Witness Name: David Graham

Statement No.: M08-CLA-001

Exhibits: 4

Dated: 1st August 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY

WITNESS STATEMENT OF David Graham, The Care Leavers Association

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In this statement we focus, as requested, on the time period between 1st January 2020 and 28th June 2022. This is except where the inquiry asks for information about the periods before or after the pandemic.

I, David Graham, will say as follows:-

Part A Our Organisation

1. The Care Leavers Association (CLA) is a small user-led national charity established in 2000 to improve the lives of care leavers in England and Wales. Our office is in Manchester, and we have 3.2 FTE staff (a National Director, one full-time project worker, two part-time project workers and one part-time development worker). Our main purpose is to support care leavers of all ages and to use the voices of care leavers to improve the current care and leaving care system. All our trustees were in care as children and so were the majority of our staff. Given that we have helped thousands of care leavers, individually and collectively, in the past decade and beyond, we believe we have unparalleled knowledge of the direct issues facing care leavers of all ages.

2. Our services fall into four distinct areas:
    a. Advice, Guidance & Advocacy – to individual care leavers and others via email, telephone and self-help guides.
    b. Connection – group work in person and online. By this we mean that we provide various opportunities through which care leavers can connect with each other.

c. Improving policy and practice – engaging with government and service providers, producing briefings and conducting relevant research (mostly in collaboration with others)
d. Projects in specific funded areas. Our current focus is on older care leaver (i.e. those over the age of 25). However, we have also been active for well over a decade in projects focussed on the mental health of care leavers, the situation of many young care leavers in the criminal justice system and the needs of care leavers of all ages seeking to access and make use of their childhood care files.

3. The most significant change at the start of the pandemic was that we closed our office and all staff worked from home for almost the entire time (we let our office lease lapse in August 2020, only getting another office a year later). Online meetings through Teams and Zoom replaced face-to-face interactions. This applied throughout the lockdown periods and, after August 2020, when our lease period ended, for the following years. Within a month of the first lockdown starting, we started providing groupwork sessions online and monthly meetings. This proved to be a popular method of delivery, so we kept it and have increased our reach with our members and other care leavers of all ages. This shift to digital interaction is something that we regard as a silver lining of the pandemic. This is because not only has it significantly increased the numbers who interact with us, it has also made it easy for particularly excluded groups – those with physical disabilities, for example – to interact with their fellow care leavers. This helps reduce social isolation, amongst other benefits.

4. In terms of working routines, staff team meetings continued. We moved back into a shared office space from August 2021, but we have kept up our digital meeting practices and the shared office space is thus used less than it was.

5. In June 2020 we were awarded funding by the DfE as part of the supporting care leavers during covid fund. We were funded to establish an online digital portal to promote connection between care leavers, to provide groupwork for care leavers and to provide advocacy for care leavers. Due to technical difficulties, we were only able to develop a limited digital portal which benefited a small number of care leavers. Delivering groupwork was also difficult as we were unable to engage leaving care teams to recruit participants. We did manage to deliver a course of art therapy workshops for 30 care leavers. We also delivered two online training workshops attended by 400 professionals

in our sector. During the funded period we also delivered advocacy to 147 care leavers. This was a 48% increase compared to the previous year.

Part B Challenges facing care experienced children prior to the pandemic

6. Based on our experience and research, one of the main challenges faced by care experienced children (and here we mainly focus on care leavers up to the age of 25, given the focus of our work and expertise) is the increased likelihood of mental health difficulties. In turn, this can increase the challenges of developing meaningful relationships with peers and adults and result in increased social isolation. This can be intensified by the relative lack of family connections that are an intrinsic part of the care and leaving care experience. We produced a research report in 2017 (Caring For Better Health, attached at DG/01 [INQ000620903]) highlighting the mental health challenges of care experienced people.

7. There are huge challenges related to transition points, such as leaving care at 18 and the ending of leaving care status at 25. Such legal and bureaucratic endpoints would never occur to parents in relation to their birth children. The state, however, often leaves care leavers to fend for themselves at these points.

