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**Anne Longfield CBE, Executive Chair and Founder of the Centre for Young Lives: A new social contract with our vulnerable children and families**

Over the last few years, it feels hardly a month passes without a terrible story emerging of cruelty inflicted on a vulnerable child. Devastating cases like those of Arthur Labinjo Hughes – killed by his parents aged just six years old in June 2020 and Star Hobson – a one-year-old murdered by her mother and partner just a couple of months later, bring out into the open the desperate and dangerous circumstances in which some children are growing up.

We also hear too often about teenagers with their lives ahead of them being murdered by other young people.

I think of the recent murder of a 15 year old girl in Croydon after she got off a buss on her way to school during rush hour. Or the murder of a teenager in the small town of Horsforth on the edge of Leeds, not far from where I live, before Christmas - killed at 3pm in the afternoon collecting his friend’s brother from primary school.

These tragedies are heartbreaking. They wreck lives, families, cast shadows over whole communities.

And we should never see these events as something that just sometimes happens to people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

These examples - and I could spend the next half hour recalling many more – are extraordinary and extreme events in terms of their seriousness, but they are not unique. And there is almost always a similar pathway that leads to them happening.

Along with those young people who carry out acts of serious violence leading to injury or loss of a life, or those parents who seriously harm or kill their children, there are many more just a few steps away from tragedy, and many, many more growing up in households and communities facing very big challenges.

Just over a year ago, I visited a community project on a housing estate where residents told me they were being terrorised and intimidated by a gang. The nine gang members were known to the local community and the police, but they seemed to be untouchable.

They were delivering a ‘county line’ to an area about 80 miles away and had been for a year, using scooters and cars stolen from takeaway delivery drivers.

The project workers I spoke with told me that the boys in the gang were all around 14-years-old, and how they had stepped up into senior roles in an existing gang when the drugs market reopened after Covid. It was not clear who was supplying them, but they were a key part of a delivery chain.

These young boys, barely in their teens, wore balaclavas and were dishing out acts of violence and torching vehicles. All had been excluded from school, and all had been sent to a local Pupil Referral Unit with a very poor reputation, which none of them seemed to attend.

One parent on the estate explained how her teenage daughter no longer went out. She and other residents were scared to confront the boys as they are seen to have no fear of legal reprisals.

They carried knives and other weapons, which in turn was encouraging other young people in the area to carry knives for protection. Younger children were now starting to follow the group around and mimic their behaviour. I was told the police did not have a visible presence on the estate and that they seemed reluctant to intervene.

All attempts by community workers to connect with the leader of the gang had so far been unsuccessful. His parents were unwilling to engage with anyone who offered help.

Youth workers often tell me that the gang leaders and members they encounter are becoming younger and younger. They are now more likely to be in their early teens and far more likely to engage in serious violence. And incidents are getting more extreme and more frequent. Often, they don’t involve gangs at all. A cross word or argument that gets out of hand can be enough to trigger a violent response.

Talk to many headteachers and you will get a similar story. The number of children facing vulnerabilities is rocketing. More children are starting school without the social and emotional skills they need. Poor mental health is now part and parcel of growing up and sadly, self-harm and suicide attempts are something most schools have experienced. The impact of poverty is visible in so many classrooms and the numbers of children out of school or not attending has become a national crisis.

And yet, there are parts of our country where the state is completely failing in its duty to protect the most vulnerable children. This goes beyond failing individuals. It is a failure that affects whole communities, for generation after generation. So often these are already the most marginalised families.

Today I want to outline what I think our country needs to do about it.

How a new government could embark on a new social contract with vulnerable children and families and what action should be taken to tackle the symptoms of vulnerability but also the root causes. The Centre for Young Lives, the new think tank and innovation centre that I am founding this month will dedicate its work to making that happen.

I want to begin though by going back to the innovative and ground-breaking work my then Director of Evidence Professor Leon Feinstein produced when he began working with me when I was Children’s Commissioner for England, 8 years ago. It was an attempt to gather all the information we could about childhood risk and fragility in one place and to estimate the levels of real need around the country.

When I began my term as Children’s Commissioner, department after department told me that their Minister was very concerned about the vulnerable. But how are they defining this I would ask? Each one had their own version – those vulnerable to ill health (patients), vulnerable learners (students), vulnerable to being involved in crime (prisoners). You get the pattern – the officials saw the vulnerability through the lens of the department’s responsibilities and failed to see that vulnerabilities were interlinked and a vulnerable person was a vulnerable person whoever was looking at it.

Through the data we collected we were able to predict levels of need around the country.

Essential if you are serious about reducing risk – because how can you solve a problem when you have no real idea about the extent of it?

