

# United for a Better Childhood: Building Brighter Futures



NATIONAL  
CHILDREN'S  
BUREAU



Building  
Brighter  
Futures

NCB Strategy  
2024-29

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**Our vision:**  
**For every child  
to thrive.**



**Our mission:**  
**To build a better  
childhood for  
every child.**

# Introduction

Anna Feuchtwang – CEO



## Is 2024 a good time to be a child?

**Far too many children in England and Northern Ireland would answer with a resounding "no".**

### The external environment

The National Children's Bureau has just celebrated its 60th birthday and rarely in that time have we been more concerned about trends for children.

Throughout this strategy we use "children" as an umbrella term for babies, children and young people.

Fewer children feel able to attend school; far fewer families receive the early help and intervention that can prevent crises from developing; political deadlock in Northern Ireland has led to devastating cuts to the services that children rely on; the number of children with mental health problems is exploding; and the scandalously high rates of child poverty are getting even higher.

We are only now beginning to fully understand the myriad ways the

Covid-19 pandemic made all these problems worse – putting family finances under further pressure, stretching the NHS intolerably, and creating additional mental health challenges while straining both the formal services and the informal connections that can help to manage them.

We also know that many children face discrimination because of their race, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, special educational needs, or social class – and that this makes the challenges outlined above far more difficult to overcome. This is simply not acceptable.

Many services and support networks designed to address these issues desperately require additional investment, yet with a difficult economic context, Governments have largely focused on minor initiatives rather than real transformation.

## The NCB response

I am extremely proud of the work NCB has done in the last five years to push back against these trends – from our award-winning work to catalyse change in local systems around the country, to our policy and influencing work that has won key changes and amendments to legislation, from delivering practical change like the Stronger Practice Hubs programme helping early years settings to recover from the pandemic, to the amazing results of NCB's specialist membership groups like the Anti-Bullying Alliance reaching tens of thousands of teachers and millions of students. You can read about these achievements and much more in our [annual reports](#).

This strategy has been an opportunity to keep challenging ourselves to go further and do better, to keep pace with the rising challenges that children themselves face. In doing so, I am pleased that we have stayed grounded in the strengths and insights that have brought us to where we are today.

NCB is first and foremost a convening organisation and our success is founded on networks of trust across different parts of the system. We will deepen and expand these networks in a spirit of openness and collaboration.

Second, we know that moving between on-the-ground practice and policy change gives us immense credibility in both arenas. Growing

these feedback loops and grounding our influencing work in our own learning will mean we can achieve even more for children.

Third, at NCB we understand the level of empathy and time spent listening required to truly be an ally to disabled children and their families – and how you can only speak authentically on behalf of others when they trust you enough to ask you to do so. This is a trust we will continue to re-earn each day.

Last, but not least, we believe in the power of positivity – how even in dark times finding glimmers of hope and celebrating success can create a shift in thinking that gathers momentum.

I am delighted that we will move forward in these areas while welcoming Research in Practice into the NCB family (you can read more about them in the next section). Combining our deep knowledge of areas like children's social care, our expertise in system-change and research, and our extensive reach across the sector will create a uniquely powerful agent for change.

All of us at NCB are hugely excited that Research in Practice has joined our family, allowing us to combine our complementary expertise in supporting the sector and enabling social change. NCB has always offered a rare combination of vision and practical know-how and Research in Practice is very much a kindred spirit in this regard.

We take this as inspiration for our next five years as a larger and even more impactful organisation: looking up at the stars without missing the step in front.

As you would expect given NCB is first and foremost a convening and evidence-informed organisation, this strategy is the result of both a detailed examination of our impact and a wide range of conversations with our partners. This has included a major survey to understand how we are viewed, detailed work with staff, analysis of key trends and – most importantly – conversations with children and young people and their families.

All of this has given us increasing confidence that welcoming Research in Practice into NCB will help reinforce and amplify the strategic direction that makes sense for us. You can read more about this in the "How we developed our strategy" section starting on page 54.

In particular, we have worked hard to draw on the insights of children and our staff to co-produce a definition of a "good childhood" – and to develop our vision for what society would need to look like for this to become a reality for every child in England and Northern Ireland. I'm proud to set out the results of this work here.

However, alongside that, we are clear-eyed about how far we are from this vision today. That is why this strategy focusses on the specific and tangible

goals we have for the next five years to stride towards this vision in an imperfect world. We have worked hard to ensure that a focus on diversity, equity and inclusion is threaded through each of these goals – reflecting our determination to make this the business of every one of us.

***Is our vision possible? Absolutely. Will it happen tomorrow? No. But that can never be an excuse not to do better for children.***

At NCB our mission is to build a better childhood for every child because we believe that as a society we can and must do better for children every single day – and we must demand the same of our Government.

With an evidence-informed approach to seemingly intractable problems with complex systems, having the courage and space to reform around the outcomes that matter to children and young people, and, above all, with a stronger voice for children themselves, change is truly possible.

**We know that because we've been proving it for 60 years.**

**Anna Feuchtwang – CEO**

## What is the role of NCB in building a better childhood?

NCB was founded to forge closer links across the children's sector – bringing together Government, professionals, the charity and community sector and children themselves. We know that this trust is something we must earn and re-earn each day and we have done so: our history is, in many ways, a story of how change can happen when people come together.

You can read more about our history – and the wider UK history that we have been such a big part of – in our [digital interactive timeline](#).

NCB exists at the intersection of the children's sector – this has always been true and always will be. Whether it's in our work to coordinate the children's sector's input into political party manifestos or in our award-winning membership groups like the Anti-Bullying Alliance, we are about bringing people together and making connections – and most importantly connecting all stakeholders with the voices and experiences of children and the outcomes that matter to them.

But our power comes not only from our position at this intersection, but from our approach that stands at a unique intersection in many other ways as well...



# NCB is at the intersection of...



**Courage and reason**

We speak the truth on behalf of children and young people, but we do not chase headlines or exaggerate what the evidence says: when we speak, the sector listens.

We tackle the hardest challenges in children's services, bringing the focus and evidence to solve them.

