



National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care

Nudged to oblivion - a future newspaper story – a work of fiction.

Fiction gives us the details about kinds of suffering being endured by people to whom we had previously not attended.’ Richard Rorty

I was there when the last children’s home closed.

A bird cannot be another bird. Darwinian adaptation can go so far. Residential child care didn’t thrive and didn’t survive. It wasn’t the survival of the fittest. If it were then it would still be with us. This extinction was of something healthy.

I’d been there all the time it existed. Dwindling, heading for extinction.

Very few people knew about children’s homes. They thought they did. But no one researched or wrote from experience. One report was written in the latter stages and it was received warmly thereby incorporating the need for a response that never came.

We’d be waiting still.

No one listened to people saying they were critically endangered. It could never happen. Someone needed to tell their story, but no one was listening. They were listening to bad news stories but not to good news. People had the wrong idea. Children’s homes were a success. So successful they threatened people’s ideas of the world – it wasn’t all good in families and sometimes young people needed ‘something else.’ People believed in families so doing away with children’s homes meant doing away with ‘bad things’ being visible in families. So what happened to those children who needed the chance of a children’s home? They went to families. There was nowhere else except hospital or Youth Offending. Children could only be ‘mad, bad or sad.’ It was all about the children and not the people and reasons around them.

People thought a miracle could happen and children’s homes survive, no matter what they would ‘be there for the children.’ But gradually it dawned not to reduce to an ineffective rump but to shut them down. Of course it was done with a Requiem thanking them for all they had achieved, lauding the ‘rich tradition.’ The Minister spoke.

And now unseen, unconsidered, but not missed, we search for the solutions of what to do with ‘these children.’

Over the years the many things residential could do, those that were more favourable called them 'opportunities,' became whittled down the provision of last resort. Often these people spoke of residential 'units' but never fostering 'units' though they were the same size. An impossible task given, the homes were attacked for doing it. And if they did it well, and they did, no one celebrated and heaped regulation on top.

The resilience of the homes was magnificent, new working procedures, increased costs, all were taken on. Morale was high. But after years people got tired. All ways were used to obstruct, to ensure the load was unmanageable. Extinction rarely happens in a catastrophe but by degrees, nudged to oblivion. Those outside of homes asserted it was the homes who were responsible for the labour being so hard; nothing was to do with them.

I met an inspector of a home. *"Nearly all Good or better, let me tell you how good they were, and how creatively varied to meet needs. Young people loved them, the staff loved the kids and they loved them back."*

"I carried on inspecting even though it was declining, it was inevitable. What could I do? I kept working for as long as I could. Sometimes I made things difficult for homes. I had to follow the inspection procedure. What they were doing was good."

It was like animal protection, keep the habitat, but they were sent impossible children, and local authorities cut fees. Everyone wanted them killed off. It was unprotectable."

Sometimes there's sense, and nonsense, and no matter how strong the sense is people believe and act on the nonsense.

I went to see people, once young people, who live in children's homes.

I went to see people, now aged, who worked in children's homes.

It was easy to see how their lives intertwined.

"I needed somewhere specialist."

"It was my choice."

"I needed somewhere safe."

"I wanted to work with issues that demanded a total commitment of everything I had."

"It was a choice; I could've done an easier job."

"I lived working in a fully focused team."

They loved the equality of experience, none superior. They loved the creativity, the stress of getting somewhere only to find it was another place on the way to somewhere. The challenge to learning new things about themselves.

One young person said, *"It was getting more difficult when I visited after I'd left. Tiredness of waiting for a change in Government thinking and income. Some of the people who looked after me had gone. A basic income because that was all that they could be paid. They carried on. They should've been given a medal. Not a selfish bone in their body. They don't do anything with children now. It's too painful to realise what's been lost. All the treasures. But for young people like I was, today they're all gone. Are young people better off? Probably not. Can I prove it? No. Is their evidence to say so? I don't think there'll be any, trying to find it. I think the Government abandoned children's homes and all the grown-ups and young people, and all the future ones too."*

I went to what were once children's homes. Some were overgrown. Most were family homes, because that is what they were, small groups of grown-ups and children like medium sized families.

I wanted to ask people if they would consider opening up children's homes again, rather than use their knowledge and skills than lose them. They said they'd need a lot of encouragement and didn't want to go through it *'all that again just to be picked up and put down, denigrated, used as a diversion from reality, as place to put all their blame'*. Overall they thought that their tradition would be written about in the future and people would wonder how it was allowed to fall away.

