



Living Assessments

Summary of Action Research
outputs 2020–2025



**NATIONAL
CHILDREN'S
BUREAU**



**UNIVERSITY OF
CAMBRIDGE**

**University of
Kent**

Five years of Living Assessments (2020–2025): A summary of Action Research outputs

Experts-by-Experience

Year 1 (2020–21)

The COVID-19 pandemic had a considerable impact on the entire world, causing recruitment for the three groups (care leavers, disabled children and parents of children's involved with children's social care) and face-to-face sessions start in year 2. Drawing on input from existing participation groups, five young people-led blogs on experiences during the pandemic were published, including one in Children and Young People Now and NCB also ran a creative competition for Young NCB to engage creatively with Disability History Month.

A group of diverse young people also presented to the National Vulnerable Children Programme Board on their experiences during the pandemic. The Department for Education (DfE)'s Permanent Secretary wrote individual letters to the young people thanking them for their contributions.

Year 2 (2021–22)

With recruitment now possible, the three Experts by Experience (EbyE) groups were established with a range of experiences and ethnic, regional and socio-economic backgrounds represented. There were initially five members of the care leavers group (although this had grown to 13 by the end of the year), seven members of the disabled young people's group and 13 members of the parents group.

Overall activity is led by Keith Clements, Senior Researcher at NCB, with colleagues Ava Berry and Teresa Geraghty leading on some activities. Each group has a lead facilitator based at NCB with support from members of the research, policy and participation teams along with placement research assistants co-supervised with the University of Cambridge.

A broad work plan was co-produced and four rounds of meetings (12 in total) were held this year, all via Zoom. They focused on a range of issues and engaged with relevant work package leads and policy makers. Meetings in December were attended by the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Review's Experts by Experience and discussed the Review's call for ideas. A member of the parents group co-authored with a Work Package 3 team member a journal article on local authority domestic violence policies.

Year 3 (2022–23)

There were changes in group membership as members stepped down and new members were recruited. A total of 14 group meetings were held this year, all via Zoom, with topics discussed including qualitative data collection techniques, systematic and umbrella review methods and approaches to policy influencing. Group members participated in additional activities, including:

- **The 'day of action' on Care Review.** NCB worked in partnership with six other children's charities to hold a 'day of action' in parliament to coincide with the publication of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, with around 100 care experienced young people attending parliament. Two members of the group met with the Secretary of State for Education, Nadhim Zahawi, and another took part in a roundtable that included the Children's Commissioner and the chair of the Independent Review, Josh MacAlister.
- **All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children (APPGC) event on family help.** NCB supported a member from each of the three groups to give speeches as part of this event at Portcullis House and all members were invited to attend as guests. EbyEs also asked the panelists questions and contributed to NCB's social media posts on the day.
- **Podcast on experiences of care and assessments.** A member of the disabled young people's group volunteered to work with NCB and colleagues from Kent to develop and record a podcast.
- **Article on domestic violence policies.** The article was published with the parents group member named as a contributing author.
- **Young Trustee.** A member of the care leaver EbE group became an NCB Trustee.

Year 4 (2023–24)

Highlights this year included the involvement of EbyEs in the planning and delivery of Public Engagement Award activity, a productive round of online group meetings to inform WP3 papers on mental health, a series of activities exploring the concept of 'the home' and engaging in NCB's expanding policy influencing activity in the run up to the general election.

A total of 12 online group meetings were held in 2023, all via Zoom, with a total of around 20 active members. Alongside these meetings, EbyEs were supported to participate in a number of activities, including:

- **Public Engagement Award Launch Party.** To launch the start of the public engagement award, NCB and the University of Kent held a party at the Wellcome Trust. Approximately 100 people attended - a combination of young people and adults with lived experience of children's social care, charity colleagues, government officials, academics, and creatives. The programme's first activity was an online art gallery, with a range of contributions received from children and young people on the theme of "home" and an award ceremony was held in January 2024. NCB then worked with a theatre throughout 2024 to develop a series of workshops and performances based on EbyE contributions.
- **Visit to the Museum of the Home.** In September, NCB and the University of Kent accompanied members of the care leavers and disabled young people's groups on a visit to the Museum of the Home. The University of Kent facilitated the recording of conversations between NCB staff and the EbyEs for development into podcasts.
- **Parents' Consultation on 'Working Together' Statutory Guidance.** Members of the parents EbyE group were supported to attend a consultation event facilitated by NCB on behalf of DfE.
- **Podcast on experiences of care and assessments.** A podcast was recorded with a member of the disabled young peoples group was broadcast in 2024.
- **Involvement with It's Our Care coalition.** Members of the care leavers' group were involved in the campaign of the It's Our Care coalition of seven charities working with care experienced young people. This has included meetings with the then Children's Minister Claire Coutinho and with Labour's Shadow Children's Minister Helen Hayes.