We are thought leaders who articulate what a better childhood can look like, but we ground this in the inch-by-inch progress we drive forward up and down the country every day.

As policy-makers change we are a consistent voice for best outcomes for the most vulnerable children – holding both short and long-term goals in mind and encouraging pragmatic decisions to move towards the world we ultimately want to see.



**Vision and pragmatism**



**Evidence and voice**

We are highly qualified to bring together hard evidence **and** the voice of children and young people.

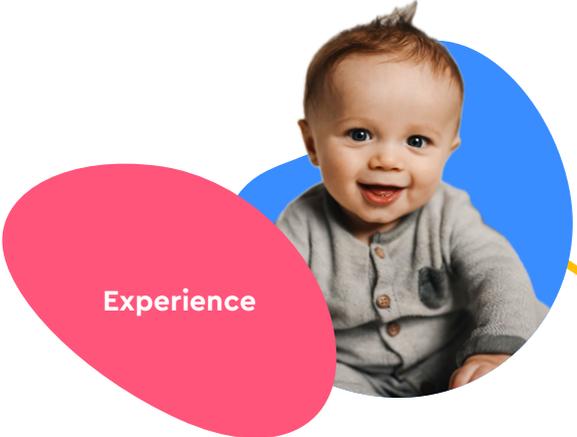
We focus on the outcomes that make a difference to children and we understand systems and practice thoroughly enough to translate this into actionable progress.

We drive change at every stage of the process to improve childhoods. We understand:

- ▶ the political pressure it takes to set a new agenda
- ▶ the evidence it takes to change policy and practice
- ▶ the patience and focus it takes to plan good local services
- ▶ the training and resources it takes to enable professionals to do their best



**National and local**



**Experience**

We have a holistic view of childhood, acknowledging the intersectionality between life experiences, which means we see where the challenges are and help others to do so – often they are in the margins or links between established areas and so no one else sees them.

# From policy to practice, we follow a distinctive process to improve childhoods underpinned by our core values (see page 17).



# Research in Practice – the newest member of the NCB family

## research in practice

Joining us in 2024, Research in Practice works with and for professionals in the social care, health, criminal justice and higher education sectors offering resources, learning opportunities and specialist expertise. Research in Practice's aim is to support their learning to enable people – children, young people, families, adults, carers and communities – to live good lives.

Research in Practice's work brings together research evidence, practice wisdom and expertise from people's lived experience, combining these elements to create learning opportunities and resources on relevant topics; tailored to the needs of individuals and organisations.

Research in Practice's work is steered by its Partner network, comprising of over 220 local, national and voluntary organisations, as well as universities across England. Membership of this network includes access to learning opportunities and support for whole



organisations, while many also contract Research in Practice to deliver additional strategic consultancy and tailored learning and development opportunities.

Research in Practice is an ideal addition to the NCB family because we have so many shared values and approaches, while also enough differences that we can learn from each other to the benefit of both. Key opportunities arising from Research in Practice becoming part of NCB include:

- ▶ Pooling our very considerable subject-matter expertise around social care and youth justice in order to solidify our sector leadership in these areas.
- ▶ Combining our deep experience in systems change methodology, research and evidence generation and supporting professional development to create a truly unique offer for partners.
- ▶ Aligning our reach across the sector – including local authorities and their partners, NHS and other national institutions, and academic networks – to build on our role as a hub and translator of ideas and innovative practice.

NCB has a proud history of hosting a family of specialist membership organisations, such as the Council for Disabled Children and the Anti-Bullying Alliance – so we are confident that Research in Practice will be able to carry on delivering its highly respected programme of work, while over time we start to realise the opportunities outlined above.

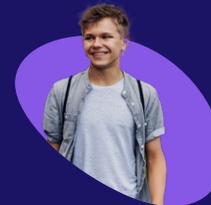
We have picked out some of the other key examples of synergies between Research in Practice and NCB throughout this document.

Find out more about [Dez Holmes](#), Director of Research in Practice.



## Our values

As important as what we do is how we do it. At NCB, all of our work is guided by our values, which reflect the inspiration we get from the children and young people that we work with.



### Forever young

Children and young people are at the heart of what we do. We reflect this energy and optimism in our approach to work.



### Better together

We collaborate from the inside and outside, living up to the trust our partners place in us to do what's right for children and young people.



### Always learning

Like an inquisitive child, we always ask 'Why?'. The rigour of our evidence drives our work and helps us challenge ourselves and others not to make assumptions and to search for future progress.



### Taking care

We invest a significant part of ourselves in our work. We respect and value that investment by looking after ourselves and each other.



### Being brave

We don't shy away from the biggest challenges because that's where children and young people need us most. We speak the truth with the authority of evidence and experience.

# The NCB family



## research in practice

We create more opportunities for deeper understanding and practical application when we pair research evidence with wisdom and expertise from people's own lived experiences. Research in Practice works with and for professionals in the social care, health, criminal justice and higher education sectors offering resources, learning opportunities and specialist expertise to enable people – children, young people, families, adults, carers and communities – to live better lives.



Creating safe and secure environments in which children and young people can live, grow, play and learn without fear of being bullied by others is fundamental to a healthy and happy childhood. The Anti-Bullying Alliance (ABA) is a unique collaboration, bringing together organisations and individuals to put an end to bullying for good.



All children and young people in the UK, and their caregivers, should be able to easily access high quality local and national information, guidance and support to manage the impact of death on their lives. The Childhood Bereavement Network (CBN) works collaboratively with expert individuals and organisations to make this vision a reality.



Our society should respect the rights of disabled children and young people, support them to be active in their communities and allow them to fulfil their potential. The Council for Disabled Children (CDC) brings together professionals, practitioners, policymakers and children and families themselves, to deliver systemic change across education, health and social care.



We know increased early years investment and by integrating services around children and families can improve children's life chances. The aim of the Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP) is to give thousands of children aged 0–3 across four London wards a better start. The A Better Start programme, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, ends in 2024.



Early intervention and a whole school approach can be highly effective in improving the wellbeing of children and young people and reducing the impact of mental health problems. The Schools' Wellbeing Partnership brings together more than 50 education, health and wellbeing and children's organisations to work towards this goal.

