

11. Action for Children

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. This is an important year for Action for Children as we mark 150 years of supporting children, young people and families using a diverse portfolio of interventions. Our founder, Methodist minister the Revd Thomas Bowman Stephenson, established our organisation in 1869, and we remain relevant, forward-thinking and resilient today.
- 1.2. We plan to mark our anniversary from 9 July 2019, starting with the launch of a landmark report looking at the challenges of childhood today. Our staff and volunteers hope to join as many churches as possible for special Action for Children Sunday services on or around 14 July, and at other local celebrations throughout the year.

Leadership changes

- 1.3. In 2018/2019, we were delighted to welcome our new Chief Executive, Julie Bentley, and our new Chair of the Board of Trustees, Sarika Patel. We gave our previous Board of Trustees chair, John O'Brien, a befitting send-off in December 2018 to express our sincere thanks for his strong leadership since 2012.

2. Methodist partnership in 2018/2019

- 2.1. The generous support of the Methodist Church has been a source of strength and inspiration for 150 years. We have so much to be thankful for, from the wisdom of Methodist leaders and the work of our dedicated volunteers, to the committed local church supporters who help us raise thousands of pounds for our vital children's services. Some examples of the support we received include:
 - Almost £1.3 million raised through local church fundraising and memorials as at February 2019 (this does not include national events such as marathons and legacy gifts).
 - The placement of two ONE Programme interns who brought valuable knowledge and skills.
 - Kent College, Canterbury, adopting Action for Children as charity of the year.
- 2.2. We had the privilege of welcoming the Reverend Michaela Youngson and Bala Gnanapragasam, the President and Vice-President of the Methodist Conference (2018/2019), to visit some of our services. We appreciate their prayers and encouragement during their year of office.
- 2.3. We would like to thank David Humphreys, Methodist Independent Schools Trust General Secretary, for providing opportunities for exploring greater collaboration, which will impact on both the lives of children who use our services and young adults in schools. These opportunities have paved the way for discussions between some of our local services and the Methodist Schools around them. We were delighted that Methodist College, Belfast, adopted our Blues Programme, an initiative that helps young people look after their emotional and mental wellbeing.

- 2.4. In June 2018, we joined in the 150th anniversary celebrations of Bethnal Green Methodist Church, East London, which is situated near the site of one of the first Children's Home on 8 Bonner Road. The celebration showcased the impact of the church and charity on the local community through a history exhibition and educational activities for our Hackney Young Carers.

3. Seeking justice through our policy and campaigning work

- 3.1. Policy and campaigning remains a vital part of our work to tackle the challenges children face today. Our research revealed some of the crucial issues that affect vulnerable children and families, and we are working with young people on matters that are important to them. We have made good use of various opportunities to positively engage with the government and other organisations (including at party conferences and events), and these have produced encouraging results. Notable achievements include:
 - 3.1.1 **Best Start in Life:** The campaign stepped up a gear this year as our petition reached 10,000 signatures (www.actionforchildren.org.uk/how-to-help/support-our-campaigns/best-start-in-life/). Alongside families and young children from one of our centres, we marched to Westminster to demand that the government urgently review the support children receive in the first few years of their lives.
 - 3.1.2 **Domestic abuse:** As part of a cross-sector group of organisations, we have called on the government to ensure that the draft Domestic Abuse Bill addresses the needs of children who have experienced domestic abuse and violence. The impact of domestic abuse on children and young people is devastating, and the response to those affected needs to improve. When the draft Bill was published, we were encouraged to see that our work had influenced the government's overall approach.
 - 3.1.3 **Build Sound Minds event:** We hosted an event in Parliament to raise awareness of Children's Mental Health Week. Young people spoke about their experiences of the Blues Programme, and we encouraged MPs to take our message back to their constituencies.
 - 3.1.4 **Young campaigners' workshop:** We delivered a campaigning workshop to young people from our services, equipping them with the skills they need to make a real difference. The young people designed their own mental health (#DontZipItUp) and homelessness (#TheFightAgainstHomelessness) awareness campaigns.
- 3.2. Plans are underway to launch a landmark report in July 2019, which will look at the state of childhood today. The report will outline the challenges faced by young people across the UK, and suggest how we – the government and society – can improve childhoods, particularly for those in or on the edge of crisis.
- 3.3. For more about our campaigning and policy work, please visit: actionforchildren.org.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/

4. Making a difference to children's lives

- 4.1. We continue to develop new areas of work to support vulnerable children and young people. These include increased mental health support and the expansion of our permanency work

(residential support and fostering and adoption), which will enable us to give more children a safe and loving home. We are also looking at the commercial activity of our nurseries.

