





Lemn Sissay

Lemn Sissay is an award-winning writer, broadcaster and poet, currently Artist-in-Residence at the Southbank Centre and an artsadmin artist. He spent his Lancashire childhood with a white foster family and in various children's homes. As a young man, he found out that his Ethiopian biological mother had spent years fighting to get him back, having only given him up for short-term fostering.

‘When I was three months old, my birth mother approached social services to ask for short-term fostering. But unbeknown to my mother, the social worker had no intention of offering her short-term fostering and instead offered the foster parents a “shadow adoption”.

‘On leaving care at 18 years old, after being fostered for 11 years and in children’s homes for seven, a benevolent social worker gave me letters from my mother. The social worker also gave me my birth certificate. It had the name on it “Lemn Sissay”. Up until then, I had thought my name was Norman.

‘I left the children’s homes without a surrogate family, without a birth family and without the knowledge of how to cook a tin of beans. Nobody that I knew had known me for longer than three years.

‘When a child is in care, the government is the legal parent. How the government treats its children is the most significant indicator as to the state of government. The worst effect of my time in care was not while in it, but while out of it. Like shock, the devastation happens after the catastrophic event. My childhood becomes more apparent to me as I grow older.’

It was not the intention of this part of the 1989 Act that social services should move away from providing accommodation or care for vulnerable teenagers (indeed it requires that authorities must provide accommodation in some cases). But evidence suggests that local authorities seized the opportunity to back away from providing an ‘accommodation service’ to young people aged 15 or over. This trend was accelerated by a new duty on local authorities to financially support care leavers beyond the age of 18, and the removal of social security benefits to this group. This pincer movement served to make cash-starved local authorities increasingly reluctant to take on the long-term financial burden of vulnerable teenagers. It is sadly ironic that those already in care were better protected, while those who might have benefited from being ‘looked after’ were turned away, and were more likely to receive a custodial sentence through homelessness and associated criminality.

Young offenders have also been affected. One key element of the 1989 Act was to bring an end to the use of a Care Order as the routine response to teenage truancy and delinquency. Properly framed, this might have had much to commend it. However, for the Conservative

and then Labour Governments not to bring in legislation to give the Youth Courts power to refer some teenage offenders with complex needs to the Family Court for a welfare disposal was a missed opportunity, and is still having a negative impact on vulnerable teenagers today.

Since then, an increasingly punitive approach to teenagers and their parents made a large rise in custody for offenders inevitable. The contrast can be seen with France and Scandinavian countries where more older children are in care and far fewer in custody.

It is sadly ironic that those already in care were better protected, while those who might have benefited from being ‘looked after’ were turned away

In the following decade, the drive to reduce child poverty, combined with a powerful public demand that ‘something should be done’ following the death of Victoria Climbié, led to an uneasy compromise in Every Child Matters between improving universal services for all children and strengthening child protection services for the most vulnerable.

as long as it takes



This compromise has potentially harmed services for children in the care system. A policy of amalgamating all local authority children's services under one roof, and putting a large part of the available resources into generally available services such as Sure Start and 'extended schools', may have depleted the resources available to children in care or on the edges of care.

There have been some notable exceptions where government has taken an admirably long view

Despite an overall picture of short-termism, however, there have been some notable exceptions where government has taken an admirably long view. The emphasis on educational outcomes for looked-after children (including following up data after leaving care) has shown an improvement from around only one per cent of children in care going on to higher education to around six per cent, as well as gradual improvement in results. It is belatedly being accepted that it takes longer for children who enter care as troubled teenagers, who are often already excluded from school, to achieve good results in public examinations. For authorities to make every effort as soon as they enter care to meet all their needs, including at school, while not taking the final measure of outcomes until they are in their early 20s, is a policy improvement. The pending Children and Young Person's Bill 2008 should see even greater progress.

And while it is easy to regard churn as an overwhelmingly negative driver, like most things, it has had both good and bad effects for children in the care system.

In my opinion, two overwhelmingly negative aspects of policy inconsistency and 'reactive' policy making have been the increase in the number of children in custody, and the insufficient emphasis and attention paid to the development of high-quality foster care and residential care. For a long time, politicians have been wedded to the mantra that children admitted to care almost all did very badly. This was not justified by the message from research and practice that most children entering care had more positive outcomes than similar children remaining at home. What is needed is a balance between better 'out of care' services to keep children out, matched by high-quality 'in care' services for those who do need to be in out-of-home placements.

Less clear-cut impacts can be seen in adoption and post-adoption services. Improvements have led to adoption for more children who can benefit from it, and to earlier decision making. However, the drive to speed up adoptions from care and adoption league tables have led to sibling groups being unnecessarily separated, and has seen the importance of long-term foster care as a permanence option being downplayed. The adoption drive may also have delayed the development of kinship care, which has now (belatedly) replaced adoption as the only 'preferred' placement.

Rhona Cameron

Rhona Cameron rose to fame via the stand-up comedy circuit and she became a regular on British TV when she appeared in the first series of *I'm a Celebrity, Get me Out of Here!* She also co-wrote and starred in her own BBC2 sitcom, *Rhona*. She has published two books to critical acclaim – her memoirs, *1979*, and more recently *The Naked Drinking Club*, which deals with adoption and alcoholism. Cameron is a Patron of LGBT Youth Scotland.



'Quite a few comedians are adopted, come from broken homes or have suffered the loss of a parent. I'm an artist so I've been able to write about it and rationalise some of it. But I was very lonely at times in coming to terms with my adoption. When I naively told people at primary school, one boy called me a bastard for a while. This was obviously distressing and it would have helped me if I'd had someone to talk to.

'There seemed to be nobody to talk to about adoption. However, a couple of teachers in particular spent a lot of extra time with me, nurturing my talents.

'I also loved Girl Guides because it gave me a safe and joyful environment away from bullying boys, and something to belong to.

'A child should be raised by someone who can love and accept love, who has resolved their own emotional baggage. Parents often adopt because of their own grief or unresolved loss, whether that is passed on from their own parents or because they are perhaps infertile or have lost a child. They are then given a baby onto which they load their unrealistic and high expectations.

'There should be someone available for adopted kids throughout their lives – perhaps there should be a yearly appointment which they can take up if they need it until a certain age. Everyone else has a helpline, so why can't adopted kids? And if a child needs to discuss or pursue a biological parent, they need to be supported and feel able to discuss their feelings openly. Trust is everything with the adoptee.'