Looking at the data about childhood vulnerability the scale of change needed is clear.

Even before the pandemic, the rate of permanent exclusions from school had increased by over 50% in 4 years. After a dip during and after Covid, they are going up again.

We knew that one in five children was growing up at risk, in families with complex problems – that’s six in every classroom. Of these, four will live in households where there is domestic violence, addiction, or the adults have mental illnesses.

Four children in a typical classroom had a special educational need; and 4 had poor mental health.

That was before the pandemic – possibly the greatest test of our system for vulnerable children since WW2 and a challenge that, in my view, the country failed to respond to as it should have done.

For some children, certain aspects of the pandemic initially brought benefits. Families who were able to work at home or whose incomes remained stable, perhaps as a result of the furlough scheme, often found that they had more quality time to spend with one another.

For others, those children in poor cramped accommodation, those living on low income whose parents needed to go out to work, those living in vulnerable households with poor mental health, addiction and domestic violence, those living in poverty, those without access to the outdoors and those without access to the digital technology to access education or socialise with friends, this was a very difficult pandemic heightening existing vulnerabilities and laying the foundation for long term problems.

Whilst the pandemic, and our country’s response to it was a major challenge for most children, it was a disaster for many disadvantaged children who were already living with risks and vulnerabilities in their lives.

As Children’s Commissioner for England, I was particularly concerned about these children and focused much of my advice on reducing and mitigating the risks they faced. Whilst Government appeared on occasions to understand the risks to the wellbeing of children, at least in part, their approach on too many occasions lacked coherence, was indecisive, and at times appeared indifferent to the impact of policy decisions.

The Covid crisis gave government the opportunity to not only respond to vulnerability as a priority, but also to build back better.

It chose not to. Perhaps because children weren’t seen as a priority.

Why didn’t Government put as much energy into reopening classrooms and supporting children as it did into organising the Eat Out to Help Out scheme?

Why were schools behind pubs and restaurants in the queue to reopen?

Where was the national creative effort on the scale of the Nightingale hospitals?

Where was the ambitious and generous recovery programme for education and wider childhood like that proposed by the Education Recovery Commissioner, Sir Kevan Collins in May 2021? He asked for £15 billion. Ministers announced just £1.4 billion.. Sir Kevan resigned.

Since Covid the level of childhood vulnerability in our country have become more pronounced and perhaps more visible.

1 in 6 children now have a probable mental health condition up from one in 9 with older teens even more prone. Almost a quarter of children are not attending school on a persistent basis with 140,000 attending less frequently than not. The number of children being home educated has rocketed again – in many cases because children are not getting the support they need at school.

Off rolling (albeit now a little more subtle) remains firmly alive and exclusions have continued to increase. [ex numbers].

We should be ashamed that a fifth of children leave school without basic qualifications. Only 4% of those who are sent to Alternative Provision get a GCSE in English and Maths.

What kind of system thinks that so many children’s education isn’t worth investing in?

And it’s no surprise that the cohort of children most likely to be vulnerable are the ones most likely to experience these barriers to their life chances.

Children who have special educational needs or who are black, brown, or marginalised are 5 times more likely to be excluded from school – damaging their education and putting them at increased risk of harm from those who wish to exploit them.

But it is the ever-increasing numbers of children who are part of the children’s social care system where the system fails most starkly. There has been almost a 30% increase in the number of children on child protection plans and in care since 2010.

According to Sal Tariq – head of relational practice in Leeds and former Director of Children’s Services in the city which is widely regarded as being at the forefront of getting alongside families talks of a children’s social care system which is designed around the 10% of families who pose the greatest threats to children despite the fact that 90% of families with children in care are primarily families battling with adversity.

Just think about those figures – over 70,ooo of the 80,ooo children in care are there because their families can’t overcome the challenges they face. How many of those children might stay with their families if they got the help they need?

Josh MacAlister looked at this in his independent review of children social care that reported in May 2022. He recommended a once in a generation radical reset towards better family support, family group decision making and kinship care. Without that reset he estimates the number of children in care will have risen to 100,000 by 2032 at a cost of 15bn. Resetting the system at a cost of £2.6bn over the first four years will bring costs down and will mean that 30,000 children will have been prevented from entering care by 2032.

With a growing number of local authorities warning of impending bankruptcy and according to the Local Government Association, half of those citing children’s social care as the main reason for looming insolvency (the average cost of a residential place is now an eye watering £300,000 per year) I agree with Josh MacAlister – there is no alternative to resetting the system. It’s the right thing to do for the children and families who could continue to live safely together and it also makes economic sense. Staying as we are is not the cheap option and the Treasury should wake up and smell the coffee.

