West Midlands evidence session notes

Wednesday 17th March 2021, 5.30 – 7pm

The APPG held the first online evidence session of the Spotlight Inquiry in March, focussing on care and community connections in the West Midlands.

We were delighted to welcome over 40 people with different personal and professional experiences of care to join the discussion, including 20 care-experienced children and young people, 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 across the region including to Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Stoke on Trent, Telford & Wrekin, Walsall, Warwickshire and Worcestershire. Also in attendance to observe the session was Josh McAlister, Chair of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care.

Welcome and introductions

The session began with a welcome and introduction from Steve McCabe MP, Chair of the APPG. Those joining early were asked to participate in a Mentimeter task exploring the question *What does the word 'community' mean to you?*

Lucy Allan MP, Officer of the APPG, also provided a welcome to all attendees and shared her thanks in advance to everyone for their contributions to the Inquiry.

Spotlight on… Artslink

Pepita Hanna, Arts Connect, and Andrew Wright, Dudley Virtual School, kindly offered an insight into the ArtsLink project which creatively connects children in care with arts and cultural communities in the West Midlands: https://www.artslinkwm.org.uk/.

Andrew outlined the aims of the project which works collectively with 14 Virtual Schools as a foundation across the West Midlands to support the education and wellbeing of children in care in the region and ensure they can access the arts. The past year had proved challenging with the move from face-to-face to online delivery as a result of the pandemic.

Pepita introduced Arts Connect, the bridge organisation funded by Arts Council England, which works alongside partners to bring communities within arts, culture and heritage together with children and young people in the region. Pepita outlined the three key strands of the Artslink project: give it a go (taster sessions, creating initial sparks of inspiration); make and create (building aspiration to develop interest, talent and skills); and make it mine (arts specialism, developing independence and potentially leading to qualifications or careers). Attendees heard about the online summer festival, training for people from arts, culture and heritage communities, the ICE (In Care Experience) toolkit to support artists and arts organisations in their work, and the 3,200 free arts and craft packs provided to children in care in the region during the pandemic.

Finally, Andrew shared some of the highlights from a recent conversation with the Dudley Children in Care Council about their involvement in Artslink, including the opportunity to have their artwork displayed on the website gallery and learning about different careers within the arts.

A conversation about care and community

Steve McCabe 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 from the chat and are not intentionally assigned to any specific attendee referred to in the accompanying text.

Stigma

A number of attendees highlighted the impact of negative stereotypes and stigma towards care-experienced people. One person shared their experience of being looked upon unfavourably by employers given the assumption that all care leavers were 'troublesome' and drug users; another person in the chat agreed and raised the common social class associations with being in care too. A young person attending shared how they had tried to connect with their local community in joining the army cadets but felt pushed out by others as a result of their care experience.

> *"I agree from my experiences of being in the care system for onwards of 15 years young people in care and care leavers get a hell of a lot of judgement from others whether that is at college or school or applying for jobs saying that you have been or are in care you are instantly judged on that bit. There is a lot of stigma around care leavers and people in care and that needs to change."*

> *"So many young people I work with don't tell anyone they are in care (even their best friends) due to the feeling that they will be treated differently."*

Attendees with different personal and professional experiences in care identified some of the policies and processes around care and other systems which can reinforce this stigma, including as an adult, and particularly for care-experienced parents.

> *"some organisations do automatic referrals if a parent is care experienced"*

> *"Even at 30 the midwife asked if we had social care involvement when i said yes I had she said she would have to do some checks. I just brushed it off but my partner was furious."*

One attendee noted their experience had demonstrated that even the most successful care leavers are overlooked by non-care-experienced people, and that those in power rarely made enough effort to challenge this.

> *"I do think the stigma prevents people like me, ever getting into the world where I'd ever be chosen to lead a review, become an MP, or even a civil servant, unless I did the care leavers scheme..."*

Individual and community responses

A key point raised was the importance of individual approaches to boosting community connections, and not assuming the care-experienced community to be homogenous.

> *"So remembering that YP are all individual and we cannot be treated like a product and that everything is going to work in the same way"*

One attendee raised the power of individuals in care to break out of others' preconceptions of them and get involved in things within the community that carry them beyond the 'label' attached. Others challenged this, noting that we needed to improve the wider public's misconceptions of why children come into care (i.e. through no fault of their own) to reduce stigma, and that no child should be expected to face stigma in the first place and there was a collective community responsibility to advocate for them – they are children first and should be allowed to make the same mistakes as their peers without fear of retribution or labelling.

> *"Its everyone's responsibility to challenge perceptions and not just the care experienced young people's responsibility"*

> *"I think we also need to remember, the labels young people are given are always a reaction to something happening, it is a reaction to what they might be going though or because of what may have gone on in this past. Young people don't deserve these labels, it isn't a child's fault they have gone through what they have..."*

> *"young person smokes cannabis… parents ground them… child in care smokes cannabis, referrals, meeting, recordings, therapy"*

Teachers and the police were among the groups who it was suggested would benefit the most from training and support to combat misconceptions and stigma. Many agreed this wasn't a problem which could or should be solved by children's social care alone, but others raised that local authorities as corporate parents were the key actors to creating change.

