



As we approach our next 'virtual Board meeting I have decided to try to get something down in writing and out there to our supporters. Not in the usual format I'm afraid – more of a blog or even a 'stream of consciousness' I hope that's OK? Talking of blogs we have a couple of new ones on the website - one from the terrific Wayne B - <https://blogbywb.wordpress.com/2020/08/12/about-asking-for-help/> - and another from me which I hope shows what can be achieved when relationships with young people who have been in care are maintained well into adulthood.

The message below includes an update on the work being undertaken that will support our campaign come to fruition, this includes

- COVID – impact on care leavers
- Work with the Children's Minister
- Update on Care Leavers Covenant
- Work with Children's Commissioner
- ECLCM's support of Article 39 to stop statutory instrument 445
- ECLCM's position on unregistered and unregulated homes
- ECLCM's support that The Care review must be fully independent

I think all the possible and even some ridiculous adjectives have been used to describe what we have all been going through over the course of the last six months. I'm not going to try to add my description to others but obviously we must recognise that an event that seems to have occurred about every century for the last few hundred years is not one that anyone can be prepared for and self-evidently we haven't been prepared for this one. As I write, the lockdown appears to be returning given the ruling on households meeting – or not – in the last twenty-four hours.

Tens of thousands have died; hundreds of thousands have lost loved ones; our society (indeed from what I read and hear virtually all societies) have been shredded. Once, a long time ago when I was a student (sociology obviously!) I studied a chap called Emile Durkheim coined the word 'anomie'. This is a social condition in which there is a disintegration or disappearance of the norms and values that were previously common to the society the concept might be thought of as "normlessness." From (my sometimes unreliable) memory, he first used it in his book 'Le Suicide' and explained his theory in respect of the increased incidence of suicide because the state is failing or perhaps some external factor – such as Covid19 – is leading to the disintegration of 'norms'. I feel that this is in part where we are now. Covid has wrecked or badly impacted on so many lives but none more so than Care Leavers – those in the process of leaving (or commonly, in my terms, evicted from) care. I have listened to countless people discussing the impact of Covid, as have we all but some discussions have particularly resonated with me and these generally involve those making comparisons between living through Covid and living through a war. The most common point of reference for those who can offer us 'spoken, lived, experienced' history (strange how

we afford these folk great credibility – and rightly so -but we don't do the same for care leavers and care experienced people when discussing proposals for the present and or future but that's for another part of this newsletter) has been the Second World War. Of course, this was a catastrophic and unimaginably difficult time for the country but what many of those experienced people were saying when lockdown was first imposed was that Covid is in many senses worse. The reason being that society was made to face inwards. Friends and families could not gather together in solidarity, defiance and determination to 'get through it' as they are described as having done in innumerable examples of 'the war-time spirit'.

They know and I believe them. What occurred to me is that what those people are describing as being possible in the war and denied them by Covid is routinely denied to care leavers every day, every month, week and year. Where is their support network? Where is their family (corporate or otherwise)? When they are frightened, hungry, cold, homeless, struggling with their emotional or mental well-being where do they turn? It actually doesn't matter because many or most simply have nowhere to turn, no long-lasting sustainable relationships, no support network.

So, what has this to do with Émile Durkheim and even ECLCM. It has this to do with it. We know that the incidence of suicide among Care Leavers as a group is already massively higher than national averages. Maybe someone will create statistics on this after Covid that will evidence my take on Durkheim's theory and its relevance to 'anomie' and 'normlessness'. I hope so and I sincerely hope that I am wrong, but I fear I could be right. I imagine that the already frightening incidence of suicides and suicide attempts by care leavers will have risen. If I am wrong, then that's OK then? No, it's not because it will simply mean that things haven't got worse.

So how have we tried to mitigate this risk during Covid?

Children's Minister, Vicky Ford M.P.

Of course we have continued to do what we always do and put things 'out there' but that was not enough, we know that in relative terms we are a tiny whisper when it comes to influencing any decision makers so we targeted politicians with our social media activities. I am pleased to say that the Children's Minister – or more likely one of her team might have seen something but regardless and for whatever reason she contacted us and asked for a telephone conversation at the end of March. Although the notice was virtually non-existent we agreed and spoke with her, some of her senior civil servants and Mark Riddell. To be fair she asked what could be done to help care leavers and those about to leave care during the 'Covid period – which of course was an unknown time at that (and still this) point.

