

I have to say that I am thrilled and happy to be back contributing to our campaign for our children and young people in and leaving care. I have had my own demons to fight but now have some stability in my own life and have had access to interventions that I should have had many years ago. I know first-hand what a lack of support and options can do for a child who has had many adverse childhood experiences only to be abandoned by the state without any person, any interventions, any support to help me. I may have been 'damaged goods' but I was made to feel like a reject ; simply not worth caring about or for. Self-esteem was pretty well zero and it felt like there was only one way to go – down. And I did.

Some of our children have multiple moves within the care system before finding a children's residential home that they can call their home. It does happen, you know. Listen to the song by 'K' on our website. I've not met the lad but even so I believe in him. I'm glad to say that he feels (and that's what matters) that this is his home and so do the adults around him. They may be workers not alternative parents but they seem to have gained his trust - they believe in him and in turn he's obviously starting to believe in himself too. I often think is there any need for all the moves around foster carers before eventually getting moved to Residential Care? Is someone suggesting that the string of foster carers left in the back pages of a child's case file were all useless? I simply can't believe that. Maybe it's not about the carers, maybe it's about the child – does anyone ask them if they wanted to be fostered again and again and again? Does anyone assess the child's needs and conclude that right now this child's needs would be better met in a children's home for all the positive reasons that a children's home can sometimes be a better place to be, for now. A little less intense perhaps? A little less under the caring scrutiny of two pairs of eyes always focussed on you – or feeling that they are. A place where a child who is so sad, or demanding, or challenging, or lively, or complex or perhaps all of these would reasonably be expected to exhaust any couple or single carer. How many broken placements and partial attachments does it take to make a child feel like they are just a waste of time? Useless? Five? Ten? More? I'm not saying foster care doesn't work because it does for many, for the majority it's by far the best option. But not for all. For some they will be better placed to move to foster parents after they have settled in a children's home for a while receiving the specialist care they need at that time.

I believe children should be asked what they feel will work for them and where they believe they will find stability and be able to thrive and be happy. I have met and worked with many children that finally find a place where they feel comfortable, happy, loved and have found stability with people that they are building strong and meaningful relationships. Where trust is established between the (residentially placed) child and carers. For some children this is the first time that they have enjoyed a period of stability in a place they feel happy to call home. Unfortunately, it can be and often is seen as a last resort placing a child in residential settings even though I, for example, much preferred being in residential care. I, like many children preferred, to be with people 'just like me'. They became more like a family; they were my friends. I truly believe the more we consult children in what will work best for them, the more successful it will be for them, to find a place they call home and they will be happy in and want to remain.

Sadly at 16 - 18 years old our children in residential care know they will be asked to leave their home even though they are happy and have stability, security, support, love, strong

relationships where trust is established and they are thriving. Does that make sense? Not to me and not to many children either.

Some children, perhaps long before they get to 16 will try to break down these relationships before this happens to them. These children have precious little control over their future lives if they see that it is mapped out for them. What they do have is a degree of control over the timing insofar as they sometimes decide to stop investing in relationships that others will break for them – whether they want to or not. What's the point? However I 'behave, conduct myself, live my life' someone else has already decided I'm out of here so I'll decide for myself and I'll break those relationships to 'prove' they don't matter to me. Their behaviours may change because they know they will be abandoned by their corporate parents and sent into the big wide world with little to no support and won't be able to maintain the relationships they have formed with their carers'.

Sadly children in residential care currently don't have the option to 'stay put' or a good choice of options. The average length of stay in a children's home remains at about 6 -7 months. That's not because so many placements in residential care break down it's because the average age of arriving there is over 15 – almost(definitely?) too late. Imagine starting a job. It's a scary job, it's a really hard job but you really want a job and you've been made redundant 15 times in the last 4 years. You start the job and are told that no matter how well you do, how hard you work, how well you get on with all of your colleagues, how many good ideas you introduce the job is temporary. You have 6 months. Do you do your best, risk exposing yourself to ridicule by your colleagues? You are then promised a month's salary at the time you leave (a 'leaving job grant' if you like) and you get this whether you've done brilliantly or simply shown up to work every day. Even if you decide to quit the job before your time is up once you've passed a certain date you can have the money. What would you do? Take the money on the first day you could and run for it? Maybe.

Legislation discriminates against some of our most vulnerable children in residential care. There are about 13% of children who are looked after in residential care. I believe residential care should be seen as a positive option and not just a last resort for our children.

Some councils are now building more residential homes for our children. When we started the campaign there were 9% in residential care who were discriminated against. I think there needs to be a change in the general public's attitude in regards to 'NOT IN MY BACK YARD' attitude. Do they know that only 1% of children in care are there because of socially unacceptable behaviour? Do they know that 63% have been abused or neglected? So many of our children in care have had abusive and traumatic early childhood experiences which they're not to blame for. Would this be good enough for their children? I suspect not and it's not good enough for our children who are looked after and arguably need this support more than most in society.

Children deserve the best start to life and chance to thrive and not just survive. They are our children and our future!

I've said this many times - it is a false economy not to support our children and young people. Save lives now and money later. We need to be investing in our children like we would our own.

I feel Government are too short term and don't see the bigger picture. We need a ten-year plan that will invest in our children and it should be invested and fully funded no matter what Government changes happen or who is elected.

OUR CHILDREN, OUR FUTURE. OUR HANDS THEY'RE IN!