

A tough commission

The Office of the Children's Commissioner in England survived the initial quango cull but the Government has announced a review of the new role. The new incumbent Maggie Atkinson tells **Terry Philpot** about her aspirations and priorities, and how she sees children's welfare in a time of cuts

The health secretary Andrew Lansley says that Jamie Oliver's healthy eating initiative is not based on evidence and, anyway, is no more than nanny-like lecturing. His colleague at the Department for Education Michael Gove has slashed the schools building improvement programme cancelling over 700 rebuilding projects and badly needed repairs. Child poverty remains stubbornly high and youth unemployment is now touching one million. These are times to try the hardest souls.

Except, it would appear, Maggie Atkinson, the children's commissioner for England. She does recognise the potential effects – most of which are outside of her remit – that the financial crisis may have on children and young people but says: “We can

either be overwhelmed or we can stand by the promises we have made to them.

“However the children's workforce is reconfigured – whether it shrinks or not – we must be driven by them [children and young people] and their needs in what we do; we cannot afford to leave their issues on the side lines.”

She goes on: “I am an optimist, driven by what children and young people say and how they respond whenever I meet them and whoever they are – care leavers, Romany children, those with learning disabilities, carers, young offenders, the young stars and leaders, or just ordinary kids – and even if they are five or six, it's amazing how well they express themselves to talk about what concerns them.”

Perhaps her optimism is, in part, occasioned by being a new broom in a relatively new post – she joined in March and succeeded Sir Al Aynsley-Green, the first commissioner for England (although last in the home nations) appointed in 2005.

The changes in her office may symbolise a fresh approach afoot: the sign welcoming you to “Al's room” has gone from the office door as has her predecessor's trademark ‘hoodie’.

True, the bright posters in the reception area do give the impression of a multi-national company posing as a nursery, but the enigmatic title 11 Million has been quietly and inexpensively dropped in favour of the mundane but descriptive Office of the Children's Commissioner. The change was suggested, apparently, by children and young people themselves but, presumably, not the same ones who, we were told, wanted 11 Million in the first place.

Atkinson has weathered some early storms – the opposition to her appointment by the Commons' select committee on children that believed that she would be the then children's secretary Ed Balls' poodle; and Gove's claim that she was “just another Labour establishment choice”. And, then, in office, she felt media wrath for saying, fairly uncontroversially – it was hardly a new argument – that the age of criminal responsibility is too low and that the killers of James Bulger should not have been tried in an adult court. But since then she's gone about her business undemonstratively, learning on the job (she has met more than

1,200 children and young people in her first three months), and devising her strategy. She was given what some might regard as a kind of unofficial blessing by being a panel member of Radio 4's Any Questions?

While the office has survived a quango cull, the children's minister Tim Loughton has announced a review of the role. The annual budget has been frozen at £4 million since 2006 and in the last financial year the number of full-time staff fell from 29 to 22. Despite this, cuts are likely to be made.

Atkinson came to a post which is weaker than that of her fellow UK commissioners: it has been widely argued that it lacks independence (she is responsible to the secretary of state), with all references to “rights” – as opposed to children and young people's “interests” – removed from the legislation that enacted into law the commissioner role.

But, she sees virtues here: “My vision is partly determined by what the legislation says, which is that I have to represent the interests of children and young people, but I also have to see that their voice is heard where anything affects them – in social care, education, the criminal justice system and many other areas – and that they should be taken seriously as citizens. This makes me the statutory single champion charged with challenging both local and central government, whichever party is in power, to get the best for the child, so long as this is done in a relationship based on respect between them and adults and – and this is what they say to me all over the country – with a knowledge that they have, and want to exercise, their responsibilities.

“The virtue of the English commissioner's role is in its influence and voice, I am not meant to be directing or rewriting the law.”

She makes a point of emphasising (and will often quote a stance determined by her constituency to support it), that much of her work is driven by

what children and young people say – their right to appropriate treatment when they have emotional and mental problems, not “as cut-down adults”; their experiences of youth offending teams and social care; and changes to education.

The small set-up means that the office often works in partnership with others and she turns down requests for help or action unless the subjects are those she has mapped out for the current year. These are safeguarding, education, health (which includes mental health), youth justice, helping children and young people to make a positive contribution and asylum-seeking children and young people.

The modest resources may account for the unsurprising modesty of the commissioner's impact. Atkinson points to practical successes: that one of the first acts of the new Government was to end the detention of asylum-seeking children and subsequently announce the intention to close the children's wing at Yarl's Wood detention centre; while the two reports produced with YoungMinds (Pushed into the Shadows in 2007 and Pushed Out of the Shadows the following year) led to a ban on adolescents being placed on adult mental health wards from April 2010.

Defeated on the opening up of family courts to the media, she wants to see how children can still be sure that their experiences are heard.

One big effect on children and young people is likely to be the creation of the so-called “free schools”. Here Atkinson expresses herself “agnostic” as to who runs schools but says: “I am concerned about who holds the moral rein when it comes to children who have special needs, who have difficulties at school, who need support and so on.”

She herself went to a Catholic high school near Rotherham in her native Yorkshire and to sixth form college, with the intention of going to teacher training college until Cambridge was suggested to her parents. “I laughed – people from

my background didn't do that.”

She progressed through teaching, educational administration and inspection and was director of children's services at Gateshead before she became commissioner.

She says: “I think I am marked by what marks most people who work with children and young people whoever they are – social workers, teachers, paediatricians, youth workers – which is to draw out from them the best of their qualities. They are driven by a sense to give something back, to see children and to try to improve the chance that the child will grow up as a well-rounded human being even if they face massive challenges in their lives. I think this is a vocation, not in the religious sense but in the sense of wanting to work deliberately to get the best for the child and its life chances. I hear ‘it's not about us, it's about them’ in so many services and schools.” This may prove useful in navigating the choppy waters that lie ahead. ■

CV – Maggie Atkinson

March 2010-present:

children's commissioner, England

2005-2010:

director of children's services Gateshead Council

2003-2005:

group director learning and children, Gateshead

1999-2003:

manager (education standards) Cheshire Council

1998-1999:

assistant director, education, Warrington Council

1992-1998:

general inspector (English), Kirklees Council

1991-1992:

adviser, schools support, Birmingham Council

1989-1991:

regional co-ordinator, North & West Yorkshire local education authorities

1987-1989:

head of English, Birkdale High School, Dewsbury

1979-1987:

teacher, Hungerhill School, Edenthorpe

Other roles:

2008-2009: president, Association of Directors of Children's Services

2009-2010: chair, Children and Young People's Workforce National Partnership



Office of the Children's Commissioner