



South West evidence session notes

Monday 7 June 2021, 4.30 – 6pm

The APPG held the fifth online evidence session of the [Spotlight Inquiry](#) in June, focussing on care and community connections in the South West.

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 region including but not limited to Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole, Bristol, Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, South Gloucestershire, Swindon and Wiltshire.

Welcome and introductions

The session began with a welcome and introduction from Danny Kruger, MP for Devizes. 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... Carefree Cornwall

Mari, Lottie and Duncan introduced Carefree Cornwall and their roles, and the organisation’s focus on the development of positive relationships – be they positive relationships between workers and young people or between young people themselves. Their work explores how young people make friends and develop trusting relationships so that they’re better prepared for points of transition, including when leaving care or leaving compulsory education. Carefree delivers a significant proportion of Cornwall Council’s leaving care personal advisor service. Lottie also highlighted Carefree’s work making change in Cornwall by linking together care-experienced young people and those who hold decision-making power.

“Having positive relationships helps build a community around us.”

Carefree’s work began in 2005 with six young people acting as peer mentors during a two-week residential activity programme including outdoor activities, with a focus on befriending and developing trusting relationships. It was important for everyone to meet each other beforehand so they felt comfortable going on a trip together.

Mari explained how Carefree’s Theory of Change is based on supporting young people leaving care to work successfully in groups and develop positive friendships, particularly important for those who have had difficult experiences with their very first group – their family of origin.

Lottie shared her experience acting as a peer mentor.

“It’s allowed me to meet other young people who are kind of in the same situation as me. I got to do that through a training course and I learned about confidentiality and the best ways to be a role model to carry my role forward for the better, and then I had to pass a panel to be officially a peer mentor. Before people start they have a friend and someone they know when they come to this new environment.”

Duncan spoke about his journey, first getting involved with Carefree between the ages of 11 and 14. He shared how this involvement helped him build the relationships he needed to move on, and although he didn’t return to Carefree until aged 18 as an apprentice, he knew a door was open if he needed during those four years.

“Carefree is like a family. You’ll hear young people say ‘Carefree is a family’. Everyone feels comfortable.”

Attendees heard about the various opportunities within the ‘participation triangle’ which seek to engage with young people in a way and at an intensity which suits them, including a biannual newsletter, one-off activities such as sport, music or camping, additional support at times of transition, an annual care leavers celebration event, and regular Care for Change Council meetings which take ideas to the local authority’s corporate parenting board – chaired twice a year by members of the Council. Recent changes secured include appointing new life story workers across Cornwall, influencing priorities for the Virtual School and establishing council tax exemptions for all care leavers up to age 25.

A conversation about care and community

Danny Kruger MP chaired an open discussion with attendees 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.

A wider view of corporate parenting

One of the key discussions centred around how local authorities performed their duties as corporate parents, including how they supported businesses and other sectors and organisations to participate in this in order to boost community integration. One lead member described this as *“using corporate parenting as a lever to improve understanding in wider communities around the needs of care leavers, and how we come together as that wider corporate family”*, although recognised that this had to start first within the local authority itself – including through all local Councillors and existing structures such as the Virtual School. *“The local authority has an enabling and empowering role.”*

“Our Care Councils made a brilliant Corporate Parenting film which is now forms induction training for county and district council staff and health colleagues which tells them how to help our children and young people feel part of their community”

Attendees shared some examples of events or other ways of connecting their care-experienced young people up with opportunities beyond the local authority and supporting better understanding about their strengths.

- A Director of Children’s Services highlighted a recent link with a restaurant who provided food packages and supported care leavers to connect online through shared recipes and cooking classes: *“Through that some amazing connections were made in the community – relationships with volunteers, intergenerational work – that is continuing well beyond lockdown.”* It even led to some young people pursuing successful work in hospitality and catering as a result.
- A Bristol colleague spoke of working alongside a local football club, supporting children to participate in extra Maths and English tuition on a Saturday followed by the opportunity to stay afterwards to watch the team’s home games.
- A colleague from Wiltshire shared how they were searching for community ambassadors with particular skills or knowledge to link up with care-experienced young people who share an ambition or interest, noting they had lots of ambassadors from across the council but were still trying to recruit beyond this.

“We hold an Annual Achievements Awards ceremony in Somerset where children and young people are nominated by their workers for their achievements and workers are nominated for the support they have given. I try to encourage community groups and local firms to sponsor the event as it’s so uplifting and positive that those community members get to see the strengths of our children looked after and care leavers and think about how they can be better Corporate Parents.... Mainly some of the local Rotary groups, carnival clubs and the caterers and venues we use for the event”

“I’m trying to get our local faith communities (like churches mosques etc) to have better links with our CICC. we have a faith community leaders group at Wiltshire council which I have discovered and am going to meet them all in the next few weeks”

Within this, employment was seen as a key area of opportunity for supporting community connections through good corporate parenting, ensuring care-experienced young people were in sustainable employment and also showcasing the brilliant skills and strengths held by young people

leaving care to employers. A colleague from Bristol described their success working alongside a voluntary sector provider to deliver training for employers and educational settings so they understood the unique strengths of care-experienced young people as well as the challenges they face through a values-based methodology; this had resulted in growing rates of care leavers in education, employment or training.

“Being a care leaver, employment can be really difficult. Employers should also be aware of our situations and see how the employment side can best support us within the community as well. I’m finding it hard to find employment at the moment.”

“It doesn’t say care leavers need special treatment. It says care leavers should have what other young people get from their family, which is your uncle might offer you a bit of work experience, or your second cousin twice removed might know someone that can get you an interview for an apprenticeship.”

“could the government give businesses tax breaks for taking on care leavers as apprentices, keeping them in work, and offering work place mentors?”

Some local authorities had seen success working in partnership with the Care Leaver Covenant or embedding their corporate parenting role within procurement practices.

“If you’re purchasing toilet rolls or tarmac or buses, you could quite easily say ‘and what could you do extra for our children?’ which is care leavers to make sure they are care-leaver proofing each local authority’s business transactions. That could include apprenticeships, traineeships, support with getting into employment... The corporate family includes businesses and employers.”

“Using social value in contracts to ensure that local firms who contract with local authority they offer work opportunities to care leavers. in Somerset our 3 largest contractors offer work experience and apprenticeships. We also have the largest construction site in Europe based in Somerset at the moment so work really hard to find care leavers work opportunities there”

“Yes I think really good idea and embeds the idea of wider corporate parenting responsibility (beyond social care/local authority).”

Instability and placement change

Consistent with previous sessions, attendees raised the difficulties of establishing strong community connections when you didn’t have the time or security needed to build relationships.

“Knowing whether you’re going to be in a placement long-term can affect your connection with your community. If you’re constantly moving around, you’re not going to be able to form those relationships and you’re going to struggle to form other relationships with people.”

“I moved an awful lot in care... I went to at least 13 different foster homes and I just didn’t settle. I argued a lot with the people because I didn’t know when I was next moving... I didn’t have a good relationship with the social worker or the carers because I just didn’t know. It was all these short term placements. I just got really angry towards the end and because of that there was a lot of police involvement. I just ended up in a lot of trouble and a lot of placements broke down.”

“I would definitely agree that the lack of stability for some young people impacts on connections with the community.”

“The system could potentially be worse than what the home situation was.”

Awareness of and access to local opportunities

Attendees shared a common view that young people needed to be better supported to understand and participate in local opportunities which introduced them to others in communities which mattered to them, especially those locally with extended beyond the care system.

“It’s about making sure that young people are aware of every and all opportunities in their area and within their local authority regardless of where they are placed. It’s important that all young people get the opportunity to maximise and participate in any opportunities given to us as it helps make us a strong person and gives us the skills we need to cope with things in life we may not be able to get elsewhere.”

One young person with experience of residential care highlighted that they only found out about opportunities when they moved into a children’s home and were able to speak with their peers; the same knowledge hadn’t been available from their previous foster carers.

“Through the kids home, I discovered the children in care council and have now been a part of it for nearly 7 years. Through being a part of the children in care council, that has allowed me to access other opportunities available for me.”

Many acknowledged that awareness alone wasn’t good enough, and that opportunities needed to be plentiful and accessible in order to make a difference. It was also important to utilise what might already be there and listen to what care-experienced young people wanted from these opportunities themselves.

“provide us with different opportunities from 16 upwards”

“they need more youth clubs and that so kids stay out of trouble and stuff”

“Everyone should take some form responsibility to help young people engage in activities or opportunities as well as local communities making the effort”

“It’s important to listen to what young people want or feel they need whilst not only looking for new services or areas to facilitate these needs but to also look at using and strengthen things or services we have with in councils or communities”

“That is one of the big challenges in Wiltshire because we are more rural it can be harder to travel to activities and things.”

However, whilst attendees agreed with the need to celebrate care-experienced young people and deliver targeted support for those typically less able to participate in opportunities, some warned of the dangers of well-intentioned work which instead acts to further stigmatise by marking them out as ‘different’. One care leaver spoke of their experience attending a school where they made it easy to be included in everything available, including trips abroad and extra-curricular activities, as well as supporting with PEP and other meetings involving social care staff, without ‘making a big scene’ by pulling them out of lessons in front of their classmates.

“I think it’s really important in the community to make sure that young people in care don’t feel singled out because a lot of young people in care find that if communities and schools

focus on the fact they are in care, they feel a bit isolated and can feel like they're almost special."

"It can create unnecessary attention to that child that doesn't need to be there, because at the end of the day, as a child in care, we are no different to any other child. The only difference we have is that we don't live with our families. We still have a family, we just for whatever reason can't live with them. It's important to make sure that whilst we're providing as many opportunities as we can within the community as possible... it's about making sure that young people doesn't feel picked on for being in care."

Mental health and wellbeing

Attendees raised the importance of good mental health and wellbeing both in terms of supporting young people's ability to develop stronger connections to the communities which matter to them, as well as those community links in turn supporting better emotional wellbeing.

"A barrier is the support around mental health for care experienced young people.

"Some of our young people in Wiltshire have told me it can be hard when they feel angry and people feel uncomfortable with that. It can be hard to make relationships with people when you feel very angry or sad."

A Bristol colleague shared a positive programme they had run alongside health colleagues to deliver personal budgets for young people. In one example, a young person had rented an allotment space and gained great satisfaction growing things and connecting with others in the allotment space to support their mental health. Another bought a tank for keeping pet lizards and snakes, and another used the money for gym membership. Key to success was giving agency and control over this to individuals themselves so they could curate their own ways of strengthening community connections which worked for them.

"What we saw was, rather than young people accessing specific therapies or interventions around emotional and mental health, we saw them using their personal budget to find ways to be outdoors... If we actually give the control and the cash to young people, they often know exactly where they need to invest that money to support their emotional and mental health and build those connections."

Stigma and representation

The constant battle against negative stereotypes in wider communities, through the media and elsewhere was seen as a challenge in supporting community engagement; more needed to be done to combat discrimination and stereotyping.

"We should celebrate the achievements of young people who are in care more as often it's just a load of negative statistics (the numbers of care-experienced people in prison etc) - then the public get the wrong idea about young people who are in care"

"I think there is more that central government could do to debunk myths about children in care and to raise the positive profile of children in care. To give one example, I recently spoke to an insurance broker about insurance for activities. They were very new in role and had a stereotypical negative opinion of children in care believing that children in care were more likely to behave negatively. Our national media can also frame children in care in a negative

sense with some of the headline they use. It would be good to see the national media presenting children in care in a more positive light.”

“One of our ambitions in Bristol is to have care experience as a locally protected characteristic in order to improve access to all the city has to offer.”

Again, many young people during the session raised challenges engaging with their school community as a result of the stigma and stereotyping they face from their peers and from adults.

“We get judged differently. Some people in school may get bullied. You’ve got people boasting about being with their own family when you’re not.”

“When you’re out in public with a foster carer, you do get weird stares from people you know who go to the same school. They’ll give you this weird stares like ‘oh, she’s not with her parents’.”

“I don’t think they [teachers] truly understand how being in care can impact somebody.”

“I think the solution I was trying to say was having schools be trained to be a little bit more understanding when it comes to kids who are in care or in the process of leaving care, so it makes the young people feel a bit better, but it also helps the other students understand us a bit more, creating that safe space at school as well as at home.”

Identity and belonging

Some contributors during the session spoke of the need to better understand who you are and which communities you belong to before being able to consider how to strengthen your links with others within and beyond those communities; there was a need to develop a sense of self before feeling comfortable connecting with others. One care-experienced young person shared how they entered care at the age of 10 but not knowing very much about why and how this happened hampered their ability to develop links with others.

“When I was in care, I always felt like I had to wear a mask to whatever placement I was in, to fit in with that family. And then that breaks down, but you’ve been living that way for a certain time, and then you’ve got to move into another placement and wear another mask and then that breaks down, and you don’t have a sense of identity or a sense of community. These are things which carry on with young people as they go into their adult lives. Who am I? Where do I belong? What is my community? What is my identity?”

“As a young adult, y’know, I feel that I’ve done quite well. I’m a graduate. I’ve worked in social care for 8 or 9 years now... There’s always that thing of where do I belong? I certainly don’t belong with them but I don’t almost fit in with the normal society of people.”

The Covid-19 pandemic

Attendees discussed their experiences of how the pandemic had changed how care-experienced young people were able to engage with the communities which mattered to them, such as within school or college, in the local area, and with family and friends further away. One care-experienced young adult spoke of her experience becoming pregnant at the start of the pandemic, but seeing much more support from their PA than they would have otherwise due to online and telephone contact, particularly given they were living outside of their local authority area. Consistent with previous sessions, the use of online communication tools and social media was seen as both a positive and negative for different individuals at different times.

"I spent the first two lockdowns in a psychiatric hospital so I was completely shut off from my community. For me, the integration back into the community whilst still in a lockdown was very, very hard. The integration back into college over the last two months has been hard too, but also for lots of other young people in care."

"In Wiltshire our PAs and social workers massively stepped up and took to social media and Facebook in order to stay in contact and support young people."

"the importance of wi-fi and smart phones for all Care Leavers (essential for life)"

"I went from being really sociable to being shut away... "The only thing I did learn was not to take your friends and family for granted. I think I kind of did before the whole Covid so now I've learned not to."

Participation leads and young people involved in their local authority's participation structures shared some of their experiences supporting their own communities of young people during this time.

"Our Care Councils hate Zoom..... with a passion..... and we are now starting to meet face to face again. COVID really emphasised how isolated and lonely some care leavers could be - especially if living in shared accommodation and there were quarrels and arguments and they felt 'stuck'."

"I spoke to a LA care council lead lately who said their young people had mixed views about Zoom. They were trialling meetings whereby children were able to attend the same meeting, choosing whether to do so physically or virtually. It takes some planning but gives choice and has been received positively :)"

"Our participation team took all groups that were in-person online. During lockdown we'd do things like cooking together, doing crafts together and things like that. It gave us the chance to meet other care-experienced young people and to also stay a bit connected and be able to talk to people.... I got Covid at uni and I was completely shut away in my room and during that time those groups really helped as it meant I could still talk to people from my uni room. They've been a massive help throughout the whole pandemic."

"I know in my six years working with the children in care council that one of our biggest problems has been to drive up engagement and we are finally being able to do that."

Age and ethnicity

Briefly, attendees also raised two other key things which impacted on strengthening community ties within and outside of the care system; age and ethnicity.

"I think this whole 'everything stops at 25' thing is a bit of a joke because in your own family, you don't just stop being a family at 25 and kicked out. People's health and mental health continue beyond then. People might be ready at a later point to go back and say 'actually I'm in a place now where I need a little bit of extra help, a little bit of extra support and can you link me in with different organisations, instead of it being 'well I've wiped my hands of you now, you're in adult services'".

"More work needs to be done to help people, especially those that are from a minority ethnic background. We're doing a lot of work with Black young people living with White foster carers and the impact this has on them and their identity is quite significant."

Thanks and close

Danny Kruger 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.