

Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP
Secretary of State
Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street
London, SW1P 3BT

Cc – Vicky Ford MP, Minister for Children and Families

26 February 2020

Dear Secretary of State,

We, the undersigned, are organisations and groups who work with and represent care-experienced children, young people and adults across England.

In 2020, too many young people in and on the edges of care find themselves without the love, support and stability they need to heal and thrive. As you know, over 78,000 children are looked after by local authorities in England today, a record number, and many more are being raised in kinship care by relatives or friends or have left the care system through adoption.

Yet at the same time, local authorities are facing significant financial pressures, there is a lack of safe and secure places for children to live, and too many families find themselves without the support they need to care for children who have experienced trauma and adversity.

We were delighted therefore to see the commitment in the Conservative Party manifesto to a review of the care system and your subsequent confirmation that the review will be “bold and broad... independently led... with the aim of better supporting, protecting and improving the outcomes of vulnerable children and young people”. It is crucial that the views and experiences of care-experienced people and their families remains the central focus of any review.

Such a review is urgently needed. It offers an incredible opportunity to truly transform the experiences, outcomes and life chances of care-experienced children and young people in England, which for too long have lagged behind their peers. We hope this will lead to a renewed focus on the development of loving, nurturing relationships, improved ways of listening to and acting upon the voices of care-experienced young people, and support that recognises how the impacts of care last throughout a person’s lifetime.

In order to achieve this we have set out in the enclosed document what we believe the aims, scope and principles of the review should be. By adopting a comprehensive outlook that listens closely to those with lived experience, and with government commitment to act on its conclusions, we believe that a review has the potential to deliver meaningful and lasting change for children and their families.

This is an important opportunity that must not be wasted. We urge you to ensure that planning for the review considers the principles we have outlined. Our children and young people deserve nothing less.

We look forward to receiving your response and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss how we can work together to deliver a meaningful review. To arrange this, please note the contact for correspondence details below.

Yours sincerely,

Katharine Sacks-Jones, Chief Executive, Become

Carol Iddon, Acting Chief Executive, Action for Children

Sue Armstrong Brown, Chief Executive, Adoption UK

Carolyn Willow, Chief Executive, Article 39

Javed Khan, Chief Executive, Barnardo's

Dr Cat Hughman and Jamie Crabb, The Care Experienced Conference

David Graham, National Director, The Care Leavers' Association

Kathy Evans, Chief Executive, Children England

Dr Carol Homden CBE, Chief Executive, Coram

Brigid Robinson, Managing Director, Coram Voice

Kevin Lowe, Managing Director, CoramBAAF

Martha Wansbrough, Chief Executive, Drive Forward Foundation

Cathy Ashley, Chief Executive, Family Rights Group

Lucy Peake, Chief Executive, Grandparents Plus

Sylvia Duncan, Chief Executive, Institute of Recovery from Childhood Trauma (IRCT)

Enver Solomon, Chief Executive, Just for Kids Law

Ben Kernighan, Chief Executive, Leap Confronting Conflict

Paul Smart and Jon Fayle, Co-Chairs, National Association of Independent Reviewing Officers (NAIRO)

Lynsey Burridge, Chair, National Association of Virtual School Heads (NAVSH)

Anna Feuchtwang, Chief Executive, National Children's Bureau (NCB)

Felicity Dunworth and Arron Pile, Co-Chairs, National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL)

Rita Waters, Chief Executive, NYAS (National Youth Advocacy Service)

Peter Wanless, Chief Executive, NSPCC

Jonathan Whalley, Chief Executive, St. Christopher's Fellowship

Andy Elvin, Chief Executive, TACT Fostering and Adoption

Kevin Williams, Chief Executive, The Fostering Network

Mark Lee, Chief Executive, The Together Trust

Contact for correspondence:

Sam Turner, Voice and Influencing Manager, Become

sam.turner@becomecharity.org.uk

15-18 White Lion Street, London, N1 9PG

Delivering a meaningful review of the care system

Aims

The aim of a review of the care system should be to improve the experiences, outcomes and life chances of care-experienced children and young people.

The ambition of the review should be to deliver meaningful and lasting change. It should seek not only to assess the problems with the current system but to identify solutions.

Scope

The parameters of the review should allow for a vision of bold and radical reform, and its ambitions cannot be limited by the need to be cost-neutral in the short-term. However, a commitment must be made to protect the basic legal infrastructure of the Children Act 1989. Children and young people should only gain additional rights, not be at risk of seeing existing rights weakened or removed.

The review should be wide and comprehensive in its scope and look across government departments at the range of issues that impact on the lives of care-experienced people.

It should consider the 'care system' as the experiences of children and young people and their journeys into adulthood. This should include those not legally 'looked after' such as those cared for under a Special Guardianship Order or as part of an informal kinship arrangement, and those who have left care through adoption. It must recognise that the outcomes for care-experienced young people cannot be disentangled from their lives before they entered care.

The review should consider the importance of practice and culture as well as policy, legislation and guidance. It should consider sufficiency of funding and value for money in how it is spent.

An exact scope should be determined organically in the early stages of the review by listening to those with lived experience of care.

Principles

1. Independent

The review should be genuinely independent, led by a Chair with no conflict of interest, strong understanding of the children's social care system, and who can command confidence and demonstrate integrity and empathy with children, young people and care-experienced adults.

2. Care-experienced people at the heart

Lived experience must be at the heart of the review and the principle of equality of participation for care-experienced children, young people and adults must be embedded. The review should support the building of a care-experienced community as part of its process, respecting and listening to the voices of a significant number and diverse range of care-experienced children and adults, including those less often heard from. Care-experienced people must be meaningfully included and represented at all levels of the review's lifecycle.

In addition, the experiences of parents and families affected by the care system, carers, and professionals must be heard.

Given the context of media reporting and public perceptions of the care system, the review should seek to create a positive public narrative about those who have experienced care.

3. Evidence-based

The review should recognise and build on the existing evidence base, particularly that which has engaged with the views and experiences of care-experienced children and young people. This includes previous system review work (such as the [Care Crisis Review](#), [The Care Inquiry](#), [Achieving emotional wellbeing for looked after children: A whole system approach](#) and the [Blueprint for a Child-centred approach to Children and Young People in Public Care](#)), reviews undertaken across other sectors and internationally (such as the [Independent Care Review](#) in Scotland), insights from the [2019 Care Experienced Conference](#), and work within the academic and research communities.

4. Sufficient time and resource

The review should not be rushed, but given sufficient time and resource to report with a clear shared understanding of a timeline for government response and implementation.

Urgent reforms to the care system must not be delayed by the review process. The review team must alert Ministers and Ofsted where legislation and guidance in its current form are not being adhered to and when new issues are identified where urgent action is required.

5. Government commitment

There should be cross-government commitment to act upon the review's recommendations within an appropriate timeframe, including a mechanism for monitoring initial progress 1-2 years following publication. To enable this, HM Treasury should make contingency for the potential need to invest additional resources. The review should additionally seek to achieve cross-party consensus.

The principles above are supported by the following organisations and groups:



