

The background of the cover is a photograph of a sunset or sunrise seen through the vertical bars of a prison cell. The sun is a bright, glowing orb on the horizon, partially obscured by a layer of clouds. The sky is filled with soft, golden light and wispy clouds. The bars are dark and create a grid-like pattern over the scene.

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# Reflections of a 'Champion'

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In 2013, when I was the Governor of HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall and was asked to become the Care Leavers Champion for NOMS (later HMPPS), I didn't know anything about the care system or care leavers. I was told it was an 'ambassadorial' role and I would not have to do anything apart from represent the organisation on the subject of 'care leavers' (we now use the more inclusive term 'care experienced people'). In reflecting on the last 8 years, and my journey from ignorance to a degree of knowledge, I realised that this journey can only be described through the people who taught, encouraged, corrected, challenged, supported and helped me. As I was the first and, until October 2021, the only 'Care Leavers Champion for HMPPS, it is also the story of how we as an organisation began to understand and deal with the people in our care and custody who had been in the care of local authorities as children. I use the term 'care' in its technical sense — appreciating that many of the people I am referring to didn't feel cared for. Many still don't feel that the large organisations that act as the 'corporate parent' (whether that's a local authority or HMPPS) often fail to meet their obligations to provide the level of care and support needed. That said, I have been overwhelmed by the dedication, enthusiasm and commitment shown by people in many organisations to work with and support those who have been in care. The willingness of those both in the voluntary sector and local authorities to challenge us to do better has been one of the most refreshing aspects of this work. Here, I share my reflections of the last eight years in my role as 'Champion' (a term I never felt comfortable with) by considering some of those people and the part they played on this journey.

Let's start with someone to whom I owe a huge debt but who is sadly no longer with us: Darren Coyne. Darren worked as part of the Care Leavers Association and was the first person to help me understand these issues. When I was appointed, as a result of the Cross Government Strategy on Care, launched in 2013,<sup>1</sup> he met with me to explain why we should find out who

our care leavers were, establish contact with the relevant local authority, and access the entitlements each individual had. It's important to stress that at this point neither the Prison or the Probation Service had any way of identifying those who had been in care, and didn't know they might have entitlements nor have any links with local authority leaving care teams. Darren taught me about entitlements, legal requirements and local offers but also about how it felt to have been in care, the disadvantages people faced and the trauma experienced by many. Darren was my guide and teacher and his passion for doing the right thing was contagious. He was always willing to challenge and tell us we should be doing more but did so from a position of authority not only because he had been in care but also because he devoted his life to this cause. He championed the notion that a 'care leaver' should not be narrowly defined as a young person between the ages of 18 and 25, but as anyone who had ever been in care, regardless of age. He argued that once you had been in care this was an experience which should be recognised as impacting on your whole life. This was one of the reasons we moved to using the terminology 'care experienced people' — in order to recognise that experience of care is something which needs to be recognised for the long term and regardless of age. He campaigned for closer working between prisons/Probation and the local authority, arguing that there should be one plan rather than a Sentence Plan by the prisons and a Pathway Plan created by the local authority. I am pleased to say that this is currently being considered and explored by the Innovations Unit as part of their work in our prisons.

One of the most powerful aspects of this work has been hearing from the young people who are or have been in care. On several occasions I have heard Sam, one of the young men who work with the CLA to represent those who have been in care, speak about his experiences. He gave evidence to both the Farmer Review (which considered the experiences of families of prisoners) and Lord Laming's review<sup>2</sup> into children in

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1. HM Government 2013 Care Leavers Strategy: A Cross Department Strategy for Young People Leaving Care Available online: Care Leavers Strategy ([publishing.service.gov.uk](http://publishing.service.gov.uk))
  2. Lord Laming (2016) In Care, Out of Trouble: How the life chances of children can be transformed by protecting them unnecessary involvement in the criminal justice system. London: Prison Reform Trust. Available online: [www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/In%20care%20out%20of%20trouble%20summary.pdf](http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/Portals/0/Documents/In%20care%20out%20of%20trouble%20summary.pdf).

care and custody, each time making an impact by simply telling people how he had been moved around, neglected and not treated as though his needs and wishes mattered. Similarly, the stories of those we hold in custody and who have experienced care have reminded me that those we label 'prisoners' were, not long ago, 'children' who were 'in care' but not necessarily being cared for. After over 20 years in the Prison Service, I had thought I could not be shocked or moved by the backgrounds of those we held in custody but when we held a 'Care Leavers Day' in Swinfen Hall in 2015, and some of the young men told their stories, I found myself moved to tears. One of the most challenging aspects of working with this group of people is that we are reminded of their humanity and ours.

I think that is why when I introduced the Prisons Minister, Andrew Selous to a group of young men who had been in care at Swinfen Hall he didn't want to leave and almost missed his train. He visited Swinfen Hall in 2015 and wanted to hear about the work I was leading but was short of time. I knew he would get more understanding of the issues by meeting these young men than by walking around the prison so, after a short tour, I introduced him to a group of young men who had been in care and left him. An hour later, he had to be reminded repeatedly by his aide that he needed to get a train! I was touched by his interest and willingness to listen to people whose voices are seldom heard. He was moved by their stories and asked me to let him know what he could do to help.