- 4.2. In 2017/2018, we supported more than 301,000 children, young people and families. This included those who attended at least one session, had been seen by a staff member, received advice from us, or used any of our 529 services. The overall reach has drastically reduced from 340,000 in the previous year as a direct consequence of the reduction in the number of children's centres we manage.

Mental health services

- 4.3. Mental health services for children and young people are in crisis. We have identified several schools-based programmes that are proven to work, and we are using these to support children and young people. We continued to deliver our Blues Programme in schools and this is achieving some remarkable results, with 75% of young people reporting improvements in their mental health and emotional wellbeing. We are working on the sustainability of this programme and an expansion of the service.
- 4.4. Another successful programme is GUIDE, which is supported by Welsh Government Grant Funding and Swansea University. GUIDE will be rolled out across Wales for year 9 students (13- to 14-year-olds). The programme was developed in Canada and provides schools with a complete set of resources that are proven to increase the understanding of mental health issues and reduce stigma. The programme also offers professional learning sessions for two teachers in each school, which enhances the mental health literacy of both students and teachers.
- 4.5. We have also secured funding to pilot the FRIENDS for Life programme in Dewsbury. This is a social skills and resilience building programme that is recognised by the World Health Organisation as an effective means to prevent anxiety among children aged 8 to 11 years old. FRIENDS for Life is proven to give participants the necessary tools to reduce their anxiety and cope in stressful and challenging situations. It also improves participants' social and emotional skills, their ability to focus, confidence, and capacity to relax and regulate emotions.

Residential care and permanency services

- 4.6. Our permanency work offers a range of options designed to meet a child's needs and help them to remain in a secure and stable placement. Our goal is to minimise the number of times children move home, thereby reducing the upset and trauma they experience.
- 4.7. Over the last year, we have further expanded our residential developments, which now include two new homes in North Wales and Cardiff. We have also:
- Repurposed a property we own in North Somerset to provide a long-term home for children with disabilities.
 - Purchased the first of four properties in Tyne and Wear, which will form a new cluster of residential homes for children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD).
 - Explored using our East Midlands properties to create a cluster of EBD children's homes, as well as the development potential of properties in Stroud and Hastings.
- 4.8. As part of our efforts to improve fostering services, we embarked on the Digital Handbook Project last year. Our aim is to develop a 'welcome' app to support foster children as they

move into a new home. The inspiration came from a foster child in an Action for Children placement who talked about the need to improve our paper welcome pack to meet the communication needs of the digital generation. Our corporate partner, CBRE, has provided some funding for the project, enabling us to co-create the product with young people and foster carers. We will be rolling it out to our carers over the coming months.

Nurseries

- 4.9. The number of Spring by Action for Children nurseries has increased to 46 following the acquisition of additional RAF nurseries and the purchase of an existing nursery business in Kent. We plan to open more locations in the coming year.
- 4.10. We are proud to have made such an impact, but we know there are still significant numbers of children and families who need our help.

5. Youth Advisory Board

- 5.1. Action for Children believes in actively engaging children and young people in decision-making. We have set up the Youth Advisory Board to increase input from young people and extend their influence in terms of developing our work. Our Board of Trustees, Executive Leadership Team and National Committee meetings have found the group's opinions extremely useful.
- 5.2. In the past year, the Board has been involved in the recruitment of our new Chief Executive and Chair of Trustees. They have also helped us appoint young people to our Scotland National Committee, designed new resources that will support young people across the UK, including a Mental Health Outcome Star, and helped with our new 'welcome' app for young people moving into foster placements.
- 5.3. In 2019, we will implement our new participation and co-production strategy to support the meaningful engagement of children and young people throughout the charity.

6. The year ahead

- 6.1. During this anniversary year, we hope to increase support from the public, partners and our Action for Children family of supporters, staff, children and families. We will continue to work in partnership with others to find innovative solutions to the tough challenges faced by children, young people and families.
- 6.2. We are grateful for the prayers, gifts and encouragement we receive from the Methodist Church, and look forward to making the coming year one to remember.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

11/1. The Conference received the General Report of Action for Children.

11/2. The Conference noted that the trustees of Action for Children for the current year are:

Chair: Sarika Patel (2019), Vice-Chair: Kate Guthrie (2014), Methodist Church Appointee: Dr Daleep S Mukarji (2014), the Revd Dr Sheryl M Anderson (2016), Richard Cryer (2015), Tracy Griffin (2015), Debbie Morgan (2016), Markus Ruetimann (2015), Josephine Larbie (2017), Fiona Thorne (2017), Patricia Gordon (2017), Gill Ellis (2017)