All of them looked puzzled saying it wasn't because of a lack of facts and evidence. *"It counts for nothing,"* they all said.

And they have gone, does it matter? An academic told me, *"Losing something forever. It's a death isn't it? It could have been a bird or a plant. It's very, very big. We don't realise how big yet. We didn't value it enough, so how do we know how big the loss? We'll find ways of making it seem less till it's nothing. We won't deal with it. We have learned no lessons."*

The academic continued, *"It was all so fissiparous. Residential people were never ones for standing back. They were like a sack of ferrets between themselves, their uniqueness made it hard to see the commonalities. But given them a common target, make yourself one, and they could take you apart in a few minutes with well-chosen comments, observations, questions. The only way to deal with them was to know as much as them, or to squash them. The Government never understood them and repeatedly undermined them and then besmirched them with stories they knew were wrong. When all children's homes proved themselves on inspection they'd change the goalposts so next year they'd struggle."*

How could it have happened? More correctly, how could it have been allowed to happen?

An observation from a well-informed participant and commentator, *"It was an implosion. It had been explained there wouldn't be a big collapse. As with individual homes that closed over the years it wasn't noticed until it was too late. Well, that's not true. National and local government had been told, they commissioned their own independent research, there were surveys by providers. These were published. Evaluations of regulation and commissioning were too. There were private discussions over what was happening. Unfortunately because the concerns came from providers it was thought somehow that is lobbying or disinformation. So breakdowns of figures were given. Local authorities asked for actual accounts. Still nothing changed even when it was clear."*

At that time the Government operated on the idea of 'nudge economics.' They also had an Innovation Programme with one focus being to reduce the use of residential care so they could have thought that their policy was being effective. There were no Government papers that we could find in the writing of this article that would support that view or substantiate any claim that this was in any way so.

"The reduction happened by default rather than by design," said a leading commentator on Residential Child Care and Children's Services. *"It was indiscriminate. Good people who hadn't had an increase for many years were hit the hardest. The large companies who dealt with many placements got their fee increases, found to be entirely legitimate across the board, agreed. It was the smaller ones with fewer resources that had to work harder to get any attention. People weren't interested, or had instructions to delay payments to meet budget headings. It was an impossible situation to make sense of. Providers called repeatedly for a needs-led analysis and co-production of placements to get what was needed where it was needed. It was a searing indictment of procurement. We never had any commissioning, only procurement nailing people to the floor then ripping up the floor they had been encouraged to stand on."*

Meanwhile Government statistics show fostering was booming, profits soared. Also the number of placements per year continued to rise with the numbers coming into care. We were told it as not unusual for a young person to arrive at a children's home with tens of previous fostering placements. *"That everyone knew it was wrong was well-known but no one had any authority to do anything different. It was cost over care, no doubt."*

This now being attested to by the numerous court proceedings by ex-Looked After Children, their claim being that local authorities did not provide the 'most appropriate placement.' The implications of this situation should the court rule in favour of the once young people is immense. Local authorities are completely unprepared for the enormity of the cost, to be borne without mitigation by Government. The costs could

be astronomical and put providing the right placement at the right time at that time into the shade. Residential child care was said to be expensive. Now we see it as more expensive not to have provided it.

There was also a demonstrable failure of leadership by Government, national and local. We have been unable to find any positive comments made by the Minister for Children. The ADCS and LGA similarly had no positive planning for Residential Child Care. No Government spokesperson made any positive statements for many years. Clearly there was a culture of scepticism at best and what seems to be intentional damage over many years despite regulatory outcomes and research conclusions showing Residential Child Care was positive option. It was wilful act, perhaps made in desperate financial circumstances. *"But how do you cost a young person's life?"* as one barrister put it in the court proceedings.

It didn't matter if they were resting on their laurels as Outstanding to Ofsted, or as cheap as chips, no home could make ends meet. Rather than a lingering death it was decided to end.

The commitment and vocation and dreams of small providers, 45% had only one home, were ended. Many suffered considerable effects, it took one million of pounds to open a home and trading at such low levels on income meant the debts were largely unaffected. It's not a wound but a punishment that people now feel. There is no consolation. *"Noone was managing, protecting or promoting the sector. The devastation is total."*

Now it is a few years on, and it is like children's homes were never there. Now people say we need something urgently that adoption, fostering, hospitals, schools, and Youth Offending aren't what's needed.

