



APPG for Looked After Children and Care Leavers

Spotlight Inquiry

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Foreword from APPG Chair, Steve McCabe MP

In January 2021, the then Education Secretary Gavin Williamson launched the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, promising bold and wide-ranging reform which aimed to “raise the bar for vulnerable children across the country”.

In my time as both a social worker, as an MP, and as Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers, one of the most consistent messages I’ve heard from care-experienced young people has been how care can really make or break your connections to communities. It was clear to me that this had to be recognised and understood by Josh MacAlister as Chair of the Review if it was to achieve its difficult task.

To support this, the APPG established its Spotlight Inquiry in early 2021, aiming to shine a light on care and communities across the country, looking at how the care system could better support young people’s connections to the communities which matter to them when in and leaving care, and exploring how wider communities could be better supported to understand and respect their care-experienced members.

This is particularly significant as the country continues its response to and recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic. The close community ties which allowed the pandemic to spread so rapidly were also those which gave many strength and resolve in the face of crisis. To truly ‘level up’ our communities, we must recognise those who have been most impacted by the pandemic. Care-experienced young people often report feeling less connected to their communities – dislocated from where they may have been before and stigmatised where they may be now. Navigating messy concepts of identity and belonging is often even more difficult for care-experienced people given the instability, inconsistent relationships, and lack of agency experienced by many before, during and after their time in care.

The care system is too facing a moment where it risks destabilising further young people’s lifelong connections to the communities that matter to them. Recent years have seen a sharp increase in the number of children living outside of their local area, complicated by a deepening postcode lottery of support and provision, and continued public misunderstanding about what it means to be in or leaving care. Any successful review of children’s social care must consider the power of community, and the time for change is very much now.

I’m extremely grateful to all the individuals and organisations who kindly shared their experiences and views with the Inquiry through our regional online evidence sessions, young people’s workshops, or by submitting something to the accessible call for evidence. The breadth and depth of insight across those with different lived and professional experiences – and in many circumstances both – has helped the APPG offer a set of strong recommendations which we hope the Review team will consider and for Government, local authorities, and other organisations and individuals to take forward in their work. I’m also grateful to Become – the national charity for children in care and young care leavers – who as Secretariat to the APPG led on the coordination and delivery of this Inquiry.

I look forward to hearing from many more of you as the APPG’s work continues in 2022 and beyond.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Steve McCabe". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Steve McCabe MP

Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Looked After Children and Care Leavers and MP for Birmingham Selly Oak

Acknowledgements

The APPG would like to thank all those individuals and organisations who contributed their experiences, views and recommendations to the Inquiry. Over 300 people provided input, of which over 130 were care-experienced young people.

We would particularly like to thank those APPG Officers and other Members of Parliament below who kindly hosted one of the regional evidence sessions, each welcoming a range of people with different personal and professional experiences around the care system. Thanks also to APPG members Lucy Allan MP and Baroness Young of Hornsey for their attendance and contributions.

- Steve McCabe MP – West Midlands
- Tim Loughton MP – London and the South East
- Daisy Cooper MP – East of England and East Midlands
- Emma Lewell-Buck MP – North East and Yorkshire & the Humber
- Danny Kruger MP – South West
- Kim Johnson MP – North West

Thanks to the individuals and organisations who kindly shared examples of their own practice to develop care and community connections at the beginning of each regional evidence session: Arts Connect and Dudley Virtual School, Volunteering Matters, Leicestershire Cares, Sheffield Children’s Involvement Team, Carefree Cornwall, and Pure Insight.