Governments over the last 20 years have taken too long to heed the lessons from research that led to the 1989 Act, and have spent too much energy on supposed ‘quick fixes’ – without the evidence to justify them

It is tempting to ask what the UK government could have achieved over the past 21 years if it had been willing to focus exclusively on improving outcomes rather than on meeting short-term political needs. For children who are so troubled that they need out-of-home care, there are no easy solutions. Both governments over the last 20 years have taken too long to heed the lessons from research that led to the 1989 Act, and have spent too much energy on supposed ‘quick fixes’ – without the evidence to justify them. These have diverted too much energy away from the steady progress that could have characterised the period. A good start for children in need of care was made with the England and Wales Children Act 1989. Although Scotland and Northern Ireland legislation was a bit later, practice started to change at the same time and in the same direction.

The research evidence to support the balance struck by the 1989 Act was available in 1989. If this had been heeded and there had been less experimentation, there would have been more steady progress for children in care. The number of children experiencing short periods of care as part of family support would have gone up, but far fewer would have needed long-term care. A stronger emphasis at an earlier stage on stability of foster carers, and also on stability of social workers for children in long-term care, could have led to better outcomes now. Children in care will benefit from the proposals in the Children and Young Persons Bill 2008, especially encouragement and financial help to remain with their foster carers after the age of 18 and emphasis on resources to support them in, and provide access to, the best-performing schools. Most of what is in the 2008 Bill could have been implemented gradually since 1989. The evidence was there to support it. What children need, after all, is stability and secure attachments.

‘My mother died of a heroin overdose when I was 11, and I ended up in care. By the time I was 15, I was missing school, smoking and drinking. I got pregnant when I was 18 and had a daughter, Lucy, who is now three. Action for Children Rotherham Bridges supported me throughout my pregnancy and helped me sort out my childcare so I could go to college, and came to look at the crèche with me. Being there has made me think about things like college and qualifications, and I’m now working as a volunteer, as well as training to be a social worker.’

Action for Children Rotherham Bridges supports young people who are in care and leaving care

A close-up portrait of a young woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a bright pink tank top. She has dark eye makeup and is looking directly at the camera. The background is a dense wall of green leaves. The entire image is framed by a white rounded border.

Katie

Family support: 21 years of policy



Helen Dent,
Chief Executive, Family Action

Family policy has greater political prominence than ever before, occupying centre stage for all the main political parties. The past two decades have witnessed demographic change on an unprecedented scale: more mothers are in paid employment, marriage and parenthood are no longer synonymous, and the number of lone parent families has increased.

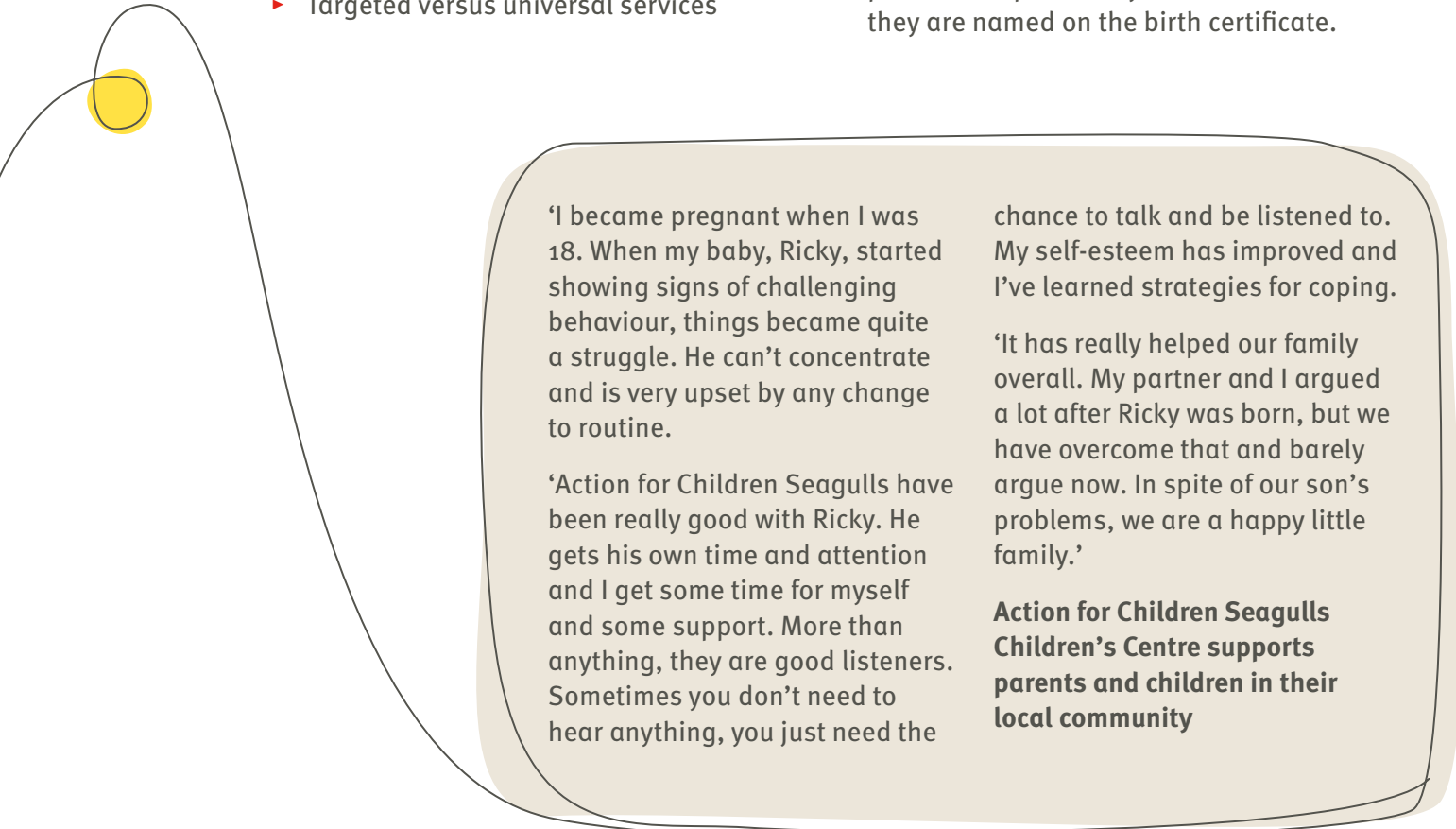
Looking at family support policy over a 21-year period, four enduring themes emerge:

- ▶ Promoting marriage and the traditional family
- ▶ Developments in welfare policy
- ▶ Prevention versus crisis intervention
- ▶ Targeted versus universal services

Promoting marriage and the traditional family

The Conservative Government was defined by a series of moral panics – about lone parents, youth crime and ‘feral’ children. Two major pieces of Conservative legislation – the Children Act 1989 and the Child Support Act 1991 – while positive in many respects, also reflected the prevailing concern that traditional family values were under attack. The Child Support Act aimed to make non-resident fathers face up to their responsibilities towards their children but defined these responsibilities almost solely in terms of financial support.

