

26. Action for Children

Contact name and details	Karis Kolawole, Head of Faith Partnerships karis.kolawole@actionforchildren.org.uk actionforchildren.org.uk
---------------------------------	--

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Our 150th anniversary year has been incredibly special. It has brought many people together, been a platform to amplify the voices of vulnerable children, and seen us intensify our efforts to get people behind our cause.
- 1.2. Methodist Church leaders and members across Great Britain have played a vital role in all our anniversary activities, events and fundraising. We would like to thank everyone for making it an unforgettable year, and for their unwavering love and commitment.

New interim Chief Executive

- 1.3. Sadly, Julie Bentley resigned in February after 18 months as Chief Executive. She made a huge impact in a short time, and was loved and respected by staff. She worked tirelessly to champion the cause of children and further our work, and we wish her well as she moves on to other things. Melanie Armstrong, former Interim Managing Director of Corporate Shared Services, has become interim Chief Executive.
- 1.4. After six years of dedicated service and absolute commitment, Dr Daleep Mukarji will step down as the Methodist representative on our Board of Trustees. Dr Mukarji's wisdom, business acumen and leadership has contributed immensely to our work, and to our close relationship with the Methodist Church. We are truly grateful for everything he has done and wish him well for the future. The Conference is asked to appoint the Revd Dr Michael Long (see below).

2. A sharper focus

- 2.1. As we entered our 150th year, we wanted to harness our experience to come up with new, and to develop existing, ways to support children today. As a result, we have sharpened our strategy and created a new vision, mission and set of values. This will help us to meet the changing needs of the children, young people and families we support. It will also help us to adapt and develop services so that we can support even more children and young people.
- 2.2. Our new vision is that every child and young person in the country has a safe and happy childhood and the foundations they need to thrive. Our mission is to

protect and support children and young people. We do this by providing practical and emotional care and support; by ensuring children's voices are heard; and by campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

- 2.3. We have also refreshed our brand identity. It is important we have a brand that children, families and supporters recognise and feel warm towards. We believe our new look and feel will bring what we do to life and help us connect better with both existing and new supporters.

3. Emergency Coronavirus Appeal

- 3.1. Coronavirus has thrown all our lives, our communities and the UK into an unprecedented crisis. The families we support – who were already struggling – now find themselves unable to afford food and other essentials. This is why, in March, from our web home page www.actionforchildren.org.uk we launched an appeal. We are asking for urgent donations to help families cover the cost of the basics, including food, nappies, cleaning products, and gas and electricity. As at April, we had raised about £300K. We are also rapidly expanding our digital support services for parents in the UK to provide alternatives where contact is restricted.

4. Choose Childhood campaign

- 4.1. We began our anniversary celebrations by launching our Choose Childhood campaign on 9 July 2019. The campaign urges the public to join us in asking the government to commit to a national action plan for children. We are grateful to the Methodist Conference for getting onboard so swiftly, passing a motion asking all Methodists to write to their MPs about the state of childhood today. We have been working with Rachel Lampard and the Joint Public Issues Team to facilitate this, but have been hampered by the elections and coronavirus pandemic. We will revisit this as soon as the time is right.
- 4.2. We launched the campaign and accompanying report at a Parliamentary reception. The report explores childhood experiences over the last 150 years. We asked children, parents and grandparents to give us their views, and examined the policies of the four governments of the UK. We found that – despite significant changes over the years that have improved life for many – much more still needs to be done. Every child deserves a safe and happy childhood, and we are calling on governments to act now.
- 4.3. The campaign has reached a wide and varied audience, spreading the message about the crisis facing vulnerable children today. Our efforts have paid off, significantly increasing media coverage, our engagement, and credibility with

26. Action for Children

politicians and new supporters. A survey in 2019 showed a 17% improvement in how MPs perceived our effectiveness.

- 4.4. The *Choose Childhood* report, including a young people's version and discussion pack, and campaign updates are at www.actionforchildren.org.uk under What we do/Policy and research. We would like to thank everyone who has already signed up online.

5. Policy and campaigns

- 5.1. Our Policy and Campaigns Team continue to work hard to make sure the voices of children are heard, and to campaign for lasting improvements to their lives.
- 5.2. The Team called on the government to make sure that the new Domestic Abuse Bill met the needs of children who have experienced abuse and violence. Domestic abuse has a devastating impact on children, and the response to those affected has to improve. When the draft Bill was published, we were delighted to see that the Team's work had influenced the government's overall approach. We were the only children's charity to be asked to give oral evidence to the Committee scrutinising the Bill in Parliament. However, there are still gaps in provision for children, particularly in terms of the availability of support services. We will continue to work with the government so that every child who has experienced domestic abuse gets the support they need.
- 5.3. In January and February, the Team held two drop-in events in Parliament. These were great opportunities to engage with both newly elected and returning MPs.
- 5.4. The first, just before Children's Mental Health Week (3-9 February), showed the difference our mental health interventions make. More than 50 MPs and Peers attended the event. They spoke to three incredible young people who had taken part in The Blues Programme, which is funded by Royal Mail. They learnt how this innovative, six-week intervention has helped more than 3,260 young people in schools across the UK. MPs then pledged to choose healthy, happy minds for all children and young people.
- 5.5. The second drop-in event marked the launch of our *Patchy, Piecemeal and Precarious* report, which looks at the help available to children affected by domestic abuse. Over 40 MPs and Peers attended, including one of the ministers leading on the Domestic Abuse Bill, which is passing through Parliament. Two Children's Services Managers and our policy experts shared valuable insight about what it is like for children and families that have experienced domestic abuse. You can read the report on our website.

