

national assembly of women children and young people

the importance of children and young people

Children and Young People are our present and our future. Yet all too often they are portrayed by both policy makers and the media as a problem. Policy and public attitudes towards our young citizens are contradictory.

Every Child Matters and Youth Matters!

Young people need places to go and things to do; children should be safe and happy, be healthy, enjoy economic well-being, have every chance to achieve, make a positive contribution to society, and enjoy their lives. But in general there is a severely punitive attitude to behaviour judged to be antisocial, towards young parents, and recently towards “chaotic families”. If we take a good hard look at what is happening in children and young people’s lives in the UK today, we can see that life is often very hard for them. The National Assembly of Women stands for a social policy for children and young people that is based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and wants to see such policy in the UK developed within the context of its full implementation. The NAW is also aligned to but not restricted to the government’s *Every Child Matters* and *Youth Matters* agendas. Because in addition, there are issues which underpin the desired policy outcomes, such as, for example, equal access to play and leisure opportunities and use of public spaces, and the need to reduce the incidence of wars and improve the environment, all of which also contribute to a good childhood.

In fact, many of these concerns were expressed in the slogan from the first meeting of the NAW, when it was formed more than 50 years ago:

“Peace not War, Life not Death, for the Future of our Children”. It is us as adults who determine the legacy we leave to our children, and as adults we are setting an example to the younger generation, hoping that they will share our beliefs and commitment to social justice and a better world.

some problems

It is a scandal that four in 10 children in the capital – one of the richest cities in the world – live in poverty, as do many children in the rest of the UK. Children growing up in deprived areas (free school meals are a poverty indicator) often under-achieve at school which affects their capacity to get decent work. Over a lifetime they can lose hundreds of thousands of pounds in comparison with better skilled young people.

Because poor estates tend not to have a variety of shops children have less access to fresh food and thus suffer inadequate nutrition. This can lead to poor attention, unruly behaviour, exclusion from class or even from school. Ultimately poor nutrition leads to poor health – including obesity and diabetes. These children’s chances of enjoyment, achievement, and positive engagement are undermined and compromised by the conditions in which their families live.

The NAW recognises that for many families, child labour is a necessity rather than an opportunity to earn pocket money. All families need to be guaranteed an adequate income, whether or not the adults in the family are in work.

One of the biggest threats to children today is the impact of climate change. Children born today are arriving into a world which will almost inevitably be more unstable because of changes in temperature, sea level,

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and biodiversity. Alongside climate change is the nuclear threat: nuclear weapons, new nuclear power, and even from waste left behind in nuclear decommissioning. The next decades will be decisive and risky. The prospect of flawed nuclear decommissioning combined with flooded coastal areas is almost too awful to think about. But it is essential that we do so – and with a perspective that holds true to the concept that the children of the next generations will inherit our legacy – the earth and the way we organise our society.

Children and young people in the UK are affected by war abroad. Their relatives may be civilians affected by the conflicts in various parts of the world, or serving soldiers and ancillary staff. They are bombarded with images of destruction, death and violence. This is destabilising to their emotional health and wellbeing.

Many youth facilities have declined or closed, and local authority spending on youth services varies wildly. Also, apprenticeships have diminished as have other forms of meaningfully engaging young people in productive activities, thus leaving them – as many surveys show – with little to do and nowhere to go.

Today's children are too often very far from safe; many are the victims of crimes. Their lives are blighted by violence – domestic violence within their family, cruelty, negligence and assault; violence within the community around them (guns, gangs, drugs). Trafficked children are particularly vulnerable to threat and violence, including abduction by force, and sexual exploitation.

Crime rates are falling throughout Britain, yet the numbers of children being prosecuted keeps on rising; the justice system seems intent on criminalising and demonising young people.

