

## Secretary of State for Children message to Residential Child Care Workers

November 2024

**Please note: Similarities with the wording of Bridget Phillipson speech to the Confederation of School Trusts Conference on November 7<sup>th</sup> are not coincidental. We are not aware of any other Minister making positive remarks about Residential Child Care. This gives us space to dream how it might be. This piece is perhaps for the future but by no means does it have to be. The Secretary of State for Children in the way it is characterised here does not exist – yet. This piece is written as a signal and signpost that Residential Child Care workers need to feel they belong and are valued as integral to children’s services, indeed integral to and valued members of the workforce and community. Our peer reviewers advise that they regard the piece as constructive, creative, and visionary.**

Good morning, everyone. We wanted you have this message now, so it does not get lost in the Christmas rush. I know Christmas is a busy time in children’s homes.

I'd like to affirm the responsibility we are sharing.

For us all doing the jobs we are doing for children is the result of the determination of others, the support of significant others across many roles in the lives of children, the result of insight and commitment arrived at through professional and personal pain resolved into professional learning, growth and ultimately change. We thank them all. As I thank those in my life, I thank those in yours. Our job is to create a future where all children reach out and find what in fact has been provided, a needs meeting child centredness.

We have all made a choice. Not to do what others do or have done. We receive our task and welcome it with a determination that ensures that we will be up to it and present the best version of ourselves in successfully delivering our duty.

Our choice has been to stand in support of and solidarity with the most vulnerable children in our society. The ones who have received the least, and who need and deserve the most from us all and from our society.

So, first, I want to say thank you for making that choice of committing your lives to the betterment of those society wishes to forget exist. Forgotten; invisible – the positives especially; misunderstood, that is in need of reframing (like residential child care?); too often ignored; on the too difficult to sort list. Rarely is residential child care, its children and staff held in mind.

Your passion for social justice really is an inspiration for all.

Your dedication to the children of this country is clear in all you do.

Our message is that we now want you to take on an additional responsibility - to push government to be better, to ask and resolve the tough questions to get residential child care off the too difficult list. No more swerving because the subject is too difficult and too easy to avoid regardless that receiving answers is imperative indeed ‘an imperative’.

I undertake that I will present those questions to those who can and must provide answers and actions.

We will improve the life chances of all of our young people.

You all know it has been a long journey for me to get here today.

I have grown up in care. My early years were without many things until I was a child in care, and until I came to a children's home.

The care system works. It has worked for me. Though not all, it has for others too. Research informs us that children of the same circumstances do better with care, a truth conveniently overshadowed by previous governments foregrounding family over group care. Family is best for some. But not for all. I had the all too familiar number of family-based care placement breakdowns. It wasn't what I needed. My needs were of the magnitude I needed lots of people looking after me and they needed the professional development and support that a family cannot provide.

I am standing here because of such people in my life. My children's homes workers. They were parents too. They parented me. It was the state who parented me. Who else paid for my care? We can value many types of parents when we think beyond the family. If it wasn't for family, I wouldn't be standing here - and you can take that in all the ways it is was meant to be interpreted.

I stand here in front of you as the first Secretary of State for Children the result of those who cared, for me, professional work in a personal way, nurtured tirelessly to give me every opportunity to succeed.

I thrived in care. I thrived because of care throughout my childhood.

That's my story – being nurtured, emotionally nourished, achieving and thriving.

I was able to learn, to engage, advance, achieve, attain because I was given emotional security. Because of my secure emotional base, of everyday unconditional love and boundaries

- I felt I belonged
- I was given every opportunity to thrive.
- I was happy and healthy in school.

Many of my friends on my street weren't so lucky.

They didn't get those same opportunities of care. They didn't meet the thresholds; they were met with rationed scarce resources. Because there wasn't enough money for s.

Some were more fortunate than others. It depended where they were born but life shouldn't come down to where you were born, in geography, in class, in race.

This new government is on a mission to spread opportunity far and wide, to give every single child the very best life chances.