8. For children in care, placement instability is the key issue. High rates of placement breakdowns, particularly in foster care, can lead to a lack of consistency in caregiving and disrupt relationships and education.

9. Care-experienced children often perform worse academically than their peers due to disrupted schooling, low expectations, and lack of support. They face higher rates of exclusion and lower levels of post-secondary attainment. Care leavers are underrepresented in higher and further education and often face increased challenges to complete courses.

10. Many care leavers experience financial difficulties due to the lack of financial support when leaving care. Young people leaving care at 18 often face abrupt transitions with limited support, compared to peers who may rely on family well into their 20s. They are at greater risk of homelessness, unemployment, and mental health crises.

11. The accommodation of 16-18 year old care-experienced children remains a problem as they are often placed in unsuitable accommodation without receiving care and only limited support. The quality of accommodation is also often poor.

12. Young people in care face stigma and discrimination on a daily basis. Negative stereotypes and societal stigma can affect self-esteem and social integration. Children may internalise feelings of shame or difference, further isolating them. They also experience a lack of advocacy and voice. Children in care often feel unheard in decisions about their lives. Systems may be bureaucratic and adult-driven, with insufficient mechanisms to genuinely include children's perspectives.

13. Children in care and care leavers are overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

Measures prior to 31st December 2010 to mitigate these challenges

14. In the decade before the pandemic, measures such as 'Staying Put' (allowing some children in settled foster placements to stay there up to the age of 21) had helped a minority of care leavers. The extension of the Personal Adviser to cover all care leavers up to the age of 25 was also helpful. However, such improvements took place in a context of cuts in local authority services and the increasing use of small private sector children's homes that required local authorities to move some children hundreds of miles away from their home area. Other problems including increasing numbers of care leavers effectively leaving care between the ages of 16 and 18 and living in semi-independent accommodation without on-site adult care and supervision.

15. Significant trends in the period 1st January 2015 to 31st December 2019

- An increase in the prevalence of care experienced children and young people experiencing mental health problems. Despite high need, many care-experienced children struggled to access Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Key issues included long waiting times, high thresholds for support, disruption in care due to placement moves or out-of-area placements. Even when access was achieved, services were often not trauma-informed or tailored to the complex experiences of children in care. Older care-experienced young people (aged 16–25) faced significant barriers transitioning from CAMHS to adult mental health services.

Many fell through the gaps due to rigid eligibility criteria, lack of continuity, and reduced support after leaving care.

- There was a major increase in the use of unregulated accommodation for 16/17 year olds. This led to many young people being placed in unsuitable low-quality accommodation without appropriate care and support.
- There was growing attention to the outcomes for care leavers, especially in housing, employment, and education. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 in England introduced duties on local authorities to provide personal advisors to care leavers up to age 25. However, this was not sufficiently resourced. Care leavers over 21 had to ask for the support which was then assessed and often refused due to lack of resources.
- Transitions at the age of 18, 21 and 25 continued to produce a "cliff edge", with support tailoring off at each age.
- Housing options for care leavers were sparse, due to continued pressures on local authority social housing provision. Care leavers, without priority access to social housing, often had to resort to poor quality private accommodation in unsafe areas.
- The ongoing delivery of 'Staying Put' remained patchy across the country. 'Staying Put' also highlighted the discrimination faced by children in residential care, as no similar program was developed.
- Local Authorities did not properly act on their sufficiency duty to ensure the availability of a range of suitable placements. This resulted in an increase in placement breakdowns and out-of-area placements.
- One positive development, partly as a result of our work, was increasing awareness within the criminal justice system of the needs of the disproportionate number of care experienced children and young people housed within the secure estate.

16. We don't have data on whether the above trends affected specific groups, such as those from specific ethnic groups or those with SEND. Nor are we aware of particular geographical areas being more affected than others.