Children are victims of racism and homophobia. Stress and distress within communities leads some children into hate crime; in September 2006, a 15 year old boy was given a life sentence for the murder of a younger, disabled boy. Black young people have been murdered by white young people,

purely on grounds of the colour of their skin. Guns and gangs culture and a distorted sense of "turf", power and identity has led some young black people into criminal and murderous activity within their community; shootings, stabbings and pointless loss of life.

Children in refugee families or unaccompanied asylum seeking children are often locked up in detention without having committed a crime. There are no proposals in the recent Green Paper on children in care to address the emotional plight and real need for support of these children.

Children of adults thought to be illegal immigrants can be taken into social services care, thus splitting up already vulnerable families.

Teenage parents are blamed and condemned rather than recognised as in need of sensitive and special support, as are young carers.

Girls within particular communities are subject to genital mutilation; too often tolerated by the mainstream as being a cultural tradition, rather than treated as unacceptable violence.

Children in care get a poor deal all-round. They are over-represented in a range of vulnerable groups including those who have under-achieved in their education (been failed by the system), those not in education/employment/training post-16, teenage parents, young offenders, drug users, young prisoners. The recently published *Care Matters* Green Paper looks at a range of ways of improving services for children in, or leaving, care but does not promise any new money for delivery.

Young people leaving home, and taking up tenancies can be trapped in debt by obscure welfare benefits rules which limit housing benefits for under 25 year olds to the average local rent for shared accommodation. This is a policy based on age discrimination.

There is an epidemic of obesity amongst children and young people, caused by a range of factors, including increasingly restricted outdoor play and leisure spaces, ie. access to physical activities, and a poor diet, with too much carbohydrates, fat and salt. There is an explosion of diabetes building up. Sustained multi-agency collabora-

tion is vital to secure the health of our young people. If current trends are not arrested, today's children will have a shorter life expectancy than their parents.

Ten per cent of young people suffer from mental health problems, with two young people committing suicide every day. Almost all imprisoned young offenders have a mental health disorder, yet there is severe under-provision of appropriate mental health services for young people.

what the NAW wants for our children and young people

The National Assembly of Women strongly believes that much more needs to be done to support, value and respect our young population.

We can only get children and young people to take their responsibilities seriously if adult society provides them with good role models, at all levels from the government to sports people and parents/carers. All too often we find that young people are supposed to show respect but themselves do not receive respect as young citizens without a vote. Popular TV shows promote bullying and brutalising people, yet we ask children to adhere to strict zero-tolerance anti-bullying policies in schools. Young people do take responsibility and take pride in worthwhile activities – too often the many examples of positive behaviour are overshadowed by a dominant culture that demonises young people.

The National Assembly of Women believes that it is important to obtain the views of young people themselves about the issues facing them. A wide-ranging survey would find that different groups of young people face different issues. Adult perceptions of what concerns young people are not always accurate. For example, young people have come out in large numbers to protest about the build up to the war on Iraq, but the media portray young people as problems (drug takers, binge drinkers, displaying anti-social behaviour).

We should celebrate young people's contribution at every opportunity. In response to the government's questions (in its consultation over *Youth Matters*) about

how it is possible to incentivise young people's good behaviour, the NAW pointed out that recognition is perhaps more important than financial reward. We feel that it is vital to give children and young people some control and more say over community aspects that affect them; they should have a right to participate at all levels of society. The confusing and often contradictory age limits at which children and young people can and cannot do certain things, and be held accountable for their actions, need an urgent overhaul and rationalisation.

Where there is poor and disruptive behaviour by children and young people, we believe that we should ask young people themselves about the right kinds of sanctions – they often have much better ideas than adults have about which forms of discipline work. The most troubled young people need to be treated as children. Instead of only being handed punitive sanctions, they should be provided with meaningful diversion programmes based on the belief that most will be able to take advantage of them and change their behaviour.

There also needs to be recognition that teenage rebelliousness has always existed and that it is a normal part of growing up and becoming more independent.