Year 5 (2024–25)

Highlights in the final year of the programme included a continuation and culmination of the Public Engagement Award and the end of project celebrations, which included an event co-produced by Experts by Experience.

We also worked with our three EbyE groups to ensure young people joined NCB staff at the Labour Party conference, parents were supported to contribute to a journal article on social workers perspectives on mental health, and to secure the future of the groups post-Living Assessments.

A total of 12 online group meetings were held in 2024, all via zoom and between 1.5 and three hours in length.

Alongside these meetings, EbyEs were supported to participate in a number of activities, including:

- **Article on social workers and mental health.** Three parents were supported to contribute substantially to the article Coughlan et al '*Children's social workers' perspectives on mental health and working with child mental health teams: Systematic review and narrative synthesis*'. Two of these parents agreed to be named as contributing authors.
- **Communications activity for WP3 findings.** EbyEs were offered the opportunity to provide quotes explaining the relevance and importance to them of a key tranche of published findings. A parent and a member of the disabled young peoples' group provided quotes that were included on NCB's online content.
- **Other policy sessions/activities.** NCB jointly hosted a one-off workshop with Action for Children and the Cabinet Office for care experienced children and young people to feed into the child poverty strategy.
- **Public Engagement Award: Online gallery.** NCB and the University of Kent co-ordinated creative entries from children and young people on three themes: Home, Identity and Adventure, with awards ceremonies held for each, with invited artists acting as judges. The gallery has successfully demonstrated the case for using creative methods to explore young people's experiences to influence policy.
- **Public Engagement Award: Theatre workshops.** NCB commissioned Chickenshed Theatre to carry out 12 workshops with children and young people between 2024 and early 2025. Young people who identified as social care experienced and/or disabled developed a series of monologues and physical performances based on their lived experiences and performed them in February 2025 as the central element of the end of project event.

- **End of Project events:** Over 100 guests, including Trustees, CEOs, academics, senior policy makers at Director and Deputy Director level, and sector colleagues joined EbyEs and NCB and University of Kent colleagues over two days of celebrations and reflections in February 2025. The celebrations culminated with an event co-produced by EbyEs that included the Chickenshed theatre performance by social care experienced young people.
- **Transitioning beyond Living Assessments.** Work has been undertaken to identify how the Experts by Experience groups can contribute future research projects now Living Assessments has concluded. It is anticipated that in the 12 months starting April 2025 the groups will have a full schedule of funded activities, including contributing to projects funded by NIHR and Wellcome that directly build on Living Assessments, as well as exploring the potential to work with other academic partners on relevant research on children's social care.



Policy engagement and communications

Year 1 (2020–21)

In this first year, extensive relationships were built with the DfE. NCB's Chief Executive raised Living Assessments with the Director-General for Disadvantage and Social Mobility and a meeting was then held with the two relevant Deputy Directors.

As a result, a designated link person was allocated at DfE with quarterly meetings held going forward. Richard White, lead Social Care Analyst at DfE agreed to be on the Living Assessments Advisory Board. Progress with the project was presented to the Parliamentary Chair and Officers of the APPGC. NCB's Chief Executive was briefed on the emergency response to COVID-19, following which NCB supported DfE with revised social care guidance and accompanying messaging to the sector.

NCB arranged for Robbie Duschinsky and Barry Coughlan to present and take questions to over 20 DfE officials on the CRIS analysis, NCB and Dr Calum Webb presented to over 20 DfE officials on spend on early help and family support and the impact on children in need rates, and Dustin Hutchinson, Senior Research and Policy Analyst at NCB, presented to the NCB-hosted Social Care Reference Group (SCRG).