So what’s going on? how have we got here? – stuck in a system that seems to be locked into crisis. In reality spending more and more money on helping fewer and fewer children. How could that possibly happen?

The first answer is – as I have set out – the level of need has been growing steadily over the last decade and was turbo charged by the pandemic.

Secondly, this has all happened at a time when services have been drastically reduced. IFS have said that there had been a 70% cut in funding for early intervention of Sure Start Children’s Centres and Youth Centres. Councils themselves have seen a reduction of 50% in their funding.

Put simply, less funding for early intervention drives crisis which is not only damaging but is costly – leaving even less money for early intervention. Poor planning - locally and nationally – is creating high cost, crisis-led provision.

From mental health teams to children’s social care, services are buckling under the pressure with those on the front line – teachers and school staff in particular being left to pick up the pieces. Help like parenting classes or speech and language therapy are few and far between and after school clubs, playschemes, youth workers and sports activities – the things that make a neighbourhood a great place to grow up are now most likely out of reach and behind the paywall.

This is the reality we have to face. We cannot go on this way.

Without a plan and a properly evidence-based strategy to meet the needs of children, we could see the problem worsen further: it could sustain and perpetuate a system that is broken. A system that simply manages failure, a system that waits until children hit crisis before intervening, a system trying to hold off chaos until a young person reaches an adulthood which itself won’t be easy.

It’s financially wasteful, pouring money into acute late intervention services when earlier help would produce better outcomes and would have been cheaper. And it’s morally wrong – creating a lifetime’s disadvantage for the children.

So what needs to change?

For a start we need to understand the scale and nature of vulnerability – back to the work as Children’s Commissioner again.

Back then we created an illustrative vulnerable child and called him Ben. At aged 2, he was already living in temporary accommodation. At 5, his father is drinking heavily and he starts reception already behind his classmates and having trouble controlling his temper. Expelled from school at 12 he joins a gang, is taken into care and placed in a children’s home miles away from home. After running away and being involved in serious violence at 16, he ends up in custody with no qualifications and no contact with his family. He’s now the father of his own baby and the cycle begins again.

We know there are many more Bens in this country – the statistics I’ve already quoted tell us that. But most go unseen.

Our national political leaders need to recognise the scale of the challenge and build services for vulnerable children. It isn’t good enough to throw things at a problem only when it hits the headlines and becomes a problem politically. That is no way to run a country responsibly.

The young make up 20% of our population and 100% of our future. What happens to young people affects us all. Young people’s lives and their childhoods should matter deeply to us – relevant not only to our communities now but also to the kind of society we want in the future.

We don’t need professionals and specialists to tell us how the experiences of childhood can impact on adult life. We see it every day. Our relationships, our work, our health, and the way we parent our own children are all affected by what we experienced as we grew up. If we look after our young and support them to succeed, then we all benefit together.

Yes most children and families in our country are doing well. They receive a good education, they find decent jobs, they will own their own homes, and they can expect to live long and healthy lives. The pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis have had an impact on many, but most will recover.

But there is a sizeable group of young people and families for whom this isn’t the case. They don’t share in the nation’s prosperity, and the impact on their children can be far-reaching.

Many of these problems that start in childhood continue into adult life and then cascade from generation to generation without the cycle ever being broken.

The social and economic cost to our country is huge, in not just lost opportunity but also the pressure it puts on public services and the public purse. Too many systems remain unreformed and unable to provide the preventative work that has led to many of the services that are supposed to support vulnerable children surviving in a state of almost-permanent expensive crisis.

Over the last decade, many of the services and programmes that were put in place to turn these problems around have not been priorities or have been dismantled. Sure Start, dawn-until-dusk schools (which open early in the morning and stay open into the evening after school closes), poverty reduction and elimination targets, a focus on families, youth intervention with teenagers at risk of crime, and youth clubs more generally have reduced dramatically in scale.

There is little doubt that the reduction in investment in these services has worsened, at least in part, some the social problems we are now seeing. All of us can see the impact of child vulnerability around us – in our classrooms, on our streets, in the terrible news headlines about young people being killed or exploited that I talked about at the beginning of this speech.

Yet this is only the tip of the iceberg. So much remains unseen, happening behind closed doors or in communities that are left behind or marginalised. These children can easily become invisible to those who choose not to look for them, and that includes some of the services you would expect to care for them.

It doesn’t need to be this way.

Hundreds of thousands of children are being held back in our country with devastating impact on their life chances. We need to care about this. This is our society, our young generation, our potential engineers, entrepreneurs, teachers, and health workers of the future. We need to dare to care about it enough to do something about it. As families, neighbours, professionals, young people themselves, and – yes – as voters, we need to choose to value and support our young people.