Young people also need to be allowed to socialise and engage in unstructured and – to adult eyes – aimless activities and it is these that are often seen as threatening by adults. Much more needs to be done to rebuild inter-generational fabrics of society. Parents of teenagers need to have access to a range of support to ensure that they are able to help their young people through transition. Young people themselves need excellent information advice and guidance so that they can access work and have good career choices, training or education which does not burden them for years to come, eg. via student fees and loans.

To ensure that young people from the diverse range of communities that make up today's society are effectively engaged by service providers, this requires an unequivocal recognition that many

young people are affected by gender, race, sexuality and disability exclusion. Strategies for inclusion will need to be transparent. In planning the development of the desired outcomes for children and young people under the *Every Child Matters* and *Youth Matters* programmes, there will need to be concrete statements of inclusive expectations and standards to be met in local provision.

To be consistent – for example in our opposition to violence against women – the NAW joins the call for a complete ban on the defence of reasonable chastisement which permits physical punishment by parents.

NAW has clearly stated its opposition to the trafficking of women and children. We will work with others to ensure an effective policy of safeguarding these especially vulnerable women and children. Young people who have been trafficked should be treated as a victim of a serious crime in need of protection.

All sections of young people and especially minorities – black and minority ethnic young people, young people with disabilities and/or learning disabilities, young gay, lesbian or those questioning their identity – will need to be allowed to have their voices heard. There is always a danger that services are developed on the basis of 'one size fits all'.

The National Assembly of Women is naturally concerned that gender issues are fully considered. We have a role to promote the resolution of the UN's 4th World Conference on Women held in 1995, which states that "measures to protect and promote the human rights of women and girl-children as an integral part of universal human rights must underlie all action"; we also believe that the concept of the girl child and her particular needs should be revisited and updated.

In particular, we would like to see a revitalisation of efforts to encourage girls and young women into science, technology, engineering and construction. We are also firmly against faith based education and its continued expansion. The NAW stands for secular education.

In summary, the NAW wants to

see empowerment of, increased respect for, and a democratic voice for children and young people accompanied by good, well-resourced services which properly and holistically support the development of the next generation.

contacts

■ **All-Party Parliamentary Group on Children** Sally Cole, Clerk, APPG for Children, Parliamentary Officer National Children's Bureau
8 Wakley Street,
London EC1V 7QE. 020 7843 1907

■ **Barnados** Tanners Lane,
Barkingside, Ilford, Essex IG6 1QG.
020 8550 8822,
www.barnados.org.uk

■ **ChildLine** Under 18s:
www.nspcc.org.uk/under18/Under18HubPage_wda33341.html
helpline 0800 1111

■ **Child Poverty Action Group**
94 White Lion Street
London N1 9PF. 020 7837 7979
www.cpag.org.uk

■ **Children and Young People's Unit** Mayor's Office, Greater London Assembly, City Hall,
The Queen's Walk, More London,
London SE1 2AA.
mayor@london.gov.uk
020 7983 4100
Minicom 020 7983 4458
Fax 020 7983 4057.

www.london.gov.uk/young-london

■ **Children 1st** 83 Whitehorse
Loan, Edinburgh EH9 1AT
0131 446 2300

■ **Children in Wales** 25 Windsor
Place, Cardiff CF10 3BZ
02920 342 434

■ **Children's Legal Centre**
University of Essex, Wivenhoe
Park, Colchester, Essex CO4 3SQ
01206 872 466

■ **Children's Rights Alliance for England** 94 White Lion Street,
London N1 9PF. info@crae.org.uk

■ **Connexions** 080 800 13219,
www.connexions-direct.com

■ **Council for Disabled Children**
National Children's Bureau
8 Wakley Street
London EC1V 7QE. 020 7843 1900
www.ncb.org.uk/cdc/index.htm
cdc@ncb.org.uk

