



Dear Friends,

I am writing this letter on behalf of and with the agreement of all of our Board members who have assisted its preparation.

First and foremost, we would all like to thank you for your continued and relentless support. Some of you have been with us since the start of our journey in 2013 whilst others may have joined our campaign more recently. Regardless, you are the campaign and without all of you we would not have travelled so far.

You will have been aware that over the course of recent months, our position has changed slightly. You may have noted that we have been promoting the new government initiative 'Staying Close'. We feel that this is the time to explain our stance and try to provide you with the background that has led to our current position.

The right for all young people leaving residential care to 'Stay Put' in their placements until they reach the age of 21 is the foundation of our campaign and this remains our aspiration for all care leavers – including those many young people leaving foster care currently who should already have this right, but many of whom still are unable to 'Stay put'. Sadly, funding for Staying Put was never adequate, and many local authorities have been unable to fund all young people leaving foster care to remain. Even now, whether a young person leaving foster care is able to 'stay put' is a post code lottery, dependent upon where they live. There is much yet to do

You will be aware that in preparing his report into 'Residential Care in England' (published July 2016) Sir Martin Narey received a submission on behalf of our campaign along with a number of personal submissions from some Board members, based upon their own personal experience of the children's residential care system in England.

Ian Dickson and I were able to meet with Sir Martin Narey. Indeed, we met on two occasions and entered into correspondence with him to support our discussions. I believe Sir Martin listened to our views carefully. He was of course aware of the arguments for and against young people leaving residential care being allowed to 'stay put' and the relative merits of each argument. He accepted much of our case, but an ongoing concern about safeguarding and the projected cost of implementing staying put for all care leavers remained as significant issues. Whilst it is clear that not all young people leaving residential care would want to 'stay put' past the age of 18 years, the projected cost was viewed as a serious obstacle to this option being acceptable to government.

In my opinion, at the time of Sir Martin Narey's review we were dealing with a government that may well have had more sympathy with care leavers than the current one, so the situation has probably become even more challenging.

Sir Martin sought our views on a 'Staying Close' model that I believe had been proposed to him by the 'Care Alliance'. We explained that as presented, this was neither new nor acceptable and was little more than better children's homes may have been providing for years. It was our view that this basic model was not enough. He invited us to come up with a more acceptable model. We did so, and we firmly believe that this was the model that he proposed in his final report along with a firm recommendation that Ian Dickson and I should be invited to participate in the planning of a Staying Close model with the DfE.

The Board of ECLCM has spent many hours debating what our position in relation to 'Staying Close' should be. When the campaign began in 2013, we were clear that we are a 'single issue' campaign and that single issue was that all care leavers should be afforded an identical option to stay put in their placements until age 21. Notwithstanding the limited 'post code lottery' implementation of Staying Put for 'foster care leavers' some of our supporters might be unhappy for the ECLCM campaign to move away from this single objective. Why then are we prepared to support the current development of the recently published 'Staying Close' proposal?

I cannot deny that to some extent this is a pragmatic decision. It is very clear that this government will not consider Staying Put for all residential care leavers. There remain concerns about potential safeguarding issues, but we believe that the main concern is cost. We believe that the discussions and negotiations in which we have been involved with colleagues from the DfE have been fruitful and that our involvement has led to tangible improvements in the proposed framework for the 'Staying Close' pilots.

There is a recognition that for some residential care leavers the best and available option should be to stay in their residential placement; this was included in Sir Martin's recommendations and the papers now published by DfE. However, there are other options included as part of the 'Staying Close' proposal.

The support for the 'Staying Close' placement would be delivered by the children's home with a contracted, commissioned package on offer.

Young people leaving care will be able to 'stay close' to the children's home they are living in at the time they are due to leave care. Where young people are placed away from their 'home' area, these 'out of borough' their 'Staying Close' placement must be close to the children's home they are living in not in their home Local Authority area.

We have been able to move towards a definition of Staying Close which includes:

1. The young people will be supported by a 'team around the child (young adult)' that should be chaired by an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) in an attempt to make the 'Staying Close' placement a more natural and planned progression rather than the young person simply 'keeping in touch' with a former residential placement.
2. The main vehicle for positive change and support for young people in the care system is the relationships they enjoy with those who care for them and significant others. For the child living in a children's home to develop a meaningful trusting relationship with an adult takes time. Trust is not transferrable for children in care any more than it is for any of us and as such the availability of ongoing relationship with 'their' trusted adults is essential to the success of 'Staying Close'.
3. We have stressed in our work with the DfE that key relationships established in a young person's life in the children's home are maintained into their Staying Close' placement. We propose that the key worker takes an active role, but not just the key worker. The whole residential team must play a part in the 'Staying Close' plan. This is based upon the realisation that key workers can move on, but residential teams rarely do.

4. The key worker and the team from the children's home will be at the centre of their support team for as long as the young person finds it helpful until they are 21. A personal advisor (PA) will also be involved and the young person will be supported to forge a positive relationship with them as part of the 'Staying Close' team. Planning will be agreed by the team and the young person will be an active part of that ongoing planning.
5. We have established the fact that what is meant by 'close' would need to be defined specifically for each young person, determined by their wishes and capacity e.g. whilst some young people might consider a short 'bus ride' to be 'close' other may need to live within a short walking distance. This would need to be agreed with each young person individually when the plan was being agreed. Indeed, consideration would need to be given to the reality that buses may stop running at a certain time, or that sometimes a young person may not have sufficient money to pay bus fare. As such the young person's planning meeting (attended by that young person) will consider possible options and explore the viability of the accommodation being 'close enough'.
6. The accommodation provided must be "suitable and sustainable" (DfE). A means of monitoring this to ensure that it is and remains so is currently under consideration.
7. The support should be agreed by the young person and all the members of the 'team around the child' and underwritten in a contract between the local authority and the children's home
8. The offer of support must be both tangible and meaningful. It must be "more than a loose offer of support and sporadic contact....it should mirror, as far as possible, the way that parents support their own children to move into independence and adulthood.....should be led by the particular needs and preferences of the each young person" (DfE)
9. Planning must be carried out sufficiently early, indeed some time before the young person is due to be discharged to ensure all elements are in place, fully agreed and funded. They must be agreed with the young person to ensure that any future Staying Close arrangement provides the right support. "...we want to see evidence of young people's experience and voice contributing to the design of services" (DfE). Ian and I were determined to ensure that leaving care is seen as a process not an event and should form part of planning from the moment a child enters care.
10. The DfE currently state that the Staying Close plan must "Be the responsibility of the originating local authority to fund and plan for Staying Close arrangement." This remains an issue for further discussion in our view.

There is still work to be done. For example, we are determined that Staying Close arrangements must be regulated and inspected by a (properly funded) Ofsted and Ian and I plan to meet with senior OfSTED officials imminently to discuss this. Failure to monitor the plan to agreed standards could lead to significant difficulties so further discussion is necessary.

Our work with DfE continues and we understand that we will remain part of the process for some time – still in a voluntary capacity. Discussions with the DfE to date have been cordial and positive and we look forward our future partnership positively.

'Staying Close' is not 'Staying Put', but we firmly believe that if the details can be agreed during the forthcoming pilots, and regulation and funding can be agreed, it can offer a very positive alternative to 'Staying Put' that could offer real support to many young people leaving care in the future, much better than the support offered to too many care leavers in the past and currently. We seek your support and blessing to continue with this amended agenda which we honestly believe offers a viable alternative.