This is a new era of child-centred government.

Our country is far from where it should be, from where I'm sure it can be. It is a matter of personal, professional, political, economic choices.

Too many children have been held back by their background, and the possible response to their background.

Poverty, deprivation, abuse, trauma and neglect stalk the land the same as in Dickens time.

A stain on our society, a disgrace that holds our children back. That holds us all back. Because if we had the support and services needed, they would be available for all children. I want you to reflect on the difference between a threshold and an opportunity.

So are fixing the foundations upon which services will be created.

This will not come without unprecedented spending.

I look at those who maybe say we cannot afford it and say then you must be a person who can.

John Maynard Keynes wisdom, yes the economist, noted, "Anything we can actually do we can afford."

Actually, we cannot afford not to make this investment. What's more it comes back into the economy. This spending is integral to economic growth. We can transform negatives into positives. We can.

Here's some of the ways to turn the curve from nett expenditure to nett income. Let's look at the outcomes of care leavers currently that can change with investment

- NEET figures stand at 41% for 19 to 21-year-olds who are care experienced compared to the national average of 11.6%.
- Only 17% of care experienced people gain 5 GCSEs compared to the national average of 60%.
- 58% of children in care are classified as SEND, more than three times greater than their peers, and 53% of these SEN relate to social, emotional, and mental health

These and other such adverse outcomes, according to Alma Economics Care Review analysis are costing £23 billion.

You see how , by investing in our children, we will save £Billions. What's more the savings go on because it is the case that the children of former children in care are massively more likely to also enter care. This is not inevitable; it is absolutely avoidable.

We must be that bold in our advocacy to end the centuries of discrimination that has written off a multitude of vulnerable children each of whom had potential to do great things

A child-centred Budget sets each on the path to their best life chances.

A Budget that puts care at the forefront of national life.

With a committed budget now we must deliver our commitment.

The Chancellor has done her bit, now we must be committed to raising standards of care, in families and group care. No distinction.

Not just for some of our children, some pockets of excellence here and there. Everywhere. Everyone. This country deserves better. Parents deserve better. Children deserve better.

Today I am honoured to be the person who makes the first public speech inaugurating the Childfair state.

In 1948 my party set up the Welfare State. It was the making of a new world that had been struggled for, not just in warfare but in decades of industrial struggle and voluntary support.

We are now ready willing and able as a party, and economically able as a country, to take another step onwards in setting up the Childfair state.

High and rising standards of care in every home. Every home. Every care.

I am the first Secretary of State for Children. It is a mark of the importance of the mission that, along with the Cabinet and Treasury, the Children's Ministry will be involved with all others. Every initiative will require a child impact analysis and will only proceed if it delivers a good-enough childhood for all children.

No child left will be left behind in a growing economy, a welfare state, social security, a Childfair state emotional security.

And whilst we are in this thinking space, maybe people are wondering, "Won't this cost a lot"? It will. And I follow this by saying it always costs a lot, in a different way and in the same way, to the children's whose needs were not met.

Did we think that what we have been doing was everything? Really? We deliberately did not ask some questions because we knew the answer, we would find more children and it would cost more. So governments of all shades of politics didn't ask the questions, and didn't go looking. The result was the children found us.

Today this is made visible in the hundreds at any one time, cumulative thousands, of children in unregulated settings, intensively staffed but not necessarily getting intensive interventions. There has been an increase of 44% of new homes in the

independent sector over the last 5 years, but these were unplanned, few meeting high level co-occurring needs.

And this has gone on for decades. So, yes, it will cost more.

In this age of decolonisation let us bring it home. Let us avow the existence of the children we have been disavowing evidence of their existence.

We recognise you. We recognise what was not done. We do not have enough, perhaps, for reparations but our avowal is that no child will suffer, for that is what it was, what you had to. Your legacy is the Childfair state.