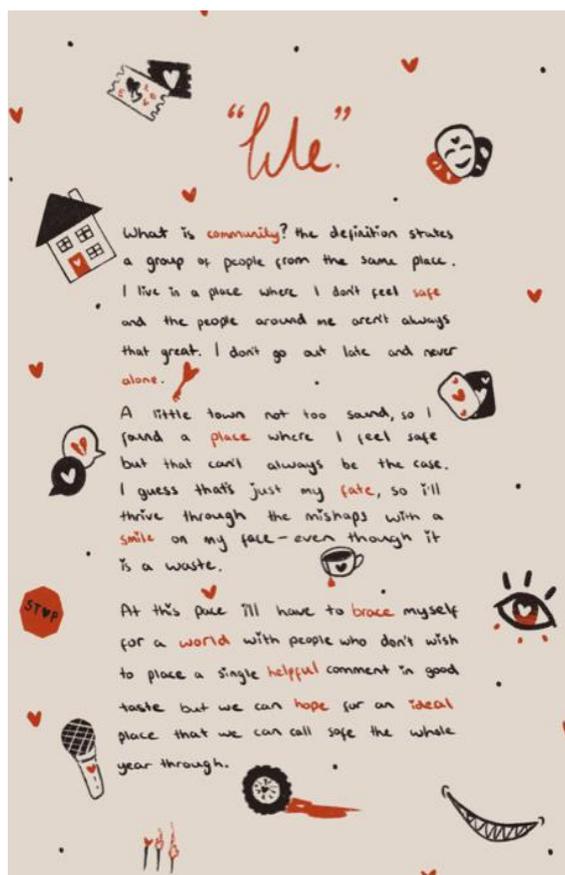


Figure 1: Evidence from Derbyshire Children in Care Council

Thanks to the local authorities, organisations and individuals who supported the young people’s workshops, including Dudley, Hampshire, Investing in Children, Isle of Wight, North East Regional Children in Care Council, and NYAS, and to those who shared submissions as part of the call for evidence, including A New Direction, Children’s Services Development Group, Derbyshire, National Independent Visitors Network, Pause, Photo Voice, Professor Amanda Sacker, Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, and Somerset.

Finally, thanks to Become – the national charity for children in care and young care leavers – who as secretariat coordinated the Spotlight Inquiry activity, and particularly to Henrietta Imoreh, Participation Officer, for leading delivery of the young people’s workshops and to Sam Turner, Policy and Participation Manager and Senior Clerk to the APPG, for writing this report and the other outputs from the Inquiry.

Executive summary

‘Community’ is of vital importance to each of us. As social beings, the people and the places in which we live and interact play a crucial role in both our individual and collective well-being. However, for many children and young people in care, and care-experienced adults, their relationships with some of the most important communities in their lives can be strained.

There are many reasons why these relationships can be strained, from the events that led to a young person being taken into care, to the ways in which the care system itself undermines young people’s abilities to form and sustain new and existing links with the people and places that matter to them as they grow up.

It is important that policy makers do more thinking about the ways in which care-experienced people relate to the different communities in their lives and build a care system that does more to improve these experiences.

In the here and now, it is communities that provide the friendships, experiences and support that help all of us to be happy and to thrive. Looking to the future, community is important because it is sustainable and provides support through adulthood and into older age. By ensuring that children and young people in care have strong and stable relationships with the communities that matter most to them we will be ensuring that they continue to thrive throughout their lives, long after they have left care.

This APPG report puts a spotlight on what ‘community’ means to care-experienced people and explores what might be done to help strengthen important community relationships and connections for current and future generations of children in care.

We make 15 practical recommendations for changes that could be made in the near future to improve the ways in which the care system supports young people to connect with their communities and we highlight 5 broader areas where we feel serious reform is required that the Department for Education (and others) should consider in greater detail.

This final report brings together three strands of evidence gathering activity that formed the basis of the inquiry – a series of regional workshops for care-experienced people, professionals and others chaired by MPs that provided an opportunity to provide oral evidence, a series of workshops for children in care and care experienced young people to share their own thoughts and experiences and a call for evidence which comprised of written submissions from key organisations and stakeholders and creative submissions of art, poetry and other mediums from young people themselves.

Throughout our evidence gathering we uncovered a range of important themes for reform:

People

Communities are made up of people and the roles of certain individuals in supporting young people to build links with the communities in their lives were of paramount importance. Of note were Family, Carers, Social Workers, Friends, other care-experienced young people and Independent Visitors and many of our recommendations focus on how to best support these core relationships.

However, to build strong relationships, the inquiry highlights two important underlying factors that need to be addressed.

The issue most explored was an underlying barrier – that of stigma. Across a range of different relationships – from the public and friends to professionals like social workers and teachers, care-experienced people reported a range of difficult prejudices they often felt they either had to overcome, or that prevented them from building the strong relationships they needed.

Care-experienced young people gave compelling evidence that in order to build relationships with other people there was an important pre-condition: having a good relationship with oneself. Evidence about high-quality life-story work

and about opportunities for care-experienced people to explore all the different aspects of their identity – like their ethnicity, religion, sexuality, or nationality was widely received and often given additional emphasis.

Therefore, to strengthen relationships with the people that matter we make a range of recommendations about tackling stigma, exploring identity and improving relationships with those key people care-experienced people talked about most like their family, carers and social workers for example.

Place

Communities gather in physical or virtual spaces, and proximity to the people we love and care about and to support is crucial in supporting anyone to navigate life's ups and down. It was unsurprising therefore that a lot of evidence that we gathered related to 'place'.