Both pieces of legislation had wider significance in that they positioned at centre stage the issue of fathers’ rights and elevated the status of fatherhood. Legislation such as the Adoption and Children Act 2003 further advanced fathers’ rights by extending parental responsibility to unmarried fathers if they are named on the birth certificate.



‘I became pregnant when I was 18. When my baby, Ricky, started showing signs of challenging behaviour, things became quite a struggle. He can’t concentrate and is very upset by any change to routine.

‘Action for Children Seagulls have been really good with Ricky. He gets his own time and attention and I get some time for myself and some support. More than anything, they are good listeners. Sometimes you don’t need to hear anything, you just need the

chance to talk and be listened to. My self-esteem has improved and I’ve learned strategies for coping.

‘It has really helped our family overall. My partner and I argued a lot after Ricky was born, but we have overcome that and barely argue now. In spite of our son’s problems, we are a happy little family.’

Action for Children Seagulls Children’s Centre supports parents and children in their local community



Kelly

Ricky

as long as it takes

Tricky's debut album, *Maxinquaye*, was nominated for the Mercury Prize and voted Album of the Year by NME magazine. Since then he has produced a string of highly regarded albums, including 2008's *Knowle West Boy*, chronicling his tough upbringing on a Bristol council estate.

'I grew up in Knowle West in Bristol. My mum committed suicide when I was four, so I lived with my gran, and sometimes my aunt. Where I come from, you don't really ask for support. But there were quite a few people who had a positive impact on me. There was a youth club called Eagle House Boys Club round the corner from where I lived. Everyone would hang out there, and they sorted us out with turntables and got us into making music.

'My lowest point was when I was in Horfield prison. When I was locked up, the guard took my inhaler away. I had a full-on asthma attack and nearly died. That made me very negative towards authority.

'The big change in my life happened when I first heard Rakim. The track was "Check out my melody". I listened to the lyrics on that and it just took over my life. I started writing words, started hanging out at clubs, rapping, meeting people – it all went on from there.

'I wouldn't change anything about my past. I think I've been very lucky indeed. If I could make a change, I'd make sure there was a studio and instruments in every school – so kids had those opportunities. Not everyone would make it, but it would help.'

Tricky





The governments of Margaret Thatcher and John Major promoted the traditional family model – they were more concerned about family structure than family wellbeing. Concerns over divorce and the prevalence of lone parent families were a significant factor in the Major Government’s Back to Basics campaign, and single mothers were subjected to a series of moralistic and highly stigmatising judgements.

When the Labour Government abolished the married couples tax allowance in 1999, it signalled its reluctance to promote marriage through fiscal measures. However, *Supporting Families* (1998), a Green Paper devoted entirely to family policy issues, provided an early indication of the new government’s interest in the family. The document devoted a whole chapter to ‘strengthening marriage’, which was portrayed as ‘the surest foundation for raising children’.

Developments in welfare policy

The current government has focused much of its family policy on reforming the allocation of financial resources to families. The pledge to end child poverty within a generation has been accompanied by a procession of legislation, including the introduction of the New Deal, reform of lone parent benefits and the launch of Tax Credits.

Despite the breakneck pace of reform, the rationale for focusing policy and resources on families with children is compelling: between 1979 and 1995–96, rates of child poverty almost trebled and inequalities in health and employment widened. The number of families relying on means-tested benefits for their basic income rose from 8.5 per cent in 1979 to 21 per cent in 1994.¹

Perhaps the most enduring theme of Labour’s welfare policy is its ‘work-first’ focus. This has resulted in a range of measures to make work pay, such as the introduction of the national minimum wage, Working Families Tax Credits and the Child Tax Credit.

Perhaps the most enduring theme of Labour’s welfare policy is its ‘work-first’ focus

However, the Government has also promoted a policy of increased parental choice in combining work and family life. There is a similar tension between the ‘work-first’ agenda as a means of alleviating poverty and the commitment to improving children’s wellbeing and outcomes. Such tensions persist despite a raft of legislation, starting with the Employment Relations Act 1999, designed to enable people better to combine paid work with family life.

¹Home Office (1998) *Supporting Families: a consultation document*



Andrew

as long as it takes

Prevention versus crisis intervention

Whether services should take a preventive approach or focus on crisis intervention has been an enduring debate over the past two decades. The Children Act 1989 was clear that the State had a responsibility in offering services, and its definition of children 'in need' theoretically enabled local authorities to work with a broad range of children. In reality, however, the squeeze on public expenditure meant it was almost impossible for local authorities to shift away from the provision of acute interventions and towards support and prevention.

In the mid-1990s, policy makers gained a better understanding of the impact of disadvantage. The Commission on Social Justice, which reported in 1994 and was credited with influencing much of the Labour Government's first-term thinking, together with the creation in 1997 of the Social Exclusion Unit, emphasised the commitment to tackling such issues. The creation of 18 Policy Action Teams, each charged with developing a series of evidence-based policy recommendations, signaled the pace of policy change that has characterised the Labour administration.

The prevention agenda was given a major boost with the creation of the Children's Fund in 2000: the Fund has allocated £960 million in the past eight years to tackling social exclusion through partnerships between the

statutory and voluntary sectors. While national evaluation of the Fund demonstrates that it has been successful in reaching target groups of children and young people, there has been criticism of the short timescale available to plan and commission services. Changes to the Fund mean that from April 2008, the money will be distributed to local authorities and pooled with other funding to form a new area-based grant for improving a wide range of outcomes, including those for children and young people. However, the lack of ring-fencing is an ongoing concern.

Policy development has taken place at formidable speed and been accompanied by an avalanche of guidance and consultation documents

Every Child Matters transformed the landscape of family support services by creating a much more responsive continuum of support and intervention through personalised services. But policy development has taken place at formidable speed and been accompanied by an avalanche of guidance and consultation documents. Similarly, there has been a tension between the pressure to transform services within a short timescale and the Government's public commitment to implementing evidence-based policy.

'I have autism and moderate learning difficulties, and until I was 16 I lived with my parents, but London was too stressful. I spent a while in a college where everything was catered for me, but I wanted to be able to make my own choices and do things my way.

'I came to Kingfishers when I was 20. The staff have helped me improve my independent skills. I can cook meals, do my laundry and manage my own money and bills. The staff here have

included me in everything, and I can take my time without anyone rushing me, which is important to me. Since being here my confidence has increased dramatically and I am now doing voluntary work that I really enjoy. Now I am concentrating on moving on and hope to have my own place next year.'