The situation at the point of collapse was desperate. Commissioners telephoned all the providers they knew to ask if they were the placements that were closing.

When it dawned on local authorities what was happening the Ministry switchboard melted. The civil servants telephoned the providers' organisation and told them to "do something". They were told there was nothing they could do. Government said providers must stay open and "use resources." The association told them they had told them there were no resources left to be used.

The Minister spoke to the Secretary of State who went to the Treasury. Even the offer of funds was too late.

It all came as a relief from the impending doom providers knew was coming and the dread they'd lived with for many years. Many of them spoke of the dread they'd had for years being lifted even though they were completely without any money at all. One we spoke to had signed everything over to the bank to keep going, and his partner had signed all claims across too. They only had their clothes.

"It's never a single factor, always many factors missed over time." But providers' voices hadn't missed them and had kept making them public.

A deciding factor that tipped the scales were three regional contracts, badged as co-operatives, made impossible for providers to work within. Terms and Conditions were made fiercer and other arrangements, such as the three monthly monitoring taking nine days of management time, made costs over care further weighted. *"There was nothing that could be done,"* one ex-provider told me. *"It was impossible to provide care that was needed. All that could've been done had been done. All that was left was air and the local authorities wanted that too."*

As I'm writing I remember the opening scenes and music to a long time ago BBC Comedy programme of seventies northern England, The Likely Lads. "Oh what happened to you." And that destroyed building.

I went to other countries and explained the situation. After the shock they just sat and shook their head in disbelief. They asked where were the experts, where was the evidence?

I explained that the Government had an idea about Innovation as an answer. They all responded they all saw the incremental gains were better than wholesale change. I explained it has been evaluated. One said, *"You have an English saying, 'One swallow does not make a Summer.' Some responses to need have been tried over decades. This is the research base. Don't deny your history is a lesson England must be learning hard now?"*

It seems everything conspired for the Government to mislead themselves. They couldn't admit their mistakes. They couldn't admit commentators and providers were right.

The meeting where the decision to end Residential Child Care was packed with almost all providers there. There was a strange restlessness in the room. The Chair of the provider organisation welcomed people and handed over to the CEO who introduced in a way no one could have been unaware of the facts and what was to be decided.

He invited contributions.

Some spoke in tears, some super-fast, some from notes. Some just sat staring, others determinedly doodled. Water was soon exhausted. Sweets all gone.

After an hour the hands weren't going up any more. No one had disagreed though some reticence, dismay, anger was expressed and held by the listeners.

Nothing more to be said the CEO put the motion to the hall.

"We can't go on. We have to close. We give 28 days notice as required under contract."

No amendments were requested.

The CEO read the motion again.

No amendments? None.

Those in favour, against, abstentions.

There were none against. No abstentions.

There was silence and stillness.

Some cried, some sat breathing heavily, some laughed manically. One person started to pound a table, then another, until all were. No other motion. No other, no one.

The CEO let it go on until the last one felt they had no need.

“Colleagues, you have taken a momentous decision and taken it together as one sector, as we have been these past years together.”

He stood there, looked around the room. He held that silence and attention.

“Colleagues.” He looked deep into the eyes as he scanned the room.

“I want us to be sure. With the utmost respect to you, your commitment and investment emotionally and professionally, for the sake of young people I want us to be sure. I am going to ask you to vote one more time but before we do are there any further comments?”

One stepped forward and simply said, *“Be together.”*

The CEO waited and no one stepped forwards.

“Colleagues, the motion.”

It was unanimous again.

It was agreed that all providers would terminate all placements by the end of the day.

Not one provider failed to follow through.

The media release had the motion and few other words, *‘In an act of professional integrity children’s homes have decided that, with regret and only because of being placed in an impossible situation, they must close in 28 days time.’*

The media gave full coverage. The CEO spoke for the sector, no other provider wanted or felt able to speak.

There was disbelief, then anger, which he understood and explained there was no other decision that could be taken. The task now was to support the children and the staff to make new lives.

He added, *"This was not unthinkable. It was made clear over years that the slide was happening. Providers did what they could for as long as they could. There was no assistance, just more of the same. The crisis that children's homes have been speaking of for so long has ended. Children's homes have had the honour of supporting children and young people in desperate circumstances for decades. We now enter new territory for child care."*

Children's homes were now in the Past.