## What do we mean by a better childhood?

Drawing on insights from the children we work with day in and day out, coupled with some more dedicated sessions with a group of specific children drawn from across our networks, we have co-produced a definition of a good childhood.

This is an ambitious vision and we don't apologise for that. When we say we want to build a better childhood, we mean making this a reality for more children. We want to keep improving lives until every single child in the UK can say that they have a good childhood.

I learn and achieve

I am and feel safe

My opinions make a difference

I am loved, valued and have people I can trust



I have fun and try new things

I am as physically and mentally healthy as I can be

I have a stable home

I am included



## Our future vision

Having built up this definition of a better childhood, we set ourselves a further challenge – what would a society that builds this better childhood actually look like?

The result is our future vision, which explains what would need to happen in key areas of children’s services and wider society to create the conditions for better childhoods.

In most cases there are specific changes that would unlock the “I statements” (see page 20) from our definition of a good childhood, but we also believe there are some foundational changes that are essential to unlocking all of the statements. These are set out at the end of this section.



### Physical and mental health and wellbeing

We need to tackle the root causes of poor mental health and wellbeing, making sure children get the support they need at the right time.



#### The change we need

- ▶ Health services for children are integrated and child-centred.
- ▶ All babies, children and young people’s services, schools and early years settings promote good mental health and wellbeing and staff are supported.
- ▶ Children get the help they need as early as possible, whatever their age and circumstances.
- ▶ Children who are bereaved, and their parents or carers, get the support they need to live with their loss.
- ▶ Good regulation of the online world and wider education on digital engagement so children can harness the potential of digital tools while being protected from harm.

### Voice of children

We need to build services at every level with the voices of children and their parents at the very heart.



#### The change we need

- ▶ Children are involved in decision-making on all levels – individual, service, and strategic – and are equipped with the skills to take an active role.
- ▶ Children are an explicit, personal priority for every Prime Minister and efforts to improve their lives should be co-ordinated across government rather than within individual Departmental silos.

## Social care

We need to ensure all our children, especially those who are most vulnerable, get the intensive support they need before their families reach crisis or they are put at risk of harm.



I am and feel safe and I have a stable home

I am loved, valued and have people I can trust

### The change we need

- ▶ Children who need social care support receive effective, well-funded services that respond to their individual needs and voice.
- ▶ Parents and carers receive the support they need to ensure that their children can thrive.
- ▶ Children in or leaving care are supported to improve their wellbeing and mental health and find the stability they need to manage the transition to independence.
- ▶ Children who are off the radar, such as those who are missing from education, are identified early and get the support they need to thrive.

## Education and inclusion

We need our education system to support the ambitions and aspirations of all our children with equity and dignity.



I learn and achieve. I am included & I have fun and try new things

### The change we need

- ▶ Our children experience an education system where they feel they belong and which supports their mental health and wellbeing as well as their academic achievement.
- ▶ From birth to adulthood, disabled children receive services which take a whole-child approach, where they are empowered to achieve the goals that matter to them.
- ▶ Disabled children and those with special educational needs are fully included in an education system which is responsive to their needs and supports their aspirations.
- ▶ Children with the most complex needs and challenging behaviour are able to access suitable services closer to home.
- ▶ Children live, grow, play and learn without fear of bullying.

# Foundational changes required

## Child poverty

We need to end the poverty which blights childhoods and holds our children back in so many ways.



### The change we need

- ▶ Ending punitive policies like the two-child limit for benefits that drive child poverty.
- ▶ Increases to key welfare support like the child element of Universal credit, alongside a wider strategy to address housing and other determinants of poverty.
- ▶ Shifting to a needs-based model of welfare that ensures everyone can afford life's essentials (food, heating, and decent housing).
- ▶ Ultimately, eradicating child poverty entirely.

## Funding for services

We need education, early years settings, health, justice and social care services to have adequate funding to deliver on the goals above.

### The change we need

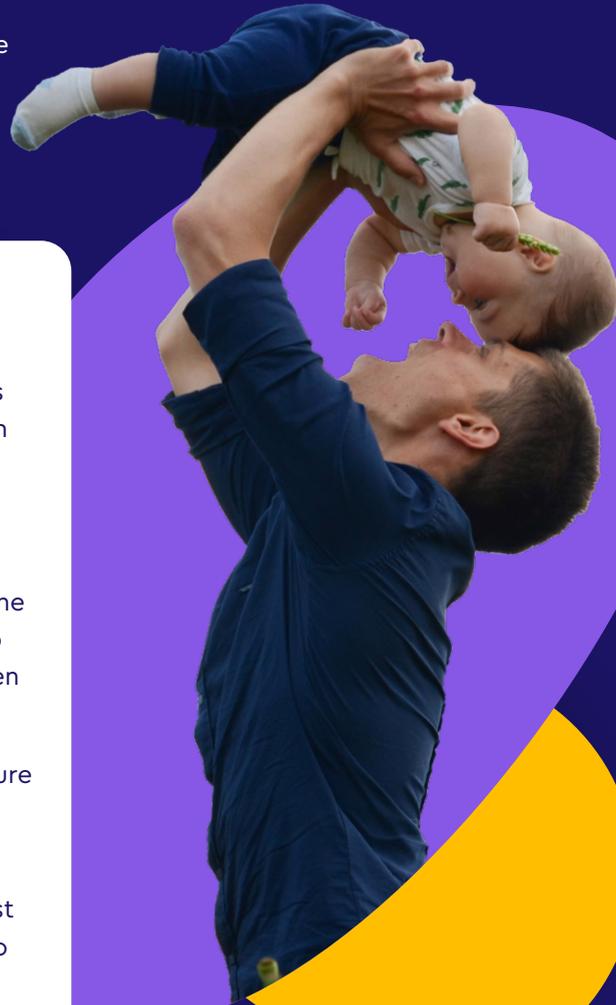
- ▶ A significant increase in the proportion of Gross Domestic Product is spent on children, enabling proper investment in early intervention across a range of services.

## Early years

We need to support our children to get the best start in life, because we know that the early years are the foundation on which their future life chances are built.

