).

- Their future**
- 53% of girls and young women said they were "uncertain" and 52% said they were "anxious" about their future, while 51% said they were "hopeful".

CHAPTER 2: GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

Girls and young women do not feel safe — particularly in public spaces, online, and in leisure settings. Many girls and young women told us they do not trust the police, and do not trust institutions to take gender-based violence seriously.

- Feeling safe**
- 93% of girls and young women do not feel "completely safe" in public places.
 - Only one in eleven (9%) girls and young women say they feel completely safe online.
 - Around 6% of 12 to 16 year olds say they do not feel safe at all online. This doubles to around 12% of those aged 17 to 21.
 - One in five (20%) girls and young women told us they do not trust the police at all to help them if they are in difficulty. This increased with age to almost a quarter (24%) of 17 to 21 year olds. A quarter (25%) of girls and young women of colour do not trust the police at all.

CHAPTER 3: HEALTH AND WELLBEING INEQUALITY

Many girls and young women we spoke to feel conflicted about their mental health. They feel positive about their ability to share how they feel with each other, whilst at the same time feeling a lot of pressure to be and act a certain way. Many girls and young women talked about the prevalence of suicide and self-harm, disordered eating, and use of drugs, nicotine, and alcohol among their peer groups.

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| Mental health | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Only two in five (40%) girls and young women are happy with their mental health, declining from 46% of 12 to 16 year olds to 35% of 17 to 21 year olds. |
| Alcohol or drugs | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Nearly half (46%) of respondents to our survey knew someone in their peer group who was addicted to alcohol or drugs. |
| Our natural world | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• One in five (20%) girls and young women told us they were anxious about the protection of our natural world, rising from 17% of 12 to 16 year olds to almost a quarter (24%) of 17 to 21 year olds. |
| Physical Health | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 25% of young women aged 17 to 21 are not happy with their physical health. |
| Menstrual Health | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 8% of girls and young women say improved access to period products would help them to achieve their full educational potential. |

CHAPTER 4: BEAUTY, BODY IMAGE, AND APPEARANCE PRESSURES

Girls and young women face enormous pressure to look a certain way, and face repercussions if they don't conform. Girls and young women told us they feel policed, and unable to control decisions about their own bodies.

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| The way they look | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 44% of girls and young women felt that the way they look holds them back — this rises from 38% of 12 to 16 year olds to 51% of 17 to 21 year olds.• 37% of girls and young women were not happy with how they looked and their body image – this rises from 30% of 12 to 16 year olds to 42% of 17 to 21 year olds.• When we asked girls and young women what worries them, 'how you look (body image)' was top of the list with more than half (52%) of 12 to 21 year olds identifying this as a source of concern. |
| Media representation | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A third (33%) of respondents feel that girls and young women are not well represented in the media, rising from 25% of 12 to 16 year olds to 41% of 17 to 21 year olds. 46% of girls and young women with a mental health condition feel girls and young women are not well represented in the media. |

CHAPTER 5: EDUCATION AND WORKING LIFE

Girls and young women told us that educational institutions were largely important and joyful for them. However, many felt education was letting them down; especially girls from seldom heard groups. They wanted to feel safe yet faced discrimination or violence. As they enter the world of work, girls and young women are worried about inequality and feeling unsafe.

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| Preparing for the future | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Just 54% of girls and young women agree that their education has, or is, preparing them well for their future. Disagreement increases with age with 15% of 12 to 16 year olds disagreeing, rising to 25% of 17 to 21 year olds. |
| Job prospects | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 15% of 12 to 16 year olds are not happy with current or future job prospects, more than doubling to 36% of 17 to 21 year olds.• Only half of the girls and young women we spoke to feel they have the same educational and employment opportunities as boys or men their age — 54% of girls and young women aged 12 to 21, declining from 58% of 12 to 16 year olds to 52% of 17 to 21 year olds. |

CHAPTER 6: MONEY WORRIES AND THE COST OF LIVING

Money was a common cause of concern for girls and young women, especially as they got older. The cost of living crisis is having a disproportionate effect on women, with worries about access to basics like food and stable housing.

