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## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. The last 12 months have been incredibly tough for all of us. 2020 has tested the resilience of individuals and organisations alike. However, the collective creativity and determination of Action for Children staff, volunteers and supporters has ensured we can continue to be a vital lifeline for the children and families we support. This collaborative effort has also seen the introduction of innovative ways to reach the most vulnerable children and provide the help they desperately need.
- 1.2. We were touched, but not at all surprised, by the Methodist Church's remarkable support. The Church showed that children and families were not forgotten and has inspired us in the face of adversity.

### *Leadership*

- 1.3. The Conference appointed the Revd Dr Michael Long as Methodist representative on our Board of Trustees when Dr Daleep Mukarji's tenure ended. Dr Long, one of our partners for many years, brings a wealth of experience, and we are truly grateful to have him on the Board. Since his appointment in July 2020, he has contributed so much, including as Chair of our England Committee.
- 1.4. In January 2021, we said farewell to Carol Iddon, Deputy Chief Executive and Managing Director of Children's Services, who retired after 18 years of exemplary service to the charity. She had planned to retire in October 2020 but stayed until she could hand over to her successor, ensuring her post was not vacant during a critical time. This kind of commitment is characteristic of Carol, an authentic leader who is passionate about the safety and wellbeing of children, young people and families. Please join us in wishing her well in the future.
- 1.5. We were delighted to welcome Dr Tim O'Neill as the new Managing Director of Children's Services. Dr O'Neill, who was Director of Children's Services in Birmingham, will focus on enabling our children's services staff and volunteers to achieve their best for children. Visit our website to learn more about him.

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### 2. Delivering services during the coronavirus pandemic

- 2.1. When the government announced the first lockdown in March 2020, it was clear that the situation for vulnerable families, where 4.2 million UK children were already locked in poverty, was about to get worse. The significant rise in the number of families who could not afford basic essentials, such as food, nappies, cleaning products, gas or electricity, was extremely worrying.
- 2.2. The pandemic did not just place financial pressure on vulnerable families; it affected them in many other ways. Parents had to do their best to support their children's learning while keeping them entertained. Many had to balance this with the stress of either having to continue working or having lost employment.
- 2.3. To help ease the financial pressure on families and tackle other challenges, we launched the Coronavirus Emergency Fund, which has helped around 20,000 children so far. The Fund helped meet the cost of food and other essentials. It also enabled us to provide books, technology and other resources to help children learn and play at home; to make adaptations so parents or carers can care for children with special needs; and to support new mothers and their babies. Since its launch in March 2020, the Fund has raised over £750k.
- 2.4. During the pandemic, we kept 99% of our services open, ensuring we stayed connected with the children and families we support. We worked hard to keep our staff and children safe. In some cases, staff even stayed away from their own families and moved into our children's homes. We adapted many of our community-based services so that families could receive practical support at home, for example by video conferencing and telephone. Staff also developed games online with children and some carried out socially distanced doorstep visits. Without such alternatives many families would have been cut off from vital support.
- 2.5. In July 2020, we launched our improved online parenting service, Parent Talk, to the public. It offers free and confidential live chat with our parenting coaches, along with a rich catalogue of parenting articles. Since last April, Parent Talk has supported over 400,000 parents and carers. This has included more than 10,000 one-to-one conversations online. In February 2021, the service was awarded the Helplines Standard Accreditation, a nationally recognised quality mark which accredits best practice in helpline work. We now join the likes of organisations such as NSPCC and Childline. We also launched a bilingual version of Parent Talk in Wales.
- 2.6. We have also grown our support and services in other ways, across the four nations, during this time. This includes increasing mental health support through

our Bouncing Back programme, as well as being awarded tenders in Cornwall, Derbyshire and Inverclyde; we started a fostering service in Wales; we worked with Barnardo's to distribute £2.4m of the Scottish Government's wellbeing fund; in Northern Ireland teams have worked with young people and the new government to develop policies on young carers, mental health and special needs and we've been a core partner in the 'See, Hear, Respond' programme which has engaged with 60,000 children and young people since June 2020.

- 2.7. In 2020, we successfully achieved the Investing in Volunteers Award. Volunteers have been invaluable to us over this past year, and we cannot thank them enough. Over 2,500 volunteers across the UK provided essential support throughout the pandemic. They helped get emergency resources to the most vulnerable families, adapted to digital support, took on new befriending opportunities, and shared their own lockdown activities to keep families entertained.

### **3. Influencing policy and campaigning for change**

- 3.1. Our role as a loud campaigning voice for children has been more important than ever. Our Policy and Campaigns Team has continued to work relentlessly to influence change to improve children's lives and highlight the impact of the pandemic.

#### *Impact of domestic abuse on children*

- 3.2. In July 2020, after years of campaigning, we received news that the government will amend the Domestic Abuse Bill to make sure children are recognised as victims of domestic abuse. This is likely to help over 800,000 children. We are currently supporting an amendment to the Bill, which would ensure that children affected by domestic abuse are able to access community-based specialist services to help them recover from their experiences.