6. Making a difference to children's lives

- 6.1. Our work has three key pillars: the best start in life; safe and stable home; and mental health and a chance to thrive. In 2018/2019, we supported 387,000 children, young people and families in the UK, increasing our reach by 86,000 from the previous year.¹ We continue to come up with new solutions and services to support vulnerable children and young people.

Mental health and a chance to thrive

- 6.2. We have continued to increase our mental health support programmes in schools. The Blues Programme is achieving excellent results, with 76% of young people reporting improved mental and emotional well-being after taking part. Thanks to Royal Mail and other funding, we can continue to run the programme for a further two years. In Wales, we run GUIDE, a mental health literacy programme for year 9 students and teachers. This project is supported through Welsh Government Grant Funding and Swansea University.
- 6.3. We launched our new Build Sound Minds Derby and Derbyshire service, working in partnership with NHS Derby, the Derbyshire Clinical Commissioning Group and Derbyshire Federation for Mental Health. The service offers early support for more than 2,300 children experiencing mental health problems. Every child gets a tailored package of support, ranging from one-to-one therapies and group programmes, to digital well-being tools. The service helps them to build resilience, preventing issues from getting worse and preparing them for future challenges.

Safe and stable home

- 6.4. We continue to find secure, loving homes for vulnerable children and young people. Our permanency work includes fostering, adoption and modern residential homes. The support we offer is always based on the individual needs and wishes of a child.
- 6.5. Our portfolio of permanent places for children to live has continued to expand, albeit progress has been slower than expected. This is primarily due to objections from neighbours, who do not want a children's home on their doorstep. In one case, local objections were so severe – and the feedback so negative – we decided not to expose our children to such hostility and prejudice. We faced similar challenges in Newcastle, but the incredible support of the local Methodist community – including members writing to the council – helped us to secure planning approval.

1 This includes those who attended at least one session, had been seen by a staff member, received advice from us, or used any of our 476 local services.

26. Action for Children

- 6.6. Our children's residential portfolio includes: a new permanent home in North Somerset, which offers a long-term home for children with disabilities; in North Wales, which is home to three young men and their five chickens; and three newly purchased properties in Tyne and Wear.
- 6.7. We launched our Big Welcome digital app to support foster children when they move into a new placement. The app replaces the paper welcome pack and better meets the communication needs of the digital generation. We are now working with other providers, including local authorities, to make this available to all children in care. We have also received funding to introduce transitional specialist support workers to help young people make the transition out of care. This funding will also build our apprenticeships offer for young people.

7. Methodist partnership in 2019/2020

- 7.1. The continued support of the Methodist Church means so much to us. Raising money, spreading the word, volunteering, organising events – we are truly grateful for everything the Church does for us.
- 7.2. Local churches and memorials have raised an incredible £1.1 million for us (as at March 2020 and excluding national events like marathons and legacy gifts). We want to give special thanks for the creativity and effort Local Churches put into Action for Children Sunday last year. We really do value the opportunity to visit churches and thank them in person.
- 7.3. In October, our Chair of Trustees, Sarika Patel, and the Secretary of the Conference, the Revd Dr Jonathan Hustler, hosted a thanksgiving event at St Paul's Cathedral in London. The Revd Michaela Youngson, former President of the Conference and London District Chair, gave the keynote speech. It was wonderful to bring friends from the Methodist Church together with other guests, including Christian leaders, old boys and girls from our children's homes, trustees, volunteers, and former and current staff. It was the perfect way officially to mark our anniversary with the Methodist Church – and openly thank members for their support over the years.
- 7.4. In September 2018, we were delighted to offer placements to two interns, Abigail and Ruth. They both made exceptional contributions to our work, while also supporting special events and the Action for Children Christian Network. We were sad to see them go in August. In October 2019, we welcomed a new intern to Action for Children, Franklin, who works in our Policy Team.
- 7.5. We would like to thank the President of the Methodist Conference, the Revd Dr Barbara Glasson, for spending a day with our staff at a short breaks programme

in West Hyde. This is one of our residential services for young people with learning disabilities and complex health needs.

- 7.6. We were delighted to take part in 3Generate 2019. We ran activities to inspire young people to think creatively and come up with ways to talk to their MPs about the issues that affect them. We also asked what they would do if they were the Prime Minister. Their responses were used to shape an activity we undertook to engage with MPs.

8. Pressing forward with passion and ambition

- 8.1. Over the coming year, we will press forward with passion and ambition to ensure that every child in the UK has a safe and happy childhood, the challenges of the Coronavirus notwithstanding. We are grateful for the Methodist Church's partnership and ask for your prayers for our staff and the families we support.

*****RESOLUTIONS**

26/1. The Conference receives the General Report of Action for Children.

26/2. The Conference notes that the trustees of Action for Children for the current year are:

Chair: Sarika Patel (2019), Vice-Chair: Patricia Gordon (2017), Kate Guthrie (2014), Methodist Church Appointee: [the Revd Dr Michael J A Long](#), Richard Cryer (2015), Markus Ruetimann (2015), Josephine Larbie (2017), Dawn Warwick (2020).

Mike Long is superintendent of the Notting Hill and Harlesden Circuits, he is a member of the Faith and Order Committee and is committed to the work of Action for Children.