The Care Leavers Association

Response to the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care

A “once in a generation” review? With respect to children and young people in the care system, we hope not. There is still too much that needs doing to improve the lives of looked after children and care leavers. The long-awaited final report of the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care contains positive and negative features. Some of the positives are developments that we and other organisations have been campaigning for over many years. Like many other organisations, we are still digesting the contents of the report and developing our detailed responses to its proposals. Here, we offer our overall impressions.

Firstly, the Review didn’t fully meet its initial aims. It does not focus sufficiently on the journey through care and into adulthood. Indeed, based on the report, there could have been four separate reviews: 1) early intervention, 2) child protection, 3) the care system and 4) the social care workforce. The 2019 Conservative Party General Election Manifesto promised to “review the care system to make sure that all care placements and settings are providing children and young adults with the support they need”. That intention has assumed a low priority within this review.

While there are some valuable proposals in the sections on the care system and leaving care, several important areas are not addressed. Well-known issues with leaving care pathway planning and personal advisers are ignored. There is also a lack of understanding of the effects of trauma as young people enter into and go through the care system. This has led to there being no significant recommendations for improving mental health and wellbeing outcomes for care leavers. There is little if any mention of children in care and care leavers in the criminal justice system or of those with disabilities. Moreover, the review has done nothing to challenge negative perceptions of residential care. Indeed, it tends to reinforce them.

Whilst the recommendation for the introduction of “opt-out” advocacy for all young people in the care system is welcome, implementing this as a replacement for IRO’s and Reg 44 visitors is short-sighted. At a time when the review recognises that we are currently failing children in care, removing safeguards that protect children in care is not the way to go. Instead, reform of the IRO and Reg 44 system could help to improve the quality of care received by children and young people.

On the positive side, some of these proposals could make a welcome difference to the lives of many children in care and care leavers. They deserve to be supported. From the perspective of our experience and areas of expertise, we would highlight the following worthwhile developments:

● The extension of care to all young people under the age of 18, regardless of form of accommodation. However, the timetable for implementation is too long

● The extensions of ‘Staying Put’ and ‘Staying Close’ to the age of 23

● The offer of lifelong support for care leavers accessing their files

● The broadening of corporate parenting responsibilities

● Making care experience a protected characteristic under equality legislation

● The new lifelong Guardianship Orders

● The local authority ‘lifelong support’ commitment for care leavers

● The collection of health and mortality data for care leavers by the Office for National Statistics.

However, many of these measures are vague at this point. Now that the report is in the hands of government, we face a long battle to develop them in ways that genuinely enhance the lives of looked after children and care leavers. For that to happen, the biggest gap in the review recommendations needs to be addressed. The failure to prioritise the voices of children in care and care leavers in reforming the care system is a significant weakness. If it remains unrectified, the implementation of these reforms is likely to descend, in the next few years, into a fight between professional vested interests. If the voices of those who live in this system, or have lived in it, are made central to developing these proposals, the results could be far-reaching.