

Foreword: Helen O'Donnell, CEO, Children's University Trust



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Earlier this year I announced that I will be stepping down as CEO of Children's University Trust in December. After 8 years in the role, I've seen huge developments and changes in my organisation and within our far-reaching network of delivery partners and schools. Nothing makes me prouder and more reflective than publishing this, our third set of State of the Nation Reports. Since 2021 these reports have been the culmination of an annual research project looking at everything we know about learning beyond the classroom in modern Britain.

No other organisation collects and collates this information as broadly and as comprehensively as Children's University. To be able to share this information with the intent of informing and improving provision of opportunities for children and young people, makes me proud. As legacies go, I'm pleased with this one.

When I joined Children's University, I made it my mission to answer the 'So what?' question. We had an active network and provided thousands of children with Passports to Learning each year as part of our programme. Encouraging, tracking, and celebrating children's participation was what the charity had done since its establishment in 2007, and in schools and pockets of the country for even longer. But so what? What was the impact of this?

These reports take data from the past 12 months and analyse provision of, and participation in, learning activities beyond the classroom. Using our bespoke digital platform, Children's University Online, we can gather data that allows us to see this learning through the lens of skills development, categories of learning, and engagement linked to the Gatsby Benchmarks. This year's reports are informed by data from:

- 70,000 children
- 19,400 activities
- 704,000 hours of participation

Having such data underpin a unique 12-month picture like this answers that 'so what?' question by showing the current and real impact of informal learning in a way that straddles school, home and community. For this to be the third set of such reports establishes Children's University as not only a provider of valuable information, but also the only organisation to be able to now show trends and patterns. Over the past three years we have now analysed over 1,000,000 hours of learning. This is information that we want to see used by others and grow in subsequent years.

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If you provide activities for children and want to see where your provision fits within the national context, you'll find it here. If you are looking for a tool and data set that will help your organisation audit your local assets, you'll find it here. If you're a policy maker looking for insights into the impact of learning beyond the classroom, you'll find it here.

The past 8 years have been and gone in a blur for me. But for everyone in the education sector it's been a time of exceptional change. I fought the urge to write 'unprecedented change', because as statutory education has always been intrinsically tied to the shifting whims of Governments, ministers and trends, there has always been a precedent in place for the instability of the education sector. That said, the past 8 years really have been exceptional in shifting the environment we work in. We have seen five Prime Ministers, presiding over nine Secretaries of State for Education. For the first time in modern history, we also saw a period of enforced school closures during the pandemic. The cumulative impact of all of this on our economy, living conditions and education is huge.

The world into which we publish this report is one deep in the midst of a cost-of-living crisis. The cost of living, as measured by the Consumer Price Index (CPI), rose 7.9% during the period captured in this report. For the parents of children looking to engage with opportunities outside of the classroom, the reliance on the provision of free activities is greater than ever. Yet for schools, now facing reduced school funding at the same time as having to source staff pay increases from existing depleted budgets, the ability to provide free activities is harder than ever. 50% of school leaders have reported cutting trips and outings, with 26% cutting sports and extra-curricular spend¹.

With such tightening of purse strings at every level, the need for efficiencies and focus is huge. It is here that I believe Children's University really shows its value. Children's University offers a means for collating school, home and community learning in one long-established framework. Rewarding children and young people for participation in a wide range of opportunities under one umbrella is arguably the kind of programme we should see being accessible to all children. It is my hope that this report shows the value and impact that coordinated and comprehensive support for our children and young people beyond the classroom can have.

Footnotes:

1. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/school-funding-and-pupil-premium-2023/>