17. The Department of Education had a Care Leaver strategy, published in 2011, which raised awareness of some of the challenges without providing concrete solutions. There was also the 2017 CSW Act which extended PA support to care leavers up to the age of 25 and introduced the requirement to produce a local offer. However, in relation to the PA extension this was only available to care leavers after an assessment of need and therefore the local authority could manage the amount of support offered. This has often

left care leavers we deal with without adequate support. And in relation to the local offer, there was no requirement on local authorities to involve care leavers in the development of the local offer. Hence the local offer was usually not based on and evidence-led understanding of need and what works.

18. The DfE and DHSC, whilst recognising the research showing care experienced children and young people were more likely to experience mental health challenges, were unable to introduce guidance on increasing evidence-based mental health support.

19. The MoJ and HMPPS have shown an improved understanding of why there are more care experienced young people in prison and what support they need. Both appointed a policy lead and HMPPS produced guidance. This made some improvements particularly in prisons. However, there was little collaborative working with the DfE and local authorities to understand why care experienced young people were overrepresented in prisons and how they could all work together to prevent this happening.

Part C The Impact of the Pandemic

20. As a small charity whose work is mostly focussed on older care leavers, we are not best placed to comment in this area. However, we did undertake a small piece of research in this area (PowerPoint summary attached) exploring the effect of the pandemic on care leavers of all ages. Of our 51 care experienced respondents, only seven were young people so we are unable to use this data to make an authoritative statement. However, this survey and our other forms of contact during this time – for example, our June 2020 monthly Zoom meeting for care leavers of all ages attracted 26 people, also we delivered advice, guidance and advocacy support to 147 care experienced young people during the pandemic – suggested an apparently paradoxical experience that makes more sense if one has worked with care leavers for some time. This is that many care experienced people experienced acute isolation because they were already relatively bereft of social contact, while others stated that the lockdown experiences were little different to their normal lives so they coped reasonably well.

The key points from our experience during this period are:

- Many care-experienced children and young people already faced emotional challenges, and the isolation caused by lockdowns worsened feelings of loneliness,

anxiety, and depression. Reduced contact with family, friends, and support networks further strained their emotional wellbeing.

- Many care-experienced young people told us they were effectively abandoned, having no contact with their PA for months.
- Care experienced young people in residential care and supported living arrangements often experienced draconian – and, in our view, brutally excessive – lockdown restrictions, being confined to their bedroom for long periods of time, akin to those in prison.
- Social workers and support staff were often restricted in face-to-face contact, leading to fewer visits and less oversight.
- Therapeutic and mental health services were harder to access, with some children and young people falling through the cracks.
- Care experienced young people found it harder to maintain and build social relationships due to the lack of contact with others outside their placement.
- At the start of the pandemic, we encountered examples of digital poverty as care experienced children and young people had limited access to laptops and data/Wi-Fi etc. It was positive to see government and private backed schemes to send laptops and data to care leavers. However, we heard of instances where local authorities kept new laptops destined for care leavers and instead sent them old models.
- Care experienced young people in custody were subjected to lockdowns in cells of 23 hours. Some young people also reported to us being unable to be visited by family and friends for over 12 months.
- For our part, as an organisation with a long record of work in secure criminal justice establishments, we were unable to visit care leavers in prison for 18 months.
- More positively, we did see attempts to deliver more flexible services. For some young people the move towards online and digital communication was beneficial. and NHS agenda.

21. We were not aware of that any of these impacts disproportionately impacted specific geographical areas and/or groups of care experienced children (for example children with SEND or from ethnic minority backgrounds)

22. Our main concern during the first lockdown was the changes to safeguarding practices and child protection process introduced by Statutory Instrument 445. We did not believe that any of the changes were required, on health or any other grounds, as they create more risk and harm than they deflected. At such a difficult time, children in care more

care and direct support, not less. The changes served the convenience and fears of local authorities and their workforces, to the detriment of children. For example:

- Face-to-face visits were replaced with phone/digital contact.
- Six-weekly the six-weekly meeting duty was removed.
- Six-monthly reviews were no longer mandatory.
- The reduction of regular independent oversight meant that issues such as neglect or abuse were more likely to go unnoticed.
- Twice-yearly Ofsted inspections of children's homes no longer required.
- Monthly Independent Visits to Children's Homes were no longer mandatory.
- Legal powers were granted to detain COVID-19-positive children in care.
- Adoption and fostering panels were made optional
- There were reduced initial checks on foster carers, such as in relation to health and criminal background.