To those who disagree we say we must decolonise our thought. For decades RCC was used as a colony, a place we sent young people to and forgot them. Exiled. In some cases, we actually exported children to colonies to work, we are only just realising. Oh yes, our conscious mind absented them and was comforted by a large budget heading the story of which we never enquired.

And we colonised and plundered residential child care theory and practice to strengthen family based care options. So many models, approaches, practices originated in residential child care.

We salute you. We recognise you pioneers. We owe you a great deal for pursuing in the face of intransigence. You didn't look the other way from the children. You looked us in the eyes, we looked away.

No more. Never again.

For those who are thinking we are radical we say it is all self-evident. It was in front of our eyes, hidden in plain sight. If you don't agree then how would you describe it? The words in what inevitably follows our decision will be interesting. They will be scrutinised more closely than whatever policy we have discussed over the 80 years.

This government will never be soft on standards.

I am the first Secretary of State for Children, and I take this opportunity to state unequivocally this government believes in residential child care. We are remedying the omission made in our manifesto where all options other than residential were supported. We are sorry for the pain we caused to children and their grown-ups. We have woken up. And if that makes the headline 'Woke' then I am happy for it and say to anyone 'Wake up too'!

This government believes in residential child care and will develop its presence, activity, scope, size.

We are remedying the wrong turn taken in the Curtis Report of 1946 that placed family care over group care. We reject this binary choice. We understand this split has been at the root of the underfunding of childhood for decades. It has been unpaid or underpaid domestic labour, often by women, who resourced family options

for children in care, and this led to a comparison to the cost of residential child care options. Both have been held back as a result.

All care is specialist care. We will fund all options so long as they are evidence-based and meet stringent and relevant regulatory standards. And we are setting up alongside the range of other wealth creating banks we are setting up, the CareBank. This will invest in care as a publicly owned and organised social good.

I will never compromise on achievement or aspiration for our children.

Because we all know who misses out when standards slip – it's working-class children.

We are going for growth. Growing expertise. In each home, everywhere.

The residential child care practice and workforce delivery review is now in full swing. We are looking at all social work and social care practice. It is an integral part of the spending review.

It will deliver an informed workforce that is rich in knowledge, strong on skills and led by evidence and experience. Supporting our workforce leads to each child getting what they need.

We're reforming accountability to be focussed on meeting needs.

Our national needs led audit will show the granularity of co-occurring need and we will plan the response, homes and staff, who can meet the need as local as possible as specialist as necessary. Commissioning will be redirected to prioritise needs and relational working, really commissioning from new the homes our children need. Not procurement, not market shaping.

The focus of this government for children is meeting needs, meeting needs, meeting needs.

The factor that makes the biggest difference to our children's life chances is that the people looking after them will know how to, and are supported in, looking after them.

In sum it's great Residential Child Care workers.

Don't look for this in our manifesto. We were persuaded by the Care Review. We've woken up.

Look what we are doing now.

We will support every worker and every home to support every child achieve great things.

Achieving this will mean, in that great insight of Winnicott's, each child reaches out and finds what has been provided. This means they are living within resilient environments resourced for a child to experience, I have – fully resourced, I am -

identity, I can – make a difference in the world. Free to be themselves, free to make friends, free to explore their talents. Thriving. To experience and benefit from an emotional secure base, to experience and benefit from availability, sensitivity, acceptance, co-operation, belonging.

This government knows a secure base is at the heart of any successful caregiving environment - whether within the birth family, kinship, in foster care, residential care or adoption.

A secure base is provided through a relationship with one or more caregivers who offer a reliable base from which to explore and a safe haven for reassurance when there are difficulties. Confident competent carers promoting security and resilience.

It's about belonging. Children feeling they belong. They have parents. They are parented.

It's about residential child care belonging – in every way and not separate, not able to be thought about. To be extinguished

A happy, healthy child who knows, that deep down inside, they belong.

A happy, healthy sector that knows, that deep down inside, they belong.

This government is well aware of the old residential child care saying, 'Show me, Don't tell me'.

If care is effective children thrive, and grow. This will be recognised by regulators.

