

East of England and East Midlands evidence session notes

Monday 17th May 2021, 4.30 – 6pm

The APPG held the third online evidence session of the [Spotlight Inquiry](#) in May, focussing on care and community connections in the East of England and East Midlands.

We were delighted to welcome nearly 40 people with different personal and professional experiences of care to join the discussion, including care-experienced children, young people and adults, social care and voluntary sector professionals including Directors of Children's Services, service managers and participation leads, local Councillors acting as lead members for children's services and many others. Attendees had connections to areas across the two regions including but not limited to Bedford, Cambridgeshire, Derby, Derbyshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Leicester, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Luton, Norfolk, Nottinghamshire, Northamptonshire, Rutland and Suffolk. Also in attendance to observe the session were colleagues from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

Welcome and introductions

The session began with a welcome and introduction from Daisy Cooper, MP for St Albans. Those joining early were asked to participate in a Mentimeter task exploring the question *What does the word 'community' mean to you?*

What does the word 'community' mean to you?

 Mentimeter



Spotlight on... Taking Hold of Our Heritage

Jacob and Casey from Leicestershire Cares – an organisation working with care-experienced and other young people in Leicestershire – spoke about 'Taking Hold of Our Heritage': a heritage project which worked with young people to investigate the complex nature of the identity of care leavers, producing an archive of artefacts including oral histories, photography and photovoice. The young

people investigated the memories and experiences of Leicestershire's leaving care community, by looking at themselves, but also visiting and interviewing and documenting care experience young people.

Jacob outlined how the project began following discussions with young people who wanted to change the narrative around care to something more positive, and conversations which explored memories, items or trinkets which connected them to their past. Many spoke about not having an item which connected them to their birth family or having lost it during their time moving around in care, and negative memories

Casey spoke about the consideration of care-experienced heritage and the impact of being distanced or estranged from your family undermining typical understandings of 'heritage'.

"We don't have stories passed down, we've got no ties to whatever made up our past, and you don't quite realise how big a thing it is until you don't actually have it."

Casey spoke about how the project allowed young people to sit down together as the community they are to reflect on their care experience and identify what they wanted their heritage to be – recognising the positive aspects of their experiences and offering a space which provided "*some kind of control over our lives which are often chaotic and don't have a lot of control.*"

Jacob noted the use of a participatory media production model which used photography, spoken word, heritage crafts and art to make and create things which acted as a starting point for exploring memories and discussions with others and themselves. The physical book as the 'output' was powerful as a tool for showcasing the project's work.

Casey highlighted that care-experienced people often don't have pictures from when a baby or toddler.

"We don't actually know what we looked like as a kid... you don't realise that plays a huge part of the concept of heritage... you don't have this seemingly normal and common thing.... But we have the option to create ourselves and we can become who we want to be, we can identify how we want to identity. That gives us a nice flexibility that can be quite healing when we look back on our experiences."

Casey also shared her experience of finding comfort and security amongst groups of other care-experienced young people.

"You sit down with this group of other people and you all know you're care-experienced, nothing has to be said. I explain it as – there's this wall you didn't realise was there that completely dissolves. You can say something like 'oh my foster dad once did this'. Nobody blinks an eye and it's the most normal thing to say in that room."

This contrasted with speaking to others at college for example where Casey would refer to 'my parents' to hide her care experience.

"You don't realise how much having these safe spaces... gives you confidence in your experiences and makes you feel more secure. It lifts a weight you didn't realise was there. It makes a huge difference knowing you have this space to go to because it can be more exhausting than you realise feeling you have to lie for the sake of other people's comfortableness."

To find out more about the project and download a PDF copy of the book, please visit <https://www.leicestershirecares.co.uk/get-help/individuals/young-people/care-experience/taking-back-our-heritage/>.

A conversation about care and community

Daisy Cooper MP chaired an open discussion with attendees for one hour on the Inquiry's theme of care and community, loosely framed around the four key questions below:

1. How can experiences of care impact on connections with communities? What are some of the barriers care-experienced young people often face?
2. What can be done to support care-experienced young people to feel connected to the communities which matter to them? What are some of the solutions?
3. How can wider communities be better supported to understand and respect their care-experienced members?
4. How has the Covid-19 pandemic changed community connections for care-experienced young people, and what can we learn from this?

Below are some of the key themes and insights shared by attendees verbally and in the chat. All direct quotations in italics come as spoken or from the chat and are not intentionally assigned to any specific attendee referred to in the accompanying text.

Instability – ‘putting down roots’

Many attendees raised how instability in care – particularly moves in where children are living – make it difficult to ‘put down roots’ and develop long-term relationships with other young people and adults. There was a clear recognition that time is needed for these relationships to develop, something the care system often doesn’t provide young people with enough of before they experience another significant change in their lives. For many, these experiences continued to impact them well into adulthood.