Action for Children Kingfishers, Ebley, provides supported housing and intensive independence training for learning disabled people aged 18–25



Targeted versus universal services

Too often, services targeted at deprived communities risk becoming low-quality services while high-quality universal services struggle to reach disadvantaged families at greatest risk.

The creation of Sure Start attempted to tackle this by providing a high-quality universal service that also housed targeted support for those in most need. Launched in 1998, investment has grown to £1.5 billion and, while concerns remain about the effectiveness of some local programmes in reaching those most in need, evidence from the evaluation demonstrates positive outcomes.

However, the scheme has not been without its critics. For a time it looked as though the political pressure to produce new initiatives could signal the downfall of the programme.

A recent dilemma is who should services be targeted at – parents or children? Since the Antisocial Behaviour Act reached the statute book in 2003, parents have too often been seen as the cause of social ills.

Conclusion

The growing interest in family issues, particularly in recent years, has influenced the pace of policy change. New initiatives have come on stream and legislation has been enacted at an unprecedented rate. But has the pace of change been too fast? There are also questions about the extent to which frontline staff have been able to keep up with the fast-moving policy landscape.

At times, the objectives of different government departments have clashed and policy developments have been unpredictable. But when set against the unprecedented investment of recent years and the rolling out of preventive services, policy churn could be considered a price worth paying.

There are questions about the extent to which frontline staff have been able to keep up with the fast moving policy landscape

There is a need for policy and practice to properly recognise the diversity of family forms, customs and histories. The Government's recent 'think family' agenda – with its emphasis on whole-family working, more effective collaboration between adults' and children's services, and 'no wrong door' attitude to accessing support – has the potential to impact positively on the delivery of services in the future. However, at present there is no indication as to how these principles will be embedded across services and government departments. Realising the ambition of 'think family' will require an outcomes framework similar to that of Every Child Matters – and ideally underpinned by statute.

Sinclair Thomas

Sinclair Thomas has represented his country in wheelchair basketball more than 150 times, and won a bronze medal in the sport at the Athens 2004 Paralympics Games. He retired in 2007 and now works full-time for the Great Britain Wheelchair Basketball Association. One of his roles is assistant coach for the 2008 team for the Beijing Paralympics.



'I was born with a spinal defect that meant I spent a lot of time in and out of Great Ormond Street hospital when I was a child. They "rebuilt" me, like the bionic man. I had dislocated hips and ankles and a rod inserted into my spine, and although I walked a bit when I was younger, I've been confined to a wheelchair for most of my life.

'My first experience of sport was swimming – I started swimming competitively at a national level, and eventually my swimming coach suggested I try basketball. The first time I played I thought "no way am I doing that again". I thought it was just too physical, really hard work. But somehow you just get the bug, and I kept going back.

'I don't feel negative about my disability. I've never known anything different, and I've had a very satisfying and interesting career that I wouldn't have had otherwise. It has been a great experience and I've had a wonderful life.

'If I was to give advice to a young person facing similar challenges, I'd say "seize the moment". You've got to seize your opportunities and make the most of what you have. I think people can achieve whatever they really set their minds to.'

Young people: 21 years of social policy



John Pitts,
Vauxhall Professor of Socio-Legal Studies,
University of Bedfordshire



The three major strands of government youth policy are employment, the use – or misuse – of leisure, and crime and disorder. Twenty-one years ago, in 1987, youth unemployment was running at record levels, the youth service was ravaged by financial cutbacks and, despite record annual rises in the crime rate, the number of young people entering the criminal justice system was falling steadily, with youth custody at an all-time low. This report will focus primarily on the youth justice system.

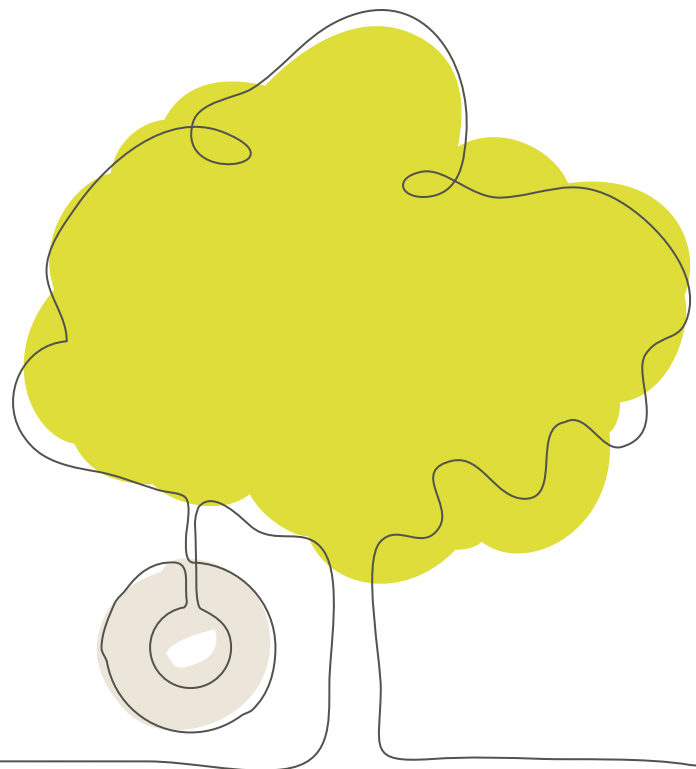
Crime and justice

Margaret Thatcher was elected in 1979 on a pledge to crack down on youth crime. But the youth justice system was an area of government spending perceived to be spiralling out of control. So the 1980s saw a sustained attempt to limit the numbers of young people entering the system. The police were encouraged to deal with first-time offenders informally and, in 1983, the Department of Health launched its Intermediate Treatment Initiative, which gave voluntary sector projects £15 million over three years to develop 4,500 non-custodial ‘alternatives to custody’ for ‘heavy end’ young offenders. Thus, between 1981 and 1989, the number of juveniles imprisoned in custodial or secure establishments fell from 7,700 to 1,900 per annum. And the Criminal Justice Act 1991 raised the age at which young offenders could be sent into custody or security from 10 to 15.

However, record rises in crime from the mid-1980s and the murder in 1993 of two-year-old James Bulger put youth crime back on the front page. The reforms of the 1991 Act were not implemented and in March 1993, Home Secretary Kenneth Clarke created 200 places for 12- to 14-year-old ‘persistent offenders’ in new Secure Training Centres. This *volte face* signalled a new era in which crime in general, and youth crime in particular, moved back to the centre of the political stage.

