

INTERVIEW

The British Academy's Childhood Policy Programme

Ruth Lister, interviewed by Fiona Williams

Abstract: Ruth Lister talks about the British Academy's Childhood Policy Programme, in conversation with Fiona Williams.

Keywords: Children, childhood, young people, public policy, voice, rights.

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Can you tell me how your interests and activities have led to your chairing the British Academy's Childhood Policy Programme?

I was approached because I've had both a policy and an academic interest in children and childhood. In the first part of my life I worked for the Child Poverty Action Group, so there was quite an emphasis on children there in terms of child poverty. As an academic I had done work in particular around children's citizenship, children as citizens, and how we think about citizenship from the perspective of children. In the House of Lords, where I am now, I've been involved in various pieces of legislation to do with children, and in fact we have a WhatsApp group of peers who are interested in children, and I am part of that. There is quite an active interest in children in the Lords. I guess that range of background interests is why I was approached originally – although it feels quite a long time ago now – to chair the programme's steering group. It was agreed that my priority would be the childhood steering group in terms of my work on the British Academy's Public Policy Committee which I joined at the same time. The childhood programme had already been established by the Public Policy Committee at the point when I was asked whether I would chair the steering group.

It's been running since 2019. I know that in the first phase you had a lot of position papers, and a lot of them are very challenging and cover a lot of disciplines. One of the key features is the interdisciplinarity of the programme. What are the key themes that you are now covering within the second phase?

The interdisciplinarity, or the multi-disciplinarity, is why it's so important for the British Academy to be doing this. It brings in so many different perspectives that I personally would not have been aware of sometimes. We covered a lot of ground in the first phase in terms of position papers, more descriptive than analytical on the whole, but I think they provided a wealth of material for academics, policymakers and others, historical and contemporary. Publications that came out of this first phase included chronologies of childhood policy, and also detailed studies into two policy areas – young people leaving care, and the approaches taken towards child poverty throughout the parts of the UK.

It culminated in a workshop that reflected on a lot of this material, and it was out of that that the three themes emerged. They very much emerged out of the first phase. As we moved from the first into the second phase we published a synthesis report that summarises how the programme came to focus on the three themes of phase 2.

The first of the three themes is children's voices. That was such a strong message out of the workshop that we held: the importance of listening to children, children's voices being heard, both in policymaking and in academic research, even though our focus is more on the policy side.

The second is children's rights. There was a lot of discussion on that in the workshop and the contrast between the different nations of the UK.

The third is something that I've actually written about in the past, particularly in relation to New Labour and the third way approach, and that is how to get the balance right between seeing children as 'beings' and 'becomings', and the way the policy tends to focus much more on the becomings than on the beings.

Although those are the three themes, it was also felt that we had to thread the four parts of the UK through those themes. That emerged very strongly out of the first phase, particularly the approaches of Scotland and Wales on children's rights in contrast to England. A second cross-cutting theme is inequalities in terms of the intersection of those inequalities which shape the structural environment of childhood.¹

Could you give us an example of the difference between a policy approach that is about being rather than becoming?

We've seen so much emphasis during the pandemic, understandably and rightly, about the impact on children's education and the long-term effects of that (i.e. their becoming), but much less on what it has meant for children as children, how they are experiencing childhood in the here and now (i.e. their being). Thinking back to an earlier government, and thinking back to New Labour, there was very much then an emphasis on children as citizen workers of the future, preparing children in terms of education and development, and not seeing children as children. They were adults-in-waiting. The emphasis of policy was on that long-term educational impact.

It's a question of balance.. These are some of the things that have been raised in some of the provocation papers we've published, for example in terms of how we create environments that encourage children to play, engage with nature, and just be children.² That is a different emphasis of policy in terms of thinking about the here and now of being a child from how we are preparing children for adulthood.

I suppose that 'becoming' approach is a lot to do with the economy rather than the social and emotional life of everybody, and a failure to recognise that, even if you were going to look at the mental health of children, for example, the focus on that is actually in and of itself an investment for the future, so that these things are not separate areas of policy.

