



EVERY CHILD



LEAVING CARE MATTERS

Campaign Newsletter – A letter from the Chair

December 2020

**EVERY CHILD LEAVING
CARE MATTERS**

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THE PETITION**

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ECLCM BOARD



Ben was welcomed into his new role as Vice-chair of the team having received the unanimous support of colleagues in discussions at the last meeting.

There will be some changes in the coming months. Two of the existing team will not be able to remain in their positions beyond February or March – for very positive personal reasons which will be made public in due course. On the other hand another Board member who has not been able to attend for a while will, we hope, be in a position to return at some point in the new year so at this stage we do not feel any need to take action to increase the Board membership.

STAYING CLOSE PILOTS

Jane wrote, on behalf of the Board to all of the Staying Close Pilots to ask how they and their Young people are doing through the various lockdowns.

I'm pleased to say that we received responses from three of them. Sue Read in Portsmouth, Rosie-Mai Iredale in Bristol and Susan Blake in North Tyneside. Firstly, thank you to all three of you for being willing to share your very helpful written responses. It would be unfair to go into detail here as that's not what we agreed but Board members were all at pains to say that they were very impressed and delighted to read just how much effort staff and young people are expending in helping everyone to get through the times brought about by Covid-19. The commitment of staff and young people appears to be exemplary and we can only imagine that the young people are happy to have others care for and about them. Obviously a range of issues have been experienced such as isolation and loneliness and it was fantastic to read how such matters have been mitigated by using a range of inventive and innovative approaches. It's also good to know that there has been relatively small movement of young people given the reason is that it's better to 'stay home' than moving out into the community in such challenging times.

Unfortunately, we have not yet had responses from St Christopher's, Fairways, NE Lincolnshire or Bristol but we look forward to doing so.

Staying Close is not, of course, Staying Put but when it was agreed we took it as a 'steppingstone' to get there and this remains our view. We will support the projects in any small way that we can.

COVID-19

This has been the most awful of times for so many people in the country in living memory and our heartfelt commiserations go out to those who have lost their loved ones to Coronavirus.

Almost nothing good can be said to have come from this dreadful virus but perhaps we should note something that has, in principle, been helpful to the case for @rescaredo21.

Those who have followed the campaign for any length of time will recall that in the early days we hit a brick wall among some politicians and others who said that adults over 18 could not remain in their children's home because they could present a risk to children there. This was always a fatuous argument and easy enough to dispel for those willing to listen to a range of reasons – but some of course don't want to have a discussion they'd rather cling to their own supposition regardless of evidence to the contrary. Well you may recall that in the early days of the first lockdown the Children's Minister, Vicky Ford, agreed that no young person would be made to leave their children's home during emergency measures just because they were becoming 18 and to the best of our knowledge (though we acknowledge that our sources are limited in information gathering) this has been the case. We certainly know of many and hope that there have been many more young adults who have benefitted from this relaxation. So here we are now nine months on and to all those groups and individuals who said it wouldn't be safe to allow children and adults (who became adults without moving from their children's home) to live in the same household we say 'Look. It works. No problem'. This should be accepted as a precedent and make Government re-think their policy on Staying Put – unless it wasn't the reason in the first place. We now see nothing but money as a reason for the refusal to fund our residential care leavers. We are, of course open to someone from Government explaining why our conclusion is wrong.

CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER

Let's spend a moment considering the incumbent Children's Commissioner before moving on to the process of appointing her successor.

In many senses the role of Children's Commissioner is immensely difficult. It is effectively a Government appointment of an independent person to promote the welfare of the country's children. This could place the Commissioner in an invidious position. Their 'paymaster' is quite possibly the very body that they may need to criticise. Anne Longfield appears to have had no difficulty in reconciling this. She has acted for and on behalf of children frequently – too many times to mention here – challenged Government. Think of some issues – failure to recognise that children were starving during school holidays; highlighting the growth of poverty and the (sometimes, but by no means always) consequences of that in terms of domestic violence and abuse; the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on children's education, health and emotional well-being; unregulated homes where vulnerable children are placed and sometimes exploited; children 'locked up'; 'children who no-one knows what to do with'; children in mental health facilities. I could go on, but these are just some of the more recent reports to have come out of Anne Longfield's office. Perhaps her willingness to challenge is the reason why she was not consulted over the scandal of Statutory Instrument 445? Perhaps Government knew that she wouldn't have agreed with this action – which caused untold harm to children until, after the splendid work of Article 39 with Carolyne Willow at the forefront, thrown out by the Court of Appeal. We applaud Anne Longfield for her integrity. She will retire from her role in the Spring and we would like to add our compliments and good wishes.

So to her successor.

We are told that the Government's preferred candidate is Dame Rachel de Souza. She is the founding CEO of the Inspiration Trust who is considered by many to be 'close to the Conservative party'. Perhaps it is a mere coincidence that the person leading the appointment panel was Simon Burns, former M.P. for Chelmsford who again, coincidentally is the predecessor as M.P. to the current Children's Minister, Vicky Ford. What do we know of Dame de Souza? Certainly she appears to know how to operate academies that have an alarmingly high rate of pupil exclusions. Certainly one of her biggest fans is Michael Gove who once said, "*If anyone asked me what my ideal education policy would be, it would be to clone Rachel 23,000 times.*" Perhaps not certainly (at least I must acknowledge that my capacity to delve into people's

c.v.'s is limited), I can find no evidence of her having any knowledge or experience in children's social care. Will she challenge the Government as her predecessor has? That remains to be seen. Will she speak with authority on the majority of the issues (a fact check will illustrate that most of these are focussed on children's social care not education) that come to the attention of the Children's Commissioner's office.