As other countries have done, we should agree that protecting our vulnerable children and young people is a priority and we should agree that it is the job of our government, in partnership with the many brilliant individuals, innovative organisations, and public services to help these young people succeed.

We need to be ambitious for all young people. We need to look after our young people, particularly those with the most complex problems and facing the biggest challenges.

We need to understand and tackle the causes of the problems – not just the symptoms that persist and reoccur – and invest in proper long-term help before setbacks become crises and emergencies.

The good news is we already know from experience and good practice that a bold move to a different approach to supporting children and families is possible. It is happening in some communities and schools right now.

Look at the countries in Scandinavia, who top the UNICEF charts for children’s wellbeing and life satisfaction. Britain comes a poor 27th on the list, way behind countries like Singapore, Finland, Estonia, New Zealand, and Australia.

If we choose to make children a priority, like these countries so often do, we could bring about generational change. We can transform the lives of the most vulnerable children to break the cycles of vulnerability, of deprivation, of adverse childhood experiences, and of social exclusion, and support them on a positive path in life.

The pandemic has exposed a system of protection and support that is under-resourced and unable to support all those children who need protection and help.

It exposed the casual way we put children’s interests behind opening pubs, and theme parks before schools.

It exposed decision-making systems that are designed for adults but too often overlook the needs of children, and which refused to exempt children in England from the ‘rule of six’ – the number of people allowed to meet and play – denying children and young people the opportunity of seeing their friends and forcing more damaging isolation.

And it exposed deep inequalities in our society that were only deepened further by young people’s experiences during those two years of lockdown and uncertainty.

So, this post-pandemic Britain should be a moment where we choose to do things differently. We can start by recognising the scale and nature of child vulnerability in our country and follow that up by committing to bring about change.

What would radical reform look like?

One that understands the context and the impact of disadvantage, that spots when things are going wrong at the earliest point and is willing and able to respond with coordinated help to prevent problems developing into crises.

It must be a vision that understands how help needs to be built on respectful relationships that gets alongside young people and families, that goes the distance in their lives, from cradle to career. It must be help that responds to individual needs, that gets to the cause of the problems, and that does whatever it takes to stick with young people and those around them. It must be help that strengthens families and works with them to devise solutions, that believes in people and does all it can to help them succeed.

This is the kind of inspirational support people have been telling me for decades that they need to succeed, and the good news is that, collectively, we do know how to deliver it.

There are hundreds of schemes and innovations that are showing us how transformational change can be done, how young people at risk of exploitation or serious violence can be diverted away from it or supported to move on from it on to a better path. Why can’t we have these approaches everywhere/

To make that happen requires a very different support system for children and families than the one that exists now. It requires bold reform from top to bottom, and a new national mission that brings the engine of government to join with those volunteers, charities, and organisations that are already making a difference, determined to resolve the long-standing social and economic problems at the source of so many of the vulnerabilities we see.

A new Government:

If a new Government is to be serious about these issues it would need to make what they call in the trade ‘machinery of government’ changes. Remember I talked earlier about every department defining vulnerability in its own way and the lack of coherent cross Government strategy. That would need to come to an end.

Anyone who listened to Baroness Louise Casey’s Fixing Britain series on BBC Radio 4 at the beginning of the month will know what needs to come first - a No 10 commitment to a Children First Government with a Prime Minister that drives delivery. Without it, even the most enthusiastically welcomed policy can find itself in the grassy sidings firmly locked into the ‘too difficult’ box. With it mountains can start to shift.

It needs a strengthened and broadened Department for Education back into Department for Children and Families with leadership and clout to deliver major programmes of policy reform. This would also ensure there Is a cabinet minister for Children.

Tackling child poverty will be essential. A new government should have a child poverty reduction target with a new Child Poverty Unit at the heart of government to support ministers and drive government to meet its commitments.

An overarching outcomes for all children – something Leon and I have spent many hours talking about needs to be rebuilt. For those that remember the ‘Every Child Matters’ framework – an updated version.

There needs to be a cross government mechanism to coordinate the engine of government for children and young people led by the Prime Minister and attended by Department heads.

Ambitious joined-up programmes of reform and delivery in the policy areas of education, SEND, mental health, children in care, and support for families.

Devising policies in Whitehall is one thing but delivering them in a joined up and impactful way in the community is another.

The system needs to be reset. Our public investments need to start working properly for the most vulnerable children in society, whatever their social background. We need to reform our public services to truly get help to the communities, families, and young people who need it.

