

BECOME.

**THE CHARITY FOR CHILDREN IN CARE
AND YOUNG CARE LEAVERS**

Response to release of Independent Review of Children's Social Care: The Case for Change

June 2021

Become is the national charity for children in care and young care leavers. Our vision is that care-experienced people have the same chances as everyone else to live happy, fulfilled lives. Our mission is to help children in care and young care leavers to believe in themselves and to heal, grow and unleash their potential. We work alongside them to make the care system the best it can be.

Introduction

On Thursday 17th June 2021, the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care published [The Case for Change](#) – an early attempt to synthesise what it has heard so far and set out the key challenges and questions in children’s social care to guide its future work. At Become, we campaigned alongside many others for the establishment of an independent review of the children’s care system, and welcome this important milestone. Below we set out the conclusions we welcome and support, in addition to our key concerns or disagreements, based on the insights and experiences from across our work and early conversations with care-experienced young people.

Our response

The good...

Firstly, we’re extremely grateful to the Review team for publishing a [simplified version of the document](#) which is particularly accessible to children and young people and includes direct quotes from those who have kindly shared their views on the Review’s key questions.

Much of The Case for Change provides a thorough analysis of the challenges in how the care system today operates today, and the impact this has on children, young people and their families. This often echoes the issues we have advocated, alongside care-experienced young people, for the Review to consider and address, through our engagement sessions, ongoing dialogue and [submission to the call for evidence](#). Young people told us The Case for Change covered the majority of the issues which were reflected in their own experiences of care, including separation from their siblings, and appreciated the lack of ‘sugar coating’ in its analysis of the problems.

We’re strongly supportive of the attention paid by the Review to the ‘cliff edge’ experience of leaving care faced by thousands each year – something we have been calling for since the Review was first launched in January – and its challenge to the existence of ‘leaving care’ at all. We’re looking forward to bringing together care-experienced young people and young adults to help us reimagine what this could look like for young people in the future. We strongly agree with the concern articulated around the variations in support which young people receive based on where they live or their specific care histories and hope to see recommendations which seek to both improve the baseline level of support and reduce the ‘postcode lottery’ of care.

We’re particularly pleased to see a recognition of the impact of poverty and deprivation on children’s social care and a commitment that the Review’s recommendations must deliver a system which acts as an agent of change in tackling inequalities, and specific attention paid to the “*collective inaction*” which has led to the urgent crisis in secure care.

We’re pleased too to see the central focus of relationships placed at the heart of a good care system. The most consistent message we hear from children and young people about care is that it must focus on strengthening the relationships they have with family, friends, professionals and other important people in their lives right through into adulthood.

The awareness of the role of community is also welcome, particularly in how care can sometimes act to disconnect and dislocate young people from the communities which matter to them. Alongside the role which wider communities have to play in celebrating and understanding their care-experienced members, this has been a key focus of the [Spotlight Inquiry](#) from the [All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children in Care Leavers](#), and as secretariat, we’re looking forward to sharing insights and recommendations from this work to inform the Review’s work in this

area as it progresses. It is right to highlight the often-lifelong stigma and discrimination which care-experienced people face and seek to understand more about potential policy levers which can support public empathy and understanding.

Additionally, the recognition of the necessity of additional funding for children's services – alongside system change – is crucial. The Case for Change correctly identifies that we need to invest substantial financial resource to ensure both high-quality early 'family help' as well as proper functioning of the care system and local authorities' statutory duties.

Finally, the identified failure of the care system to act as a "*pushy parent*" to ensure care-experienced young people get what they need reflects our experiences supporting children in care and care leavers through Become's advice and support services. It's important to note that, although young people agreed with this point too, they told us the language of 'pushy parent' felt awkward and didn't quite capture the positive encouragement and celebration they wanted their corporate parents to have for them; they felt the phrase had too many negative connotations. We know first-hand that, whilst legislation and guidance help us hold people and organisations to account, this regularly doesn't translate to sufficient and tailored support, and young people continue to feel powerless in decisions made about their lives.

... the bad...

However, there are other areas where the conclusions made in The Case for Change do not align with our experiences at Become and what we hear from care-experienced young people, or where we view the analysis of the key challenges and opportunities for change as substantially weaker.