Just on that, I have done it myself, and particularly when I worked at the Child Poverty Action Group. We quite often use the argument of children being our future in order

¹Rogers (2019), Grauberg (2019), Tisdall (2019), Smith (2019), Eisenstadt (2019), Byrne & Corr (2019).

²The provocation papers can be found via <https://medium.com/reframing-childhood-past-and-present>

to make the case for addressing child poverty in the here and now. It's quite tricky. I became more aware of the dangers of putting so much emphasis on that. You're right, it can be a very economic approach, in which you just think about how children are future units of production, and it's not just that it underplays the social but also in the sense of the political: what does it mean for a child to be a citizen? Clearly, children don't have a vote, but that wasn't really thought about if you have only got an economic mindset. It's about balance, and it's not about one or the other. It's just that too often policy is totally imbalanced towards the future rather than the present.

I wondered as well whether there have been some changes in our observations of children as being rather than becoming, because they are not only being, but they are also more active these days, as in activism. Young people particularly are telling us about the future that they want, the environmental future, young people are involved in Black Lives Matter, in the issues that have been raised recently about gender sexual violence in schools, and so on. Would you say there is a lot more of a sense in which young people are becoming activists as well?

That's true. Your point is interesting because when you started saying that, I was thinking that not just young people but children at quite a young age are speaking out, and they are talking about their futures.

As I say, it's a question of balance, but certainly not in an economic way. It goes back to the first theme of voice. Children are making themselves heard, which is a really positive development, particularly on the environment. Children and young people have really helped lead the way in many ways, I think.

One of the proposals in the key themes is that you begin to work out policy in terms of children and developmental stages rather than ages. Much policy, and indeed popular discourse, is about what children should have achieved by a certain age; but you are talking about developmental stages, which is pretty important for dealing with the idea that every child matters, that each child has their own way of approaching the way they grow up. I don't know whether you want to just say if any other work is being done on that.

That's a really important point. Certainly, some of the material in phase 1 related to that, and we had quite a big discussion about what was our definition of children, because it is problematic. You have to have a definition which is age-based while being very conscious that it's arbitrary, in a way, but it is very relevant. One of the areas that we have looked at is the criminal justice system and how it interacts with children and young people. We commissioned two provocation papers and also held a panel discussion exploring this topic. Thinking about age and developmental stage was very

relevant to that, and it is also very relevant to thinking about participation and children's voice. Clearly, how you enable that is going to be different for younger children than older children.

However, the assumption that young children don't have anything to say, or that their voices do not matter, it just doesn't relate to the realities of children's developments and the evidence we have that children, as you yourself said, can sometimes bring clarity to issues.

I was thinking too about the multidisciplinary nature of the programme, and I wondered whether that had been deliberate in terms of approaching policy in this multidisciplinary way. A lot of the policy that deals with children is quite siloed into different departments, whereas if you look at children across the board you can bring together a lot more key policies that affect them.

That's right. It was partly just that we can understand childhood better from a multidisciplinary point of view. But it was also not just the 'what' of policies but also the 'how', thinking particularly of more creative approaches, particularly for very young children, where we might be using art and things like that as a way of helping children express themselves. The process of policy can be very important, but there is a point about the institutions of government and how they play to children. We can come back to that later.

You are right. It gives us a much richer understanding of childhood, and policy needs to be rooted in that richer understanding rather than siloed into education and poverty, or whatever.

You have outlined the areas of listening to children, children's rights, inequalities, the four parts of the UK. What activities are going to flow from these priorities?

At the outset I have to say that we have been affected by COVID-19, and we are not able to do everything that we had hoped because the programme is due to come to an end at the end of this year. We have a really great team in the British Academy working on it, but with the focus on producing the Academy's important wider COVID work,³ it has squeezed the opportunities for research and engagement in phase 2 of our programme.