The then Shadow Home Secretary, Tony Blair, mounted a full-scale attack on the Tory ‘law and order’ record and asserted that ‘New Labour’ would be ‘tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime’.

**Between 1981 and 1989,
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Kriss Akabusi

Kriss Akabusi spent 15 years in the army, followed by an athletics career during which he won a succession of Olympic and World Championship medals. He followed this with 10 years presenting and commentating on TV and radio, and now runs his own company providing motivational tools for big business.



‘My parents came over from Nigeria in the 1950s, having won scholarships to get an education in England. Then when I was four and my brother was two, they went back, leaving my brother and me behind. We spent the next four years in a variety of private fostering arrangements. Some of the families were good, but we moved around a lot and I think most of them were more interested in the money than in the children.

‘At eight, I went into a children’s home. Overall it was very good – the first couple of years were very draconian, but after that I enjoyed it. As I got closer to 16 and a half, I realised that I was going to have to leave this safe environment and the thought of living on my own really terrified me.

‘If I could change anything, I’d make sure there was some sort of half-way house for 16- to 20-year-olds to go – a sort of supported tenancy or place where they could make that transition between childhood and adulthood. If I had been forced out into the world at 16, I would have been a crook. I needed that support – the support of a tribe. And I got that from the army. That suited me, but it wouldn’t suit everyone. There should be other places to get it.’

Upon its election in 1997, New Labour’s legislative intentions, embodied in the *No More Excuses* White Paper, were quickly translated into statute in the Crime and Disorder Act (1998) (CDA). The CDA, and the government’s subsequent flurry of criminal justice and anti-social behaviour legislation (between May 1997 and May 2007, the Blair Government created 3,023 new offences, almost one a day), served to draw far larger

number of children and young people, many of whom had committed no criminal offence, into the purview of the youth justice system. Very soon, however, the Youth Offending Teams (YOTs), brought into being by the CDA, were faced with the dilemma of whether to maintain the focus on diversion from custody and support, or tailor the service to the achievement of the prescribed targets.

as long as it takes



Whereas the youth justice strategies of the 1980s and early 1990s had aimed to minimise stigma by diverting young people in trouble out of the system, the 1998 Act was rooted in the belief that early exposure to the youth justice system would have long-term deterrent and rehabilitative effects. Shelving ‘alternatives to custody’, it developed an expanded range of community penalties, while the new, semi-indeterminate custodial penalty, the Detention and Training Order, could be imposed on offenders as young as 12, or 10 if the circumstances required.

Between May 1997 and May 2007, the Blair Government created 3,023 new offences, almost one a day

Meanwhile, the ‘fast-tracking’ of persistent and/or serious young offenders, coupled with the tendency of the system to accelerate the progress of their less-serious counterparts through it, was creating a custodial bonanza. Between 1992 and 2002, the numbers of children and young people aged 10–17 sentenced to security or custody in England and Wales rose by almost 90 per cent. Moreover, in the decade 1992–2002, the numbers of under-15s held in security or custody increased by 800 per cent. Following a brief dip in 2006/07, custodial numbers are once again on the rise. However, during this time, crimes recorded as having been committed by children and young people fell by 20 per cent.

The criminalisation of social policy

Because crime and disorder were so central to New Labour’s youth policies, the dividing line between the criminal justice apparatus and education, employment and social welfare services became ever more blurred. A recent study of street-based youth work found that by 2002, 52 per cent of the 564 projects surveyed had entered partnerships with criminal justice and community safety agencies and organisations.

Connexions, established in 2001 as a universal education, training and vocational guidance service for young people, exemplifies the way services for young people were progressively seen as a tool of the criminal justice system. Connexions aimed to involve street-based youth workers in identification, support, tracking and information sharing about hard-to-reach young people. The subsequent DfES report *Transforming Youth Work* observed that the Youth Service would be at the core of Connexions, contributing to ‘cross-cutting preventive strategies including identification, referral and tracking’. This proposal caused considerable disquiet among youth work professionals who regarded client confidentiality and accountability to the young people with whom they worked as a fundamental ethical precept. Then the *Respect and Responsibility* White Paper (2003) identified the Youth Service and Connexions as key members of Crime Reduction Partnerships and suggested a more directly controlling role for both.

Kevin

'I left home at 15 after falling out with my mum, and lived in an abandoned car for several months. I had a couple of tenancies which didn't work out, because I

didn't pay the rent. Eventually Action for Children found me a place at the Camelia Botnar Foundation, which provides residential training and support for young

people. The project gave me emotional support and one-to-one sessions with a worker where we could work through some of my problems.

'Until I was 18, I didn't take responsibility for myself. Then I grew up. Now I know that if there is rent to be paid I have to pay it. Action for Children helped me to get off the streets and although I was confused and angry, they kept on helping. Having someone to talk to really helped me to get things off my chest and I feel calmer now. They are always there. A few months ago my best friend was murdered – I did self-harm a bit but Action for Children helped me through that and it stopped because I had someone to talk to about it.

'Finally I ended up in Northampton, where life really took a turn for the better. I've started doing some voluntary work for the YMCA, doing Youth Bank, which involves sitting down with young people and discussing which youth areas need funding and why. I get real satisfaction from it. I want to put something back.'

Action for Children Youth Support Services East Sussex helps young people with housing and money issues



as long as it takes



Sam Martin

Sam Martin grew up in London and as a child was regularly ‘in trouble’, involved with gangs, fights and joyriding, being cautioned and on one occasion arrested by the police. But a visit to Vauxhall City Farm and a chance encounter with a donkey called Jacko sparked an interest in horses, and he now runs his own riding yard in Surrey. He is training towards competing as Nigeria’s first Olympic horseman in the 2012 Games.

‘I have certainly had times when I needed some good advice but didn’t know who to ask. But I think we all have at some point. As you grow older and gain more life experience, it becomes easier to find help and advice. In the times when I did not know which way to proceed and had no one to ask, I stayed as focused as possible on the bigger picture and believed in my instincts.

‘I wouldn’t change much about my past – I don’t have any regrets. But there are situations, like being arrested at 13 and cautioned a few times, that I would have preferred to have avoided. These experiences helped shape me into who I am and I have learned from them. I am happy with who I am and what I do – the past has got me here, so it’s all good.

‘My advice to other people in similar positions would be to stick at things once you have decided what you want to do. Anything is possible and money is not always needed to start something and progress with it. Instead of thinking “what can I do with this money”, I like to think instead “what can I do without any money?” I have learnt to be decisive and think laterally to achieve my goals.’