#### *Impact of the pandemic on children*

- 3.3. In September 2020, we published our *Childhood During Coronavirus* report, which focused on the needs of families supported by Action for Children's Coronavirus Emergency Fund. We called on the government to retain the £20-a-week Universal Credit uplift beyond April 2021, a recommendation that has gathered momentum in recent months. We also used evidence from the report to directly engage with Ministers and MPs ahead of the budget, and to inspire campaigners to apply public pressure.

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### *Leaving foster care*

- 3.4. In October 2020, we published our *Staying Put* report. The report found that the policy designed to allow care leavers to remain with their foster families after they turn 18 – Staying Put – was being hampered by a lack of funding. We put forward alternative funding options for the Staying Put programme, as well as further recommendations, to the government.
- 3.5. We have also engaged government and politicians on other issues including:
- Organising a virtual visit for Andrea Leadsom MP to our children's centres in Devon, as part of the government's Early Years' Review. The visit involved more than 20 sessions with frontline staff, partner agencies and parents we support. We also published a briefing looking at how our Early Years services adapted to support families virtually during 2020.
  - A digital drop-in event focusing on how our mental health interventions are supporting children and young people during the pandemic. Over 40 MPs signed up, and five young people, who are excellent advocates for our work, talked about their experiences of The Blues Programme.
- 3.6. Going forward, we will work to influence and support the government on how best to prioritise children within their pandemic recovery plans. We will make recommendations to tackle poverty, invest in services, and support children's mental health. We are looking forward to engaging closely with the government's review of children's social care, too, which is a once-in-a-generation opportunity.

### **4. Methodist partnership in 2020/21**

- 4.1. We thank our Methodist friends for their encouraging messages of support, which have meant so much to our staff during this challenging time. The messages conveyed empathy and a deep sense of responsibility towards the wellbeing of both the children we support and our staff.

### *Fundraising*

- 4.2. Despite lockdown restrictions, the Methodist community raised an amazing £333,600 between April 2020 and February 2021. While it may be disappointing that many fundraising activities were put on hold, we had to prioritise the safety and wellbeing of our supporters.
- 4.3. Methodists have enthusiastically supported our online fundraising activities,

taking part in Boycott your Bed, a new sleepout fundraiser; our Secret Santa appeal, which included our first-ever virtual carol service and raised over £1 million; and conducting online worship services.

- 4.4. Blessed with creativity, Methodist supporters have come up with innovative ways to continue to raise funds. Brownhills and Willenhall Circuit's nativity character window pack and Jim Godfrey's book of cartoons, *Trying Times*, are just two examples. We are also aware of efforts to safely gather income from home collection boxes.

### *ONE intern*

- 4.5. In October 2019, we welcomed another ONE intern, Franklin, to our Policy and Campaigns Team. For more than 16 months, Franklin was an invaluable team member, contributing to diverse areas of our work. Sadly, the ONE Programme was discontinued in 2020. It was an absolute privilege for Action for Children to be a part of the spiritual and career growth of five exceptional young people since September 2017.
- 4.6. The Methodist Church's loyal support means so much to us. Our heartfelt thanks go out to everyone for their kindness and prayers. We look forward to being able to meet up with our Methodist friends again as soon as it is safe.

## **5. End Childhood Crisis: a new focus**

- 5.1. Even before coronavirus, vulnerable children's lives, their childhoods, and their futures were in crisis. Children were going hungry, struggling with their mental health, and experiencing domestic abuse without proper support. Now things are even worse. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on many vulnerable children's lives. And with unemployment rising and families relying on furlough, even more face being plunged into crisis. But we are determined to do everything we can to stop the pandemic from scarring a generation.
- 5.2. With the help of our supporter base, our frontline key workers can make sure the most vulnerable children have enough proper food, somewhere safe to sleep, equipment for learning, and the right mental health support. These are essentials, the fundamentals of a safe and happy childhood – things that no child in the UK should go without.
- 5.3. Our End Childhood Crisis campaign will raise money to support these children and families in 2021. The support of the Methodist Church in this will be vitally important.

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### *Securing our Future*

- 5.4. The past year has been incredibly difficult for charities. After an extensive review of our organisation, followed by a consultation with staff, we have introduced a new structure, which will be in place from 1 April 2021. The revised structure will enable us to make essential savings while ensuring we continue to support children, young people and families now and in the future. Regrettably, like many charities, this also means having to lose some of our excellent and committed staff.
- 5.5. Although this is a difficult time, we believe our structure will give us the stability, skills and expertise to keep providing vital services, while putting us on track to become financially sustainable.
- 5.6. Of course, children, young people and families remain at the centre of what we do, and our commitment to ensure all children have a safe and happy childhood is stronger than ever. We know that we can count on Methodists' support for our work as has been the case throughout our history.

### **\*\*\*RESOLUTIONS**

**17/1. The Conference receives the General Report of Action for Children.**

**17/2. The Conference notes that the trustees of Action for Children for the current year are:**

Chair: Sarika Patel (2019); Vice-Chair (since September 2020):  
Markus Ruetimann (2015)  
Methodist Church appointee: The Revd Dr Michael Long (2020)  
Richard Cryer (2015); Dawn Warwick (2020); Enda Johnson (2020);  
Steve Bell (2020); Gary Edwards (2020); Peter Curran (2021).