

Chief Executive Officer

Action for Children

Starfish

Brief for applicants
October 2026

Welcome from our Chair

Thank you for your interest in becoming the next Chief Executive of Action for Children.

I joined Action for Children as Chair in August, and I have quickly come to see what a remarkable organisation this is. For more than 150 years we have take action for the children and young people who need us most. Today our **4,000 staff and 500 volunteers run 342 services** across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Supporting children in care, disabled children, and families needing extra help. Protecting children from abuse and neglect, reducing childhood poverty, building mental resilience and working to prevent the criminal exploitation of children. We campaign to make sure children's voices are heard by those who make decisions about their lives. And last year we were proud to help over half a million children, young people and families.

The case for our work has rarely been stronger. Each of the four nations is taking its own approach to reforming support for children and families, in line with devolved powers. In England, the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act and reform of support for children with special educational needs and disabilities are reshaping children's social care and education. Wales is removing profit from the care of looked-after children, and Scotland has committed to Keep 'The Promise' to care-experienced children by 2030. Across the UK, rising child poverty and mental health need are placing huge pressure on families and the services that support them. Action for Children has the scale, experience, expertise and reach to make a lasting difference, and I want us to be ambitious about what we can achieve in future.

This is a period of change and transition for Action for Children, and our experienced Executive Leadership Team has worked hard to bring stability. Our next Chief Executive will build on that. Their first priority will be to get to know our people and services across all four nations, building trust and confidence and creating a shared sense of direction. From that foundation, we want them to lead the refresh of our strategy, give Action for Children a more clear and confident voice, and help raise our profile with governments, funders and the public across the UK.

The quality of our services is consistently high, and our people bring a passion and commitment to children that is one of our greatest strengths. Like many charities, we are also working in a more challenging financial environment, and our operating model needs to be as strong as the work it supports. We want to focus our energy where Action for Children makes the greatest difference, building on what we do best, working in partnership with others, making good use of technology and staying ahead of changes in policy, such as the growing emphasis on fostering. Our next Chief Executive will lead that work.

We are looking for a values-driven leader who has led a complex organisation at chief executive or executive director level and has the breadth to take on a role of this scope, whether from the charity, public or wider purpose-led sector. You will be commercially minded, listen carefully and lead with warmth, humility and clarity. You will also be confident and outward looking, making the case for children with those who shape their lives. Above all, like us, you will be driven by love to take action for children so they don't miss out on a safe and happy childhood.

We are committed to being an inclusive, proactively anti-racist organisation that reflects the diverse children and families we support, and where everyone's voice is valued. Our next Chief Executive will champion that commitment and lead the next stage of our work on diversity and inclusion.

The Board and I are fully committed to supporting our new Chief Executive. If you believe you could lead Action for Children into its next chapter, I very much look forward to hearing from you.



Jeremy Newman

Chair of Trustees, Action for Children

About Action for Children

At Action for Children, what you do makes a difference. Everyone here is passionate about creating safe and happy childhoods. It's the sense of purpose that drives us every single day. From direct work in communities to national campaigning, we are focused on making sure every child has the foundations they need to thrive.

What we do

At Action for Children we're driven by love. We take action so children don't miss out on a safe and happy childhood. And we have done for more than 150 years.

We now operate 342 services across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. We have 4,000 staff and 500 volunteers who work tirelessly for children and young people.

When we see problems we take action early to help children, young people and families trapped in poverty, and facing other challenges before things get worse. We teach young people important life skills and help build their resilience. And we listen to what children want and take their concerns to government, campaigning for better support and resources.

Our Royal Patron is Her Royal Highness, the Princess of Wales. From visiting our services to championing the importance of early childhood, she plays a valued role in raising awareness of the issues that matter most to children.

Our impact

Services	342 services across the UK offering practical and caring support
People	Around 4,000 staff and 500 volunteers
Reach	551,400 children, young people and families helped in 2024/25
Annual expenditure	Around £160 million
Founded	1869

Our vision, mission and values

Our vision is that every child and young person has a safe and happy childhood, and the foundations they need to thrive.

Our mission is to protect and support children and young people. We do this by providing practical and emotional care and support, and by campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.

Our values

- We're **passionate** about all children having a safe and happy childhood.
- We're **ambitious** for children and young people.
- We **collaborate** internally and externally with other organisations to get the best outcomes for children.
- We're **inclusive** and strive to ensure that all children are included.

Our areas of work

We work directly with children, young people and families to deliver services that make sure:

- **All children and families get the support they need to thrive**, ensuring that young children get the best start in life and families are supported to stay together and thrive.
- **Every child in care has a stable and loving home,** supporting children and young people when family mechanisms have broken down.
- **Every vulnerable young person is safe, valued, and able to succeed,** helping young people to work towards the best start in adult life.