> *"[The police] said they were "setting up a relationship" with the kids home coz it was new and wanted to build a relationship with them coz we were bound to be bringing trouble their way..."*

> *"When social services care more about what children think rather than what Ofsted think then things can change"*

> *"I don't think it's just down to social workers though... it's early help, PA's (they have no training to help young people become independent..) police, communities, schools, NHS, etc. One thing social workers said to me recently was that they wanted to change around use of language for example, other agencies would change their language or words in documents back to older words we no longer use."*

> *"it needs to be a community effort to make a difference with professionals and the wider community too!"*

Leaving care

The leaving care period was highlighted as a crucial point at which young people's connections to communities can be particularly fragile and need supporting by the care system. A participation lead drew attention to the false sense of community which can sometimes be created within care, and that young people can often feel unprepared and disconnected to their wider communities when pushed out of care from age 16.

A care-experienced professional highlighted their experience being left unsupported as a care leaver because they had been deemed 'one of the successful ones' due to their role working for the council, and therefore didn't need the same level of support as others; other attendees in the chat also reflected on similar experiences.

> *"Yes, I agree!! And if you are a successful care leaver, godforbid you do need support..."*

Out of area connections

Some attendees noted the additional challenges faced by young people who live out of their 'home' local authority area in keeping a connection back to where they may feel most comfortable. A Head of Service noted how this problem had increased both in terms of numbers placed out of area and the distance they were sent as a result of privatisation and sufficiency, impacting increasingly so on children's local connections to important places and people.

> *"we need to keep as local to their original community as we can. it is so hard for anyone to move to a different community and then instantly build links"*

Photos

Some attendees shared their experiences being excluded from photos as a result of poorly-understood safeguarding concerns and the impact this had on their community connections (e.g. with friends at school or through community sports clubs or events). Some were not provided with an explanation by their carer or worker at the time for why they had been excluded from photos.

> *"So there needs to be more listening to the yp and taking their feelings and views into account re photographs"*

> *"there needs to be a 'can do' attitude so that exclusion from photos and trips abroad etc doesn't happen..surely there is a way of making things work!!"*

Social care professionals noted that this often resulted from misinterpretations of guidance and a 'risk' focus which didn't take enough consideration of young people's experiences and relationships. Others noted similarities to other aspects of practice in the care system which felt governed by risk or professional concern rather than what was in the best interests of children.

> *"It is a little like the 'you can't hug children in care'..."*

> *"Oh my god this!!! No hugging is so damaging! I spent almost 2 years nor being allowed to hug staff"*

> *"Certainly doesn't make you feel a part of the family/community. Just another thing that reminds you that you are different."*

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

A participation lead attending noted a recent meeting with care-experienced young people who had shared that the pandemic hadn't necessarily increased their isolation but had made them more acutely aware of this and how isolated they already were. A care leaver attending agreed with this and shared some of the feelings from their care leavers' forum members who felt isolated, particularly where they didn't have access to technology.

Another young person noted how the pandemic had impacted on their own and others' mental health, but were grateful to have received good support from their social worker. A participation lead emphasised that mental health was always the key issue raised by care-experienced young people at almost every session or event and must be more seriously considered.

> *"the pandemic has highlighted how isolated Care Leavers actually are."*

> *"Without the access to technology, mental health can be impacted and things like access to social housing can become a real struggle"*

> *"I think Covid has affected children and leavers because you aren't able to see family face to face and that will affect people in care and leavers since you haven't seen them most in your life."*

> *"Interesting when I have spoken to YP who have been brought up in such a technological age , when mental health issues have been discussed and I've said about the online platforms we have to support YP all say they are fed up online and just want to talk to someone in person!"*

Children's social care review

The importance of the current review of children's social care in tackling some of the challenges was raised a number of times, particularly in its understanding of the generational impact of repeated failures of previous reviews or governments and the lack of trust this creates, and the wider reforms to children's social care which are needed. A Director of Children's Services drew attention to the importance of family safeguarding models which place an emphasis on supporting the whole family.

> *"We have a child protection system which is designed to protect children from parents. This doesn't account for risks from outside family which means teenagers being brought into care due to community risks."*

> *"Yes putting Families First and ensuring you have the funds is essential to the journey of all those you Journey alongside"*

"Thanks to everyone for sharing your experiences. The Spotlight Inquiry will make a valuable contribution to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care. The review will be sharing direct opportunities to contribute to the review very soon. I've learnt a lot from listening so thank you." (From Josh MacAlister, Chair of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care)

Thanks and key reflections from attendees

Steve McCabe 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.

Listen to young care experienced people!	We need to find a way to deal with the stigma.	Photos taken, or not taken, of young people and consideration that needs to be given around that.
Community support towards care experience young people	Challenging the social stigma that is felt by young people leaving care and changing public attitudes towards children in care and care leavers is vital if the community is able to have a fair chance in life.	All of us have a role to play in uplifting care experienced children and young people. Collaboration is key to getting results.
That some people aren't lucky to have good social workers and carers like I have.	To be support by a good worker who cares, needs to be care for by their employer themselves.	We all need to challenge the negative perceptions of care experienced young people it is truly a community challenge
Care-experienced young people must be HEARD. They have invaluable lived experience of the system, and are better placed than most to help us to drive change.	More support for parents	We should not be treated any different to other people. There is a stigma when being referred to as a care leaver, and this needs to change
that social workers and mp's wont to hear what we have to say	Working to enable yp out of borough to connect to activities/ session, to maintain their local identity	Mental health support needed for care experienced young people
the support and experiences of care expereinced children and young people caries hugely between local authorities	There needs to be access and available funds to technology and mental health support	children and young people must be listened to and valued, they are the experts
To be ready for the support young people will need as the lockdown eases	It's not one size fits all!	More training for those support young people on lived experience is needed.