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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Our mission to secure safe and happy childhoods for the most vulnerable children is as important now as it was in 1869 when the Revd Dr Thomas Bowman Stephenson created the first national children's home. Demand for our services continues to rise as the devastating impact of the cost of living crisis hits children and families across the country. We are hugely grateful to all our Methodist supporters for their continued commitment to our work. In such challenging times for so many, your support is even more valued and vital.

Leadership

- 1.2 The Revd Dr Mike Long continues to be our Methodist appointed trustee, playing an active role in the charity including as Chair of our England Committee. Mike is a much-valued member of the Board and we are thankful for the time, wisdom and expertise he offers to the charity.
- 1.3 In March 2023 we said a fond farewell to Melanie Armstrong as CEO. Having been in post since 2020, Melanie steered us through the pandemic, stabilising our finances and introducing our new strategy. Her replacement is Paul Carberry, who has worked for Action for Children for over 30 years, most recently as National Director for Scotland and interim National Director for England. Paul brings a wealth of experience of children's services to his role at a critical time for the operation of our services.

2. Delivering our services

- 2.1 Action for Children delivers 447 services across the UK. We help make sure children get the best start in life and have a loving place to call home. We can provide food and warmth in a crisis. And we can offer the right mental health support, so children thrive. The impact of the cost of living crisis continues to affect millions of children and young people in the UK including those whom we serve.

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- 2.2 Against this background, we continue to implement our ambitious strategy which sets out our roadmap to 2025, balancing growth in a number of areas alongside long-term financial sustainability. The strategy concentrates on four core pillars – family support, children in care, disabled children, and mental health and wellbeing - with seven goals to help deliver them. The aim is clear – to help more vulnerable children at a time when many more children and their families are under increasing pressure.

Growing our numbers of homes

- 2.3 Action for Children is committed to growing our numbers of homes for children in care with substantial investment being made to purchase and renovate properties. Two recently acquired homes are undergoing renovation and will be registered and operational in 2023: one in the north east of England and one in north Wales. Plans for several other homes are also underway. All these homes will look after up to 4 children who will be in the care of the local authority and who may be experiencing problems associated to early childhood trauma including behavioural, mental health and attachment related problems. Our dedicated teams will be trained in trauma informed models of care enabling them to best support these children.

Mental health support

- 2.4 Our national online service, Parent Talk, provides accessible and trustworthy advice, support, and reassurance for thousands of parents and carers. In the year to April 2022 nearly 470,000 people accessed our online service with 9,000 people receiving online 1:1 support. Recent research from Parent Talk has highlighted some of the concerns and challenges facing parents and families. We found that there has been a huge increase in parents seeking support for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities; child mental health was the top issue about which parents sought advice with via Parent Talk's 1:1 coaching service; and there has been a steady increase in parents seeking help for a child who feels too anxious to attend school. Parent Talk continues to offer support to families with advice on common concerns affecting millions including parent burnout.
- 2.5 Our Blues programme gives young people the tools to look after their emotional wellbeing. Over six weeks it teaches emotional resilience and reduces low mood and anxious thoughts. Blues involves a one-hour group session at school each week plus home tasks. Students learn how to challenge negative thoughts and talk about different coping strategies. Regular group work builds rapport and

confidence. The home tasks are a chance to practise the new skills. So far, we've delivered The Blues Programme in over 200 schools, to more than 7,700 young people with 79% of students saying it has improved their mental health and 97% saying they would recommend it to a friend.

A focus on care leavers

- 2.6 Support for care leavers is an area of work that we have given particular focus in the last year. Supporting young people moving from the care system into independent living is at the heart of our ongoing collaboration with the John Lewis Partnership, who have an ambition to become an employer of choice for young people leaving the care system.
- 2.7 Applying principles set out by The Care Leavers Covenant, we are proud to have recently gained 'Care Leaver Friendly Employer - Gold Partner' status. This demonstrates our ongoing commitment to supporting care experienced people to get a job in our organisation and to thrive while they are with us.
- 2.8 Action for Children Scotland is working with the Scottish Apprenticeship Advisory Board to investigate access, uptake and completion rates among care experienced young people in apprenticeships.
- 2.9 Care experienced young people in north east Wales have received energy efficiency and wellbeing packs this winter. This has been funded by Action for Children staff from our service, Skills Plus and a young person who is supported by it, who raised money by running half marathons in Wrexham and the London marathon.

Nothing about me, without me

- 2.10 In September 2022, we launched our first Children and Young People's Participation and Engagement Strategy, "Nothing About Me, Without Me". The strategy is a central part of our on-going commitment to the participation of children and young people in the decisions that affect their lives.
- 2.11 The strategy and the plan we have built to deliver it set out what we aim to achieve by 2025. It reaches right across the organisation and lays out our ambition as to how we will amplify the voices of the children and young people we support and, in turn, increase the level of influence they have over our work. Our recently appointed Young Ambassadors Board is an example of this work. We were delighted to receive 60 applications from young people for 15 places on the Board.