We made a number of asks and albeit hurriedly created we sent this list to Ms Ford's 'diary manager'

Including

1. Option to remain in care until ceases. This is not a back door bid for Staying Put! Obviously, a problem until we have greater capacity but may be accommodated / mitigated by
 - a. Speeding up new registration processes in C Homes and relaxing some rules for foster carers numbers of placements.
 - b. Not a license to increase use of unregulated homes

2. Emotional well-being and M Health
 - a. Already a feature for many C Leavers
 - b. Isolation will exacerbate
 - c. C Leavers more isolated than is usually the case

- d. They have limited or no support network
 - e. For those homeless it's even worse – emergency accommodation an option?
 - f. Access to health services – particularly M Health
3. Communications
- a. What is being done digitally?
 - b. I've looked on C Leaver Covenant website – nothing that I can see – should be a headline. Worried about what Coronavirus may mean to you?
 - c. Here's how we can help.
 - d. But can they?
 - e. What's there – see later what can be there in respect of digital and other platforms in respect of health, isolation, money worries, support, guidance, affording to stay online.
 - f. So much good is coming of this dreadful crisis in terms of communities coming together and supporting each other let's treat this threat as an opportunity to achieve the same for care leavers of all ages.
4. Access to funds
- a. Many tend to live hand to mouth
 - b. How will they pay rent?
 - c. Buy food?
 - d. Access medication?
 - e. Keep their 'mobile device' or similar paid for and with sufficient credit?
 - f. How will they maintain their data source?
5. Coronavirus Act
- a. Obviously(?) a piece of permissive legislation to deal with the crisis but who is explaining this to care leavers? They often don't have that parental figure and those that do could well understand that the act enables even that to be lowered in priority – potentially altogether.
 - b. Where do they turn then?
 - c. Are we in contact with all care leavers? No, we know that so how will we reach those who are 'lost' – if not on-line nowhere if fear.
6. Homeless Care Leavers
- a. What if any, special provision is being /has been established for them?
 - b. If there is none will there be any?
 - c. If there is some how is it being communicated?
7. Self-isolation – links with 2.
- a. Many care leavers, like others of similar ages are likely – if not strongly advised not to do so – to continue to congregate with friends. They often have no (trusted) adult to reinforce this message.
 - b. Their self-isolation, if because they are ill with CV is likely to be far worse than others, almost inevitably alone
 - c. They commonly can't shop on-line because they don't have debit/credit cards or simply the funds in any account they might have – so how will they eat?
8. This crisis will, even if we manage well, almost certainly raise the already unacceptable numbers of Care Leaver suicides.
9. We need something on-line as a matter of urgency. I am in touch with people who are working in this space who may be able to offer some instant responses and would be happy to make connections if not already there.

Ms Ford invited us to work through the list so we did, explaining as best we could what the different points meant and why we think them relevant. My interpretation of the meeting was that she accepted that each had validity but then I would think that wouldn't I?!

She did promise that she would be discussing each point with the Secretary of State and I must accept that she did; she indicated that many of these things were already under consideration but then again maybe she would, wouldn't she?!

Frankly she made some promises or assurances that did not come to pass in the suggested timescale, so I did follow up with emails to her team and eventually changes did come through.

Did it make any difference – certainly some things changed at least for the duration of the pandemic but whether because of ECLCM I don't know, and we are not and never have been in the business of making claims that we can't substantiate. Certainly we know of a number of children who were allowed to stay in their children's home beyond eighteen and in our view this has yet again established the FACT that there is rarely a reason why this offer cannot be made from which we can extrapolate that @rescaredo21 should be a right for all children in residential care. Some of the 'loosening' of support to existing care experienced young adults was cancelled but how much was left as 'normal' we simply don't know as we can't research this but we would be grateful for any of our readers to let us have examples of good or bad practice that they have personally experienced or witnessed.

Care Leavers Covenant

In the midst of the pandemic the Care Leaver Covenant contract came up for renewal and I know that several bids were made to operate it in the future. Spectra First were awarded the contract for a second term. Whilst the first iteration of the Covenant has not realised its potential it is really hoped that a second contract term will see huge improvement and progress on reaching, supporting, finding employment, training and educational opportunities for care leavers.

Children's Commissioner.

I have had some conversations with the Children's Commissioner who I feel has been laudably vocal through this pandemic on a range of issues – not least the lack of consultation over the introduction of Statutory Instrument 445 by the Government – of which more later. Personally, I believe that she has been doing a good job representing the most vulnerable children (including her work on getting all children back to school) and Anne will be missed when she leaves her post next year. It's not for me or even ECLCM to eulogise but for what it's worth I respect and applaud the fact that she has been prepared to speak for children and not simply fall in with bad practice by Government. The advert is already out for her successor and I hope that we may be able to change the proposed process of the selection of that person. Through my links with NCERCC I would recommend a couple of articles to you <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/blogs/article/children-s-rights-must-be-central-in-recruitment-of-new-commissioner> and <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/blogs/article/five-tasks-for-the-incoming-children-s-commissioner> .