This is the situation that has led to the crisis of foster carers resigning. One told me, *"We're not taking the risk of having young people foisted on us. We know we could only do what we have with children's homes there as our support. If they're not there, then nor are we."*

Somebody wrote a short story, a work of fiction, some short while before all these events. It included many of the facts in this article.

Some people said it was a causal factor that precipitated the events. Cultural theory tells us that this unlikely. The factors were economic, it is clear. There was ideology, but not in the article, in the policy that led to the fall in the income and increase in costs.

Sometimes some people are able to put the pieces together in a way no one else does, or can, or has and once done it makes a difference. These people aren't reactive but proactive, always ahead of the curve. They know what comes next but also what it will come next after next, and what can be done to make it different. We don't always listen to these people. They're not trend setters but social observers of trends, able to see the ways things can go. It's a rare capacity and that is why we don't act on what they advise. We don't come across too many like them so we don't know how to realise and respond to what they're saying. Of course they're not always right but we can choose to try to discount what they say by examining the facts and potential. It turns out the short story was so close to what happened that it couldn't have been different. There is no next time.

Major consequences, there were large companies loaded with debt as a result of acquisitions that could not make the payments and defaulted on bank loans. Distraught they sent in the accountants and business 'leads' to talk to commissioners, and even Directors. It might have worked in other fields, but it didn't in social care. In many ways it should've worked. A small sector, a relatively reliable supplier, a fragile sector needing certainty of supply. That is how it seems from the outside. Internally local authorities thought there would always be more beds available. If some close then they are making space for someone else, an

instrumental and functional understanding. Difficult though for a new start to work well with the increasingly complex young people that were coming to children's homes by then; gross mental health: neglect not seen many times in the past decades, failure to thrive combining the emotional, physical and cognitive; addictions needing chemical rehabilitation; violence; gang involvement; the return of the need for under 11 residential care; misdiagnoses of autism when it was drastic neglect resulting in 'frozen' or enmeshed children.

Maybe local authorities thought the staff would be recycled. They figured without the formation of groups, the often primitive dynamics that whirl around when working with troubled and troubling people. Difficult as a children's home only really starts to gel after some years of opening. It wasn't about heads on beds.

Or maybe there was a belief in the diversions from residential options to intensive, therapeutic, specialist fostering. Or that early intervention would work and that young people wouldn't encounter difficulties at later ages.

What happened to the local authority 'make or buy' schemes is not known. It can be assumed the referrals that would have gone to the independent sector went to them. That would be 5,000 plus young people for 500 places. This is an overestimate as many local authority homes were offering short break placements rather than specialist interventions. It was not appreciated that the sector was like a living ecology, interlinked. So there were fewer than 500. In such a case how could they decide on whom to accept, and were they the specialist places that were needed?

The Government was acting on reducing expensive residential child care. No one questioned what 'expensive' meant, or to whom, or the consequences for society and individuals.

That's not to say that residential life was 'as usual' for quite a while preceding. It just got rarer, for each, and as a sector, and as a whole. The individual homes were resiliently resisting attrition. As a sector too there were advocates working tirelessly to ensure the sector had a positive space to work within. Each day a little more was worn away. Innovation was thought to be proving to be a fully worked up solution, all you needed to soak up the circumstances.

All of the effort to bring attention to the situation failed.

There was a concentration of deafness. Minds were inaccessible.

Trying to live with Hope in a Hopeless situation is very difficult. Unknowing allows continuation in such a circumstance. But this Hope is always falling in a vacuum of unknowing. All you will know is that you haven't hit the sides or the floor – yet.

The right conditions, unmet need rocketing, were present. It was the right time. Except it wasn't. There was another factor, cost, that connected to an ideological conservatism. Post-fact, post-evidence, post-policy – all was contingent. Contingent

on providers continuing to supply below cost care, and contingent on the avoidance of other factors. Contracts created at that time all took a solely provider focus. Whatever happened was the 'fault' of the providers. The attribution and contribution of the rest of the system was written out, it was never written in.

So now we have to consider the memory of Residential Child Care. How shall we make it? A magnificent trial or a temporary necessity done away with as soon as possible? Not that it can be seen as a necessity through history, not that it met needs no one else could, not that it enabled everything else to happen for children. Even in its memory we will keep it shrouded in negativity. We do not want it exhumed.