23. Add all this together and you have a colossal increase of risk and reduction of care to some of the most vulnerable children in our country. This was despite children being at minimal risks themselves from Covid-19.

24. We did not conduct or are aware of any monitoring and/or assessment in relation to any disproportionate impact on any individual groups of children or geographical areas.

25. The pandemic highlighted and compounded the extreme levels of loneliness, isolation and mental distress experienced by care-experienced children and young people. However, despite having a better understanding of the situation government and local authorities have been slow to implement support services that can reduce loneliness, isolation and mental distress. The availability and access to evidence based mental health support for care experienced young people is still patchy around the country. In many areas of the country CAMHS (Community Adolescent Mental Health Services) still do not offer specifically tailored services for care experienced young people. Most CAMHS services only support children up to the age of 18 thus leaving care leavers up to 25 without support. The pandemic raised this issue up the agenda but there has been no national coordinated strategy to improve services.

26. The pandemic also highlighted the importance of the PA (personal advisor) role to care leavers as the reduction in PA's interactions with care leavers had negative consequences. However, there was virtually no mention of the role of the PA in both the

final report of The Independent Review of Children's Social Care and the governments responding strategy Stable Homes Built on Love. To the best of our knowledge there is still no national guidance on what the role of the PA look like or training program to ensure PA's have the relevant skills and knowledge to support care leavers effectively. This results in a postcode lottery of good and bad provision across the country.

27. On a positive note, we were aware that during the pandemic the DfE did establish a grant program to support care leavers. We were recipients of this grant. We do not know if the whole program was evaluated for its effectiveness.

28. Also, it seems likely to us that some children in care would have benefited from more flexible online interactions and that interpersonal connections may have been stronger in some children's homes due to the restrictions on movement during the lockdown periods.

Part D The Interactions of the Care Leavers Association with Government

29. During the pandemic period we had no more or less contact with government than we had before. Our principal interactions were through the Department of Education, chiefly with **Name Redacted** (care leavers team) and **Name Redacted** (National Care Leaver Advisor). Our contact for the care leavers grant program was **Name Redacted**.

30. We were not asked to provide any training or guidance to any government department.

31. During this period we were not consulted with or informed of any government announcements in advance including the decision to close schools.

32. The process of communicating with government was no different to the process before and after the pandemic apart from a bit more of a delay in receiving responses.

33. We did not have any meetings with senior politicians during this period. We did write to various parliamentarians (sample attached) asking them to support an Early Day Motion to annual Statutory Instrument 445 and informing them of our misgivings in relation to the effects on care experienced young people which we outlined in Section C. As noted in your list of documents, we were also co-signatories on a letter to various individuals in government outlining the impact of the costs of living on care leavers (letter attached).

34. Whilst we received responses to our correspondences with government officials, none of our requests were acted on. This is an area of difficulty for all charities especially small ones with limited resources. It can be difficult to get the ear of ministers or officials and make a case for a change of direction. Even when charities come together to act with a louder voice government stubbornly refuses to take heed of our concerns. Whilst we have no thoughts on how government could improve communication in a future emergency, more consideration needs to be given by government to experts that come from the charity sector.