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| Food poverty | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A quarter of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 acknowledge they have experienced food poverty in the previous 12 months, whereby the food they bought didn't last and they didn't have the money to buy more. Older girls are three times more likely to agree (11% of 12 to 16 year olds, rising to 35% of 17 to 21 year olds). |
| Money | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• One in three girls and young women say they worry about them or their family having enough money (36%). Concern doubles with age, from one in four 12 to 16 year olds worried at all (23%), rising to half (50%) of 17 to 21 year olds. |
| Unstable housing | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• One in eight (12%) girls and young women with disabilities told us they do not have somewhere comfortable to live. |

CHAPTER 7: LEISURE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Leisure activities such as sports, hobbies, and cultural activities are important for happiness for girls and young women. But many girls and young women do not engage with these joyful activities as much as they would like to. Whilst this is due to many reasons, the most common reasons were feeling unsafe, feeling unsupported, facilities that are inaccessible, and cost.

Safety in leisure spaces

- Only one in nine girls and young women aged 12 to 21 (11%) say that they feel completely safe in leisure spaces.

Hobbies and activities

- Only 42% of respondents aged 17 to 21 take part in hobbies as much as they want to.
- 26% of girls and young women living in areas of high deprivation say they never take part in sporting activities, compared to 19% of those living in areas of low deprivation.
- One in four (25%) LGBTQ+ girls and young women say they take part in sport as much as they want to, compared with two in five (41%) girls and young women who do not identify as LGBTQ+.

CHAPTER 8: PARTICIPATION

Girls and young women told us that they want to take action themselves to make their community and world a better place. They also told us that their trust in politicians is low. They do not trust politicians to listen to them or to take action on issues that matter to them, such as the climate emergency or inequality.

Campaigning

- A quarter of girls want to increase their participation in campaigning (26%). This rises with age from a fifth (20%) of 12 to 16 year olds, up to a third (32%) of 17 to 21 year olds.

Politicians

- Three in five (60%) girls and young women do not trust politicians at all, which increases with age from almost half (49%) of 12 to 16 year olds to up to seven in ten (70%) of 17 to 21 year olds.
- LGBTQ+ girls and young women (74%) are more likely than girls and young women who do not identify as LGBTQ+ to say that they do not trust politicians at all.
- Only one in six (16%) girls and young women we surveyed trust politicians at all.

Inequality in society

- Inequality in society is a source of unhappiness for 51% of girls, rising from 41% of 12 to 16 years olds to 62% of 17 to 21 year olds.

Our natural world

- 31% of 12 to 16 year olds are unhappy with the lack of protection of our natural world and this rises to 52% of 17 to 21 year olds.

CHAPTER 9: GENDER NORMS AND STEREOTYPES

Girls are taught they can be anything, and society has promised them equality. However, these promises haven't been met. Society has failed to engage with the root causes of inequality, gender norms, and stereotypes in many areas of life. As a result, girls still feel pressure to act, look, and conform in impossible ways.

Expectations about how girls and women should act

- 47% of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 said that expectations about how girls and women should act, and what they should be, hold them back in life. This worsens with age from 40% of 12 to 16 year olds increasing to more than half of 17 to 21 year olds (54%) agreeing that these expectations of them hold them back. 64% of girls and young women with a mental health condition feel held back by expectations of what they are and should be.

Expectations about how girls and women should look

- Many girls and young women we spoke to (39%) felt under pressure to look and/or act older than they are. More than half of girls and young women with disabilities agree that they feel the need to act or look older than they are (55%).

Positive relationships with boys and men outside of their family

- Just over half (51%) of girls and young women aged 12 to 21 in our survey feel they have positive relationships with boys and men outside of their family – compared with two thirds (64%) who have positive relationships with girls and women.



CHAPTER 10: THE TOUGHEST PLACES TO BE A GIRL

Our Index of local authorities demonstrates a number of challenges facing girls and young women across the UK. We looked at a range of 12 different indicators to understand the place-based inequalities girls face. The toughest place to grow up as a girl in the UK is **North East Lincolnshire**, which has the lowest score on our Index. The local authority with the highest score is **East Dunbartonshire**.

