

*The Care Review – Nora Mulready*

*This blog has been offered to ECLCM by Nora Mulready and we are pleased to offer her a platform for her thoughts.*

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**The UK government has launched a “once in a generation” review into children’s social care in England. The Children’s Commissioner, Anne Longfield, has said “the system needs urgent reform” and she is right. Campaigners who have experienced care have spoken for years about a system that systematically fails children. Ben Ashcroft, care leaver and author of Fifty-One moves, describes moving fifty-one times between foster places and having thirty-three convictions by the time he was 18. His story is not unique though he is rare in so determinedly channelling the trauma of his childhood into seeking positive change for children now. The more closely you look into the whole area of children’s social care – child protection, social services, foster care, child-advocacy, care homes – the more glaring the failures of children and families are. Poverty is penalised instead of alleviated. Children in impoverished Blackpool are 8 times more likely to be removed from their parents’ care than children in affluent Richmond. These are hard, complex, uncomfortable issues to look at and if you are serious about investigating them, you must do so with the most humble and sincere understanding of the profound gravity of what you are doing. If the independent review into children’s social care is truly to be a “once in a generation” review leading to urgent and wide-ranging reform, the UK government should learn from Ireland’s approach to investigating institutional care.**

**In the last 20 years, Ireland has shocked the world with the terrible details that have emerged through two major state led investigations into historic institutional injustices against women and children in the care of the state and the church. The Inquiry into Childhood Abuse was established in 2000 to look into the treatment of children in institutional care since the 1930s. It heard from over a thousand witnesses before a Confidential Committee and reported in 2009. The Inquiry was Chaired by Justice Sean Ryan, then a High Court judge, and subsequently the president of Ireland’s Court of Appeal until 2018. When he retired from the Court of Appeal, the Attorney General said that his work leading the Inquiry into Childhood Abuse was one of his “lasting legacies to the people of Ireland.” Justice Sean Ryan said that placing this historic record into the public domain was essential to understanding the “proper history” of Ireland, and that these issues were “explored and excavated” to do justice to the survivors of these experiences. The report concluded that testimony had proven beyond doubt that the entire system of state supported care in religious institutions treated children more like ‘prison inmates and slaves than people with legal rights and human potential.’**

**The report led to the leader of the Catholic Church in Ireland, Cardinal Sean Brady, saying he was “profoundly sorry and deeply ashamed that children suffered in such awful ways in these institutions. This report makes it clear that great wrong and hurt were caused to some of the most vulnerable children in our society. It documents a shameful catalogue of cruelty: neglect,**

physical, sexual and emotional abuse, perpetrated against children." The Inquiry led to a state apology, issued in person by the Taoiseach. It led to the establishment of the Redress Board, which began financially compensating people for their historic suffering. Ireland entered a lengthy, public and painful period of reflection on its past, and of the failure of the Irish state to protect its people.

If the British government is serious about reviewing decades worth of the most painful parts of human existence – abandonment, addiction, separation from parents, removal of children, domestic abuse, sexual abuse, care homes – they must apologise for how this review has begun. They have appointed as Chair someone who had a few months experience of front-line social work, no legal background, and no experience of care himself, but rather is a founder of an entrepreneurial social work charity, favoured by the current government. They have sought applications from people who have been in care to join an Experts by Experience panel via a form on a website in which people are asked to outline in 250 words why their experience makes them a good choice to be involved. Given the pain, shame, and trauma that surrounds people's personal experiences, this is deeply insensitive way to gather information, to say the least. It shows a lack of experience and understanding with the gravity of the task. I am sorry to say, diminished the standing of the social care review before it has even begun. I would urge a rethink, and I would urge the Chair to recognise that his appointment does not do justice to this cause, and to set about – as his first and only task – to tell the government to listen to survivors, learn from Ireland, and start again.