35. We also engaged with the policy team supporting the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and we submitted responses at various stages of the review. Our main points of issue with the initial case for change can be summarised as:
    - Acknowledgment of the Review: CLA welcomes the review's establishment and its focus on major problems in children's social care but urges ongoing engagement with care-experienced individuals.
    - Criticism of the 'Placement Market': The current system, which moves children far from familiar environments, is seen as broken. CLA argues that privatisation has contributed to instability and calls for localized, long-term care solutions.
    - Supportive Relationships: The report lacks emphasis on peer support among looked-after children. CLA stresses the importance of facilitating these relationships through shared supported living beyond age 18.
    - Lifetime Care for Care Leavers: CLA challenges the notion of 'leaving care' at set ages. They advocate for removing rigid age cutoffs (16, 18, 21, 25) and ensuring continuous support into adulthood.
    - Ending Unregulated Accommodation: CLA supports higher standards for housing young people aged 16-18, arguing that autonomy should not replace adequate care.
    - Equalizing 'Staying Put' Arrangements: Current policies benefit young people in foster care but lack equivalent provisions for residential care leavers. CLA calls for equal support across all care types.
    - Access to Care Records: The CLA supports unrestricted access to records for care-experienced individuals of all ages.
    - The Role of Residential Care: CLA opposes any reduction in residential care, arguing that it can be a positive option if properly regulated and resourced.
    - Mental Health, Education, and Criminal Justice: CLA believes these areas require deeper analysis, with improved coordination between government departments.

- Hierarchy of Care: The Review appears to prioritize kinship care and adoption over local authority care. CLA stresses that the care system should not be viewed solely as a 'last resort.'
- Profit-making in Social Care: While innovation is welcome, CLA questions excessive profits extracted from care providers and suggests reinvestment in services.
- Inspection and Monitoring: CLA advocates for stronger inspection measures, incorporating care-experienced voices to ensure real improvements.
- Systemic Change & Participation: CLA urges full engagement with care-experienced individuals to create meaningful reforms rather than repeating past reviews.

36. We gave evidence to the Education Select Committee enquiry into children's social care. In summary our main points were:

    - Challenging the common assumption that group residential care for children is a flawed model.
    - Noting that Personal Adviser support for care leavers under the age of 25 is inconsistent, under-resourced and has too-long (eight weeks) gaps between mandatory contact.
    - In particular, support for care leavers over the age of 21 is inadequate, being often left to duty social work teams and hence offering no continuity of care.
    - That local and national government are consistently overlooking the need for trauma-informed care of both looked after children and care leavers.
    - That the care system needs to a lot more to prioritise the voices of children and care leavers. Without this, reforms risk being dominated by professional interests and failing again.
    - Children in Care Councils must be democratically accountable to care-experienced young people.
    - Unsafe and unsupported accommodation for 16–17-year-olds must end. All homes for under-18s should be required to provide care, not just housing. Ofsted's current guidance does not go far enough in addressing this.
    - "Staying Close" and "Staying Put" need to be extended to age 23 with proper funding and a redesign.
    - Support must be provided for care leavers to have a right to remain in care or return to care up to age 25. This is what most young people with their birth families already take for granted, to their immense benefit.

- With respect to the Government Strategy Document, "Stable Homes, Built on Love", we argued that it focusses too much on early intervention, neglecting the needs of current children in care. We also note that only one chapter addresses care leavers, with vague actions and no major reforms.

37. There were a range of other points we made, but since these do not relate to the impact of the pandemic, we do not reproduce them here.

Part E Lessons Learned

38. If there is one key lesson from the pandemic period is that never again should the government be allowed to suspend legal requirements to protect children in care on the spurious grounds of a health problem that had little direct threat to children and relatively little threat to the working-age professionals that worked with them. We note that the Court of Appeal, on 24th of November, unanimously agreed that the then Education Secretary, Gavin Williamson, had acted illegally in introducing these changes.

39. Beyond the legality, however, it was a moral outrage that the government sought to remove statutory safeguards from some of the most vulnerable children in our society at such a time. It is self-evident that no good parent in the entire UK would ever have dreamed of doing the equivalent of neglecting their parental duties during that time.

40. To be more constructive, it's clear the Department for Education had no plans in place for such an emergency. Hence, they were 'winging it' in the face of pressure from adult professional bodies and local authorities (that's perhaps a generous interpretation). One thinks of the success of teachers in keeping most children out of their schools during the same period. A plan needs to be developed to cope better next time, thereby reducing the temptation to resort to a similar statutory instrument.

41. We have no plans to carry out research on pandemic impacts in future. We don't have the resources to do so.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief in its truth.

Personal Data

David Graham
National Director
1st August 2025