### The change we need

- ▶ All young children, whatever their background, have access to high-quality early education and childcare, delivered by an appropriately skilled and valued workforce.
- ▶ Parents and carers are given the right support so they can help their babies and young children develop and learn.
- ▶ Parents are supported to nurture good relationships and attachment with their child.
- ▶ All families, especially the most disadvantaged, have access to high-quality universal services that promote the early health and development of babies and young children.



# Our goals for the next five years (2024 to 2029)

We know that the vision for the future we have set out in the previous section will take dedication, hard work, ingenuity and collaboration to achieve.

We also know it will take time. Longer than five years in fact.

With so many outcomes going in the wrong direction for children and young people, we wanted to challenge ourselves to think about what a different future could really look like – in other words, where we ultimately want to get to.

At the same time, we wanted to keep focussed on the here and now – what concrete steps do we need to take to start moving things towards that vision?

The result is our six goals set out in turn below. For each goal, we explain the existing strengths that we will continue, and how we will build on these to go further in each area.

**For each of our goals, we set out how:**

- a) Our convening role will help us to achieve our aims – this role is fundamental to NCB's approach and underpins every goal.
- b) Research in Practice joining NCB will be beneficial to both – we have noted key examples of where our strategic direction aligns with that of Research in Practice and we therefore anticipate enhanced impact.
- c) We will improve diversity, equity and inclusion as part of our work – we have embedded this throughout our strategy rather than an "add-on" specific goal.



# Goal 1

Amplifying the voice of children,  
young people and families

The voices of children have always been at the heart of all of our work at NCB. We make sure that children and young people's views and experiences inform every aspect of our work because we recognise they are experts in their own lives. We listen carefully and consistently so that we can truly call ourselves allies of children and young people. This is the key that unlocks all our other goals and that's why you'll see children's voice and perspective mentioned in each of the following goals as well as this one.

## Continuing our strengths

- ▶ **The voice of children at the heart of every project, every day.** In our last strategy we made a promise to ensure that all our work across research, policy, practice and programmes includes the voice of the child or young person. We have kept that promise and this will remain a relentless focus for us going forward.

### Our strengths in action

Living Assessments is a long-term project looking at the decision-making process for providing social care support for children and families and the impact of those decisions. The voices and lived experience of children experiencing an assessment not only guide the research, but children also get a chance to share their experiences at the highest levels of Government.



► **Bringing children to the heart.**

Whether it's local commissioners thinking about a service redesign, professionals attending one of our training courses, or a Government Minister discussing a new policy, we'll continue to ensure that children get a chance to tell their stories and share their ideas with those who make decisions about them.



**Our strengths in action**

The Council for Disabled Children supports FLARE (Friendship, Learning, Achieve, Reach and Empower). FLARE represents the views and voices of young people with special educational needs and disabilities all over England. FLARE works together to share their views and experiences to help the Department for Education and other teams to understand how disabled children and young people and those with SEN want to receive the support and services they need. FLARE won The Children's Achievement Award at the Children and Young People Now Awards 2023.

► **Ensuring our own strategy and priorities reflect the views of children we exist to serve.** We make sure that children are not just guiding specific projects or events, but also what projects and events we choose in the first place.

**Our strengths in action**

YNCB is an advisory group of children and young people that gives young people the opportunity to speak out about the things that are important to them and contribute to the work we do to improve the lives of children. Our YNCB members are involved in our governance, research, and policy work, and we ask for their advice on our projects and programmes.



**Going further**

As we move forward, we will ensure that **all children are represented in our work**. We want to create the networks and infrastructure that mean we can bring young people with the most relevant lived experience and views to specific projects, working with partners wherever necessary.

We will also use the influencing power of NCB to advocate for wider changes to the way Government and society are structured so that **we give children**

**a greater voice at the table.** NCB will always make sure that children are heard when we are in the room, but what about when we are not in the room? NCB has a really exciting platform to create changes to the way Government, professionals, companies and other bodies think and act, **so that decisions that affect children are never taken without them.** Research in Practice's experience of engaging a wide range of experts by lived experience will be particularly helpful in this area.



# Goal 2

Driving change in the local and regional systems children rely on

We are hugely proud of the work we do to drive improvement in local and regional systems. When a local authority, NHS body, school, or a combination of these is thinking through how they can deliver better for children and young people, we are very often the best people to help them do it. Increasingly, the decisions that matter most to children are taken locally or regionally rather than at a national level, so our role as facilitator has a growing importance and also puts us in a good position to link local delivery and national policy (see "Acting as a feedback loop" strength on page 36).

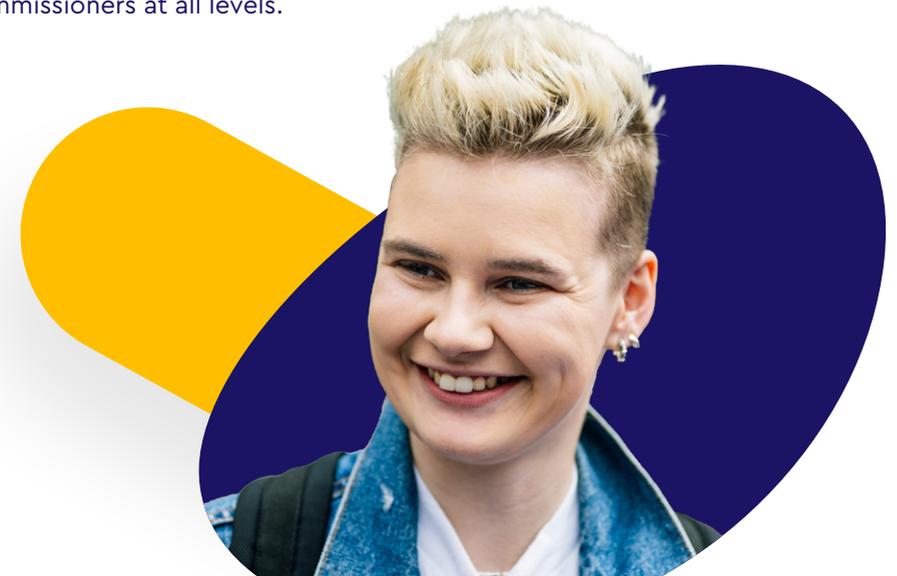
## Continuing our strengths

### ► **Building systems around children.**

We organise local system redesign around the outcomes that matter to children. We have tremendous expertise in helping professionals and commissioners work back from these outcomes to collaborate better, ensuring the value of children and young people's voices is thoroughly understood by practitioners and commissioners at all levels.