NCB developed a Living Assessments section on the NCB website and received substantial press coverage on child poverty and the PM's use of child poverty statistics. NCB also co-authored and promoted [an article on the "Toxic Trio"](#) that was distributed to over 20,000 social workers via BASW's bulletin, shared with over 70,000 child protection professionals via the NSPCC newsletter and was lead story in Children and Young People Now trade press with over 15,000 subscribers.

Year 2 (2021–22)

Positive relationships continued to flourish with the DfE, the Department for Levelling-Up, Housing and Communities (DLUC), The Treasury, and the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (with whom monthly meetings were held). NCB ran a session with over 20 senior officials from the Treasury, the DfE and our EbyE.

The Treasury fed back how valuable the session was and it was the first time they had directly heard from young people themselves in this way. NCB produced a joint paper with academics from University of Cambridge on early help entitled [Supporting and Strengthening Families Through Early Help – A Rapid Review of the Evidence](#). NCB coordinated a public launch and the article was covered by Children and Young Peo-

Now and Community Care and received support from Josh MacAlister, Chair of the Review of Children's Social Care and the NSPCC and BASW. The report also received positive feedback from the DfE and the Treasury. As a follow-up, NCB ran a Parliamentary Roundtable on early help in partnership with the APPGC. NCB also coordinated a seminar with the Supporting Families Team (DLUCH), Early Help Team (DfE) and partner academics to share latest research findings and co-ordinated a session with over 15 representatives of the What Works Centre for Social Care to share insights from the CRIS approach and analysis.

A session was also held with specialist colleagues to develop a spreadsheet of potential subjects for oral testimonies, or a witness seminar, for University of Kent and NCB ran an APPGC Event on the Health and Care Bill, attended by the Health Minister and the Children's Commissioner. NCB co-ordinated **#BuildbackChildhood** with over 100 organisations in a joint campaign to prioritise children and families in the budget and spending review. The campaign was an excellent example of Living Assessments research evidence contributing to informing campaign and policy influencing, and spending decisions. It was a joint effort between NCB and the sector, and Living Assessments made a valuable contribution.



Year 3 (2022–23)

In May 2022, the once-in-a-generation Independent Review of Children's Social Care, promised in the Conservative election manifesto, published its final report, heavily citing Living Assessments' and NCB's research. *Supporting and Strengthening Families Through Early Help – A Rapid Review of the Evidence* was cited five times and was one of the most heavily cited pieces of research in the family help section of the report.

During this year, NCB also worked with the Treasury and the DfE to identify the need for robust evidence of the impact of early intervention spend on outcomes to inform spending and policy decision and worked with eminent social work academics to develop a [bespoke briefing paper](#) that would be accessible to policy makers, outlining the statistical evidence of the impact of preventative spend on outcomes. This was received with thanks and interest from the Children's Minister's Office, the Secretary of State for Education's office, Number 10 Downing Street, the Lead Analyst for Social Care at the DfE, HM Treasury, Department for Health and Social care, What Works for Children's Social Care, LGA, ADCS, NHS England, Independent Review of Children's Social Care and over 500 sector colleagues. The launch had great social media reach, with over 10,000 impressions on social media for the report. The Children's Minister wrote to NCB in response, on behalf of the Prime Minister and said the research would feed into the government's thinking on the implementation of the recommendations from the independent review of children's social care. See the letter attached as an Appendix.

NCB met monthly with the DfE Early Help Team to feed in insight from our research, analysis and sector intelligence on the Family Help section of the Review implementation strategy. NCB also co-ordinated the Big Five (NCB, NSPCC, Barnardo's, Children's Society and Action for Children) to meet regularly with the DfE Central Children's Social Care Review Implementation Team.

As mentioned above in the EbyE summary, NCB helped to organise a Day of Action with EbyEs meeting with MPs and presenting at a parliamentary roundtable. In response to their testimonies, the Ministers committed to action. EbyEs also met with Baroness Barran, the Education Minister, and received a personal tour of Parliament from Tim Loughton MP – co-chair of the APPGC.