There is an ongoing programme of publishing provocations, and those are very much now trying to reflect the three themes. We've had some very popular panel events around the phase 1 provocations, linking them into phase 2 [see above], and

³More on the British Academy's work under the heading 'COVID-19: Shape the Future' can be found via <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/covid-19-shape-the-future/>

because those have been virtual they have been much better attended than they would otherwise have been, including quite a big overseas audience for them. We have two main projects/events that we have been planning. The first has been a workshop on COVID and children held on 20 May 2021. The British Academy held one workshop shortly after the first lockdown, focusing on the impact of the unfolding pandemic on children and young people as part of its Shape the Future programme, but a year on there is a lot more to be said. It's very much looking through the lens of the three themes, looking at it from children's rights, children's voice and 'being and becoming' perspectives, and what that tells us about the impact of COVID on children and the policy response to that. The workshop will also take account of the cross-cutting inequalities in society and how these have affected children and young people in various ways. Additionally, we will be including young people who have been involved in COVID-related research in the workshop. The other upcoming activity is a policy lab, which seems to be a British Academy focus at present, around children's rights. That is a more sustained activity and will involve three or four sessions, hopefully with the same group of people, really pulling together the policy implications of a more children's rights perspective.

Those are the main things. We are grappling with, and are very conscious of, a paradox that for much of the programme we have not involved children themselves a great deal. Yes, there has been a young person on a panel here and there, and young people were involved in the COVID & childhood workshop as described above. We've also discussed at some length what kind of research we could be doing to bring in the children's voice perspective, and that was one of the things that got lost to COVID. Instead, we are currently thinking about having something like a children's parliament later in the programme, something that brings children and young people together to get their views on what we have done, what our conclusions are. We then have to think of what we do with that.

We were also very aware of the dangers of tokenism, having one or two children in an adult space, so you can then say, 'We have done voice participation.' We have people on the steering group who have thought a lot about these things, and it's frustrating that we can't do more, but needs must. Similarly, we had planned a policy lab on the being or becoming strand, and that has had to be aborted because there just is not the scope to work on that as well. Some of these activities provide lenses through which to do other work rather than leading to a particular project themselves.

Given the nature of the world we live in at the moment, it is quite surprising how much hidden activity on the ground there is. I can imagine that there must be quite a lot of projects in different schools, areas or localities which are trying to do these sorts of things. Rather than try to reproduce that yourselves, one thing might be to see what other

people are doing. I know you have the four parts of the UK approach to different practices, but actually on the ground you might look at what is going on in particular schools. For example, an area I know a bit about is children with special educational needs, and it is so varied, and you come across some little intervention somewhere, which is just brilliant, but not replicated anywhere else.

In the *Journal of the British Academy* we have launched a supplementary issue exploring multidisciplinary perspectives on the child's voice in public policy. An initial paper by Professor David Archard explores children's voice from the perspective of philosophy,⁴ and we are getting quite a few abstracts in now from people who want to engage with that from their own disciplinary perspective. One possibility might be to commission an article which does try to look at what is happening. We had originally wanted to do that on a bigger scale, but that involves resources. It's not something you can do in an ad hoc manner. Doing a more thorough job of the kind you are talking about, in the end was something we decided that we're just not able to do, which is a shame. Hopefully some other activities and examples will come through in any case which then could be publicised and other people can learn from.

I suppose as well, although the context has changed, there is quite a lot historically that has been done. There was quite a lot of work in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly around schools, on children's voices and children's participation, and so on. I suppose that historical aspect is quite important as well, isn't it?

It is. Our original idea was to commission a piece of work that would have looked historically as well as at today, at what can we learn – what went right, what went wrong? – not just for the sake of finding out 'this is what has happened', but so that we can learn from what has happened. Again, I just don't think that is going to be possible, unfortunately.

That's worrying in a way, isn't it, because one of the things that you referred to earlier was the impact of the pandemic on children and their lives and their childhoods. In your view, and from talking to people in your group, in what way has the pandemic impacted most on children?

This is where the being or becoming lens is particularly helpful. If you look at the way it's being talked about, politicians primarily talk about education, understandably, because education is very important. Boris Johnson has made clear his priority is making up for lost learning, emphasising 90,000 children behind in basic literacy.

⁴Archard (2020).