### **Our strengths in action**

CDC supports the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Team in [Rochdale](#) with their ambitious work to develop an integrated service for children with SEND. In 2022, the project won the Public Sector Children's Team Award at the CYPNow Awards.



► **Making sure that learning spreads.**

Whether it's working on local system change or running specific programmes, or both, we bring together wider networks of commissioners and professionals to compare notes and ensure that good practice spreads.

**Our strengths in action**

Co-led by CDC, What Works in SEND is an ambitious programme of learning and innovation, designed to generate high-quality evidence of what works at system-level in SEND to improve outcomes for children, young people and families.

► **Place-based improvement initiatives.**

We are also experts at creating and improving specific programmes based in one area, often making use of our holistic understanding of children's lives to ensure that a new programme fits into the wider system it is based in.

**Our strengths in action**

NCB worked with the Greater London Authority to refresh and align the Mayor of London's Healthy Early Years London and Healthy Schools London awards programme. Our aim was to ensure the programmes ran as efficiently and effectively as possible, and to embed them into wider regional initiatives to tackle child health inequalities across London.

► **Acting as a feedback loop between local and national levels.** NCB plays a powerful role making connections between local and regional bodies and national policy-makers (see Goal 3), ensuring that national policy is grounded in the real-life challenges of delivery, helping to bring policy intentions to life in local contexts and, most importantly, focussing all levels on the perspectives of the children they are there to serve.

**Our strengths in action**

The National Children's Bureau is the national delivery partner for the Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs programme, working on behalf of the Department for Education (DfE). Hubs provide advice, share good practice and offer evidence-informed professional development for early years practitioners.

## Going further

We are hugely proud of our work in this area and the main way that we want to go further is by expanding the reach and scale of our offer. We would primarily like to do this in two ways:

① **Geographically.** We know that there are many more areas of England that could benefit from our approach and we are keen that we grow in a sustainable way to meet this demand. **We believe that it will be better for children if we are involved in these conversations.**

Over time, we want to translate our expertise more consistently to Northern Ireland as well, alongside wider initiatives, such as spreading our whole-school anti-bullying approach to Northern Ireland and Wales.

② **Thematically.** We know from our wider work that **our model of children-focussed system redesign works in many other areas of children's services** beyond those we currently focus on. Over time we would like to broaden our focus accordingly, for example:

- a. developing an approach to belonging in schools, ensuring wellbeing is at the heart of schools' ethos
- b. developing place-based early years programmes with a focus on mental health and wellbeing

The reach, profile and deep respect that Research in Practice has established within the sector will help us to collectively realise both of these ambitions.



# Goal 3

## Driving change in national policy and legislation

One of NCB's most valuable roles is to ensure that national policy and legislation reflect the evidence about what works, experience of practice and delivery, a consensus (or working compromise) across the many different parts of the children's sector, and, most importantly, the views of children and their families.

### Continuing our strengths

► **Credibility.** We have a hard-won reputation for sticking rigorously to evidence in our policy positions and that has stood us in very good stead in working with Government to improve both design of policy and its implementation. Crucially, we bring this evidence together with the views of children and young people, rather than treating these as two separate areas. This often includes children and young people themselves telling their stories directly to politicians and decision-makers.

#### Our strengths in action

In 2023, the government agreed that cohabiting parents and carers would be able to claim the same bereavement benefits to help bring up their grieving children as married couples or those in civil partnerships, the culmination of a [long campaign for justice for bereaved children](#) led by family member the Childhood Bereavement Network.

#### Our strengths in action

In November 2022, we organised a [Parliamentary event](#) on behalf of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children that gave disabled and care experienced young people and parents a central role sharing their lived experiences with an audience made up of representatives from the children's sector, statutory services and Parliament, including the Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing.

► **Authenticity.** We often achieve most influence by acting as a critical friend to Government and as go-between with the rest of the sector, but we will also speak out with authority and credibility in the media when we feel a policy is wrong or that as a sector we are not doing enough for children and young people.

### ► Convening the sector.

As with our other goals, we also play a vital role in convening the sector around crucial issues that affect children so we can magnify our collective impact, including on SEND, health policy, early years and child poverty.



#### Our strengths in action

Working with the [Health Policy Influencing Group](#) (HPIG) involves bringing together over 70 organisations to successfully advocate for key amendments to the Health and Care Act 2022 to ensure a greater focus on children.

### ► Engaging communications.

We are proud of the content we produce to communicate complex policy issues, to explain the impact NCB has, and, most importantly, to give a megaphone to children themselves.

#### Our strengths in action

We ran a series of workshops with groups of young people in March 2023 to understand what NCB meant to them and what areas we should focus on during our [60th anniversary celebrations](#). We built their ideas into the development and production of our 60th engagement activities.



## Going further

We want to grow our presence in the sector as **thought leaders** as well as conveners, using our own evidence and learning, in dialogue with other sources, to take stronger positions on the solutions that children need. This thought leadership role will dovetail with our existing convening role to give us richer and deeper coalitions that are capable of more change.

We also want to raise our profile as commentators in both traditional media (digital and print publications) and social media like X, Facebook and LinkedIn. **We are the “honest broker”** in so many meetings between different parts of Government and the sector, but this role has huge potential in the digital arena as well. Part of this will be building on our existing work to educate the wider sector about issues like neurodiversity.

We also want to **grow our presence and influence in Northern Ireland** to make sure that we play our full part in highlighting and ultimately reversing the huge impact that political stasis and Whitehall-imposed cuts to budgets have had on children in Northern Ireland. This will also give us the chance to draw further learning from solving similar issues for children in two quite different settings.

