

We are here for the young people who need us, but we passionately hope to work ourselves out of a job

Mark Russell, Chief Executive, The Children's Society

At the Children's Society, we're hungry to make immediate change alongside children and young people, but we're pragmatic enough to know that deep and lasting change is a long-term, collective effort.

About ten years ago, we set up a youth-led Commission on Poverty. This group of young people identified that the cost of school uniform was having a significant impact on their family's finances. In some cases, it even affected their choice of school. After researching school uniform costs further, we launched the *#CutTheCost* campaign. Just a year later, the Government promised to enact changes that would reduce the cost of uniforms.

Yet, nothing happened – so we kept campaigning. Our subsequent report in 2020, *The Wrong Blazer*¹, showed that the uniform cost for the average secondary school pupil was now £337. Parents of primary school pupils were paying around £315. The testimony of young people continued to demonstrate the impact on family budgets, and our annual Good Childhood Report showed that the costs of school were a major worry for many families.

The same year, we worked with Mike Amesbury, MP for Weaver Vale, who introduced a Private Members Bill to reduce the cost of school uniform. The Children's Society lobbied the Government to get behind the Bill and it finally became law in 2021. There is now a statutory duty on schools to reduce the costs of school uniform, stop using single suppliers, and introducing pre-loved uniform shops.

There is a powerful story that runs from the voices of young people in Manchester, through Parliament, to the late Queen signing a Bill into law in Windsor Castle. Young people led this campaign, and their passion and energy powered our organisation as we fought for change. It is an excellent example of how charities can effect real systemic reform.

The Children's Society has been around for a long time – over 140 years. That has given us a pipeline of experience and wisdom in innovation, pioneering, and in understanding the needs of the children and young people we serve. It is precisely because our teams are working with over 50,000 young people every year that we can see the big challenges children face, we can see how systems don't work together, and we see how more and more young people are trapped in disadvantage.

Evidence from direct practice builds our research, policy, and evidence base and it shines a bright light on the issues we need to campaign on. We work hard to ensure that, at any point, the issues we are campaigning on are earthed in what we are seeing in our work with young people and come from the voices of young people themselves.

Youth Voice is not a tick box for us. We have a dedicated Youth Voice team who sit within the Chief Executive's Office at the centre of the whole organisation. They are part of the recruitment process for staff and Trustees, and five young people sit on our Board. We are passionately committed to putting the voices of those we are here to serve at the heart of all we do.

¹ [The Wrong Blazer Report 2020 | The Children's Society \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/our-research-and-evidence/the-wrong-blazer-report-2020)

We believe this gives our work real credibility and integrity. It has certainly given us the power to build strong, trusted relationships with political leaders from different parties and with senior civil servants across Whitehall. They know our work is amplifying the voice and experience of young people – and they know we come to the table not just to talk about a problem but to bring a solution too.

In the early days of the Covid-19 pandemic, like many charities, we faced a storm of challenges. Most important was how to keep delivering our services to the young people who needed us. We also had to maintain excellence in a suddenly more digital world, keep the lights on when income streams were under pressure, and ensure the safety and wellbeing of our amazing colleagues.

Looking back on that period, like many of my friends in civil society, I am unbelievably proud that despite the challenges for the organisation, and for each of us as human beings, we continued to do what we do best. We kept supporting young people through the crisis, we gathered evidence from them about the systemic challenges they faced, and we worked at pace to translate that into policy solutions we could present to the Government. We were fortunate the major children's charities had a direct line into the heart of government during Covid.

In 2019, our *No Family Left Behind*² report argued for new investment in local welfare assistance schemes to ensure that local authorities could support families in crisis. During the pandemic, with partners including Trussell Trust and Barnardo's, made the case to the Government that this resource would literally put food on the table for families in crisis. That campaign was successful. The Minister called me personally to say that he had been persuaded by our evidence, the Government put over £500m into the scheme during the pandemic, and local authority leaders told us that it literally saved lives – they knew the families who needed urgent help but had no extra money to direct to them.

It was a welcome and humane investment, but not a long-term solution. We kept campaigning, along with our partners, and in 2023 the Chancellor earmarked £1.6bn for the newly badged Household Support Fund. This will have made an impact on tens of thousands of families but the funding was time limited and runs out in March 2024. Our collaborative continues to lobby for fresh investment for the years ahead. As in so many areas of government policy, a longer-term lens and financial planning would allow local authorities to budget effectively and help more families who need support.

My friend Lynn Perry, the Chief Executive of Barnardo's, often says 'if you want to go fast go alone, but if you want to go far go together'. This is how genuine and lasting social change happens. We need organisations and leaders who are generous and collaborative at their heart, prepared to leave their own egos at the door, and make solving problems and effecting real change for those we serve the key priority.

This year, five of the largest children's charities have formed the Children's Charities Coalition³. The Children's Society stands with our friends in Barnardo's, Action for Children, the NSPCC, and the NCB in calling for a radical new deal for children – a clear, joined-up government plan that puts children's health and happiness at its heart. The Coalition was launched in the Houses of Parliament by young people themselves, on a day we published research showing 60% do not think politicians understand the issues they face and 73% don't feel heard. It is incredible that over 130 other charities have already joined us in our campaign *Children at the Table*. We are going together to go far.

² [leave-no-family-behind.pdf \(childrenssociety.org.uk\)](#)

³ [Children at the Table: Children's Charities Coalition](#)

I passionately believe in civil society and am proud to stand with so many friends across our sector to argue for the change we want to see. Each of our charities brings experience, evidence, creativity, innovation, and solutions to the table. In many cases, these are rooted in over a century of public service, and fuelled by millions of citizens who stand with us and invest in our work with their time, money and voice.

What excites me most is that everything we do is earthed in values and in heart. We are radical and bold, and we have big ambitions for the kind of society and kind of world we want to help build. We dare to believe we can use our voices to build a fairer more just society – one that I hope is, to use The Children's Society's own vision, 'a society built for all children'.

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