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Commitment to staff

- 2.12 In recognition of its commitment to developing young people across the organisation, Action for Children in Scotland has been awarded the Investing in Young People (IYIP) Platinum Award, the highest accreditation level available to an organisation in Scotland. Action for Children is one of only 10 organisations to achieve the award which recognises a strong commitment to harnessing the talent of young people and providing a pathway for them to progress in the charity.
- 2.13 In addition, Action for Children has moved up to silver level accreditation following our latest Investors in People (IIP) assessment. IIP found Action for Children had improved across the whole IIP assessment framework since we were last assessed in 2019. Key improvements include leadership development, diversity and inclusion, and wellbeing.

3 Influencing policy and campaigning for change

- 3.1 Amidst the worst cost of living crisis in decades, we have worked hard to campaign for targeted support to the most vulnerable and shine a light on the significant barriers that millions of families have to work. In February 2023, we published a major report, *All Worked Out*, on the structural barriers that families face in accessing work and adequate support from the social security system when work is not a realistic option. We have developed a powerful [digital tool](#) giving a snapshot of levels of child poverty and financial hardship in each constituency. We encourage our Methodist supporters to use this tool to raise awareness with their MP of levels of child poverty in the local area.
- 3.2 In the autumn of 2022, in response to Government proposals to remove the link between benefit uplift and inflation, we launched a successful online action. Thank you to all our Methodist supporters who joined us to raise this critical issue with Government and help to overturn the proposals, and ensure that benefits are pegged to inflation. There is much more to do in this area and we encourage supporters to read our proposals in the *All Worked Out* report on reframing the benefits system to create a more effective way of reviewing benefit increases.

Influencing the shape of children's social care

- 3.3 Following a review of children's social care in England, the government proposed a new strategy, *Stable Homes, Built on Love*. The government says it wants

to 'rebalance children's social care away from costly crisis intervention to more meaningful and effective help for families.' This is the argument Action for Children has been putting to politicians for some time – with lots of input and evidence from frontline teams to back us up. At the time of writing the consultation period is open and Action for Children is working on its response.

Early years policy and campaigns

- 3.4 Imran Hussain, our Director of Policy and Campaigns, has been chosen as an expert adviser to the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood set up by our charity's Patron, The Princess of Wales. In February 2023 Imran joined other experts for a meeting with the Princess of Wales at Windsor Castle.
- 3.5 The Policy and Campaigns team have been working with colleagues at Spring Nurseries by Action for Children to provide evidence to the Education Select Committee's inquiry into childcare and early years. Emma Gardner, Director of Quality and Spring Nurseries, was called as a witness to the inquiry in February 2023.

4 Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II

- 4.1 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was Action for Children's patron for nearly 50 years from 1967 to 2016. Following the announcement of her death, Sarika Patel, Chair of Trustees, Action for Children said: "We are proud and privileged to have had The Queen as our Patron for almost 50 years from 1967 to 2016. She had long been a supporter of our charity and our children's welfare before she took on the patronage of what was then known as the National Children's Home. We are so grateful to Her Majesty for her enduring and dedicated support of our work with children, young people and families."

5 The Methodist relationship

- 5.1 From prayers and good wishes to campaigning to improve support for young people to fundraising, we are immensely grateful to the Methodist Church for its continued support for our work. We are inspired by fundraising stories from across the Church including sponsored head shaves, walks, pop up shops and concerts. In the year 2021-2022 Methodists raised an amazing amount for us – £644,000.
- 5.2 In addition, we are pleased to have been able to work with the Methodist Church and the wider faith sector by supporting campaigns on the cost of living crisis.

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This valuable engagement continues as the crisis for millions of children and their families grows.

- 5.3 Service visits for Methodist leaders have begun again after a hiatus due to the pandemic. Recent visits organised have included one for the President of the Conference at our children and family service in Norwich.
- 5.4 Resources for Lent, Christmas and Action for Children Sunday (9 July this year) have been shared across the Church and we welcome feedback and news from special services and events that churches and individuals have organised using these.
- 5.5 Karis Kolawole, our Faith Partnerships Lead, is on maternity leave and her replacement as interim Faith Partnerships Lead is Anna McCrum.

6 Fundraising

- 6.1 We had our most successful Secret Santa fundraising campaign ever last year, helped by our first TV advert which ran in the weeks leading to Christmas. As always, Methodists brought creative ways to support Secret Santa including carol singing at local train stations, hosting carol concerts and services at church, as well as special collections during Advent.
- 6.2 We are thrilled to be working with the John Lewis Partnership on their long-term commitment to young people across the UK who are in care and have care experience. Through their Building Happier Futures fund, they are helping us to support more care-experienced young people, with particular focus on transitioning to adulthood and employment. The John Lewis Christmas advert shone a light on the care system by featuring the story of a man learning to skateboard in preparation for fostering Ellie, a young teenager, and also highlighting that an estimated 100,000 children and young people would spend last Christmas in care, in the UK. Thank you to all who donated in John Lewis and Waitrose stores and online during the run up to Christmas.

***RESOLUTIONS

7/1. The Conference receives the Report.

7/2. The Conference notes that the trustees of Action for Children for the current year are:

Mrs Sarika Patel (Chair of Trustees), Mr Markus Ruetimann, Ms Dawn Warwick (Vice Chair of Trustees), the Revd Dr Michael J A Long, Mr Enda Johnson, Mr Steve Bell, Mr Gary Edwards, Mr Peter Curran, Mrs Lynne Atkin, Ms Leslie Evans