NCB's flagship event of the year was the [APPGC event on family help](#) held in person in Parliament (see images on page 8), chaired by Tim Loughton MP and Baroness Tyler and joined by over 100 senior

attendees, with contributions and commitments from a stellar selection of invited guest speakers including Living Assessment's Experts-by-Experience and Professor Julie Anderson, Living Assessments' Co-Principal Investigator. Claire Coutinho MP, the new Minister for Children, Families and Wellbeing gave her first public speech as Minister. Josh MacAlister, Chair of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care expressed the Review's ambitious plans for family help and recognised the power and influence of those assembled. DfE officials expressed the value of the event in terms of keeping the social care reform around family help high on the government's agenda and Treasury officials said they recognised the case for the need for further preventative investment in family help.

NCB worked closely with University of Cambridge on the CRIS analysis – feeding in insight and analysis throughout the process. NCB organised a valuable session where University of Cambridge colleagues presented the emerging findings to DfE colleagues and received feedback on the emerging analysis.

NCB worked with Cambridge University on an Umbrella Review of the Association between Child Maltreatment and Mental Health and Developmental Differences, producing a policy briefing which was extensively circulated to sector colleagues and government officials.

Year 4 (2023-24)

The government's response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, *Stable Homes Built on Love*, referenced research by NCB, University of Cambridge, and University of Kent. Many of the priorities of NCB and Living Assessments, such as prevention, lived experience, investment, and use of data were directly referenced throughout the implementation strategy. NCB responded to the government consultation on *Stable Homes Built on Love* and along with the other members of the Children's Charities Coalition (see below), NCB met monthly with the DfE Central Social Care Reform Team to feed into the reforms, in addition to the DfE Early Help Unit, with discussions informed by Living Assessments research.

To inform revisions to statutory guidance for child protection, NCB developed some key themes that informed DfE officials policy development. These golden threads were developed in conjunction with Living Assessments' academic colleagues and drew on Living Assessment's research.

NCB Living Assessment's co-principal investigator also sat on a formal Task and Finish Group to advise Ministers on reforms to guidance around

Section 17 (Children Act 1989) on Children in Need.

NCB and Living Assessments academic colleagues provided feedback on the National Framework and Outcomes Dashboard for Children's Social Care. NCB was invited to be part of a Working Group helping officials develop the indicators for the dashboard.

NCB, alongside the [Children and Young People's Health Policy Influencing Group](#) (HPIG) and Living Assessments academics worked with government to advocate for improving data and information sharing for children and young people's health and social care services, including the introduction of a single consistent child identifier.

NCB also worked with University of Kent to produce an [interactive timeline](#) to celebrate NCB's 60th anniversary. This unique collaboration combined NCB's comms and digital expertise with University of Kent's exceptional expertise around historical archive research.

In order to maximise our collective impact, especially around children's social care, a formal coalition was formed with the leading children's charities (NCB, NSPCC, Barnardo's, Action for Children and The Children's Society) as the Children's Charities Coalition.

Activities included:

- [Alma Economics modelling on implementation of social care reforms](#). The Coalition commissioned research into the costs of inaction of implementing social care reforms and the saving arising from investment and reform, carried out by Alma Economics.
- [The Well-Worn Path: Children's Services Spending 2010–11 to 2021–22](#). The Coalition commissioned Pro-Bono Economics for an analysis of the trends in preventative early interventions spending and late intervention spending between 2010–11 to 2021–22.
- **Parliamentary Engagement.** The NCB public affairs team regularly briefed Baroness Tyler, who was co-chair of the APPGC.
- [Children at the Table](#). The Coalition developed a formal programme of work to inform the manifesto development process ahead of the General Election. Initial activities of the campaign include a high profile joint policy report, a young people led Parliamentary Event in January 2024, engagement with government departments, Ministerial Offices, Parliamentarians and manifesto development leads.

- **Party conferences.** The Coalition held a reception for over 100 people at Labour and Conservative Party Conferences. Shadow Ministers, the Children's Commissioner and the co-chair the APPG for Children, and experts-by-experience spoke at these successful events. The Coalition held two events at the Youth Zone at both Party Conferences. Prime Minister Rishi Sunak attended the event at Conservative Party Conference where he met with young Experts-by-Experience to hear their priorities.