Volatility

Policy and practice with young people has been dogged by perpetual change and what some may regard as ill-considered innovation. In September 2003, the DfES published the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper. But some contend that the then Home Secretary David Blunkett was, apparently, unwilling to relinquish control of youth offending and so insisted upon a separate Home Office document, *Youth Justice, the Next Steps*, which toughened existing sentences and court orders. The Home Office has been through four Home Secretaries in seven years, perceived by many to come from different ends of the spectrum, from liberal to punitive. Youth justice policy has swung wildly in response. Thus, the *Youth Matters* Green Paper (2005) indicated that youth justice and anti-social behaviour might become the responsibility of the new local authority Children's Trusts and that funding might be handed directly to these Trusts. And, with the creation of the Department of Children, Schools and Families in June 2007, and the realignment of the anti-social behaviour team as a youth task force into that department, some saw the end of the 'Respect Agenda' that had been so dominant under Tony Blair.



Conclusion

New Labour's most progressive youth policies have been undermined by political expediency. Important initiatives have been derailed or reduced in scope because of governmental acquiescence in the face of media criticism.

Policy and practice with young people has been dogged by perpetual change and what some may regard as ill-considered innovation

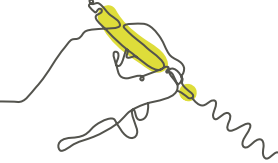
Had the Government defended the integrity of its Youth Offending Teams, they would have marked a real advance in our responses to youth crime. If Connexions had been allowed to develop into a network of centres properly serving socially excluded young people, that too would have marked a major step forward.

The Conservative Government, most particularly under Margaret Thatcher, prided itself on being tough on crime. But, despite the 'law and order' rhetoric, there was a real drive to reduce the numbers of young people entering the justice system in the 1980s. To a large extent it worked, with informal methods and non-custodial measures being used much more widely. However, the fact that overall crime statistics rocketed in the 1980s put politicians under intense pressure from the media and, beset by calls for 'something to do be done', they backtracked and reverted to ever more punitive 'get tough' approaches, most famously put by John Major when he stated it was time for society to 'condemn a little more and understand a little less'.

Governments that wish to respond intelligently to the 'youth question', by developing progressive policies that address the realities of the lives of our most disadvantaged young people rather than media fantasies about them, must therefore hold their nerve.

The intention of youth policies to ensure young people have been prepared for independence has been undermined by political expediency. In fact they have been consistently marginalised and stigmatised over 21 years.

Disabled children and young people: 21 years of policy



Ruth Marchant and Mary Jones,
co-directors of Triangle, an independent
organisation working with disabled children
and young people across the UK

Policy making in relation to disabled children does not appear to have been driven by events, headlines or political imperatives. In fact, it has not often been driven at all. This group of children has occupied a range of confusing and conflicted positions during the past 21 years: often forgotten or tagged on as an afterthought, sometimes caught up by mistake in general initiatives, occasionally given high priority for brief periods, and subject to intermittent counting frenzies.

As high users of services, disabled children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of change and reorganisation

However, as high users of services, disabled children are particularly vulnerable to the effects of change and reorganisation, and the past two decades have seen this group bounced around by the constant movement of policy goalposts and often the playing field itself. Fortunately, the general direction of travel is towards increased visibility, and in the last few years towards increased priority and greater clarity.

Defining and counting

One consistent long-term issue has been confusion about which children should be defined as disabled, confusion that has muddled policy makers' thinking and diverted attention from more important issues. Defining and recording childhood disability has proven very problematic,

with attempts to create registers of disabled children hitting serious implementation problems, partly because of confusion about definitions, partly because parents feared the association with child protection registers.

The Children Act 1989 required local authorities for the first time to identify the extent to which there were children in need within their area, and to maintain a register of disabled children within their area. Quality Protects (1999–2004) aimed to transform children's services in line with the Children Act 1989 and improve the wellbeing of children in need. Since under the Act disabled children were automatically defined as children in need, it seemed reasonable to expect that Quality Protects would include objectives specifically relevant for disabled children. However the only specific objective was to count them again.

Today, despite several decades of counting activity, there are still wide variations in the way childhood disability is defined and recorded, and we are still not able to estimate with any confidence the incidence or prevalence of childhood disability.





**Max
Lewis**

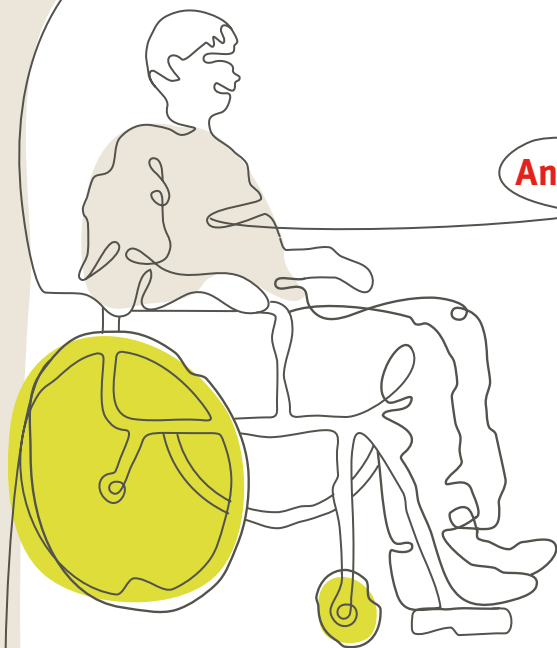
Max Lewis has Down's Syndrome, a hole in the heart, and low muscle tone, which makes many physical tasks difficult. Since the age of seven, he has been passionately interested in drama, and has been a long-standing member of the Chickenshed Theatre Group. This interest culminated recently in him winning a part in the Dame Judi Dench, Bill Nighy and Cate Blanchett film *Notes on a Scandal*.

'I loved taking part in *Notes on a Scandal*, I had a good laugh with Bill Nighy and I thought Cate Blanchett was beautiful. Not many people can say they've been in a Hollywood film. But life can be quite hard at other times, because when you look at me, I immediately appear different. It can be very difficult having to face every day with a disability. People immediately think I'm stupid and that I can't do anything and they sometimes stare at me too. That makes me feel worthless – it also makes me angry.'

'I have had some horrible experiences with bullies and I don't want to go through that again. I hate bullies. I have often needed help or encouragement and haven't always been able to get it. Actually, it's hard for me all the time. Being at school has sometimes been very difficult for me, because there were some unpleasant people. But I am happy at my school now – it's small and the people there are kind.'

'The lessons I have learned from my experiences growing up are to be kind to people, to try and listen to other people, and to tell people when there is something wrong. If I was in charge of the country, I'd make sure everyone had lots of money. But my life has been brilliant so far – fantastic, fun and funny.'