We particularly want to apply these ideas to our existing areas of expertise,

including children with SEND, early years, social care and health systems. However, we feel that we can naturally build on these existing areas by **levelling up our existing focus on children in the youth justice system and those with mental health needs**. These children are proportionately more likely to have SEND, be in touch with the social care system, have health problems, and to have been let down in their early years. So it is natural to expand our focus in this way to help us take a holistic look at children's lives. Research in Practice's expertise in issues of youth justice and, in particular, safeguarding and their interaction with wider systems will mean the whole organisation can quickly level up in this area. Similarly, we will explore opportunities to advocate for improved information for children, especially in relation to the local services available to them.

Both in our most established areas of expertise and in those we're looking to grow, we want to continue to **enhance our understanding of the intersectionality of experience**, especially how systemic racism affects children and young people's experiences (see Goal 4). We want to harness this additional learning to grow our ability to advocate for greater equity of outcomes across different groups of children and young people, building alliances with other organisations where this makes sense.

# Goal 4

Generating evidence that counts

NCB has a proud record of generating learning and evidence, both through the programmes we run ourselves up and down the country and through our dedicated research team. When we publish a piece of research or an evaluation, you know it is thorough, robust and balanced. Where we have good ideas and we know they work, we are letting children down if we don't share them as widely as possible.

## Continuing our strengths

- ▶ **Identifying and addressing gaps in knowledge through multi-disciplinary research.** We are able to bring a wide array of academic skills and practical knowledge to research projects, from evidence synthesis to qualitative work with young people.
- ▶ **Evaluating practice and programmes and generating cross-cutting learning.** We are not "ivory tower" academics, but are steeped in knowledge of the lives of children and the practical improvements required to the services they rely on. We marry this with advanced research techniques to generate key actionable learning when evaluating programmes.

### Our strengths in action

Despite the benefits of diverting children away from criminal justice processes and outcomes, there is limited knowledge on what makes diversion effective. Commissioned by the [Youth Endowment Fund](#) (YEF), NCB conducted a [systematic review](#) to explore effective youth diversion strategies in England and Wales.

### Our strengths in action

[A Better Start](#) is one of five major programmes set up by The National Lottery Community Fund to test and learn from new approaches to designing early years services. To support this work, NCB has designed and delivered an ambitious programme of shared learning and development support for A Better Start, working within, across and beyond the five partnership areas.

► **Reach of our research networks.**

We have the networks and tools to reach the numbers of practitioners, commissioners and children that are required to generate robust conclusions. In particular, our Young Research Advisors add extremely valuable thoughts and perspectives across the whole breadth of our research and this role is hugely valued by our academic partners.

**Our strengths in action**

Family member Anti-Bullying Alliance surveyed nearly 30,000 pupils across England in 2022 as part of Anti-Bullying Week and found almost 1 in 4 were being frequently bullied face-to-face, with the situation even worse for those with SEND (31%).

**Our strengths in action**

We are working alongside social policy consultants and Kingston University to study the links between financial precarity and child welfare. The findings will inform the development of joined-up social policies that improve families' financial circumstances and child welfare.

► **Building powerful cases for change.**

Our policy and research teams work closely together to disseminate new research and evaluations to civil servants, Ministers, local authorities and others for whom the findings are particularly relevant, highlighting the policy implications. We often perform this function on behalf of academic partners as well.



## Going further

While we are excellent at generating strong evidence and learning, we want to get better at curating it from different projects and drawing it together to generate further insight from **cross-analysis and evidence synthesis**. This will also help us to better capture our own impact and to respond, adjusting our own approach and priorities based on the evidence we generate.

Ultimately, we want to present this learning in a **public-facing digital library** to ensure that our evidence has the widest reach and longest life possible. Research in Practice maintains an expansive library of resources and has developed considerable expertise in the translation, curation and implementation of evidence into practice, leadership and policy, providing a tremendous opportunity to develop the overall NCB offer and maximise our impact.

We will also seize the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to harness the learning and evidence from our **10-year LEAP project** – and from all A Better Start partners – to make sure the knowledge and learning generated is embedded and used across our work and that of our partners and networks.

We also want to harness our corporate strength around **convening others to help build shared priorities** across the children's sector for research and evidence generation, to maximise the relatively limited resources that go into research on children's issues. This will include supporting others to develop their learning: building on the 'shared measurement' approaches we have initiated in the child bereavement sector to support other networks to learn and improve together.

Finally, we want to harness our holistic view of childhood in the research priorities we set, filling key data gaps on intersectionality of different parts of the system that supports children.

This will include for example:

- **Becoming an authority on youth justice issues**
- **Working with others to grow our understanding of how systemic racism affects the services children rely on** and reflecting this in our programming

# Goal 5

Making sure children have the workforce they need

Where children need help, they deserve to receive it from a professional who is qualified and confident to provide it, aware of the latest evidence and techniques. One of NCB's greatest strengths is delivering engaging, evidence-informed training to a whole range of different professionals that helps not just to increase skills but to shift thinking about what is possible for local services.

## Continuing our strengths

► **Training based on evidence of what works and on the voices of children and young people.** We have a hard-won reputation for grounding our training in the latest evidence, while ensuring that this is applied to the priorities of children themselves.



► **A compelling digital offer.** Accelerated by the pandemic, we now have very high standards of digital delivery in a range of formats, from virtual workshops to e-learning. This means our training can reach a much wider audience without compromising the standards of quality and outcomes that we hold ourselves to.

### Our strengths in action

We provide ongoing support to the Public Health Agency in Northern Ireland for the development and implementation of [the infant mental health framework](#) across the region. As part of this work, we support the sharing of good practice through our popular series of lunchtime learning webinars.

### Our strengths in action

Family member Anti-Bullying Alliance has developed a wide range of [free CPD-certified online anti-bullying training courses](#) for anyone that works with children. These include courses on reducing, preventing and responding to bullying.

► **Curating tools and evidence to help professionals develop outside of formal training environments.**

We know that most professional development takes place outside of formal learning sessions, so we also provide standing support, for example on our website.



