

In 2014, the government introduced 'Staying Put', a policy that would enable young people placed with foster carers to remain in their placement until they were 21. They would no longer have to leave their home at 18 years of age if it was their wish, in their interests and their carers agreed.

It's well established that many young people leaving care at 18 years old and younger face massive challenges at a time in their lives when they are often least prepared and equipped to deal with them. Many struggle and this is reflected in disadvantage statistics such as NEET, homelessness, percentage of care leavers in custody, or with significant health issues, etc. Allowing young people to remain with their carers until they are 21 was recognised as a positive step to reduce the disadvantage these young people face and allow them to prepare for adult independence with good support so that more would make the transitions successfully at their first attempt.

Accordingly, the Staying Put initiative was most welcome. It then came as a shock to find that this support was to be exclusively for young people from foster care, excluding the 9% or so of young people placed in residential care. This is the more baffling because intrinsically they are the same young people. Children being looked after often move between fostering and residential placements based on their assessed need, and sibling groups are often split between foster care and residential care. This meant that the decision to support one group and not the other was based solely on placement not need, and as such clearly discriminatory, unethical and immoral. As importantly, it made no sense.

Staying Put makes sense – it reduces long term cost by helping young people prepare for future adulthood safely. It allows them time to find work and establish roots in the working world from a secure home base. It helps them to engage in higher education and significantly reduces the risk of future dependency on the state. This support is surely needed by all young people leaving care regardless of their placement?

Supporting young people leaving care to remain in their placement for a few years longer may increase costs in the short term, but is likely to save considerably more in longer term costs in terms of welfare payments, costs to the NHS and the criminal justice system – notwithstanding the massive reduction in suffering and despair for many young people. It clearly makes sound sense that these savings are applied to all young people leaving care. That is why the 'Every Child Leaving Care Matters' (ECLCM) group campaigned for 'Staying Put' rights to be applied to all young people leaving care, not just those leaving foster care.

The challenges facing care leavers are well known, and were identified once again by the experts giving evidence to the parliamentary Education Select Committee that during summer 2014 examined the options for young people leaving care. The Committee recommendations in their report **"Into independence, not out of care: 16 plus care options"** supported the ECLCM position – that all young people leaving care should have as an option the right to remain in their placement until they were 21. It is recognised that many, possibly most young people won't choose to stay in placement, but will still elect to leave care into the community with support. For those who do want to remain and whose needs reflect that wish, it must be an option.

The government rejected the Select Committee's recommendations and instead supported the scoping study. ECLCM were opposed to this. We took the view that there was little to learn that was not already very well known, and time was being wasted when young people were struggling without adequate support. We also struggled with inviting young people in care to select one (possibly two) of four options in the survey which appeared to us to be simply the status quo, which had already failed so many young people in the past. ECLCM also felt that the best people to contribute to a survey about the effectiveness of care leavers' options were care leavers who had experienced these options first hand, which most of the young people in care canvassed almost certainly had not.

Notwithstanding, we were delighted to learn that the scoping survey had found, as did the Select Committee, that all care leavers should have the option to remain in placement until they are 21. **(Staying Put' for young people in residential care: A scoping Exercise: December 2014)**

The report advised that this might cost about £76m a year. For ECLCM, the issue is not whether we can afford this; it is more whether we can afford not to. As noted earlier, the longer term costs of not acting now will probably be much higher, as they have been for over forty years. These costs should be met by central government and not be left to local authorities to meet from budgets that have already been heavily cut. Whether government can afford the cost is a political decision, not an economic one.

ECLCM take the view that the duty to offer an option to remain in placement, be it in foster care or residential care, must be mandatory. We have seen already that not all young people in foster care who qualify for 'Staying Put' support are receiving it. Local authorities say they can't afford it, and simply won't fund it, and there are too few approved carers to meet the practical demands imposed. We saw with the government's 'Care Leavers' Charter' that even though most local authorities signed up to it, not all applied it by any means because it was not mandatory and they could not afford to meet the cost. This must not be allowed to happen to 'Staying Put'

There are many good reasons for the government to accept 'Staying Put'. It has been examined and recommended as appropriate by the Select Committee and the later scoping study. It is supported by many leading experts in the field, many of whom gave evidence to the Select Committee. It is the only non – discriminatory, ethical and moral option and is supported by care leavers. It will be cheaper over the long term. It will also reduce suffering and support more children to make a successful transition to adulthood. Any caring government will have no choice but implement it in full.