What I am talking about is a profound reform, valuing residential options for children.

Every child in a children's home has 2 parents, their keyworker and their social worker. Both are committed to your wellbeing. We will staff homes and social work teams to make this possible. We will train residential and social work staff to work together as co-parents in the interests of their children.

Achieving and thriving – the two pillars of our plans for children – are not in opposition. They work in tandem, one strengthening the other.

And healthy, happy children come to school ready to learn – if we get home life right, children will achieve in school. Emotional security precedes educational engagement, advancement, achievement, and attainment.

The best homes and schools understand this. They also understand it's the right approach.

I had amazing people look after me.

I really had, as Bronfenbrenner observed, 'Every child needs a grown-up who is crazy about them.'

They support my thriving, They supported me achieving. I belonged.

They were there when I arrived and when I left, and I could come back to see them.

I loved them and they loved me.

We want every child loved, beyond unconditional regard. You do a job that is personal in a professional way.

The solution to recruitment is retention.

Because the best recruitment strategy is a strong retention strategy.

There are lots of people out there who have the capacities our children need and have never thought of being a Residential Child Care worker, many simply can't afford to be Residential Child Care Workers; we will make this possible.

We must make it a career. We will make it a profession. Properly remunerated!

This is a government that knows the value Residential Child Care workers bring to our children, to our society, to our country.

You are partners, not enemies.

You are respected professionals, not political punch bags.

You are essential to building a brighter future for all of our children.

This is the work of a decade. We won't duck that challenge. Know we will be with you.

I felt I belonged. This is the leadership we want to bring. Leadership that makes a difference. Leadership that works with and for and about you, to quote Joan Tronto. This government is about creating the homes where you and the children feel they achieve and thrive.

We're going to go back and look at the Quality Standards and make the links to theory much stronger. There's a reason why each one was written and included. They are a distillation of accumulated knowledge and practice made by many people meeting over many weeks working together aiming to include in them an easy-to-understand residential life.

We want Residential settings involved with early intervention, when appropriate. This is vital. What you know and do needs to be made available earlier, to provide good parenting and to identify and support children sooner. We need to be able to intervene in the best way possible sooner.

So, yes, this means we will review residential options. It may mean less of some types of homes and more of others. Even some we do not have, yet, in this country but exist in other parts of the residential child care globe. This will require analysis and development.



It means we are going to invest more so we don't have the trade off between less residential for more early intervention. We know that deprivation and poverty account for early intervention in younger ages and trauma, abuse and exploitation in later ages. We need the same and different thinking but no less commitment, funded for what is necessary.

We're going to make changes to qualifications and workforce development. Everyone will need a level 4, and we will introduce a national curriculum and workforce development taskforce to deliver it. No one will be left behind. Everyone will be able to work everywhere. We will be paying for it. If providers want to do more that is OK with us. We are going to set up regional centres to support this ambition.

We will make use of our residential child care experts, of which we have many.

So, this is a new culture. Relational, collaborative, consensual.

We have ended challenge. I know the current system incentivised some to adopt a competitive rather than a collaborative model.

Now, we share our troubles and resolve them together. Finding what works, ending what doesn't.

We want to create certainty for all children and carers. Achieving and thriving – those two precious words.

Emotional secure base, the sense of wellbeing and belonging holds the key to so much of the change that we plan to bring, so much of what I've spoken about today. I have, I am, I can.

We are ending leaving care. It always seemed a ridiculous term. From here on Throughcare and Continuing Care is what happens next.

So, this is a moment of change, yes. And as a new Secretary of State, I bring reform.

But all of it, every last inch, is about delivering the very best life chances for our children.

I know that's an ambition that you all share.

Because when I look around this room today,

I see dedicated professionals to work with.

I see decades of experience to draw upon.

I see a room brimming with excellence to spread far and wide.

I see partners, in our shared mission.

Partners in the push for better, on our journey to break down the barriers to opportunity for every child, once and for all.

Thank you.