There were new schemes, many from America, all very open to Payment By Results. PBR is not an ethic for the caring of children. How many cuddles does it take for a secure attachment? How much do we pay for the lessening of Ambivalent attachment? There were elaborate schedules created for performance monitoring more out of commissioning practice than child care. The results showed no better or worse results than any other approach. A third, a third, a third; do well; do OK, do not last the course. Last the course, a bit like ensuring you take all the tablets. Often very expensive too, with the need for multiple professionals. Local authorities would take the name but strip out the factors involved and so lose the integrity of the approach. The result was that over time the 'skimmed milk' scheme was taken as the same as the same 'full milk' version. Disrepute followed.

So if you now want to see Residential Child Care you must go to other countries. Once there you will meet English children in these children's homes. The secret is that England sends its children elsewhere for Residential Child Care.

Residential Child Care needed full time care, full time strategy. What it got is skimmed milk and intermittent feeding.

What was needed was knowledge with power to produce what was needed. So why wouldn't you do that?

Reading the Government funded evaluations the words are that the impact of the loss would be 'minimal.' Meaning the numbers. No thinking of how it is explained to the young people now on a series, a never ending series, of placements until they are in secure accommodation, hospital or Youth offending.

It is not missed. It is not mourned.

Does it matter if it doesn't exist and is not remembered?

Something without all the parts doesn't mean all the parts are unnecessary.

In the ending you became philosophical and theological – what does the official understand of the needs of the young people? They have no experience of them

directly so their interpretation is all they have. Another box in a cluttered mind.
Another box not to open.

Residential Child Care needed a recognised space. It was given a disputed space.
Too busy doing the job others kept taking from them. All the oxygen was taken by
others for their own.

I go to see an ex-children's home. Its garden is overgrown and its paint is peeling. I'd
seen this before when orphanages closed.

I went to another and it had been converted into a family home. The metaphor was
not lost on me. The man of the house rightly asked me what I was looking at. He
said he felt the house was full of warmth, joy, happiness, laughter, play. His children
had not one day of unhappiness in it.

And I realise no one had documented it. TV programmes only wanted to record the
issues, problems. There were no films of record. There is no social history of the
contemporary homes though interestingly there is of previous times when they were
bigger, even institutional that you couldn't call the homes at the end. These
recollections are of fond memories of being loved.

Dilapidation, deliberate is how I now see what was allowed to happen. Like potholes
in roads but less visible. What would you choose to spend money on potholes or
children's homes? Most would choose the wellbeing of their cars I'm sure. The
wellbeing of 'other people's children' is not their affair, nor should they have their
money spent on them.

There'll be a Hollywood film one day that shows in golden tones the life of children's
homes. It will be as unreal as the unremitting negativity they received whilst open.

Perhaps the only way to have saved Residential Child Care was for it to be
prescribed by the NHS 'free at the point of delivery.' Once costs were seen as
volume then it was impossible to disentangle. But we effectively made trauma,
neglect, abuse non-health matters and they do not meet the clinical threshold to be a
health issue still.

Imagine a social movement to save children's homes? It's not going to happen is it?
Young people campaigned but no one took any notice.

We could do nothing about it. It was beyond anyone's control. Even though we knew
what was happening and why and what could be done.

We do not know what will happen next.

We have a lifetime locked away, of grown-ups of children, of a possibility of change.
growth and development.

So, what, now?

It was all a matter of time. Residential Child Care ran out of time.

Time does not exist but is a social construction. We could have made time.

The 'natural' reasons for Residential Child Care are present. It is needed. But it isn't seen as need. Its need is not socially constructed.

An era has ended.

Optimism has been replaced by evidence based practice.

What we have is not a community of care but an archipelago. Care is provided in unconnected atolls.

A united confident practice has gone into silos of defensible instructions. First we had packages of care, then programmes of care. Did we ever find out which was more effective? The former placed the responsibility on the team around the child to pool their resources creatively, the responsibility was the professionals. The latter and the responsibility shifted to the provider of a programme and ultimately to the young person to make the best use of this evidenced intervention. The responsibility shifted from the social to the individual, from the community with the richest resources, to the individual often deprived of a 'good-enough' start. Remember it was just after the children's centres had closed too.

It is unlikely we will repeat Residential Child Care.

Once it was central to providing a response for young people. It became an ever more liminal last resort. In the later forms a Five forces analysis showed it beset on all dimensions.

It was a quiet death. Unremarked. No obituary. Still not recognised.

(05 08 16 very slightly amended 15 02 24)