**Our strengths in action**

CDC has developed a suite of [online training](#) for members and affiliated organisations and services. The courses have been developed to improve knowledge, understanding and practical skills and support.

► **Extensive geographical reach.**

We often work with over half of the local authorities in England on a single programme, ensuring that we draw the themes from a wide range of local areas when generating learning, while remaining flexible enough to adapt to local circumstances.



**Our strengths in action**

Council for Disabled Children leads the [EYSEND Partnership](#), which provides support across nine English regions on different aspects of early years, SEN and Disability working with 72 local authorities. [Making it REAL](#), engaging parents in their children's early literacy development, is NCB's most widely delivered programme, active in over 80 local authorities.

## Going further

Over time, we want to go further at integrating all the tools and resources we have at our disposal to create a **comprehensive front door for professionals** to find what they're looking for and to maximise the potential of the excellent resources we have already developed.

Alongside this, we want to further expand the range of professionals who we reach, especially those like teachers who have a key role in identifying potential issues early with children and referring them for more specialist support. We will also apply a **continuous improvement approach to ensuring the cultural sensitivity of our training**. Research in Practice's wide range of learning and development approaches and excellent track record with delivery will mean we can combine forces to immediately expand our reach and also use our pooled expertise and resources to collectively expand to new audiences.

We also want to harness all of the learning from the training we provide and from our wider policy work to help think through **different workforce models** that can support professionals to do their best and hence ensure the best outcomes for children. Again, pooling Research in Practice's learning with this endeavour will make this richer and more comprehensive. We will promote the adoption of

new workforce models to ensure for example:

- We promote **whole-school approaches** to mental health and wellbeing, ensuring schools are able to identify needs and refer children to the right outside professionals if necessary
- We embed **evidenced informed approaches** to quality delivery in the early years, ensuring that planned expansions of capacity can take place without compromising quality
- We examine the **implications of artificial intelligence** on workforce models across education, social care and early years



# Goal 6

Building respect and trust as a pioneering and high-performing charity

Our greatest strength at NCB is the credibility and authority of our staff on issues like SEND or social care. Collectively, we want to have equal authority on running a modern, highly effective charity. With so many issues to tackle, it is essential that every pound we spend achieves the greatest impact possible.

## Continuing our strengths

► **Listening.** We emphasise listening to our stakeholders, partners and most importantly to children, young people and their families – we are not defensive or dismissive when we receive feedback and we do our best to respond and adjust. This is what keeps us agile and relevant.

► **Organisational culture.** We are proud of the culture we have built at NCB, where determination and resourcefulness are recognised, but not at the expense of caring for each other and maintaining a friendly, inclusive and open approach internally and externally.

### Our strengths in action

In creating this very strategy, we took the time to listen to our stakeholders, colleagues, partners and to children and young people. Read more about this in the section "How we developed this strategy".

### Our strengths in action

Every year we run an online staff survey to better understand how colleagues are feeling about a range of issues. Read more about the results of our 2023 survey in the section "How we developed this strategy".



► **Strong financial health.** NCB is generating good income, reflecting the trust our partners are placing in us to solve difficult problems and implement complex programmes, while providing excellent value for money. This means we are in a good position to think about going further, as set out in each of the previous goals.

#### Our strengths in action

Our Annual Report details our achievements and aspirations as well as providing full transparency on our financial position. Read our [annual reports](#) from the last ten years.

► **Safeguarding.** NCB takes its safeguarding responsibilities extremely seriously and we regularly review our processes and procedures to make sure we keep risk to an absolute minimum for everyone who engages with us, especially children.



► **Recruitment.** In a period of growth for NCB, our recruitment processes have allowed us to attract some fantastic new talent across the full range of teams that we work with, while some of our brightest stars have achieved promotion against external competition.

#### Our strengths in action

In 2023, [Amanda Allard](#) was promoted to Director of CDC and Strategic Director of Practice and Programmes at NCB, having first joined CDC in 2009 and taking on responsibility at various stages for health, mental health and participation.

#### Our strengths in action

Whether members of our young advisory groups, participating at events and workshops, or guiding our strategic focus, children work with NCB in many different ways. We provide mandatory safeguarding training for all staff, enhanced DBS checks for staff directly working with children and young people and follow organisational safeguarding policies and processes to ensure all children who engage with us are happy, safe and secure.

## Going further

We have made a lot of progress with the **digital transformation** of our organisation, but as the potential of digital technology continues to increase exponentially, any organisation that is not accelerating its transformation is falling behind. We will invest more time and resources in continuing to make sure we are leaders in internal use of digital tools (for example harnessing the power of AI, further streamlining our processes and advancing our use of data) as well as harnessing these tools in specific projects and programmes.

As the number and complexity of the projects we run increases, we want to evolve our organisational model to enable **matrix working and agile resource planning**. This will take time and careful planning, but will ensure that we are able to continue to deliver to an excellent standard while protecting staff wellbeing and work-life balance.

With Research in Practice joining NCB, we have an important opportunity to review both organisations' use of digital tools, project management approaches, and wider processes – choosing the best of each and **developing bespoke solutions** for our larger combined organisation where this makes sense.

We have made steady progress with increasing the diversity of our staff body and Trustees, but we are not complacent – we still do not fully reflect the society we are here to serve, particularly at more senior levels of the organisation. We will publish a **new DEI plan** that maintains our current focus on equality issues around disability and race and explores how we can develop a more sophisticated and consistent understanding of the equality impact of our delivery work and reflect this in our projects. We will also continue to push to make sure that all staff, and all children and their families, feel included and welcome at NCB. We will provide **greater leadership development** opportunities for internal staff looking to move up the ranks.

Last, while our overall income picture is strong, we want to continue to **diversify our income streams** so that we have greater longer-term resilience to any shocks in the external environment. Research in Practice is already a financially successful operation in its own right and we are excited about the additional growth opportunities that will come from our combined offer.

# How we developed this strategy

Set out below are the key inputs that have informed the development of our strategy, reflecting our commitment to be a listening and evidence-based organisation



## Views of external stakeholders

During 2022 we conducted an extensive survey of our external stakeholders about the issues facing children and families and how they view the role and impact of NCB, receiving over 1,100 responses. We followed this up with a series of in-depth interviews with senior stakeholders to drill further into the findings.