“Yes, it has made it difficult to put down roots. When you begin to get a sense of community, and build those meaningful relationships and trust within that community, you tend to have to move and uproot. Those who are care experienced and have moved out of local authority search for the sense of stability. Almost like a reset to default. It changed your view of community as your community can become one that is not geographical, but online, or a certain group of people.”

“Also at the same time, I didn’t have a great care life I have a very toxic relationship with my adopted mother. And being moved so much after it broke down it just puts you in a position where you don’t know where home is and then as a care leaver it’s very difficult to find somewhere to settle.”

“As we get older we seemingly settle down in one community. When we become settled we build meaningful relationships and trust within a community and our individual sense of community becomes stronger.”

“Nowhere feels like home usually, it’s purely because we’ve learned not to get too comfortable. We’re always prepared to go, and not as willing to create an emotional connection with where we live because it hurts less to leave.”

"Nowhere feels like home. If you keep moving us, we're not going to settle. Every time I did move, I never unpacked. I just travelled around in suitcases. Even as a care leaver, it's the feeling you're going to feel... It makes you feel like a parasite. Nobody really wants you."

Colleagues from Ofsted and local authorities noted the structural issues in the care system which act as 'blockers' and mean that too many young people are placed at long distances from their schools, families and other communities. These included shortages in foster carers and secure children's home places and poor commissioning practices. A local Councillor highlighted how the voices of those placed out of the local area are often lesser-heard in participation and other improvement structures in the local authority.

Returning to 'home' communities

Developing on the above, one of the key conversations which emerged was around how much the care system did or did not support young people to return to family and 'home' communities where they wanted to, but also respected and strengthened community connections for those who didn't – particularly if they'd lived outside of their local area for some time and felt more comfortable and 'rooted' elsewhere. Attendees noted that many gravitate back to the people and places from before they entered care and (re-)establish their support network from there; there was often a strong 'pull' back to the geographical place of home which professionals weren't often as mindful of for those who have been removed from the boundaries of that particular place. However, this wasn't consistent, and it was important for the system to adapt to what young people wanted.

"There is a higher probability of disconnection to your community when you're taken in to care, and I think the transition from in care to care leaver needs to place a higher consideration on the reconnection back to your community, whatever that may be... whatever you identify as community."

"It's individual based on experiences, we have supported young people who were like you who didn't move towards their families, and some who did, sometimes those who wanted to move back to family often don't get the support to do that, that choice was not always acknowledged by the professionals they are working with."

"What's important is making a community no matter where every child goes... I'm back in a community where I used to be as a young child and where it all went wrong. I struggle in this community massively. I have friends and family here but there are a lot of people from my past who I don't really want to be near. I found I had a more healthy community where I was when I was in foster care. I had lots of people supporting me and they made it such a nice community to be in. I think community is about where a child is and not where they're going."

These divergent experiences and some of the inflexibility in the way the system currently operates were particularly apparent around leaving care age, such as in the provision of accommodation and the opportunities within Local Offers for care leavers.

"One of the problems for care leavers is that in order to obtain accommodation they are told they have to go back to where they came from originally to apply for housing, but often they would prefer to live near their foster carers or where they work! The system needs to change!"

"Locally a community 'offer' can be developed so YP can pick or choose the groups/activities they want to get involved in, gaps can be plugged in the offer to cover missing pieces, this

doesn't help if a YP doesn't want to return to the 'placing authority' perhaps more joined up working between LA's and Leaving Care teams would help."

Community as individual

Extending on the above, attendees were very clear that community was an individual choice and meant very different things for different people at different times in their lives – the best thing the care system could do was provide the space for young people to better understand the communities which matter to them and help them strengthen these connections, whatever they may be. The policies and processes which make up ‘the system’ were seen to prevent this.

"I think at times we try and solve a problem with one answer it's about ensuring we treat young people as individuals, not one size fits all, the word community means different to every young person."

"There is an opportunity to decide what your heritage is, who your community are and what you need your community to be."

"Sometimes our emotional connections to things can be around place, around people... recognising whatever community means in the context of every care-experienced young person is the best thing we can do as professionals."

"Listen to what young people are saying and what they articulate what they understand as their communities where they feel safe or welcome or at home."

Examples of communities and opportunities

During the session, we heard of some fantastic examples of wider communities which young people felt connected to whilst in care, and where supportive groups within and outside of the care system had helped to facilitate stronger community connections – such as with religious communities, children in care councils, in workplaces, and through sports teams. In the latter example, a participation lead shared how they had noticed football was a particular hook for unaccompanied asylum-seeking young people living in the area, and so worked with the community foundation attached to the local football club to organise sessions near to where many of them lived. This success led to a football tournament with other local authorities. This provided something local for those young people to be involved with, but also strengthened relationships amongst them too and with others in the local and surrounding areas.

"Collectively we feel that there is better signposting needed in order to make us aware of events and groups in our local communities, we feel that carers and professionals need a better knowledge of our local areas to help us feel more connected by helping us engage in groups."

"I go to church too. Agreed, my church group really is a community. Like I feel that they are there with every problem I have."

"We're involved in a children in care council. That is our community. We have a lot of support there and we get help when needed. Without them I don't think I'd be where I am today, community wise. I've made friends through there, done hundreds of activities, worked with loads of people. I've got to experience all of this and have my say. I think every child deserves that who is in care, no matter what community they're in. They need to be part of a group that can help them no matter where they are."

"Work is one of the communities many of us find really important... There's something we can collectively do to help people understand the varied experiences that people in care have had... you won't find more resilient people than our care-experienced people... the commitment to what they're doing will outstrip what you find elsewhere."

Stigma and societal understanding

Consistent with previous sessions, widespread stigma was seen as a key barrier to care-experienced young people feeling able to engage with communities beyond the care system. Care-experienced attendees in particular spoke about the feeling of being consistently and repeatedly mischaracterised and how this impacts on a sense of belonging and community.

"Work needs to be done on the stigma that is attached to care leavers. When an care experienced person hears or find out that you are care experienced their whole outlook toward you changes."

"Because, imagine your whole life as a child trying to explain what a problem is, and 9/10 times we are not believed because of our 'reputation' as a care kids it's very hard because we want to be able to talk to people but we are so scared of being disbelieved."

"The label of being a care leaver can act as a barrier to creating and maintaining relationships with peers which contributes to the wider issue of struggling to find a sense of community and belonging."

"People need to know some people in care are good. We haven't got just a care label; we've got a young person one too. It's a double barrier."

"I'd like them to understand we're not different to anybody else. Just because I have different life experiences that maybe other people my age haven't had, it doesn't mean I'm any less capable of achieving what other people can. I'm no different to anyone else my age and these experiences don't define me, so I don't want to be treated as such."

"The media (social, local and national) really doesn't help. I'm sure we've all seen some awful headlines which show care experienced children in a negative light. Everyone needs to challenge that imo."

"It seems the wider society view care experienced people the way that 'Tracey Beaker' is portrayed on screen. Care Experienced people do not have enough accurate representation and this leads to negative stereotyping."

"If you talk to people 1 on 1, there is understanding, a concern for children who have been brought into care. Then if you talk away from just the individual, if there's going to be a new children's home opened up in an area for example, as divisive or antisocial. For me that dichotomy between people understanding when you talk as an individual vs when you talk as a group of people is a massive challenge for us nationally as a society. We should be helping people to understand the different journeys people go on and the amazing skills they have."

"There's something about how do we collectively, and I don't mean as councils, as the NHS, or as government or other bodies, but how do we, as members of communities, help people to open up and understand in the broadest sense why our care-experienced people are incredible and why we should offer them our support."

Perceptions and trust with professionals in care

Within the ‘care system’ too, attendees spoke about how negative perceptions from and poor experiences with adult professionals impacted on their ability to trust them, leading to a lack of support with strengthening community connections. Coupled with the stigma they might experience from those in the wider community, this ‘double’ barrier makes it particularly difficult for young people to have the self-esteem, confidence and trusted relationships to share what support or help they might want.

“We usually don’t open up to the professionals because we get told we’re troubled, challenged, a problem, one bad experience can really change our whole prospective on professionals as a whole.”

“I agree with this. Personally, one bad experience had a knock on effect, and led to subsequent distrust in an entire service.”

“the stigma of the way adults judge us by our past n not wat positives weve made of our selves and the other one is that social services assume that becoz we were in care we are unable to look after our own kids even tho we learn from our carers and the other positive adults around us plz”

“The reason we don’t open up to professionals is because we get labelled as ‘troubled... challenging behaviour... not listening to rules’. If there wasn’t such quick judgement on what we have to say, we’d feel more open to speak. Once you have one bad experience, it ruins it for the rest.”

“I think part of listening to young people is listening to who they say they want to advocate for them and who they want and trust to speak on their behalf when/if they lack confidence to do so. One example is a child I knew in a children’s home who wanted their key worker to attend a meeting for them (they just couldn’t manage this themselves) and for the key worker to share what the child wanted. There was real push back against this from those convening the review as it wasn’t felt by everyone that the key worker was properly qualified to do this, and there was some concern about conflict of interest. Trust is a real issue.”

“I think it also comes down to supporting CYP to develop the skills, confidence, meaningful relationships and trust to feel able to share their voices, opinions, thoughts and interests, and to know that these are valued and respected. Sharing these can be intimidating, especially when you know someone has a specific agenda and role.”

A local Councillor noted how it was incumbent on all elected members to listen to what children in care and care leavers are saying, especially as young people often feel they can’t open up to people in authority, and asked how they could better get across that they do care passionately and were looking for more to do.

Disclosing care experience in the community

Linked to the above, Daisy Cooper MP asked how comfortable care-experienced attendees felt sharing their care experience with others, and in what scenarios or with whom this would feel more or less comfortable. Attendees were interested to better understand how to reconcile the need to provide proactive support with the recognition that care-experienced young people often want to be ‘young people first’ and not ‘singled-out’ amongst their peers.

“It seems to be a common thing that we don’t necessarily disclose that we are care experienced unless it has some sort of benefit for us. There is a lot of stigma still around care

experienced people. People who don't have the experience of care quite often look at you differently and have different expectations of you than what they do of an individual who isn't care experienced."

"Personally, I wouldn't tell people I am care experienced unless it would benefit me in any way."

"I feel like for me. I don't know if it's the same for anyone else, but I had to grow up very quickly because others are at home with family they can live their lives like how they want to, and I feel I had to grow up very quickly so now that I am grown up it's like I feel I missed out on my childhood."

"for me personally I would say depends on who your telling as I wouldn't be comfortable with certain people knowing"

"The young people I have spoken to and worked with are all very different. Some have wanted to be open but some have been very closed. Well done the young people who are speaking in such a amazing way."

"Going back to the case of offering help.. I think we need to be careful that we aren't 'feeling sorry.. that pity.. a lot of young people say they don't want pity but see me for who I am."

"The only time I'd be happy people to know that if it could benefit me in a positive way."

"It's important to know there are groups that don't have that negative perception of us. If there are groups like a rotary club that have an offering that's been designed with us in mind, that sort of already takes the first step to say we're a community that are welcoming and we're a community that are willing to break away from that stereotype and we want to welcome or support care-experienced people."

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

Finally, attendees shared some of their experiences from the past year around community connections during Covid. Consistent with previous sessions, reflections were mixed around the impacts for young people. Digital connectivity was again highlighted as a problem, both in terms of practical access and the barriers it posed to creating personal relationships. One young attendee noted how they were living in supported accommodation during the first lockdown and found it particularly difficult when they were asked to stay in their rooms as much as possible; this robbed them of their immediate community within their building.

"Not being able to see people, not being able to engage fully virtually. Inability to communicate properly. A lot of community groups, like youth clubs, LGBTQ+ groups aren't running due to COVID. Actual face to face contact, meetings face to face, get our routines back, regain our sense of purpose, interaction with real people, not just a computer screen."

"Same here, we tried really hard to keep our connection digitally, but it wasn't the same and not all our YPs had the equipment to connect."

"I have been running a support group on zoom all through the pandemic and have done quizzes silly games etc just to be there for our care experienced young people. We as an outside organisation have provided tablets for some who were isolated also have run the CICC monthly meeting and been available on our whatsapp groups and have learned that the

young people appreciated this and felt they still had the safe space to talk about difficulties in CICC."

"There was a particular issue that has emerged about care experienced young people who have moved during lockdown and how they will need additional support to connect as restrictions lift."

"We have seen a huge impact on our UASC and young people, who were really building their own communities with the Creative Mentors they are working with. Not meeting face to face was really isolating for them, and connecting digitally was also incredibly difficult and frustrating for a number of reasons."

Other attendees shared their experiences with the ‘barrier of the screen’ and that turning on the camera was often a big step for young people as they were letting someone into their own space. Others highlighted more positive aspects of the move to increased digital options, such as the element of control it gave to young people and the option to meet more regularly. One attendee also shared how deaf young people – who had long used virtual means to communicate – felt at ease in the new environment and were empowered by teaching their social workers and IROs how to use technology effectively. A participation lead within a rural local authority noted that virtual engagement had actually boosted recruitment they could sustain into the future, created new delivery opportunities (e.g. music sessions) and allowed for creative outputs such as films which would help with *"marketing ourselves as a community in the future."*

Thanks and key reflections from attendees

Daisy Cooper MP thanked everyone for attending and sharing their insights and highlighted the Inquiry’s next steps and the other ways people could contribute to the Inquiry. Attendees were asked to share the most important point they were taking away from the session – see these below.

What's the most important point you'll take away from today's session?

 Mentimeter

That each care experienced young person owns their story and it is up to them if they want to people to know about their history and backstory.

Listen

Being introduced and supported as a person first, circumstances second (if at all!)

We need more positive and accurate representation of Care Experience in the media

Person-centred decisions are crucial

Developing an offer co-produced by young people so that there is something 'on paper' for YP to decide on what to get involved with and this should be available for YP who are placed outside of their city

"Just because I have been in care does not mean I am any less successful than my peers who haven't"

It was nice to see so many councillors on the call and have the opportunity for direct discussion with a wide range of people, including young people and people working outside of the council. It would be good to see that more.