We also work to influence policy, amplifying the voices of children and young people to bring lasting change to their lives through research, working with politicians, and building public campaigns. Our core services include family support including our digital service Parent Talk, children's homes, services for disabled children and support for children at risk of criminal exploitation, alongside fostering, a network of nurseries and childcare services, and a wide range of services delivered under contract with local authorities and other commissioners.

Working across all four nations means working within four distinct policy, funding and regulatory contexts. Children's social care, education and early years are devolved, so we work with different governments, legislation and regulators in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our Chief Executive needs to lead, and to influence in these areas traveling regularly across the UK.



Our strategy

We want every child in the UK to grow up safe and happy. To help us do this, we've applied all of our experience and expertise to develop our ambitious strategy. It lays out what we are doing to reach more vulnerable children and young people through our services. And how we are achieving this by building on our strong and dedicated workforce, our processes, our reputation and our income generating ability.

The seven goals at the heart of our strategy are helping us achieve our vision. They are underpinned by our commitment to put the voice of children and young people at the heart of our work, and to embed our diversity and inclusion strategy.

1. Grow our services to help more children and young people
2. Increase the impact of our work with children and young people
3. Influence policy decisions to improve the lives of children and young people
4. Attract, develop and retain brilliant staff and volunteers
5. Inspire greater support for our vision and mission
6. Increase our financial contribution from fundraising, nurseries and childcare
7. Deliver best value for children and young people by improving our efficiency

The strategy is now being refreshed, and the new Chief Executive will play a central role in shaping the next chapter.

Leadership and governance

The Action for Children Executive Leadership Team (ELT) steers the organisation to make sound decisions that benefit the children and families we support. The Chief Executive leads and supports this Team, which includes the following:

- Shan Nicholas, Interim Chief Executive
- Jo French, Chief Operating Officer
- Brigitte Gater, Managing Director, Children's Services
- Locks Farmer, Managing Director, Income and Engagement
- Fiona Adams, Director of Finance
- Mike Knight, Chief People Officer
- Richard Bryars, Director of Strategy and Implementation

The expertise of our **Board of Trustees** helps us deliver our promises to children and young people. The Board is chaired by Jeremy Newman, who spent more than 30 years at BDO, rising to become its Global CEO, and brings wide experience as a chair and trustee across the public, private and charity sectors.

You can read more about the Executive Leadership Team and the Board of Trustees on the Action for Children website, and see how the Executive Leadership Team and its direct reports are organised in the leadership structure chart.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

At Action for Children, we are committed to building a diverse, inclusive and anti-racist workplace where everyone can belong and thrive. We value different perspectives and are taking meaningful action to create more equitable opportunities. We are committed not only to attracting diverse talent, but to creating an environment where everyone feels valued, supported and able to succeed.

We believe everyone deserves an opportunity to succeed and to feel valued, respected and included in the workplace. Our approach is grounded in compassion, respect and fairness. Like everything we do, it's driven by love.

Our Diversity and Inclusion Strategy sets out how we will get there, including increasing the diversity of our workforce. This builds on work already under way, with Inclusion Champions, staff networks, working groups and an advisory group, and a commitment to becoming a Race Equality Matters Trailblazer.

Find out more

- Action for Children website
- Our history
- Annual reports
- News and stories
- Organisational strategy
- Equality and diversity
- Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2025 to 2028
- Gender Pay Gap Report 2025
- Executive Leadership Team
- Board of Trustees
- Leadership structure chart
- Royal Patron and ambassadors
- Stephenson Awards
- Employee benefits

Watch

- A short film about Action for Children



Safe and happy childhood

Action for Children is driven by love. We take action so children don't miss out on a safe and happy childhood. We have thousands of people working on the ground, giving children and young people the protection and practical help they urgently need. And we campaign tirelessly for lasting change.

Role profile

Job title	Chief Executive Officer
Reports to	Chair of the Board of Trustees
Direct reports	Around eight
Overall responsibility	Around 4,000 staff and 500 volunteers; annual expenditure of around £160 million

Role purpose

As Chief Executive, you'll provide inspiring and compassionate leadership to a large workforce delivering over 342 services across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Our 4,000 staff and 500 volunteers are dedicated to delivering high quality services, influencing meaningful policy change, and creating a positive impact on the lives of children and their families. You'll bring insight into the challenges, the opportunities and quality care in children's services.

Accountable to the Board of Trustees, the Chief Executive will provide strategic leadership to Action for Children, leading an Executive Leadership Team responsible for delivering vital services, deepening the charity's reach and impact, and amplifying its voice across the four nations. The Chief Executive will ensure that Action for Children remains financially strong, strategically focused and operationally excellent, while upholding its child-centred ethos and values.

Key responsibilities

Strategic leadership

- Lead the refresh and delivery of Action for Children's long-term strategy and business plan, with clear short, medium and long-term objectives aligned to its vision.
- Set clear priorities across a broad and complex organisation, understanding which activities are core to impact and mission and where to focus energy and resources.
- Drive targeted growth in core service lines, including family support, children's homes, disability services and support for criminally exploited children.
- Ensure the organisation's priorities respond to emerging social, economic and policy challenges affecting children and families.