But it isn't enough to hear from and care about these issues. In order to address them, you need to build structures and processes. It's all very well to insist that care experienced prisoners should be able to access support from the local authorities but if we don't have structures in place to connect with local authorities we can't request that support. Instrumental to facilitating these connections was the National Leaving Care Benchmark Forum run by Alice Frank and others for Catch 22. The forum brings together most of the local authorities across England and co-ordinates communication about leaving care support services with other organisations. When they invited me to the forum in 2014, I naively assumed they had no connection with those in custody and were providing no support. I was wrong and found myself both warmly welcomed and on the receiving end of some fairly blunt

feedback about how we were not enabling access to local authority staff who were trying to provide support to their care leavers. It was a light bulb moment.

From then on, I could tell my fellow Governors that local authorities wanted to support those care experienced men and women, but we needed to allow them to. I realised then, as I do now, that this is not universally true, but it demonstrated that there was support for many if we could just enable it. It also reinforced the need for structures in our own organisation. Without a single point of contact in every prison, and a regional or group lead in every area, we could not feed this information to those who needed it. We started to put these structures in place and organised the National Care Experienced People Forum

to gather together the various government, prison, probation and voluntary sector representatives who were willing to work with us to identify and support care experienced people. When we were funded for a full time Operational Lead for Care Experienced People and Debbie McKay took up this post a couple of years ago our ability to engage with partners, support regional leads and drive forward change really stepped up a gear. Debbie has done great work in supporting and encouraging others and I am grateful to her as well as all those in prisons who have worked so enthusiastically to move us forward.

Several of the contributors to this journal have talked about the need to identify those who have been in care when they arrive with us. However, this is not just about putting processes in place. The most robust process in the world is ineffective if people don't want to disclose. There is a need for us to approach this difficult and sensitive subject in a variety of ways and using age-appropriate language. This requires a better awareness and understanding of the issues across the whole organisation and one of the ways we tried to achieve this was by holding an annual conference. The purpose was to speak to a wide range of people particularly those who could influence our service, ministers and policy. It was also intended to provide support, education and information for those involved in the day to day, difficult and complex work. It was fantastic to be supported on this by our CEOs — first Michael Spurr and then Jo Farrar- who each attended and spoke. But anyone who attended those conferences will agree that the most powerful messages came from our speakers with experience of

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care. Lisa Cherry had us leaning forward to hear more as she described her experience of care, trauma and recovery. Her speech cemented my wish to make the Prison Service a 'trauma informed' organisation. Lemn Sissay OBE, poet, author and Chancellor of Manchester University, came and spoke of how his experiences of care both bruised and harmed him but also motivated him to rise above them. Ian Thomas described his journey from care to offending, drugs and prison and then to become a successful social worker. It was incredibly impactful and all told their stories with force, humility, humour and honesty. This is what propels us forward — the human stories of trauma and distress and the evidence that with some support people are able to rise above these experiences and use them to become beacons for others to follow.

When you work in an organisation which holds people in custody you see a lot of evidence of the damage we do to each other. Working with those who have been in care reinforces how cruel, harsh and uncaring the world can be, even to small children. But it also reminds us how strong the human spirit is, how resilient people can be and how much potential there is in those we incarcerate. I have heard prose and poetry, seen art and drama and read stories which were moving and thought provoking from our care experienced people. I have been struck by their talent, humour and resilience. We have success stories and we see people unfold and thrive when given the chance.

Over the last 8 years I have seen huge change in our understanding of the experiences of care experienced people and good progress towards more consistent identification and support. I no longer

need to explain what a 'care leaver' or 'care experienced person' is when I begin a conversation with a senior colleague or engage with others across the Ministry of Justice. Our staff increasingly have an awareness of this subject if not a detailed understanding (we are still working on ensuring training is embedded). Many of our staff and managers have engaged enthusiastically with this work and led the way in finding new ways to support people. We have a published Strategy, launched by the CEO, Jo Farrar, and supported by an action plan setting out how we will deliver it. We regularly engage with other government departments on this issue — Department for Education, the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. There is a Ministerial Board chaired by Michael Gove which considers how care experienced people can be supported and is attended by ministers from across government. The work by the voluntary sector is outstanding and drives us forward, presenting new ideas, new approaches and new ways of working. We have seen one of our previous prisoners who had experienced care secure a job with the Ministry of Justice with her lived experience valued as an asset, not perceived as a problem. In other words, we have made great strides forward thanks to the energy and enthusiasm of those inside the Prison and Probation Service who have cared and wanted to support this group of people.

I am proud of all the service has achieved in this eight year period and hand over to Alison Clarke as the next Care Leavers Champion secure in the knowledge that she will take it forward with energy, enthusiasm and fresh perspective.