Our work to enable a long-term legacy for Living Assessments and related partner work included:

- **University of Cambridge Award.** NCB and University of Cambridge won the University of Cambridge Vice-Chancellors Award for Impact and Engagement for their work around an Umbrella Review of Maltreatment and Living Assessments.
- **Action Research Journal article.** NCB and Living Assessments' academic partners are writing a journal article using the discipline of action-based research.
- **Department for Education Children and Young People's Advisory Board.** DfE responded to NCB and partners' calls for a systematic approach to EbyEs advising social care reforms by commissioning an advisory board for young people with social care lived experience. NCB is delivering a formal contracted two-year programme of work to ensure the voices of those with children's social care are at the heart of the social care reforms.

Year 5 (2024–25)

NCB co-authored two Living Assessments Clinical Records Interactive Search (CRIS) data linkage publications with University of Cambridge colleagues.

The first publication was on mental health risk profiles, resulting in this [NCB news story](#) and this [Community Care article](#) and extensive support on social media. University of Cambridge and NCB engaged DfE with the findings of the mental health risk profile research presenting and discussing at a cross DfE Social Care Directorate meeting of over 60 DfE officials. The second publication took the findings of the first publication

and road-tested them alongside the more widely used cumulative approach to understanding risk and adversity in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). NCB and the University of Cambridge produced an accessible joint blog on the study which was posted on LinkedIn and the NCB website as well as a more detailed policy briefing to be shared on request with policy makers.

The project **COACHES (CAMHS Referrals and Outcomes for Adolescents and Children with Social Workers)** was born out of Living Assessments' CRIS infrastructure, with a focus on the effectiveness of mental health interventions for children with social workers. This project was designed in partnership with policymakers as part of Living Assessments to help create clarity and insights on how to best intervene early to support children with social workers with their mental health and wellbeing and to ensure they are safe and supported.

NCB organised several policy workshops at which University of Cambridge colleagues presented the emerging findings to DfE colleagues and received feedback, which uniquely enabled the building in of policy relevance throughout the analysis of the data.

The preliminary findings found children with a current social worker, and those living in poverty were more likely to be rejected by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). The launch of the preliminary findings, **A call for change: Tackling inequalities in access to mental health support for children with social work involvement and those living in poverty**, resulted in an extensive social media campaign with charity partners and press coverage, including this **BBC article**, Sky News Radio and the Daily Telegraph and a response from the relevant Minister leading up to an ongoing programme of influencing.

In the lead-up to the general election in July 2024, NCB organised a parliamentary event for the **All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children** at which around 20 young people and parents, including Living Assessment EbyEs, gave oral testimonies and interrogated a panel representing all the main political parties, including a shadow Minister, and the Children's Commissioner, advocating for their priorities around care experience, early intervention, SEND and mental health. A **video** was made of the event, with a Living Assessments' experts-by-experience as the interviewer.

Following the general election, NCB and Children's Charity Coalition partners held an event for over 300 people at the **Labour Party Conference** and a similar event at the **Conservative Party Conference**. At the Labour event, the Secretaries of State for Education and Work and Pensions and the Public Health and Children's Ministers gave rousing speeches


committing to support children after hearing directly from young experts-by-experience.

The Autumn 2024 **Budget and Spending Review** committed the government to a shift towards early intervention as part of social care reform, in keeping with years of evidence and advocacy from Living Assessments, NCB, partners and EbyEs.

The government social care policy paper the government's social care paper *Keeping children safe, helping families thrive* also committed to legislation to provide homes for all care leavers following on from the Prime Minister's speech – a long-standing priority for Living Assessments' experts-by-experience who have worked on the theme of 'home'.

NCB, Living Assessments, the Health Policy Influencing Group and the Children's Charity Coalition have long called for a **single unique identifier** for all children. As a result of collective advocacy this became a commitment in the Labour manifesto and became government policy following the general election. It is now in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill that at the time of publication was progressing through Parliament.

In January 2025, NCB delivered an impactful All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children event on the **Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill** at which NCB and partners gave well received presentation on their priority areas and proposed amendments to the Bill. The Minister for Children, Peers, and MPs, including the APPGC co-chairs and two members of the Bill committee responded to the presentations with commitments to action.



Living Assessments was a five-year project, funded by the **Wellcome Trust**, delivered by the **National Children's Bureau** in partnership with the **University of Kent** and the **University of Cambridge**, in conjunction with the **All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children** and the **British Association of Social Workers**. It looked at the decision-making process for providing social care support to children and families, the impact of offering particular support or not offering that support, and the lived experiences of assessments.

Find out more at ncb.org.uk/livingassessments