These questions were answered by Max with the help of his mum, Sandy Lewis



Andrew

'Andrew uses a wheelchair, cannot walk or speak and is dependent on 24-hour care. For a long time he was at a special school but there was no local respite care for either of us. Then when he was eight, the Action for Children Family Support Service was set up.

'It gives me a break and a chance to go out with friends or have time with my daughter. My life doesn't revolve around Andrew all the time and it gives him some independence away from me. They take him to do things that I can't, like bowling and swimming.

'When he was 15, Andrew's specialist school closed and he had to move to a new, non-specialist school, where everything was unfamiliar. Action for Children helped him through this difficult period by developing his communication passport, which was a folder full of pictures and symbols that Andrew could use to express himself. It has made a big difference to his life – for the first time ever, Andrew was able to "talk" to people and make choices on his own.'

Andrew and his mother, Theresa, at Action for Children Family Support Service, Falkirk

Kris

'I left school aged 15 and was just sitting around the house all day feeling depressed and sorry for myself. One day I was signing on and feeling particularly down when someone in the job centre told me about Action for Children Youthbuild.

'I've learned a lot since then. I've had training in power tools, health and safety, and electrical safety. It was hard because I wasn't used to the work environment – I had no confidence and found it hard to trust people. The staff at Action for Children were brilliant. They didn't make any promises they couldn't keep and they made me feel part of the team.

'If it wasn't for this project I would still be in my bed, not doing anything. Things have turned around now and I don't have problems getting out of bed any more. Last year I had very little – now I have a career in the construction industry and a future to look forward to.'

Action for Children Youthbuild, Glasgow, helps young people aged 16–24 train and find jobs in construction



Generic vs specialist policy

Another result of policy making inconsistency is in the application of specialist and generic policy to disabled children as a group. Twenty-one years ago, much children's policy was seen as irrelevant for disabled children, who were notable only for their absence from the mainstream. Local authority services for disabled children, including social work, were usually part of adult provision and separate from mainstream children's services.

The Children Act 1989 went some way to remedying this by automatically defining disabled children as 'children in need'. This 'children first' approach, although well intentioned, created a renewed opportunity to deny additional needs using the argument 'disabled children are children first so we'll just treat them like other children'. In 1991, guidance to the Children Act clarified matters by stating clearly that disabled children should have access to the same range of services as other children.

This 'children first' approach, although well intentioned, created a renewed opportunity to deny additional needs

But despite this commitment, some policy initiatives ignored disabled children altogether, while others snagged them unintentionally. For example, the introduction of the looked-after children's regulations in 1989 was rapidly rethought when it became clear that disabled children using respite care would be subject to the rigorous reviewing process. This remains hotly debated, and an unknown number of disabled children remain looked after by the state but not technically 'looked after', because they are using respite care or are in hospital or residential education.

Similar processes went on in relation to disability legislation and guidance, aspects of which apply to children more by default than design. For example, the Disability Living Allowance in 1992, the Disability Discrimination Act in 1995, the Carers (Recognition and Services) Act 1995 and Direct Payments in 1996 were all introduced primarily with disabled adults in mind and required substantial revision as the implications for disabled children became clear. The muddle took some time to sort out: the Disability Discrimination Act was not implemented in schools or colleges until it was 10 years old, and Direct Payments were only extended to disabled children after five years.

The impacts of short-termism

In terms of demonstrable impacts, the lack of strategic direction over more than two decades has contributed to a high level of chaos and inequity and a culture of fighting for entitlements. It also means that the wrong arguments are had again and again: inclusion vs segregation, children's rights vs parents' needs, defining and redefining childhood disability.

More importantly, this lack of direction has allowed it to become, as the Government recently observed, 'traditionally' the case that disabled children are likely to have poorer outcomes across a range of indicators compared to their non-disabled peers, including lower educational attainment, poorer access to health services, more difficult transitions to adulthood, and poorer employment outcomes. Disabled children are also significantly over-represented in the populations of looked-after children and young offenders. Research tells us that a significantly higher proportion of disabled children should have a child protection plan, although it appears that this is rarely the case.

as long as it takes



2000 onwards

Happily, after more than a decade of confusion and unintended consequences, the first eight years of the 21st century have seen major policy developments for disabled children, a much clearer sense of direction and, recently, significant new resources. For the first time, there is some clarity about what ought to be happening for this group of children.

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The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 strengthened entitlement to mainstream education and protection from discrimination, and the new Disability Equality Duty (2006) required all public sector organisations (including schools) to ensure that disabled children are fairly treated. The five-year strategy for SEN, *Removing Barriers to Achievement* (Department for Education and Skills, 2004), identifies action to improve early intervention and embed inclusive practice in schools and early years settings.

The National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services (2004), in particular Standard 8, set clear standards for service provision for disabled children and young people.

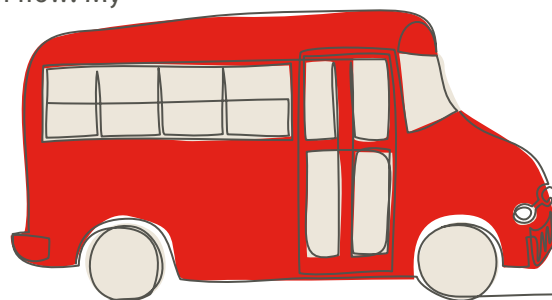
The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit report, *Improving the Life Chances of Disabled People*, published in January 2005, set out the Government's strategy for disabled people and included some 60 recommendations for improving disabled people's lives, focusing on four key themes: early years, the transition from childhood into adulthood, employment and independent living. The Office for Disability Issues (ODI) was launched in December 2005 to drive this strategy forward and report publicly on the progress being made.

This marked a real change in the way that the Government thinks about the impact of its policies and services on the lives of disabled people, by incorporating a social model perspective: the belief that people are disabled not only by their impairments but by the way in which society responds to them.

Rachel

'I came to Action for Children Kingfishers when I was 19. Before I started living there I was not allowed to go anywhere on my own, or to use cashpoints. Kingfishers have supported me and trained me so that I can catch buses and go shopping on my own. I also travel home to see my family on my own. They've shown me that I am not that vulnerable. I have more freedom and I have much more confidence. I felt really nervous before, but Kingfishers has really helped me with my independent travel skills. I never imagined that I'd be able to go to the shops on my own and I am very excited that I can now. My family are very proud of my progress.'

Action for Children Kingfishers, Ebley, provides supported housing and intensive independence training for learning disabled people aged 18–25



Emma

'My older brother has cerebral palsy and attention deficit disorder. He was always the priority because he was often violent and hard to manage. My mother suffered from depression and when my baby sister arrived, my caring responsibilities increased. I had to do the shopping, drop my sister off at school and pick her up, so I always had to leave school early.'