Firstly, whilst The Case for Change articulates a clear 'direction of travel' for wider children's social care which rightly seeks to boost support for kinship care and early family help, the same clarity isn't available on how the care system might change to strengthen consistent lifelong relationships. Although we're conscious that the aim of The Case for Change isn't to offer specific recommendations, there appears a disparity in depth of thinking across the different areas of the Review's remit at present. It's clear this is not a 'care review' and some way from the original review commitment made in the 2019 Conservative manifesto.

In some specific areas, The Case for Change also raises challenges or poses questions without any clear underpinning evidence to sit behind these, some of which appear contradictory to other conclusions it makes. For example, in an underexplored section on education, a question is raised about whether enough is being done to support children in care into grammar or public schools. This is a complete distraction. We must focus on ensuring all schools understand what it means to be in care and create learning cultures which support this cohort.

Whilst the link between poverty and social care intervention is clearly noted, the opportunity is missed to sit this within the context of wider governmental policymaking which has contributed to rising levels of child poverty and the acute funding pressures facing local authorities in 2021. The causal links between policy choices of austerity and the experiences of children and their families are notably absent. It's essential the Review feels able to challenge government and hold it to account where it has evidenced how wider policy decisions have resulted in poorer experiences for care-experienced young people.

Young people also raised with us that they felt Chapter 4 of The Case for Change (which focuses on the care system) doesn't focus enough on how ethnicity and cultural background impacts on children's experiences in care, and only speaks to ethnic disparities in terms of overall patterns in

and outcomes after care. They also wanted to see more said about foster carers and what care-experienced young people felt needed to change the most based on their day-to-day experiences, rather than just an analysis of the 'system' factors and the views of foster carers themselves. As the people who can make the most significant difference in children's lives every day, they felt this section was lacking and didn't sufficiently capture the voice of the child.

Although it is promising to see a desire for a *"coherent regulatory landscape and rulebook which is grounded in the needs – and indeed rights – of children and families"* and a move to *"return to and strengthen the bedrock principles of the Children Act 1989"*, a broader consideration of children's rights within The Case for Change is also weak. The role of the Children's Commissioner, the underpinning framework of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in and beyond the care system, and the impact of cross-government policy decisions which impact vulnerable children (and mechanisms to understand these such as Child Rights Impact Assessments), remain underexplored.

... and the ugly

One of the most disappointing elements of The Case for Change comes in its misunderstanding and misrepresentation of current challenge to the government's proposals to introduce new national standards for unregulated accommodation for 16- and 17-year-olds.

We and others do not support an immediate 'ban' on all semi-independent or independent settings for children in care and care leavers and agree that some young people can really benefit from high-quality examples of this kind of accommodation. However, we do not support the formalisation of a two-tier system which denies crucial elements of care to large numbers of young people for whom these settings are unsuitable, as is currently proposed. Indeed, The Case for Change recognises that the cost of regulated children's homes means some young people are forced into semi-independent and independent settings before they're ready; we believe this will only be exacerbated by proposed reforms. It also suggests that such settings should be able to provide young people with a *"greater level of attention, support and warmth from the adults around them"* when they need this, but fails to recognise that current proposals will deny this from being provided where it looks like 'care'. The analysis here is confused and contradictory.

Earlier, the document asks an enormous fundamental question *"about whether children's homes are the right long-term option for children in care and the extent to which they should play a role in our long-term vision for care"*. However, the same level of scrutiny isn't present for the continued use of semi-independent and independent settings only able to provide 'support' for children. Why do such settings escape questioning about their presence in our long-term vision for care, but the existence of children's homes – which young people often tell us are vital in offering a different kind of environment to foster care for those who want it – don't? This is deeply disappointing.

The next steps

As the Review progresses, young people have told us they wanted to see its future publications celebrate care-experienced young people, argue for better training for foster carers and social workers, and push for support which comes without an abrupt end at age 25 or earlier. In the coming months, we look forward to continuing to work alongside care-experienced young people – including those who are part of our care review policy group – to develop our thinking and influence the development of the Review's next steps and future recommendations. We'd love to hear from you if you'd be interested in [getting involved](#) with this and joining a safe and comfortable space for everyone to share their views and build ideas for solutions with each other. Note that individuals can also provide feedback directly to the Review team via their [online form](#).

Contact

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