## Views of current situation

- ▶ Lack of resources / investment in the sector (73% of respondents mentioned).
- ▶ Capacity of service to meet demand (47%).
- ▶ Other responses majored on staff in the children and families sector feeling undervalued and the perception that organisations are risk adverse.

- ▶ Over one-half (54%) of respondents indicated that poverty was one of the top three biggest issues facing children, young people and families.
- ▶ Waiting times and not enough prevention or intervention were also common answers.

## Views of NCB

- ▶ 55% of respondents knew about the work of NCB.
- ▶ The majority of respondents who knew about our work agreed or strongly agreed that we were delivering the priorities in our current strategy.
- ▶ Positive comments were received regarding our high-quality convening power and information and interactions.
- ▶ Less positive comments were received regarding our perceived close relationship with Government and our low public profile.

The in-depth stakeholder interviews broadly corroborated these points as the main findings to focus on and also encouraged a collaborative approach and culture of continuous improvement based on what works.

## Views of Young NCB

We have held workshops with Young NCB about our new strategy. In general, the group has endorsed our current strategy and priorities as still very important and relevant. We have set out below other ideas and challenges from Young NCB and how we plan to respond.

### Feedback

### Response

Access to information was a clear priority. YNCB identified gaps in information for: services available for young people (especially those with a disability); work and further education advice.

**We will continue to advocate for better information services at local and national level (see Goals 2 and 3). For example in our work integrated care systems and our input into the "family hub" approach for early years.**

NCB should play a part in informing /educating others about the challenges young people face.

- ▶ Neurodiversity
- ▶ LGBTQ+ communities
- ▶ Relationships and sex education (very heteronormative)

**The Anti-Bullying Alliance and Special Educational Consortium already play a vital role in informing and educating on some of these challenges. NCB overall will build on this to highlight the challenges through our wider networks, as part of improving the equality impact of our work generally (see Goal 6).**

Mental health seen as hugely important.

- ▶ Exam system puts a lot of strain on mental health
- ▶ CAMHS and wider support very poor

**We have made mental health one of the two thematic areas (along with youth justice) where we are specifically committing to increasing our focus. See Goal 3 "going further" section.**

Some groups asked why NCB don't deliver services, either fully ourselves or in collaboration with other organisations.

**While NCB does deliver some services, notably through our major LEAP project, we add most value by helping to connect and improve the services that others deliver.**

One group challenged on our lack of public profile and social media reach, relative to other large children's charities like Barnardo's.

**NCB has a strong reach with experts, professionals and policy-makers – increasing our numbers of followers in the general public is not core to our impact.**

## Views of staff and trustees

We conducted a number of conversations with NCB staff and Trustees to inform our strategy, including background sessions on the key issues facing children and discussing outlines and drafts of the strategy itself. Much of this work was qualitative, although we also asked staff to answer some key questions as part of an internal survey, the results are displayed below.

### Biggest issues for children and young people and families:

1. Poverty/Cost-of-living (18%)
2. Mental health and well-being (13%)
3. Digital safety (10%)
4. Post-Covid support (8%)
5. Service funding/resourcing (8%)

### Biggest issues facing children's workforce:

1. Service capacity/resources (21%)
2. Staff recruitment, retention and pay (18%)

3. Staff training and development (14%)
4. Staff well-being and morale (11%)
5. Data sharing and collaboration (8%)

### What role can NCB play?

1. Advocate for children's rights and influence Government policy (25%)
2. Bring people together (21%)
3. Gather evidence and show our impact (16%)
4. Upskill the workforce (12%)

### Key trends and statistics

We also reviewed the key trends and statistics affecting children right now to help us consider where our efforts would be most valuable. Our overall view of the state of the nation for children is set out in our spring 2024 policy report but the most important trends we focussed on are included below for reference.

#### ▶ 3 in 10

Rates of child poverty remains stubbornly high.

#### ▶ 4/5

More than four out five parents and carers are concerned about how the cost-of-living crisis will affect them.

#### ▶ 57%

of children eligible for free school meals reach a good level of development by reception compared to 74 per cent of other children.

### Between 2011 and 2021 there was:

#### ▶ 22%

reduction in funding for children's services from central government.

#### ▶ 50%

reduction in local authority spending on early intervention.

▶ Nearly half (48 per cent) of young people had been disciplined at school for behaviour that was related to their mental health.

▶ Rates of probable mental disorders have increased in 6- to 16-year-olds from 11.6% in 2017 to 17.4% in 2021, and in 17 to 19 year olds from 10.1% to 17.4%.

▶ A survey of 2,438 young people aged 13–25 who have looked for mental health support at some point in their lives found that 67% believed that the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health.

▶ Girls and young people from an Asian background are more likely to report being unhappy with their mental health.

▶ Children who qualify for SEN support are five times more likely than other children to be permanently excluded from school. Children receiving support for or protection from children's social care are over seven times more likely.

▶ A fifth of children have had a close family bereavement from Coronavirus. Half of bereaved children said they did not get the support they needed from their schools and college.

▶ More than one in four children of school age have experienced frequent bullying – those with SEND and those in receipt of Free School Meals are known to be at increased risk.

For 60 years, the National Children's Bureau has worked to champion the rights of children and young people in the UK. We interrogate policy and uncover evidence to shape future legislation and develop more effective ways of supporting children and families. As a leading children's charity, we take the voices of children to the heart of Government, bringing people and organisations together to drive change in society and deliver a better childhood for the UK. We are united for a better childhood.

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research  
in practice

LEAP

COUNCIL  
FOR DISABLED  
CHILDREN

ANTI-BULLYING  
ALLIANCE

CHILDHOOD  
BEREAVEMENT  
NETWORK

NATIONAL  
CHILDREN'S  
BUREAU  
Part of the family

SCHOOLS'  
WELLBEING  
PARTNERSHIP

NATIONAL  
CHILDREN'S  
BUREAU

Building  
Brighter  
Futures

NCB Strategy  
2024-29

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