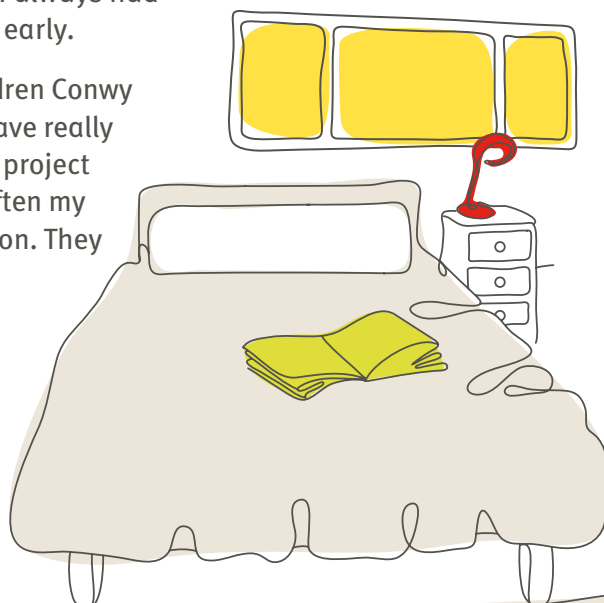
'Action for Children Conwy Young Carers have really helped me. The project workers were often my shoulder to cry on. They

listened to me and never looked shocked when I told them about my life at home. They never judged, which was something I loved.'

'Then when I got older and started getting into mischief, they really helped. Just after I turned 16, my mum and I had

a big row and she kicked me out. I disappeared for about a month and I ended up in a violent relationship, taking drugs and homeless. But the day I was made homeless, my project worker rang me up. She had managed to track me down and she picked me up and got me a bed and breakfast place. She took me to see a homelessness officer and got me into women's housing. I dread to think what would have happened otherwise.'

Action for Children Conwy Young Carers supports young carers in their caring roles



Three priority areas have now been identified: access and empowerment, responsive services and timely support, and improving quality and capacity. *Aiming High for Disabled Children* sets out a 'core offer' to disabled children and their families, which will encompass minimum standards in several areas: clear information, transparent eligibility criteria, accessible feedback and complaints procedures, and participation by parents and children in shaping local policies and services. This document informed the Government's spending plans for the three years to 2011.

Aiming High sets out to redefine and broaden our understanding of short breaks. Local commissioners will need to take up the challenge. It is not too late. *Aiming High for Disabled Children* could divert the resourcing of narrow respite into the resourcing of decent lives and greater opportunities for disabled children. This would remove the 'burden' emphasis, and if children were given skilled and robust support to make friends, go out, have fun and join in with life, their parents would automatically get regular short breaks, although this would not and should not be the primary function.

Research tells us that a significantly higher proportion of disabled children should have a child protection plan, although it appears that this is rarely the case

At last, we have a plan: a properly resourced, long-term plan with explicit aims. Brilliant. Unfortunately the plan's first priority, to which £280 million of the new £430 million is committed, is to increase the availability of respite care. Although renamed short breaks, in the past these have often been framed entirely around parents' entitlement to regular respite from their disabled child. This is a spectacularly unfortunate starting point from which to 'aim high' for disabled children, and could perpetuate both the perception of disabled children as a burden or tragedy and also the separateness of these children's lives.

As for the future, we know enough to do things differently. Disabled children have the same basic needs as other children. We do not need to start from a different position, but we do need to make sure that every time we plan for children, we plan for all children, and we need to factor disabled children into every local and national initiative, and not add them on afterwards. We also need to involve disabled children and young people in our thinking and planning: their voices are almost silent in these discussions.





Toby Anstis

Toby Anstis has presented Heart 106.2's morning show for the past five years. He first made his name on Children's BBC as presenter of *The Broom Cupboard*, but has also appeared on *Big Brother's Big Mouth*, *I'm a Celebrity...*, and the *O-Zone*, as well as hosting *Children in Need*, *The National Lottery Live* and *Grandstand*.

'My twin sister Kate and I were adopted at four months. We went to live with my adoptive mum and dad, and my older brother David, in Maidenhead. We had a fairly conventional upbringing, and I think it was easier in lots of ways because we were twins – there was always a sense of not being alone, and of having an additional element of emotional support. So it was natural that when it came to looking for our birth parents, it was a joint

decision. It was mostly a sort of long-term curiosity. We were blessed with great adoptive parents so it wasn't about finding another set. But we wanted to know about our past, and about our genetic makeup.

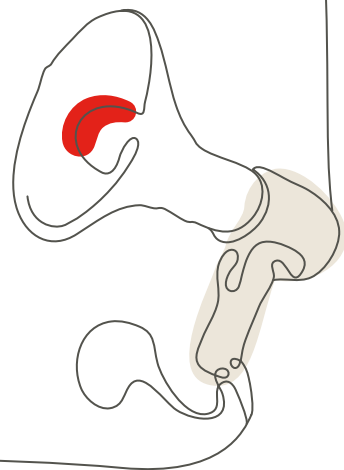
'If there was one change I'd make to help young people, it'd be to make sure that every child knew where they could get advice, support and encouragement. I know about ChildLine but I'm thinking about just normal everyday things. Just someone to listen and to understand. I'd make sure that there were counsellors available to everyone, so that they could talk things over when they needed to. And I'll be glad if the recent changes to the law mean that access to adoption records is better organised for people who are searching for their birth parents.'

Moving forward...

Action for Children calls for a child-fair state, that actively promotes a positive vision for children and young people as full citizens. Children cannot be used as political footfalls, and moral panics and headlines must not be allowed to take precedence over their needs.

Action for Children demands a political system that puts the long-term needs of children first and short-term politics second. We call on all the main political parties of the UK to give children the commitment they need, for as long as it takes.

1. In all four nations of the UK, the Children's Minister must be a permanent Cabinet/Executive-level position to represent and speak on behalf of children and hold all parts of government to account.
2. Before the next general election, a cross-party group must establish a 21-year vision for children and young people that all the main parties must sign up to. Then, at the beginning of every new government, the cross-party group must set out or reaffirm its vision, which is binding on all parties.
3. Any new initiative for children and young people must be funded for at least six years, with exceptions to be granted only by agreement with the Children's Minister.
4. Every government department and agency across the UK must examine how its policies impact on children and young people, and report annually on this to Parliaments and Assemblies.
5. All UK media bodies and organisations with governance of media, including Ofcom, the Advertising Standards Authority and the Press Complaints Commission, must establish a consultation committee made up of children and young people.





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Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.



as long as it takes