■ **End Child Poverty Campaign**
www.endchildpoverty.org.uk

■ **End Child Prostitution and Trafficking (ECPAT) UK**
The Stableyard, Broomgrove Road
London SW9 9TL

English School Students Association ESSA Signposts to other youth organisations
www.studentvoice.co.uk/links.asp

Fostering Network 87
 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8HA

4 Nations Child Policy Network
 For signposting go to
www.childpolicy.org.uk

London Play 89-93 Fonthill Road, London N4 3JH
 020 7272 2464
www.londonplay.org.uk

National Children's Bureau
 8 Wakley Street
 London EC1V 7QE
 020 7843 6000, www.ncb.org.uk

National Council for One Parent Families 255 Kentish Town Road, London NW5 2LX

NCH 85 Highbury Park
 London N5 1UD. 020 7704 7000,
www.nch.org.uk

National Council of Voluntary Child Care Organisations (NCVCCO) Unit 4, 80-82 White Lion Street
 London N1 9PF. 020 7833 3319
www.ncvcco.org

National Family and Parenting Institute 430 Highgate Studios
 53-79 Highgate Road
 London NW5 1TL

NSPCC Weston House
 42 Curtain Road
 London EC2A 3NH
 020 7825 2500 www.nspcc.org.uk

Parentline Plus 520 Highgate Studios, 53-59 Highgate Road,
 London NW5 1TL
 Helpline 0808 800 2222

Play England 8 Wakley Street,
 London EC1V 7QE
 020 7843 6000
www.playengland.org.uk/Page.asp

Save the Children
 17 Grove Lane, London SE5 8RD
 020 7703 5400
www.savethechildren.org.uk

The Children's Society Edward Rudolf House, Margery Street,
 London WC1X 0JL
 0845 300 1128,
www.the-children-society.org.uk

United Kingdom Youth Parliament 7 Anstice Square,
 Madeley, Telford
 Shropshire TF7 5BD
 01952 681 994
www.ukyouthparliament.org.uk

Voice for the Child in Care
 Unit 4, Pride Court, 80-82 White Lion Street, London N1 9PF
 020 7833 5792, www.vcc-uk.org

Vote at 16 Campaign 6 Chancel Street, London SE1 0UU
 020 7928 1622
www.votesat16.org.uk

Who Cares? Trust Kemp House,
 152-160 City Road
 London EC1V 2NP. 020 7251 3117
www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk

YoungMinds 102-108
 Clerkenwell Road
 London EC1M 5SA

Children's Commissioner, England Office of the Children's Commissioner, 1 London Bridge,
 London SE1 9BG. 0844 800 9113.
info.request@childrenscommissioner.org
www.childrenscommissioner.org

Children's Commissioner, Scotland 85 Holyrood Road,
 Edinburgh EH8 8AU
 0131 558 3733 info@sccyp.org.uk
www.sccyp.org.uk

Children's Commissioner, North Wales Penrhos Manor, Oak Drive,
 Colwyn Bay, Conwy LL29 7YW.
 0149 252 3320

Children's Commissioner, South Wales Oystermouth House,
 Phoenix Way, Swansea Enterprise Park, Llansamlet, Swansea SA7 9FS

Children's Commissioner, Northern Ireland The Children's and Young People's Unit, The Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, Room 5, 18 Castle Street Buildings, Stormont,
 Belfast BT4 3SR. 02890 528 477

Minister for Children, Young People and Families
 Rt Hon Beverley Hughes MP
 Department for Education and

Skills, Sanctuary Buildings
 Great Smith Street
 London SW1P 3BT
 020 7925 5000

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY OF WOMEN
 92 WANSBECK AVENUE, CULLERCOATS
 TYNE & WEAR NE30 3DJ

0191 252 0961

NAW@SISTERS.ORG.UK

WWW.SISTERS.ORG.UK

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email _____

Send to: NAW, 92 Wansbeck Avenue, Cullercoats, Tyne & Wear NE30 3DJ