

A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of meeting Every Child Leaving Care Matters (ECLCM) Board member, Ben Ashcroft on the first day of his incredible 261-mile walk from Halifax to London. I have followed and supported the ECLCM campaign on social media for a while and it was great to be able to meet with one of the founders in person.

Wandering around my quirky neighbouring town of Hebden Bridge on a busy Sunday, I struggled to spot Ben in the park until we had that typically British moment of discovery, as I walked towards him at the café both talking to each other on our mobile phones. Getting lost was perhaps apt under the circumstances, given the many looked-after children in residential care who find that at 18 they are no longer entitled to state support and are left, lost and alone to live independently in an adult world for the first time; unlike those in foster care who remain supported for a further three years.

Ben talked to me about his experiences in care and his work supporting young people with complex and challenging needs, work he was clearly passionate about. As a Conservative Councillor with Rochdale Council, I am especially pleased that in our role as corporate parent we not only exempt careleavers from council tax, but also support the Res2Care programme which ensures parity between young people in foster care and those in a residential care setting, so that both groups receive care and support to 21. Ben made it clear to me that care homes were not always the poor relation of the two portrayed by the media. He and others like him often preferred the sense of belonging that residential care offered, growing up with other people who shared similar life experiences. By knowing that they would be supported equally in foster care or in a children's home, young people and the services who work alongside them were able to choose the most appropriate environment for each individual.

Ben explained that it was all about having a choice and that 'Staying Close' was a way of doing that. Some young people were ready and eager to make their own way in the world and that was fine, but others needed the reassurance that there were people they could turn to for advice or a place to retreat to if they had a 'wobble'. A comfort blanket, as it were, which they could hold fast to as often as was needed until they felt confident enough to get by on their own. By enabling careleavers to return to the residential setting they grew up in also allows them to retain important personal friendships and become role models for younger residents who can learn from their journey into independence. I was surprised to hear that the additional costs for Staying Close support would be minimal as many people would choose not to take up the offer. It was having that choice though which was so important. Given the small cost to the public purse, I wondered why the campaign wasn't unanimously supported by the Government – lack of awareness I guess; something people like Ben and the team are working hard to address. I, for one, will be supporting them in their work.

I left Ben on the towpath and hoped that as he continued his journey, speaking at universities and meeting influential people along the way, more people would understand that all that was needed was simple – equality for children in foster care and residential care and the reassurance that someone would be there to hold their hand as they took their first steps into independence - just as we would wish for our own children. Every Child Leaving Care Matters.