

Heartfelt pleas or reform agendas?

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Fifty years ago, I helped an elderly uncle fulfil his end-of-life wish list. One item was to attend evensong at the city cathedral. The preacher was a guest who ran a charity in a very poor suburb. She described situations associated with gross deprivation to a congregation mostly comprised of comfortably off, middle-aged citizens. My uncle's illness had made him uncharacteristically cantankerous and in the midst of a prayerful silence, he muttered, 'I don't know what she's doing talking to that lot. She'll only get nodding approval and a bit extra on the collection plate.' Indeed, one could not imagine many of those listening having much in common with the people described, although some probably did meet them in a professional capacity.

COVID-19 has undoubtedly stimulated discussions about the sort of society people want. This helped alleviate the dreariness of the winter months and temper the gloomy predictions from the British Academy (2021) of the pandemic's potential to damage almost every aspect of our lives – income, mental health, education, housing and more.

In the middle of those dark days, Anne Longfield, the retiring Children's Commissioner for England, gave her final speech *Building Back Better*. This expressed frustration that while the Government has strong evidence about the links between different aspects of deprivation and their devastating effects, it still compartmentalises problems and eschews co-ordinating policies. In Longfield's words:

'We put children in little boxes . . . and view them as remote concepts or data points on an annual return. This is how children fall through the gaps . . . You need to go underneath the headline data, understand the interactions and see where the same child has multiple issues that combine to damage their life chances.'

All this is familiar territory but what followed was somewhat unexpected from a public official and more suited to my grumpy uncle in his cathedral pew:

The people who make the big decisions about vulnerable children often know so little about them, about their lives and why they ended up like they do . . .

Ideally [the] Government should be biting my hand off to find out more, see the data, and make use of it. Instead, too often I have to cajole people to the table, to watch them sit through a

presentation, maybe ask a question, and then on too many occasions vacantly walk away – going back to the task of the day.

Longfield's successor, Dame Rachel de Souza, was quick to keep up the pressure for change by launching *The Big Ask*, a 'once in a generation "Beveridge Report for children" with an ambitious call to rebuild childhood after the COVID-19 pandemic'. The Government was active too, as four days later it published *The Best Start in Life*, laying out plans to improve babies' and children's healthy development (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). And later, as the weather improved and the daffodils flowered, the Archbishop of Canterbury rounded off the reformist theme in his Easter sermon when he emphasised 'the need to choose a better future for all – not just the rich and powerful'.

Overriding all this activity, and of especial significance for looked after children, was the earlier announcement on 15 January of a longer-term independent and comprehensive review of children's social care to be led by Josh MacAlister, Director of the Frontline training programme for social workers. The review will focus particularly on support, strengthening families, safety, care, delivery, sustainability and accountability¹ and will engage with those with direct experience to ensure their views and experience are fully embedded in the review's work.

So, given all this goodwill and the auspicious political climate, what can possibly stop things getting better?

There is always a risk that politicians' attempts at mollification can have the opposite effect. They can re-open as well as heal old sores. So, it is not surprising that critics and sceptics have not been slow to ask whether these initiatives are really enough to produce a new social covenant. Even the Children's Commissioner had doubts: '... educational catch-up was the key focus of the entire Government – yet we still didn't know if it planned to take the Universal Credit uplift away from millions of families. The two positions aren't compatible.' Similarly, critics of the review of social care question its independence and likelihood of achieving something new (*Community Care*, 2021).

The challenge, therefore, is to move from concern to action.

Initially, the omens seem favourable as there is undoubted goodwill, facilitating legislation, unease about children's futures, an established service structure, a skilled workforce and public willingness to pay for welfare. All these are major pluses compared with countries that have poor facilities and minimal social care budgets. But while they are a good start, they are not enough.

The earlier observations suggest the need for a theoretical dimension to achieve concordance by ensuring that every aspect is underpinned by clear aims and principles – in this respect the UK is lucky to have the 1989 Children Act philosophy – but also to recognise the importance of systems. While fragmentation, specialisation and silo working are inevitable in a complex service network, they need to be complementary rather than confounding. Next, interventions informed by best evidence and delivered on agreed and transparent criteria, such as equality, equity or targeted universalism,² have to be designed. Shocking incidents that symbolise wider anxieties and endorsement by celebrities can also sway public opinion. But in the final and most arduous stage, all of this has to be 'Beveridgised' – that is, co-ordinated into a comprehensive and cohesive policy to convince the powers that be of its legitimacy, feasibility and widespread support.

What could make this happen? The MacAlister review? An assemblage of powerful NGOs? A high-profile incident? Social and economic collapse? World War Three? Or just an elderly curmudgeon in the right place at the right time? Ideas on a postcard please.

Notes

1. 'Terms of reference for the independent review of children's social care: a bold and broad approach to support a fundamental review of children's experiences' can be found at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/952624/terms_of_reference_independent_childrens_social_care_review.pdf
2. Equality assumes that everyone will benefit from the same supports, hence the need to treat them equally. Equity argues that individuals need to be given different supports to ensure they have equal access to services. Targeted universalism involves setting universal goals pursued by targeted processes to achieve them.

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