There is this idea that children have got to catch up and they have to catch up quickly because of all this learning they have lost.

These are obviously important factors, and particularly from an inequalities point of view. Some children have probably actually not done so badly, where they have good home resources and plenty of IT to support them, and parents who are able to do the home schooling without too many problems. But it's very much focused on the becomings, and it clearly has had an impact, though we don't know exactly how great an impact. Most children are now back at school.

However, when I read in the press what teachers have to say, I have been struck by how many have said, 'Look, hang on a minute, the first priority is children's wellbeing. That's what we have to look out for first when they come back to school.' That is more important than catching up with learning.

So that's mental wellbeing in particular. But there's also the physical aspect, in terms of there being quite a controversy over the lack of clarity about whether children could go out and play with each other. That's important, not just for physicality but also for children's social relationships. That's one of the things that certainly members of our steering group have emphasised – the importance of children's social relationships with each other, with their peers, with other children, and what has the pandemic done to that. You might be able to maintain those to some degree through virtual means, but it's not the same, and some children don't have those virtual means, or they're very limited in the same way that they're limited when it comes to education.

There's a lot of work going on, on the overall impact on children's mental health, and it's not a simple story. A lot of children have been suffering acute anxiety, anxiety in general about the pandemic, about their parents, about will they give it to their parents, that kind of thing, anxiety about just what it has done to their lives. However, some children's mental health has improved – children who are bullied at school, and some special needs children apparently. And it varies according to age groups. There's one piece of research that seemed to find that younger children had much more anxiety, but interestingly, 11-year-olds to mid-teens actually were doing okay. There is an awful lot to unpack there in terms of the impact.

Of course, it does impact so much. Another example is where structural inequalities have such an effect. We were aware of it as adults, in terms of the kind of lives that we have lived through the pandemic. But for children who are living in poverty, there's the whole thing around school meals and hunger. We know from ongoing research, particularly social policy research, around the impact of the pandemic on low-income families, and work that has been done by charities and so forth, that low-income families with children are really struggling, despite a temporary uplift on Universal Credit. That's bound to have a knock-on effect on children. We know from other research that quite often the parents will do all they can to protect their children from

the full impact, but children, on the whole, will know what's going on, so there is some activity around alternatives to school meals, and so forth. There are children who are homeless and in bed-and-breakfast. It is unbearable having to think about what that must be like stuck there. There are children who are refugees and asylum seekers, for whom life is tough enough as it is.

As it has more widely, the pandemic has illuminated and aggravated inequalities that make life so hard for many of those at the bottom, and children are experiencing that.

I suppose, as well, the children who have been most affected by the inequalities aspect of this are also the ones who are more likely to have possibly experienced their first family deaths and the whole lack of ritual to deal with grief. This must be terribly difficult for a child if their grandparent has died, and they've not been able to attend any funeral. That must have affected some groups of children more than others.

That's a very good point, and not just grandparents, but parents as well. That must have been unbearable. Parents were taken into hospital and they weren't allowed to have any contact. I don't know if anyone is doing research into that. Obviously, it would have to be very sensitive.

Also, there are children who are in homes where there are real difficulties and where there's domestic abuse. We know that domestic abuse has increased significantly during the pandemic, and we know that being witnesses to domestic abuse can have a really damaging impact on children. And there is the difficulty of escaping during the pandemic, even though the rules are relaxed to enable women – because it is mainly women – to do that.

Yes, I think there are all sorts of ways in which some children will have been affected. And it's not just about what will this mean for children's developments in the future; it's about what is it like now. It's hard enough for adults to get through some of the difficulties. One thing we all have in common is we have all been a child – I am trying to think back – and our experience of time is so different as well. It must have felt like a lifetime in lockdown, an absolute lifetime, with the sense of when is it going to end, which is hard enough for us – it must be really difficult for children.

In a way, that picture that you are painting of the way all the effects of COVID have affected children means that there is quite a lot to be done. Do you think that children, and perhaps how we treat children and older people, are a litmus test for the sort of society that we are?