Nonetheless we are where we are, and I can only hope that Dame de Souza will reach out to ECLCM and many other similar organisations as did her predecessor.

THE CARE REVIEW

The Conservative Party in their election manifesto promised that there would be a care review. Recently the Children's Minister, Vicky Ford, said that this review would start "very imminently" – I guess that means soon?

What will it look like, who will lead it? How will it take evidence? From whom will it hear? Will children in care be involved in it? Will care experienced people sit on the review panel – or whatever format the review team takes? What is the person specification for the 'Chair' of the review? Will it work to a timescale? If so what will this be? So many questions and to date no idea what those answers may be. We have a point of view on what the care review might look like in our recent publications on the eclcm.org website if you have time – only a few minutes to spare. It is not the way to conduct the review, but it is a way. Before it starts we must do all we can to ensure that it does what it needs to do. Should it tinker with the existing system and make running repairs or, at the other extreme, should it acknowledge (as I would) that the current system is totally unfit for purpose; a series of pieces of legislation, regulation and guidance that has been put together 'on the run' reacting to various tragedies in and before care? It's barely a system at all – how could a system have some services working to Quality Standards whilst others work to Minimum Standards. Indeed are minimum standards good enough for any child in care. Would they be good enough for your child?

Critical will be the choice of the person to lead the review and the 'brief' he or she is given by the Government. At this stage we still have a chance to try to influence that. Soon it will be too late. Thinking in terms of the Children Commissioner appointment (op.cit.) are we happy to allow the Prime Minister/ Secretary of State to identify their preferred candidate without even telling us what the preferred candidate should bring to the table? Think perhaps of Statutory Instrument 445 a piece of legislation pushed through with minimal consultation – even with the Children's Commissioner! This legislation removed a whole raft of safeguarding measures for children at risk of coming into and already in care. This dreadful piece of legislation was only removed after a campaign led by Article 39 had been taken all the way to the court of appeal and after goodness knows what harm may have avoidably come to children. How much faith can you have in the Government's preferred candidate to lead the review? Lots? None? Somewhere in between? Well, for those in the latter two categories I urge you to make your voice heard.

I hope that those who care about and for children in care (foster carers, residential childcare staff, therapists, social workers etc) will be part of the review. I hope someone representing and working with children on the cusp of care will have the chance to express their opinions. One might imagine that, as with the Scottish Care review, the review group will include some and consult with many care experienced people of all ages. But hope and imagination are not enough. If you don't say(demand?), you don't get. Please don't wait to be asked what your views are – that particular question will, I suggest, never be asked.

I'd like to invite all and any of you who read this to write a blog for us. Maybe something that could address some of the questions above and others that you believe are important. I tried a poll on twitter asking if the Leader of the review should be care experienced but frankly the response has been a little underwhelming so far, though as I write there are a few days to go. Please don't leave it until it's too late. My belief is that we have a Government with a very poor record on caring for vulnerable children – their failures to consider, let alone do something practical during the pandemic is shameful. Thanks to a young, black man, Marcus Rashford, they were shamed into some response to children starving but is that what it takes. Please don't leave children in care suffering for the next 20, 30 or 40 years because of your inactivity now. It's not enough to say it's wrong – you must do something, be an activist 'attacking', questioning, confronting and challenging what is wrong. Our most vulnerable children deserve your help. I am aware that there are some out there who will not engage with ECLCM or specifically me but please regardless of your opinion

of us/me please express your views. A blog on our website doesn't mean that you support us, it's just a public platform to express views – please express yours and ideally do it soon.

FINANCES

Like many other people we haven't travelled too far during the pandemic so guess what – the money we raised (every penny) on Just Giving is still sitting there in the bank. As and when we're allowed back to normal I'm sure we will be glad of it so, again, thank you for your generosity.

AND SO THIS IS CHRISTMAS AND WHAT HAVE WE DONE?

Where do we start?

- SI 445?
- Ofsted and others carrying out inspections via Skype or some other technology?
- Social work visits taking place remotely?
- Yet another annual increase in the numbers of children coming into care?
- More care leavers left to fend for themselves in what are the worst of times?
- The Care Review that was promised and said to be coming imminently – perhaps once they find it somewhere in the long grass to where it has possibly been kicked?

We all appreciate that this has been an unparalleled year and that the whole country has been tested and challenged. Tens of thousands have died leaving possibly hundreds of thousands bereaved and our sympathy must and does rest with them. In the face of all that perhaps a campaign seeking to extend the right to Stay Put for residential care leavers to reflect that offered to children leaving foster care seems less important? In relative terms it is. But, given that taken across all measures (such as admissions to mental health facilities, massively high levels of suicide, when compared to the general population, homelessness, imprisonment etc.) care leavers have not seen their outcomes or prospects improve in over 40 years it remains vital. We continue to ask for your support and for you to contact your M.P. to ask them what are they doing for care leavers.

Our campaign has been running for 7 years now. If we have to go for another 7 then we will do so. Let's end this inequality and demonstrate that in our society that Every child really does matter.

Have the best Christmas you can and our whole team wish you a massively improved year in 2021.

If you have any questions or observations, please feel free to contact any of us to share your view.

Once again (like a stuck record) I ask that anyone who has a story – ideally of some good news but not necessarily so – please do let us know and we will try to include it on the website or in a Newsletter

Ed Nixon
ECLCM Chairman



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