Service quality, safeguarding and impact

- Oversee the delivery of high-quality, innovative and cost-effective services across the UK, with safeguarding excellence and regulatory compliance at their heart, taking account of the different frameworks in each of the four nations.
- Strengthen the charity's ability to measure and demonstrate its impact, including through a new impact assessment framework and external accreditations.
- Ensure the voices of children and young people meaningfully shape Action for Children's services and policy positions.

People and culture

- Lead and inspire a workforce of 4,000 staff and 500 volunteers across the UK, building trust, motivation and stability and a culture of inclusion, safety, learning and wellbeing.
- Lead and develop the Executive Leadership Team, getting the best from an experienced group of senior colleagues and ensuring high standards are replicated across the organisation.
- Develop a culture that is open to change, and drive talent development, leadership capability and succession planning.
- Lead and role model Action for Children's commitment to being an inclusive, proactively anti-racist organisation where everyone can thrive.

Advocacy and external influence

- Act as a leading national voice for vulnerable children, representing Action for Children with government, partners, funders and the media across all four nations.
- Build evidence-based policy positions and lead campaigns that influence decisions at local and national levels.
- Oversee the development of a clear, compelling account of who Action for Children is and what it does, strengthening its profile and its ability to raise funds and remain independent.

Financial sustainability and growth

- Ensure financial viability and resilience, working closely with the finance lead and taking corrective action where needed.
- Oversee the development of diverse income streams, including fundraising, partnerships, nurseries and childcare, and contract-based services.

Governance and risk

- Work in close partnership with the Chair and the Board of Trustees to maintain robust and effective governance.
- Ensure effective corporate governance and risk management across management structures and all four nations, particularly in high-demand service settings.



Person specification

Experience

- Proven leadership at chief executive or executive director level within a large, complex charity, public sector organisation or relevant purpose-led organisation.
- Experience of leading a large, dispersed, multi-site workforce, with a track record of building trust and getting the best from experienced senior colleagues.
- Experience of leading transformation and change, scaling services and driving measurable impact.
- Accountability for significant budgets and diverse income streams, including taking corrective action to secure financial sustainability.
- Experience of aligning equality, diversity and inclusion with organisational objectives to improve performance.

Knowledge

- A strong understanding of UK-wide issues affecting children, young people and families, and of children's services, social care, family support or a related field.
- A clear understanding of safeguarding and quality assurance across dispersed, regulated services.
- Knowledge of the regulatory frameworks affecting the voluntary sector and of effective corporate governance.

Skills and abilities

- Strong strategic judgement, with the ability to translate mission into sustainable delivery and to prioritise across a broad and complex organisation.
- Outstanding communication and influencing skills, written and verbal, with the ability to build trust with a wide range of stakeholders.
- The ability to develop strategic relationships with politicians and policymakers, and to influence and campaign effectively.
- Financial acumen and commercial awareness.

Leadership style and values

- A values-driven, child-centred and inspiring leader, able to galvanise people around Action for Children's mission.
- A visible, compassionate and low-ego leadership style, with high emotional intelligence and sound judgement.
- Resilience and the ability to lead with clarity and focus in a demanding environment.
- A personal commitment to inclusion and to Action for Children's ambition to be a proactively anti-racist organisation.
- Willingness and ability to travel regularly across the UK, including overnight stays.

Don't meet every requirement?

If you are excited about this role but your experience does not match every requirement, we would still very much like to hear from you. The most relevant candidates may not have followed a single, linear career path, and we will look at transferable leadership capability and potential alongside direct experience.

Terms of appointment

Salary
c.£185,000

Contract
Permanent, full time.

Location
Flexible, with time at our Watford head office and regular travel across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, including overnight stays.

Benefits
Action for Children offers a range of employee benefits. You can read more in its employee benefits guide.

Checks
The successful candidate will be required to undertake an enhanced disclosure check.

How to apply

Starfish Search is supporting Action for Children with this appointment. If you would like an informal and confidential conversation about the role, please contact Katy Giddens, Client Relationship Director, at katy.giddens@starfishsearch.com.

To apply, please submit the following through Starfish.

- Your CV, of no more than three sides of A4.
- A covering letter of no more than two sides of A4, setting out your motivation for the role and how your experience meets the person specification.

Action for Children wants its leadership to reflect the children, young people and families it supports. Black and Global Majority and disabled people are currently under-represented in the organisation, and we would particularly welcome applications from them. If you would like to talk about any adjustments that would help you at any stage of the process, please let us know.

We would be grateful if you would complete the equality and diversity monitoring form as part of the online application. This information is used for monitoring purposes only and does not form part of your application.

Recruitment timetable

Closing date	Monday 16th November 2026
Preliminary interviews with Starfish	Week commencing 30th November 2026
Conversations with the Chair and Interim Chief Executive	Week commencing 7th December 2026
Final interviews	Week commencing 14th December 2026