



The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP, Secretary of State for Education,

We are writing on behalf of The Care Leavers Association, a user-led charity working to improve the lives of care leavers of all ages and the steering group of The Care Experienced Conference held in Liverpool in April 2019. Both groups are very experienced at listening to care leavers and ensuring that the user-voice is highlighted in key political, social and cultural spaces.

Both groups fully support the commitment in the conservative party manifesto for a review of the care system. Whilst some elements of the current care system undoubtedly make a positive difference, there are many aspects that consistently fail, let down and abandon children and young people.

We feel that the review must be comprehensive in its scope covering all parts of the care system and all support services and mechanisms from other departments that may be involved in a care journey. Previous investigations and reviews have tinkered at the edges of the system and not provided the required positive outcomes. The journey into, through and out of care is a complex one which the review must recognise. We would encourage you to include in the review support for care leavers over 25 as the effects of care can sometimes have long lasting ramifications.

But key to the process of any review is it must be user informed. It must listen to children in care and care leavers of all ages. We would like to see care experienced people involved directly in the undertaking of the review process. There is plenty of evidence available which talks about what works and what doesn't work. What has been lacking is the collective will to use this evidence to build a better care system. It is only through listening to the voices of experience that we can truly begin to understand the situation and what is needed. And it is essential that some of these people are care leavers over the age of 25 who can bring their experiences of care and of adulthood to the process.

Indeed, The Care Experienced Conference and the work of The CLA and others over many years have shown that the needs of care leavers do not stop at 25. Issues related to being in care can have an effect long into adulthood. A comprehensive review should highlight this issue and encourage the wide range of adult services to deliver better support for care leavers of all ages.

We would commend to you our view that a Review must embed the principles of equality of participation for care experienced children, young people and adults. We would seek to establish meaningful engagement of all key stakeholders as the Scottish Care Review has sought to do, with the inclusion and representation of care-experienced people at all levels of the planning, delivery, analysis and recommendations. We know that there are people represented in many different walks of life, with a range of skills that could be employed in key roles to deliver the review.

In 2019 at the Care Experienced Conference sought the need to recognise that care-experienced people know more about what it means to be in care than anyone else. Moreover, the reports highlighted an array of insights and possible solutions proposed by people who have first-hand experience growing up in care. To this end, we would propose that any guidelines for delivering a meaningful review of the care system must embody the values of "nothing about us, without us".

Prior to the Leaving Care Act 2000, the then secretary of health Frank Dobson said, " We asked officials to prepare a paper spelling out what ordinary families do or try to do, not necessarily continuously, but intermittently, for their own children between the ages of 16 and 21. The main thing is to provide a home to live in, or return to. Then there is the shoulder to cry on, the encouragement to do a bit more work at school or college, the morale-boosting chat before going to an interview, the consolation afterwards if the interview goes wrong, or celebration if the interview goes right. Young people want someone to provide a lift when they want to go somewhere, a meal, or, when they are bit older, someone to take them for a drink, someone to get the washing done, someone to touch for a tenner when they are skint, someone to keep an eye on them, someone who cares about them."

Clearly, he wanted a good leaving care system to replicate what good parents do to help their children become independent. Underpinning this is the principle of equality, that care leavers are entitled to the same degree of love, care and support as all other young people. This is the basic principle on which the review should be conducted.

All stages of the care journey, including leaving care need to be adequately supported so that looked after children are genuinely looked after and care leavers genuinely receive care. We cant call it a care system until it does what it says on the tin for all children and young people.

We believe and have long advocated for a right to return and a right to remain for all care leavers, which is what most other young people take for granted. Whilst we would not want to prescribe outcomes to the review, it needs to approach its thinking in terms of what is the support a young person needs in relation to where they are in their life at that moment. The system needs to fit the young person and not the other way around. Is it a sticking plaster service which seeks to manage an individual, or is it a process that helps children and young people flourish? We also think it needs to look at the fundamental question of what is care for – if we do not know what we are trying to achieve then any system is doomed to fail.

Finally, we would like to request that the person chosen to lead the review has a good understanding of the issues affecting children and young people in care and that they are able to relate to young people. It is essential that they have some credibility with young people in care and care leavers of all ages. It would be even better if they were also care experienced.

Both The Care Leavers Association and the Care Experienced Conference would be happy to support you and the department with any aspect of the review.

David Graham
The Care Leavers Association

Jamie Crabb
Care Experienced Conference

Dr Jim Goddard
The Care Leavers Association

Dr Cat Hugman
Care Experienced Conference