In many ways, yes, particularly older people who are very reliant on others. I know being older does not necessarily mean that you are any less active than people who are younger. But what has happened in care homes is at the other end of the spectrum.

That reminds me: it has been a very difficult time for children in care. Issues have been raised about those who are normally in touch with their parents not being able to see them, and things like that.

Yes, I think it is a litmus test. It took quite a long time for there to be recognition of the position of frail or older people in care homes. And there is a very strong sense in the policy community that, putting aside education, children qua children have largely been ignored. In New Zealand the prime minister spoke directly to children early on, to report to children about what was happening and what the government would try to do to protect them. There has been nothing like this in this country.

There's a very strong sense among children's organisations that children really need to be at the heart of the recovery. They've not been at the heart of policy during the pandemic, but they do have to be at the heart of the recovery.

Yes, absolutely. We were saying before that children are very aware of the future of the planet. Also, like I said, young people's involvement in Black Lives Matter, in the protests against violence against women and girls, suggests that maybe it is going to come from them. Maybe they're the ones who are going to begin to push this, having had this horrible experience. Certainly, when you just hear the vox pops on the radio of children talking through the pandemic, I'm amazed at how articulate they are about policy, how clear they are about what has gone wrong and what they want. In a sense, there is a feeling amongst the older generation that, actually, and this is not just a 'becoming' issue, it is more about what children inherit from us – the being of the earth and the social that children inherit from us. We have an obligation, as an older generation, to ensure that what they inherit is going to be okay.

That's a very good point. I'm sure there must be a way of articulating that in the 'being and becoming' frame, but it is an intergenerational responsibility, and children are trying to make us aware of our responsibilities towards them. That probably has gone a bit quieter because of the pandemic, because children are not out on Fridays [as part of the School Strikes for Climate] making the case, as they were. It may be there is a lot happening virtually that I am not aware of. But I think it is harder for children to organise in the same way that it is harder for everyone else to organise when we are not supposed to be going out. It is important that they are given the opportunity. And, interestingly, the very first thing that the new Children's Commissioner has said that she wants to do is to have this big conversation with children throughout the country, and I think that is absolutely right. That will provide an opportunity for all those articulate and not-so-articulate voices to be heard. What will happen with that, I do not know, but it seems to be absolutely the right thing for her to be doing.

What are the priorities you think she should have for the next phase, in her job as Children's Commissioner?

Part will depend on what comes out of that consultation because, if it is going to be real, then what the children themselves are saying should be her priority. One thing she could be doing right at the outset is not something that involves lots of research or anything like that. There is a growing feeling, both among children's organisations and certainly in my WhatsApp Peers Group, that we need someone in the Cabinet who speaks for children, or at the very least at a Minister of State level which existed in the Coalition Government. Later it got downgraded to a junior minister. A junior minister's voice squeaks. It is not a loud voice, and that is irrespective of who is in the position. You need someone with the authority of being, at the very least, a Minister of State, but, ideally, given the impact of the pandemic on children, you need someone at Cabinet level.

That is something she could be pushing for behind the scenes. I don't know if she is, but if she managed to achieve that as an incoming Children's Commissioner, that would be really valuable. It goes back to what you were saying earlier about how, if everything is done in silos and you're not looking at childhood in the round, then you get this fragmented policymaking. If you had had someone in the Cabinet with responsibility for children then it would have looked very different during the pandemic

Under New Labour there was a Department for Children, Schools and Families, but it then reverted under the Coalition Government who disaggregated families and children from Education and Schools. Anyway, it is now the Department for Education. These titles are not just symbolic; they actually affect the way things happen. That would be one thing.

Trying to think of it from the perspective of the British Academy's Childhood Policy Programme rather than just my own personal priorities, one of the things that we hope to do through the policy lab and other activities is to better understand children's rights in framing policies on children in all the nations of the UK, and what difference it has made when you incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of the child and when you do not. Those kinds of things.

To the credit of the Coalition Government, they put children's rights in as part of the Children's Commissioner for England's responsibility, because it was not before, whereas it was for the other Children's Commissioners throughout the UK. I would like to see her working with the other Children's Commissioners to understand what role children's rights has played. It's not as if you sign up for the UN Convention and then everything is hunky-dory, but if the message she gets is that it is actually a very helpful starting point, then I hope she might push for England incorporating the UN

Convention on the Rights of the Child. There's a lot of lip service paid to it. Yes, we do a best interests review of this policy or that policy, but there is no evidence to show that it actually was *done* and what *effect* it had. I've worked on a number of areas of policy and interestingly, just quite recently, the Court of Appeal ruled that the exorbitant fee that is charged for children who claimed their right to citizenship – children who were born or have lived in this country all their life but for complex immigration reasons have to register their right as citizens – has been deemed unlawful because there was no evidence that they had looked at the best interests of the children in setting it. A children's rights perspective would be helpful and, as I say, talking with the other Children's Commissioners.

From my own perspective, and consistent with the work we are doing in the programme, there is so much evidence of the hardship that has been experienced, the increase in child poverty, not just numbers, but the depth of child poverty, particularly among black and minority ethnic groups, but not solely. So I would like her to be thinking about what she can be doing and saying that would put the pressure on to take effective action on child poverty, because I think *that* has to be a priority over the next few years.

I suppose in that way those were some of the things that the last Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield, left behind on the table, so to speak. But she also talked about an institutional bias against children in Government. What you have laid out is an attempt to really undermine that bias, to really challenge it and to focus on the children's perspective, voice and agency to have the lives that they should have and that they are entitled to.

Just to round this up, do you feel that the workshops and the programme that you've had have enabled you and your steering group to really focus more on what these priorities are?

Yes. Certainly the feedback we have got from the workshops we held, which has involved policymakers, civil servants, and people on the ground, has been very positive. I hope that some of that learning has filtered through. We have a newsletter, which I think, again, we have had good feedback on, just to keep people abreast of the work we are doing. We're continuing with provocation papers, including actually, going back to what we were talking about earlier, I hope a paper from a young person about the climate change issue. That will be really interesting when we get that.

It is interesting the way the three themes emerged, and they make a coherent whole. They fit together very well. When the Childhood Policy Programme was set up, that wasn't what it was about, but themes clearly have emerged from the work we have done. Inevitably, some people have to move off the steering group because they're

doing other things, and so it reflects those themes better now than perhaps it did at the outset. We have people that are really pushing us on to make sure that we do right by those themes despite the constraints that COVID has placed on us. We are very lucky with the team that we have in the British Academy who are doing the work on it. I just hope that between now and the end of 2021 we can produce some really good, valuable material and also involve children themselves.

The other thing that perhaps I will mention now is that we are hoping we can leave a legacy that the British Academy itself thinks about how it can involve children in the longer term, so it's not just: 'Right, we've done children, so now we can move on to something else.' That is something that we will have to put back to the Public Policy Committee, to think about how we can maintain a children's perspective in the work we do.

That is excellent. I remember some of these issues being raised in research I was doing at the turn of the century, that we were all getting in there about children's voice, children's experiences, how children experience divorce, and how important it was to listen to them and so on, and yet it seems to have ebbed away, certainly over the last 10 to 15 years.

I don't want to be political about it, but it *has* ebbed away. At the same time, as you said, there is an awful lot probably going on under the radar, so to speak, which is perhaps bringing that out more. There's the very fact that the new Children's Commissioner for England has prioritised listening to children. To be fair, earlier Children's Commissioners themselves had various mechanisms for listening to children, such as children's panels, and so forth, but the fact that she has made this a priority makes me think that this is something that she will continue to press on. It hopefully will come back more than the extent to which it has ebbed.

Let's hope so – fingers crossed. Thank you very much for that, Ruth. That reappraisal of where policy is and where it might go was really fascinating.

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To cite the article: Ruth Lister & Fiona Williams (2021), 'The British Academy's Childhood Policy Programme', *Journal of the British Academy*, 9: 147–160.
DOI <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/009.147>

Journal of the British Academy (ISSN 2052–7217) is published by
The British Academy, 10–11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk