

Dear colleague,

As you know, the government propose to introduce enhanced support for young people leaving foster care up to the age of 21 from April 2014. Like you, we totally support this opportunity for young people from foster care to receive the care and support they need.

What we cannot accept is the discriminatory act of offering this improved support to young people in foster care, including being supported to remain living at their placement until they are 21, whilst not giving the same right to young people placed in children's homes.

We see this deliberate omission as discrimination, a simple issue of human rights. Young people in care who may have the same needs and challenges will receive different levels of support based solely upon where they are placed. In our view, this is unacceptable.

Because we see this as such a fundamental issue, we felt there was only one option open to us – to challenge the decision and seek equal rights to support for ALL young people leaving care up to 21, wherever they are placed.

Accordingly, we raised a petition to enable people to express their view about this discriminatory proposal. The response was immediately overwhelming. The campaign has received massive support from care leavers, social workers, social work teachers, leading academics, lawyers, providers of residential care and fostering as well as celebrities and other members of the public. The petition was signed by over 3000 people within 10 days, and the number of signatories is still rising. The reason for this overwhelming response was because people know that this is the right thing to do.

We understand the strategy behind your supporting this partial outcome was that it would make extending the support to all young people leaving care easier over time. We also understand that supporting young people leaving residential care in the same way may present a complex range of challenges.

However, whereas we understand your motives, we don't believe that introducing such changes for one group of care leavers will necessarily lead to all care leavers receiving the same right within the foreseeable future.

How many young people discharged from children's homes facing deprivation, homelessness, custody, poverty, exploitation and the range of challenges young care leavers face would be an acceptable number during the period of transition until all young care leavers have the same rights to support?

The only possible answer to that question must be none.

We hope that that will be your view too. We recognise that we are all on the same side and we all want the same things for young people.

We find it totally unacceptable that the nature of aftercare support a young person may receive will be dependent upon their placement, even if their needs are the same. How can such a lottery be acceptable?

We are also convinced that this discriminatory move will cause significant difficulties and distress to children who are not fostered.

The other day in Select Committee, the Secretary of State Mr Gove said that he was 'open minded' and prepared to accept an increased age for leaving care of 21 years of age for all, but only when the quality of children's homes nationally had improved to an unspecified level by some unspecified time in the future. The situation in foster care was 'different' in his view, so young people in foster care could receive enhanced support almost immediately.

This confirms our fears. A young person in a children's home who is settled, enjoys positive relationships and will benefit from remaining there after the age of 18 will not be able to until all children's homes nationally have reached this unspecified standard within an unspecified time. That could take years, if it happened at all.

A young person in foster care who needed to be supported to 21 would be eligible to receive such support – irrespective of the standard of the foster carers or the fostering providers. This is blatantly discriminatory.

We believe that ALL young people leaving care should have equal rights to support up to 21. We know from the names of signatories to the petition that many of you agree with us as individuals.

Over 3600 people have stood alongside us and called for justice. We ask that you too as organisations support our campaign for equality of treatment. We ask that you too stand alongside us and demand equality. What we are seeking is ethical practice, and is not negotiable. Government must not be allowed to deal with care leavers differently.

We recognise that you proudly supported the campaign to gain support for young people leaving foster care up to the age of 21 years. We ask that you now publicly support our petition and our campaign, and declare your support for us on your web sites. Will you do that for the benefit of all care leavers?

Kind regards

The “Every Child Leaving Care Matters” petitioners

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