Local authority that perform well, and poorly, on our Index can be found across most of the country. Each local authority will be facing different, and sometimes more extreme, challenges in terms of delivering services. It can be distracting to focus on one or two of the worst performing places in composite indices such as this one. The goal is not to single out individual local authorities, but to show the scale of structural challenges faced both by girls and young women, as well as local leaders in delivering services to communities in need of support. There are challenges across the country – not one place varies outside 69.07 to 79.74 out of 100 on our Index. This shows that every community has room to improve, and robust support and investment from central governments is necessary to improve the lives of girls and young women in the UK.

There are some striking differences when comparing the top performing and toughest places to be a girl in the UK.

STEM	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A third fewer girls take a STEM subject at A-Level in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to nearly half in the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (31.4% compared to 47.3%)
Attainment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girls' GCSE (or equivalent) performance is 30% lower in the worst performing 10 Local Authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (55.8% compared to 80.5%)
living in poverty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girls are 65% more likely to be living in poverty in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (35.3% versus 21.3%)
The pay gap	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pay gap between men and women is over 14 percentage points higher in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (17.9% versus 4.5%)
Good health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Girls are expected to live 6 fewer years in good health over their life in the worst performing 10 local authorities compared to the top 10 performing local authorities on our Index. (50.6 years versus 57.0 years)

WHERE IS IT TOUGHEST TO BE A GIRL

Where you live fundamentally affects your life chances. The support your community can provide, and the local services you can draw on, can impact your quality of life, and help or hinder access to your rights.

While there are challenges to growing up as a girl in every corner of the UK, in every community and on every street, we know that in some places there are more systemic and structural barriers which girls have to overcome to get ahead.

To understand what it means to grow up as a girl in the UK in 2024, we need to understand the impact of where you live and where these systemic challenges are the most pronounced. This is why we have prepared an Index of local authorities, looking at a range of indicators, to understand the place-based inequalities girls face.

We first did this in our inaugural State of Girls' Rights in the UK report in 2016 and updated it in 2020. In those reports, the Index only covered certain UK nations – today, we publish a full Index covering the whole of the UK. We have updated the Index with more recent data, where it is available across five domains: education and economic lives, poverty, health, violence, and participation and voice. We have used the best available indicators to measure girls' lives – the result is a series of 12 metrics spanning these five domains of girls' lives. Unfortunately, not all data was comparable across all four UK nations. In particular, there was a lack of comparable data in Northern Ireland for several indicators. Some data was not available at a local authority level,

or different indicators were used. In these instances, we have used either Northern Ireland level data or imputed data from other sources. Some data was also suppressed or unavailable for certain councils. In these instances, we sought to take an average of the relevant nation or region. This is discussed in further detail in the Methodology. These indicators are aggregated into the overall Index and provided a score, where 0 represents the worst possible outcome and 100 the best.

The goal is not to single out individual local authorities, but to show the scale of structural challenges faced both by girls and young women as they navigate through life, and also the difficulties facing local leaders in delivering services to communities in need of support. Each local authority will be facing different, and sometimes more extreme, challenges in terms of delivering services. Communities with greater needs for services, in order to give girls the best possible start in life, will inherently need to spend more in delivering public services – but this has become increasingly challenging. We have detailed earlier in this report the pressures facing local government finance generally – councils are now dealing with a 27% real terms cut in core spending power since 2010⁷ against a backdrop of increasing costs to delivery services and increasing demand from a growing population.

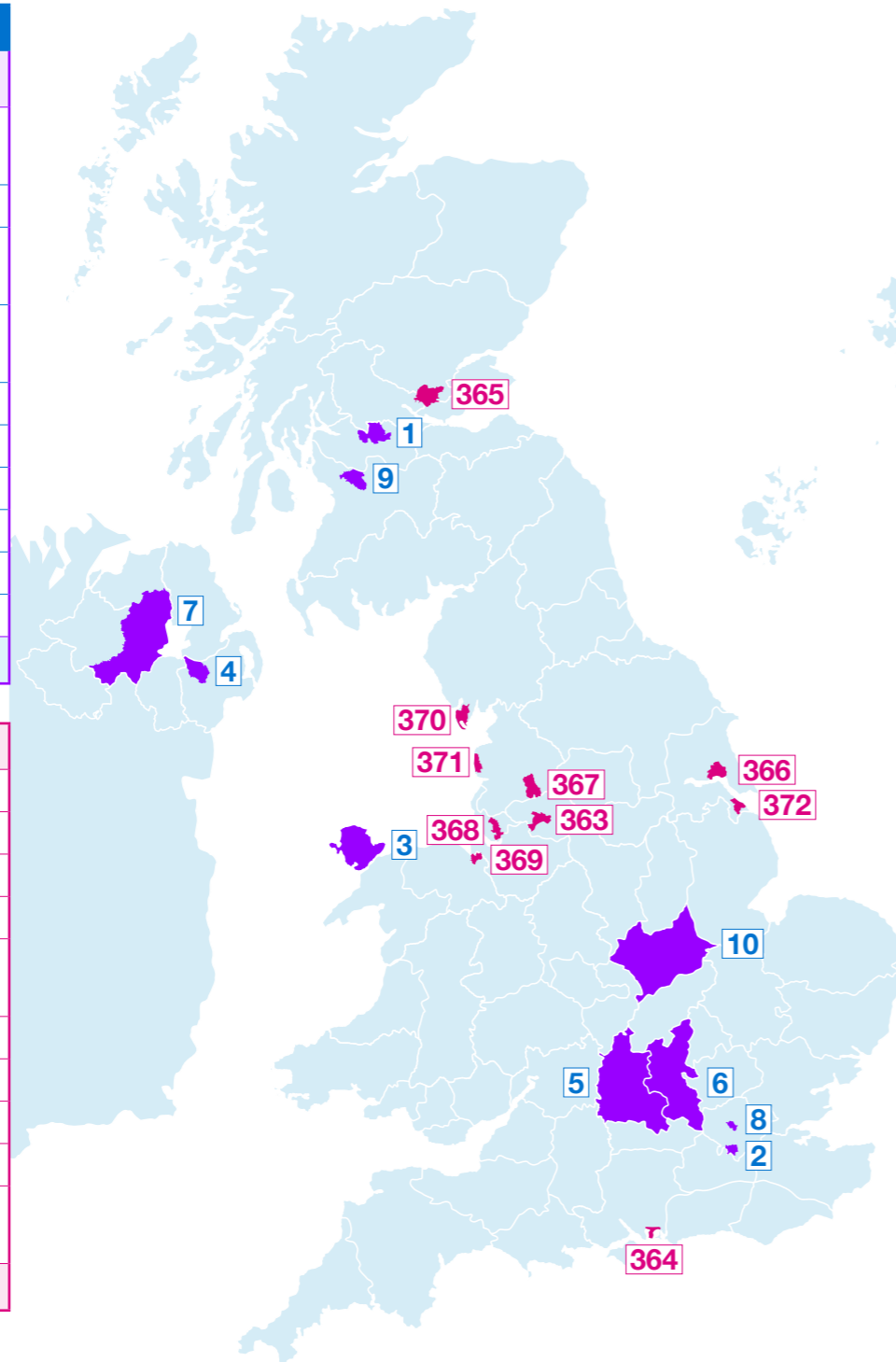
In constructing an Index like this, we must also understand the deprivation faced by communities and that many local authorities are under-resourced. Indicators which may also be tracked through indices of deprivation, such as income, barriers to housing, or the living environment, often end up being proxies

for deprivation. We have sought to avoid this in our development of the Index by balancing with indicators which do not necessarily correlate with deprivation. Quantitative national data will only ever offer a partial insight into the lives of girls, as evidenced in the appendix regarding data gaps.

WHERE IS IT TOUGHEST TO BE A GIRL?

RANK	COUNCIL	SCORE
TOP PERFORMING LOCAL AUTHORITIES		
1	East Dunbartonshire	79.74
2	Sutton	78.63
3	Isle of Anglesey / Ynys Môn	77.98
4	Lisburn and Castlereagh	77.91
5	South Oxfordshire	77.88
6	Buckinghamshire	77.45
7	Mid Ulster	77.15
8	Westminster	77.14
9	East Renfrewshire	76.99
10	Blaby	76.98
AVERAGE		77.79

TOUGHEST LOCAL AUTHORITIES		
363	Salford	70.33
364	Portsmouth	70.32
365	Clackmannanshire	70.25
366	Kingston upon Hull	70.17
367	Blackburn with Darwen	70.12
368	Knowsley	70.06
369	Rochdale	69.83
370	Barrow-in-Furness	69.49
371	Blackpool	69.19
372	North East Lincolnshire	69.07
AVERAGE		69.88



“I still can’t figure out how I’m going to turn out for the future.”

(Survey participant, 21, North East Lincolnshire)

“I would change very little about my life right now.”

(Survey participant, 17, North East Lincolnshire)

The toughest community in which to be a girl is North East Lincolnshire, with a score of 69.07 out of 100. This council centres on towns such as Grimsby, Cleethorpes, and Immingham in Yorkshire and the Humber that have been at the heart of the fishing and maritime industry for decades. An industry which has now declined in the area. There is a drive for regenerating local industry. The area now hosts the world’s largest offshore wind operations and maintenance hub, as a centre of the green economy, and is significant in the seafood processing industry. In 2018, they secured the country’s first town deal, called the Greater Grimsby Town Deal. In addition, they received significant Levelling Up funding from central government. The new Horizon Youth Zone is being developed as a local youth charity to invest “in the youngest members of the community... to ensure that every young person, regardless of their circumstance or background, can access first-rate facilities, alongside expert mentoring and support, whenever they want or need to.”

Local authorities that perform well, and poorly, on our Index can be found across most of the country, although some clear patterns emerge. Many of the ten communities where it is toughest to grow up as a girl, for example, are communities in ‘post-industrial’ areas. Several communities are in the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber. Notably, Blackpool is the second toughest community with a score of 69.19. It was also the toughest community in our State of Girls’ Rights Index in 2020. There

are then clear jumps to Barrow-in-Furness and Rochdale and Knowsley as the only other local authorities to score under 70 in our Index. In contrast, many of the ten communities which are top performing for girls veers towards being wealthier, and often more rural, and the South East, Northern Ireland, and Scotland are more prevalent here.

It can be distracting to focus on one or two worst performing places in an Index such as this one. However, North East Lincolnshire and Blackpool sadly underperform on so many metrics that they are notable outliers, distinct from the rest of the worst performing communities. North East Lincolnshire performs in the worst performing 5% of local authorities on: participation in education, employment and training, STEM uptake at A-Level, gender pay gap, and healthy life expectancy. Blackpool falls in the worst performing 5% of local authorities on: general health, school attainment, and healthy life expectancy (where it performs the worst). It performs positively only on one indicator – the gender pay gap – although Blackpool has among the lowest salaries in the country, so this is hardly a positive sign for girls’ future income opportunities. The challenges faced by these two local authorities are not new to our research. They have been widely documented and led to significant intervention from the Government as part of the Levelling Up agenda, which seeks to identify the most disadvantaged areas and provide targeted support to help them improve.

No local authority scored above 80 out of 100 points on our Index. In fact, with the exceptions above, all other local authorities scored between 70 and 80. Scores ranged between 69.07 (North East Lincolnshire) and 79.74 (East Dunbartonshire), but as no area comes remotely close to 100, we can see there is clear room for improvement for every council and community in supporting girls' rights. While councils aim to provide as much support as they can, given the financial challenges they face, there are structural factors which prevent them from delivering as well as they potentially could across a range of aspects of girls' lives. These challenges need central action and a clear, long-term settlement from central governments to enable councils to support girls' lives and rights.

The Government has identified 20 lower tier local authorities for "Levelling Up Partnerships" following on from their "Deep Dives", which are based on metrics for skills, pay, productivity and health. This has a notable impact with our Index, with Levelling Up Partnership communities in England scoring an average of 72.65 points and ranking 256 on average. In contrast, local authorities in England not included in the Levelling Up Partnerships score an average of 73.90 and ranked 191 — over 50 places higher. However, our Index is not solely driven by deprivation. The Government's Levelling Up Deep Dives were represented in the bottom ten local authorities with areas such as North East Lincolnshire, Blackpool, Rochdale, Blackburn and Kingston-Upon-Hull councils. However, several Levelling Up areas such as Torbay, Bassetlaw, Boston, Northumberland, Mansfield, and Torridge scored above

74 and ranked within the top 200 local authorities, along with Hastings at 73.98. This shows that support for girls and young women to access their rights is not solely linked to deprivation and local authorities can take actions which support their populations.

Transforming an area with deeply entrenched systemic challenges will take time. The results of this Index do not necessarily suggest that the work of local leaders or national policies have failed, but rather that they need further time and resources to properly bed in. Much has been written about the immense, broad, and interconnected challenges facing these communities. While this report cannot point to a quick solution that might resolve issues there, it does expose the scale of the problem as it relates to girls' lives, and the significant amount of work that will be needed to improve. It is clear that targeted funding to address long standing and broad issues in these areas will go a long way in improving the standard of girls' lives and experiences. Levelling Up Partnerships represent a real opportunity to experiment with local interventions, as suggested by the literature, that might improve the lives of girls in these communities. There were also local authorities which scored poorly on our Index which are not part of the Levelling Up Partnerships, such as Barrow-in-Furness, Knowsley, Portsmouth, Salford, Tameside, Lancaster, Manchester, Eden, Cheshire West and Chester, Wigan, Bradford and Southampton, which were in the poorest performing 20 local authorities — all of which have a score of 71.10 or below. This may show areas which would benefit from further support on specific elements that benefit girls' lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHANGE

Girls are telling us loud and clear that they aren't experiencing the progress on gender equality they've been promised, and that the future doesn't look any better.

It doesn't have to be this way. Girls want to be part of creating change. They are campaigning for their rights and those of future generations, including here in the UK, and want their voices to be heard.

They can't make change happen alone. It's time for our politicians to step up and restore girls' trust. We need politicians across the UK to listen and respond to the challenges facing girls today, with clear action, direction, and strategy. Tackling inequality and ending discrimination must be at the heart of government action. Some of our key recommendations are about the way politicians make their decisions and actively involve girls and young women. Plan International UK recommends that the UK Government and devolved governments where relevant, should:

1. Prioritise gender equality and girls' rights across all government departments, including by launching a ten-year cross-departmental gender equality strategy. The strategy, and its implementation, should include specific and targeted support for girls and young women in all their diversity, with a strong focus on tackling gender norms and misogyny. It should have gender-focused objectives and targets and be accompanied by specific and measurable objectives and a funding and implementation plan, with responsibility sitting with a member of cabinet. This should link to, and build on, the strategy on tackling violence against women and girls.
2. Ensure girls and young women in all their diversity are a meaningful part of government policies, strategies, and programmes which affect them. Relevant equality impact assessments should take an intersectional lens and recognise adolescence as a key life stage, and girls and young women should be meaningfully engaged in co-production.
3. Establish a time-bound commission on tackling gender norms to build an understanding of what works in addressing harmful norms and misogyny, with an independent chair and involvement from girls and young women throughout. This should dovetail with reviews of the gender equality strategy to feed in recommendations, the latest research, and understanding of gaps in knowledge.
4. Collect data that is disaggregated in ways that enable us to understand the experiences of girls and young women specifically, including by collecting data on adolescent girls and broader data on age, sex, and disability. Collecting data that is also available at a local government level is vital.
5. Deliver sustainable long-term funding for local government, following local government associations' recommendations across the UK, and enable the sustainable rebuilding of vital support such as youth services, support for survivors of domestic violence, and public health initiatives.

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For children and
equality for girls

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