If you think it's OK to appoint a new Commissioner with no input from children or care experienced people, then don't waste your time reading these short articles. If you feel otherwise then it would be interesting to add your voice and opinion to help get the best Children's Commissioner for children

Statutory Instrument 445

Many or most of you will have heard of this heinous 'legislation'. Thankfully Article 39 a small independent charity has magnificently coordinated a legal challenge to this legislation. Rather than me explain why please follow this link <https://www.cypnow.co.uk/news/article/article-39-granted-judicial-review-against-dfe-over-relaxation-of-statutory-duties>. There are, within that article a couple of links to others, notably Mark Kerr's, that I'd advise you to read too. However, if you haven't got time then just think about a piece of legislation that the Government tried to introduce back in 2017, the Child and Family Social Work Bill which coincidentally (???) contained many of the exemptions created by SI445. Ultimately but only after a Judicial review these exemptions were dropped. Come the Coronavirus and this Government tries to do what they'd previously been forced not to. They will make vulnerable children within and at risk of entering the Care system the more vulnerable with the exemptions that they are currently offering and, in most cases, continue to plan to offer. ECLCM were signed up to Article 39's (@Article39, on twitter) campaign from the outset and our (limited weight is right behind Carlyne Willow in her efforts.

Finance

With reference to the money that you all raised for us please be assured that its still all in the bank. Obviously, we've not been travelling about over the last few months so there have been no fares to pay but it will be there as and when we need it.

The team

Well it's 'as you were' on this score. A big personal 'thank you' to Ben from me for taking over the Twitter account for a short time as I've a personal issue to get through and he willingly volunteered to keep some activity up there – please feel very welcome to join in. Frankly, as with all of you we have been dealing with lots of things during the pandemic that has meant a bit of a slowdown in activity but we're still here and still doing what we can within our personal means and abilities. It will be great to meet up in the next week or so to try to plan and revisit new and older strategies for achieving our aims for children in residential care. We've put a couple of blogs out (thanks Wayne for yours) and would be very happy to accept other offers - perhaps especially from care leavers of care experienced people on how they have and are negotiating the pandemic?

Unregistered and Unregulated Homes

This is another issue that hasn't 'gone away' because of Covid, in fact it could have got worse – though as ever no-one knows because by its very nature it is under the radar. Again, our campaign has supported those who share a belief that no child (i.e. person under the age of 18 should be placed in an unregulated and therefore unregistered home). For some personal reasons I have not yet caught up on the most recent developments but I am aware that the BBC intend to highlight the issue again in September and literally as I write I am thrilled to see Anne Longfield, the Children's Commissioner has spoken out against the practice of placing children in unregulated accommodation.

<https://childrenengland.us6.list-manage.com/track/click?u=14466961e06a4f2dfbaae3cf8&id=8b5ef2bfef&e=9fabdd8360>

Nor is the answer to suggest registration of these homes against a set of regulations different to the Children's Homes Regulations and Quality Standards, 2015. If the accommodation is caring for children, then it is a children's home and should be subject to the existing regulations – not some of a lower and / or different standard. Of

the regulations in relation to the care of children – Adoption, Fostering and Children’s Homes only the latter has ‘Standards’ that are prefixed by ‘Quality’, not ‘Minimum’ – this is thanks to those who fought for an improved standard for residential care when the standards were being reviewed and their achievement must not be ‘watered down’ because it suits the Government not to tackle the real issues about Unregulated homes. Some may be excellent, more may be good, but some are undoubtedly havens for abusers and those who prey on vulnerable children by criminally exploiting them, by exploiting them sexually and possibly even as part of a trafficking network bringing vulnerable children into the UK. These latter ‘homes’ are in my opinion merely the front of Organised Crime gangs. Is this acceptable to you? If not, please support the campaigns to stop the use of Unregulated homes now.

The Care Review

There is little tangible progress on this as far as I can see. I appreciate that Covid has taken over the headlines and much Government and Civil Service time, but this cannot be used as an excuse for delays in making progress at least on identification of the format and constitution of the review body. The latter can have no credibility if the voices of children in care and the care experienced community are not given the opportunity to be equal partners within the group identified to conduct the review. ECLCM are a signatory to a letter sent to Gavin Williamson, the Secretary of State in January of this year by John Radoux demanding that the review is fully independent. The letter can be seen here:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1d4dWRUCmwLTtFrwB4Y2GcWohU7yYgayhOGbKXClo-b8/edit>

Please lend your voice to this demand. It’s simple really; when considering what is required, fall back on the old but still relevant question, “Would this be good enough for your child”? Children in care are our children and we should accept nothing less than we would for our own children. The system as it stands was created without consultation with children in care or care experienced people. I am by no means saying that it is all bad – some of the legislation is excellent – but all of it belongs to another, historical time and if we are to review the system, and we should, then let’s do it properly with people who know and have worked in and around the system but crucially those who live in and have passed through that system.

At this point I think I’ve rambled enough so I will close sending you my best wishes that you will enjoy good health and survive whatever this dreadful pandemic may throw at us next. Stay well and stay safe.

ED Nixon
Chair
ECLCM Board