I want to see government building a new infrastructure of support for young people and families and getting tough on the causes of vulnerability – poverty, poor housing, poor mental health, domestic violence, and addiction. It would reshape government finances to provide help from the first weeks of life to support families, identifying if extra help were needed and responding. It would mean ongoing help for families and parenting support throughout a child’s school years as children grow up and move towards adulthood.

In education, it would mean an end to the forgotten third of children who leave school without basic levels of qualification and an end to thousands of vulnerable children, excluded or moved out of school, falling through gaps in the education system, which can put them at risk.

It would be a new era of inclusive education that supports all children and young people to succeed by drawing on expert specialist help – mentors, psychologists, and youth workers for children with additional needs or who are struggling.

Schools would be an anchor in the community, surrounded by family workers, working alongside and as part of the Supporting Families’ teams and liaising with children’s centres, family hubs, and children’s services. Buildings would be open from morning to night, opening the resource to the whole community, providing positive and safe places to be, and providing fun, enjoyable activities in spaces where trusted relationships can be built.

It means turning the tide on the profound crisis in children and young people’s poor mental health and acknowledging that services are failing to meet demand, that early help is patchy, and that a focus on wellbeing will bring enormous long-term benefits to the whole nation.

Let’s redesign our schools, our parks, and our communities with that in mind, and ditch much of the over-medicalised, bureaucratic, and outdated system we have now in favour of mental health teams in schools, community drop-in hubs, and ‘prescribed’ activities.

Government should not be afraid to provide intensive support for families when things get tough. This isn’t the nanny state. It is empowering organisations and services to build scaffolding around families wherever and whenever they need it.

We would have pride in a care system that provides the stability, ambition, and love that our most vulnerable children deserve.

It would mean redefining our country as one that cares for young people and redesigning our public and civic society – from schools, health, and care to the police and justice system – to consider and further children and young people’s best interests.

This is what could be achieved if those in the corridors of power became ambitious for young people. What a difference this would make, not only to the young growing up but to us all.

It would also mean rebuilding a vital infrastructure of support for children, young people, and families of children and family centres and hubs.

I’ve spent the last 30 years listening to families and arguing for and helping to shape the local support they have told me they need. Places to meet, to find support, and to make friends is always at the heart of what they tell me is needed – with trusted professionals there to offer and provide advice and help.

No matter where you go, the response is the same, and those who still have these centres and services on hand are clear about the difference they make to their lives.

This is the scale of the support that needs to be built now.

The question is always, of course, whether the country can afford to do all of this. It will cost billions of pounds and there is never enough money for everything.

My question is whether we can afford not to do it for much longer. The return we can expect from each one of these investments is a country that doesn’t send vulnerable children into the arms of gangsters and criminals, where we are not spending millions on one child in care with extremely high needs because we left it too late to intervene when they were an infant, and where the costs of social failure overwhelm budgets to such an extent that we become trapped in a vicious cycle of social and financial crisis that goes on for generation after generation.

I remember Tony Blair’s famous speech to Labour Conference in 1996 that his three main priorities for Government if he became Prime Minister would be ‘education, education, education’ . that the speech also included a less well remembered line. ‘Give me the education system that is 35th in the world today and I will give you the economy that is 35th in the world tomorrow.’

Since then, governments of both parties can claim credit for lifting Britain up the rankings. Yet the point remains the same: a strong economy needs strong communities, strong families, and children who are supported to succeed regardless of their background.

Keir Starmer’s “Five Missions” have yet to catch the eye of most voters, but his fifth pledge to “break down the barriers to opportunity” is important because it recognises that improving childcare, education, and family support are crucial to boosting life chances and our economic future.

The Conservatives need to develop a similar proposition, particularly since “levelling up” has fallen out of favour along with – thankfully – a grammar school for every town. Rishi Sunak’s A-Level reforms don’t meet the scale of the challenges facing millions of our children, particularly following the Covid pandemic.

Tony Blair tuned into the national mood when he put education and young people’s futures at the heart of his offer to voters. Run down and under resourced schools, high youth unemployment, and child poverty were all barriers to creating a modern economy. He was rewarded with a landslide election victory.

A quarter of a century later, we face many of the same problems and some new ones too. There is no reason why the next election campaign shouldn’t be about our children’s futures. Our political leaders still have time to seize the moment and commit to leading a child-first government that puts young people at the heart of its mission to build a better, fairer, and more prosperous Britain.

We need a new social contract to support vulnerable children and young people and their families.

This week I am founding a new think tank and innovation unit – the Centre for Young Lives dedicated to doing just that. We want to work with all of those who share our goals and want to make it happen.