



North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session notes

Thursday 3rd June 2021, 5.30 – 7pm

The APPG held the fourth online evidence session of the [Spotlight Inquiry](#) in June, focussing on care and community connections in the North East and Yorkshire and the Humber.

We were delighted to welcome nearly 30 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 Barnsley, City of York, Doncaster, Hull, Leeds, Middlesbrough, North Yorkshire, Redcar & Cleveland, South Tyneside and Sunderland.

Welcome and introductions

The session began with a welcome and introduction from Emma Lewell-Buck, MP for South Shields. 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? 



Spotlight on... Sheffield’s ‘The Can In Can’t’ project

Tanya, Children’s Involvement Officer at Sheffield Council, and Dom, an artist and youth facilitator, introduced themselves and their work with the Sheffield Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Union. Tanya described how the Virtual School in Sheffield had voiced a desire for more creative curriculum opportunities for children they were supporting, and the Coram Voice Bright Spots survey had identified an appetite for creative opportunities from young people. The team began collaborating with the local music hub, but the pandemic disrupted their initial plans for in-person sessions.

“I asked ‘would online work with our young people?’ because the joy of us coming together every fortnight were that they loved to be together. They were all best mates. Actually what we found is that it worked incredibly well. There were times that Zoom fatigue came in, especially if they were using it for learning at school, but Zoom was really good for those young people who struggled with their confidence, and we got a lot of new young people coming and joining – the people who would maybe have never come to a face-to-face meeting.”

Tanya described how the group created and launched [an anthology of writing based around stigma in care](#) – this wasn’t their original intention but was led by young people’s desire to share their own experiences. A large Zoom launch event was critical in acknowledging the work and experiences of those who took part in the project and generating the impact and reach they wanted. Appearances on local radio followed as a result, and the project has been Highly commended at the Children and Young People Now awards.

“One of the young people said ‘I never thought I could be a writer and I am’. He’s in a published book now.”

Some of the poems from the book are printed in the city centre directly opposite the town hall, generating strong public awareness of the everyday stigma and perceptions which care-experienced young people in the city face. In addition, every young person in care in Sheffield over 6 has received a copy, with the intention of inspiring them to write and not feel alone in their care journey.

Dom outlined some of the more recent work to run rap workshops and spoken word sessions which help young people to formulate new structures to their writing. The care leavers group has also recently worked with a podcaster and broadcaster. They’ve also expanded to working with younger age groups, including 7-11 year olds, and doing sessions outdoors with foster carers involved to help young people explore their creativity in different ways.

“It’s been a really transformative project for them. We’re trying to do more creative projects and document it.”

Tanya shared that the project has helped them to be braver as a participation team and feel more comfortable going into sessions with less of a plan and being led by young people. She described that the creative activities have generated interest from a wider group, and they’ve been approaching social care staff to recommend young people who they might have dismissed for creative writing activities beforehand. A small but tight-knit community has formed.

“We’ve had a couple of young people who have had some really, really difficult times recently, and where historically they may have dropped out of the group, they’ve actually flourished in the environment of having the support of all their peers who recognise the difficult situations they’re going through and know exactly what to say to make them feel better.”

Attendees were able to listen to a recording of a shared poem from the Children in Care Council called ‘Some people’.

A conversation about care and community

Emma Lewell-Buck MP chaired an open discussion with attendees for 45 minutes 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.

Stigma, particularly around residential care

Consistent with previous evidence sessions, attendees raised the pervasive impact of stigma towards care-experienced young people in the community, particularly for those who live in children's homes. A registered social worker noted that, where homes are already established in a neighbourhood, the reputation of the home 'often goes before the child' and they are labelled based on the postcode they're entering rather than their individual actions.

"The community around them can be quite hostile to young people bringing in in case they bring what they perceive to be trouble or antisocial behaviour. That's one of the barriers. How do you create confidence in the community to be supportive rather than judgemental?"

This was echoed by a Councillor and lead member for children's social care who added that "any problems with kids in the area are attributed to our kids, even if it's not their fault." They spoke about the work they had led in their area to combat this by utilising elected members as conduits between the council and communities, linking each to a children's home in the area in which they lived. This had been helpful where difficulties or tensions had arisen. Members of the public were welcomed into local children's homes in their neighbourhood to meet young people living there and gain more understanding, empathy and respect for those who lived there and the workers who supported them.

"People know us and trust us. Councillors have a really key role in liaising between the local neighbourhood and the home."

Real corporate parenting – a whole council or city approach

Attendees from local authorities in different roles – as elected members, Directors of Children's Services and other practitioner roles – reflected on the work their areas had done to develop corporate parenting practice which went beyond just children's social care services. Good corporate parenting was seen as something which had to be understood and developed across all local authority services and priorities.

"They're our children, that's how you have to react... That means we have a responsibility for making children in care feel as though they're a part of the community."

"I think it's really important that corporate parenting take this on board and look at how Councillors who are part of their communities see how they can support our children where they're living in foster families, children's homes, SGO families, to be part of our communities."

Leeds was highlighted as an area which had done this well alongside its commitments as part of the [UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative](#).

“There’s a whole city response that’s needed to get a good deal for children in care and care leavers and to make sure they feel a part of the whole city.”

In South Tyneside, this corporate parenting commitment was seen as particularly crucial for those young adults who have left the formal care system; the council now employs 22 care-experienced young people on a sessional basis across the council.

“It’s creating a family firm. You are our children and young people and we will create opportunities for you... “We’ve learnt so many things from the care-experienced young people in those roles. It’s been the best thing we’ve ever done.”

A colleague from Hull shared their reflections on work their own local authority had championed to pull together a board and employ a number of young people to co-produce new initiatives, working with existing initiatives such as the [Care Leaver Covenant](#) and networks including the [National Leaving Care Benchmarking Forum](#) to achieve senior buy-in and unlocking opportunities within the council, such as apprenticeships. This also extended to looking externally and getting businesses on board who were keen to align themselves with the corporate parenting approach.

“For me, that’s what community is about. It’s about asking who can help, inviting them in and letting them. There’s been a bit of reluctance about letting people do some of that stuff. We can be a bit precious sometimes, but we might not particularly do it very well, and there might be others who are better equipped to do it.”

Space to explore identity

Attendees also reflected on what’s required at an individual level for young people to understand what community means to them before recognising the community connections which can support them. Navigating identity and your own story was part of this jigsaw, and something the care system needed to focus on more strongly throughout a child’s time in care rather than a finite period.

“It’s really connected to a sense of who you are and your identity. In order to get a sense of this from care-experienced individuals, its about giving the space to explore that, think it through and have agency over their own community. Community might be a family, it might be your kinfolk you live with, your footie team, a band you’re in, the street you live in. It can mean different things to different people.”

The [creative life story work of Blue Cabin](#) was highlighted as an example of how these spaces could be created through artistic and creative methods which shifted the narrative and placed the agency with the care-experienced individual. Others also shared that creative approaches could help with formulating community connections.

“I do think more creative outlets like Music and other educational outlets can help if you find your passion and fit into the community in your own niche. I do feel like at times you always feel like you need to push harder than others to be on a level playing field for a myriad of reasons with family and community”

Leaving care cliff-edges

Again a consistent theme in evidence sessions, attendees noted how the leaving care process often acts to sever rather than deepen connections to important communities. A young person who acted

as Chair of their Children in Care Council noted the work they had done in their local authority around the importance of maintaining relationships and how some leaving care support rests on an expectation that young people move into more independent living.

“When you get to 18, it’s a lot about moving away from your carers, and there’s not a lot of work that goes into Staying Put and making sure that’s an option for people. There’s a lot of things about Local Offers which is a lot about moving on but for people not in care, when they reach 18, not many of them do move out. If you’re in a stable long-term placement, a lot more work needs to go into the option of Staying Put so you don’t feel forced or pressured to move on.”

Similar sentiments were echoed by other attendees, particularly around what’s needed from the care system before young people approach leaving care age to find and develop their passions and skills, and the kind of support the system needs to put in place at the start of adulthood.

“None of us stop the need for parenting when we stop 18, but we’ve got a system that drives that for our care-experienced young people.”

“Seeing where improving those interpersonal and educational skills many families might promote from being a young age and where they might lead is massively important in my opinion, once you find something to be passionate about it can really help to find who you are and give you a sense of stability. This is important and making sure that those opportunities that many families would be able to give to their children, Leaving care allowance is amazing and Could not be more thankful for opportunities like that that help give us a way of providing ourselves with stability and being productive members of society in the long term. More schemes like this would really help in my opinion, admittedly not everyone but many could be put back on track finding a self assured way of finding stability in ourselves and our self worth and reason to keep pushing through the hard times when we feel life is getting on top of us. Personally believe this would really help”

Family help

Some attendees shared a concern over the level of support offered to families experiencing turbulent circumstances. One attendee noted the importance of good relationships between foster carers, children and birth families who have had their children taken into care, and ensuring that everything is done to ensure families can stay together where possible – particularly given the stark ethnic gradients in children’s social care intervention. They had delivered advocacy support and training for parents in Middlesbrough who reported the positive impacts of this work; they argued this was the exact family support which should be provided by the local authority.

“Is there any consideration for collaborative work around improving relationships and bridging gaps between Children in Care, their families and entire communities. It takes a village to raise a child.”

“Empowering and educating our Community to break barriers, develop strategic plans to create conducive environment for children and young people, reducing number of children looked after, and promote cohesive community is the key... ❤️”

“family support services in the community are seriously lacking.”

“Leeds are unusual in having safely significantly reduced the number of looked after children over the past 10 years. We have done this by investing in early help and protecting

preventative services. We still have a youth service, all 57 of our children's centres and Family Group Conferencing is a cornerstone. This supports families to come together and make a plan if a children and a family are struggling and it prevents children needing to come into care. We also have 34% of our foster families are kinship families - we prioritise keeping children in their families"

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

Some shared their experiences of how the pandemic had impacted on their lives and their work with care-experienced young people, particularly in how a move to online connections created a number of problems for keeping relationships going.

"It'll be the same story across the country about isolation and loneliness and how young people are not connected. There was a government rollout of laptops to try and address that that was pitiful really. It was attached to education, training and employment but we've got over 50% of our young people are NEET so they weren't going to get a bite of that cherry. Connections with people is about much more than education, employment and training. It's important for our young people just to be able to talk to somebody... Looked after children probably got a better deal than care leavers. They tend to be the back of a long queue do our young people aged 18+ for stuff like that... The fallout of what's happened over the last 18 months has taken its toll on some young people. Re-emerging is a big issue for them."

"Digital poverty for care leavers is massive. Providing a laptop when they don't have data and can't afford data just continues to isolate them. In terms of social work in general, we're all working more digitally, and we're all expected to work with our young people more digitally, but they've not got the resources to interact with us."

"If local authorities are relying on charities to support their kids in care, how will we ever get rid of that stigma that kids tell us they have all the time?"

Funding pressures

Common across a number of issues was a concern about the impact of cuts to local authority budgets and the pressures this created in terms of facilitating good corporate parenting, finding sufficient places for children to live in their local area, and ensuring councils were able to provide the level of service which guaranteed stability and support for the young person in their care.

"Because of that [cuts], we need to be more reliant on other people who are there, able to help and want to help."

"If local authorities are relying on charities to support their kids in care, how will we ever get rid of that stigma that kids tell us they have all the time?"

"On the first question, some local authorities don't have the resources or sufficient placements to meet young people's needs, so young people may move out of area or experience multiple placement moves. This has impact the ability to develop community connections."

"is the Gvmt a good corporate parent ? is it providing the conditions that contribute to good corporate parenting ?"

Hearing a diversity of care experiences

Finally, attendees shared their experiences and thoughts around telling others about their care experiences, and the importance of boosting societal understanding of what experiences in care look like – particularly highlighting the diversity of young people’s stories and recognising there is no one ‘care experience’.

“it's hard for care leavers to explain their situation to someone who has never been in this situation and is unknowlegable. We can feel a thousand worlds away at times yet it can help understanding connections with people in the community and their own family situations and struggles. It also can give you the drive to push harder at times or sometimes feel alone. It's funny that way being in care that it can change daily and by situation.”

“I think many don't know much because it is such a wide spectrum and it's always hard to just give a short explanation of what it means to a young person in care. My experience could be a world away from another.”

“I think that’s absolutely spot on and that’s why it’s important that communities and everyone involved with children in care are selling positive messages all the time and letting children tell their story and explain what it’s been like for them. You’re never just going to have a one size fits all. Nobody’s story is going to be the same. It’s important that a variety of stories are told and shared so that people start to have an understanding.”

“It can be a really personal thing to tell your story as people will judge and you always have that in the back of your mind. It is sad but true”

“The voice of all looked after children and care leavers is being heard in a positive way. Great to hear success a lot of food for thought in breaking down barriers even further. we need to hear their voices to make change happen.”

Thanks and key reflections from attendees

Emma Lewell-Buck 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

A whole local authority - not just the Cabinet Member - is responsible for being a good corporate parent	The general public doesn't know enough about care - and too often jumps to perpetuating stereotypes and stigmas	The most important thing is to listen ... really listen and act on what children and young people say about their lived experience
"some people know The spoken word peice by Sheffield.I know but sometimes forget. people that dont know - need to know and the voices of children and young people letting people know can be very powerful.	what does community mean to care experienced individuals in prison? How are they supported to connect with their community outside of prison?	The need for better and more early intervention services to support families to stay together
Telling the stories and sharing of experient along way. In addition, improving of relationships.	The system should enable not provide barriers. Solutions need to centre around those with lived experience not just by listening but acting to enable change	It all starts with early help services and they are suffering the most in terms of cuts. Better investment in early help may allow more young people and families to be supported together, and reduce the need for statutory support.