

It felt good to be donning my Boot Out Austerity t-shirt once again, early on the morning of Tuesday 10th October, before heading off on the tube to St Pancras Station, en route to St Albans to meet another long distance walker, Ben Ashcroft, of Every Care Leaving Child Matters (ECLCM). Walking the 100 miles from Birmingham to Liverpool earlier this year, in the company of a wonderful band of social workers, to draw attention to the devastating impact of austerity measures, had given me the taste for walking long distances, especially in the cause of social justice. And nothing can beat walking with committed companions, walking step by step together, mile after mile, sharing conversation, encouragement, laughs and quiet interludes, and a well-earned drink at the end of the day.

I can't imagine a more committed companion than Ben, whose Halifax to London via Manchester and Liverpool route made the Boot Out Austerity walk seem like a stroll in the park. He was nearing the end of his epic journey the day I found him in Costa Coffee on St Albans High Street, yet he seemed as fresh as a daisy to me. I'd been following his walk with interest on Twitter, delighted to see him joined at various times by other Boot Out Austerity walkers and members of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), Donna Peach, Jon Dudley, and Angi Naylor (Angi is also on the Executive of the Social Workers Union, who have been supporting BASW's anti-austerity campaigning from the outset). So it was good to meet him now in person, and to offer more support from BASW, both to Ben himself and to the important campaign he was walking to promote. I was not fully aware of the history of ECLCM before I met Ben, but that's the beauty of walking with people, it's a great way to talk and to learn about stuff.

Also with Ben when I arrived at the Costa were Harvey Gallagher and Tanya Moore. Tanya, who lives in St Albans, was there to see us off and wish Ben well. It was interesting to chat with Tanya a little, and to hear about her connections with the people at the Centre for Social Work Practice, one of the organisers of an event I am to be speaking at on 8th December, on 'Radical Relationships'. The aim of this will be to connect radical social work with relationship-based work, and I'll be mentioning the way relationships can be forged by walking together with radical ends in mind.

Tanya waved us off at the edge of town, leaving Ben, Harvey and me to march off together, south from St Albans towards our eventual destination of Camden Town. It soon became clear to me that the pace was going to be somewhat above Boot Out Austerity levels. So the home-made flapjack that Tanya had given to Ben was going to be a welcome energy boost later. In his Newcastle United shirt, Harvey looked a sporty type and I wasn't surprised to learn that he's run marathons. I don't recall us stopping at all between setting off and breaking for lunch at South Mimms services. So I was relieved to get there and rest my limbs for a while, and though I assume Harvey and Ben were too, it didn't look to me like they had broken a sweat. The huge breakfast bap I had fuelled me for a good part of the afternoon, though it probably weighed me down too.

I enjoyed talking with Harvey about his role as the Chief Executive of the Nationwide Association of Fostering Providers, and given the huge increase in the proportion of independently supported foster placements for looked after children over the years it seems important that BASW has good connections with Harvey's organisation. I also discovered that Harvey and Ben had known each other for a number of years, and it was pleasant to walk in the company of two good friends.

Most of the route was actually quite dull, as we walked along the busy main roads leading south from St Albans into north London, though it did get a little more interesting as we walked along the streets of Ben's capital city destination. Then we had a treat towards the

final stages, as we walked across Hampstead Heath, and suddenly came upon one of its fantastic views of London's centre, including the Houses of Parliament, where Ben was to end his walk and speak tomorrow.

We then walked along some streets of affluence, a long way from the worlds of young people who leave residential care, often prematurely and not adequately supported, the young people who Ben and ECLCM are speaking up for so powerfully. Ben learned along the way that day that BBC 5 Live wanted to interview him the next morning, and what a superb job he did, talking then with Nicky Campbell. Having spent the day before walking with him, I felt proud of Ben as I listened. What a great ambassador and campaigner for young people leaving care, everyone of whom matters.

Guy Shennan
Chair, British Association of Social Workers