Perhaps the largest body of evidence related to placement instability. Whether this was multiple placement moves, or being placed out of area, it was clear that it is difficult to build connections with the place we live in, and other places that matter to us, if we're constantly on the move.

However, the evidence we gathered also suggested that even in circumstances where young people had experienced relative placement stability, they felt it was still challenging to access all the opportunities their local community might have to offer. Important examples were access to leisure opportunities and the ability to spend time with important local communities that helped young people explore different parts of their identity – like faith groups or other LGBTQ+ young people for example.

One place-based community that all children in care and care leavers should have a strong and lasting connection with is their local authority. A range of evidence was provided that explored the idea of the 'corporate parent' and all the different ways in which local authorities could help build community links and support their young people to thrive.

The care 'system'

If the first two themes of people and place focused predominantly on the ways in which individual young people could be better supported to build stronger relationships and community connections, the final theme looked at the bigger picture and explored ways in which reform of the care 'system' might help improve the situation.

Evidence given around the 'system' was wide ranging. There were important questions about whether we invest enough in the care system, and specifically in the types of activity and support that help foster strong community links. There were also important observations about how a system based on assessing and reducing 'risk' to young people often hindered their ability to interact freely with different communities.

Indeed, in our exploration of how the Coronavirus pandemic has affected the care system it was clear that under the extreme pressures of the pandemic it was often the elements of the system that supported young people's relationships with people and place that were undermined the most – like cancelling social activities, reducing contact-time with family and professionals, and high levels of isolation.

Finally, there was a significant body of evidence focused on the experience of becoming a care leaver. This is one area of the 'system' where the role of community, as young people leave childhood and grow in independence, is of critical importance. Those who gave evidence urged for more ambitious reform, supporting young people for longer, and reimagining the role of community for care experienced young adults.

Recommendations

Our recommendations have been divided into two sections. Firstly, 15 specific recommendations to help improve the experiences of children in care and care leavers of the communities they are part of focused on relationships, identity, corporate parenting and stigma. Finally, we identify five areas of the care system where reform is clearly needed but the solutions need serious thought and, ideally, cross-party consensus to ensure the long-term impact needed to bring about real change.

Focussing on relationships

1. Relationships and community connections must be at the heart of Care and Pathway Planning for children in care and care leavers. Professionals working in children’s social care should ensure this includes exploration of identity, heritage, and important community connections. They should identify and prioritise the support needed to help young people maintain lifelong relationships, including with siblings and wider family members. Devolved budgets should be encouraged to give some ownership and control directly to young people.
2. Foster carers and other significant people in caring roles should be supported to maintain long-term relationships with young people they have cared for, beyond the end of any particular placement or arrangement. Guidance, training and funding should be provided for this purpose.
3. All children in care and care leavers should have access to an Independent Visitor. Ofsted should assess each local authority’s Independent Visitor services against national quality standards.

Forming identity and communities

4. All children in care should have access to high-quality life story work or other practice to help build their sense of identity and improve mental health and wellbeing. Ofsted’s inspection framework and guidance should be amended so no local authority receives a ‘Good’ or ‘Outstanding’ judgement if this isn’t happening. Ofsted should deliver a thematic inspection and/or research to understand more about delivery across the country.
5. Care-experienced young people should be supported to access both peer community spaces for other young people and adults with care experience, as well as opportunities to develop relationships in spaces outside of the care system (e.g. through volunteering and community sports, leisure, arts, faith or hobby groups and clubs). The ‘Participation in Society’ section of the Care Leaver Local Offer should detail a comprehensive offer of support. Local authorities should make available resources for this, including the provision of digital devices, online connectivity, or transport.

Delivering effective corporate parenting

6. ‘Corporate parenting’ should be renamed and its statutory principles redefined to focus on what is most important to young people – the formation of trusted, lasting relationships – and to deliver on the UK’s obligations to children in care under the UN Convention on the Rights of Child.
7. Corporate parenting approaches should involve a whole-council approach led by the Chief Executive and Council Leader. Councils and councillors, across all two- and single-tier levels, must be encouraged and supported to deliver corporate parenting action which builds communities and relationships for children in care and care leavers. Ofsted should ensure their inspections of local authority children’s services explores this by engaging in dialogue with the lead member for children alongside practitioners and young people.
8. Each local councillor should be linked to a tangible part of the local care system like a children’s home, foster care agency, independent visiting service or similar, to encourage stronger links and understanding for the children and young people in the care of their local authority.

9. Local authority – and other public sector employees as part of a national contribution towards ‘corporate parenting’ – should be given time off to engage in activities which build community connections for care-experienced young people (e.g. acting as an Independent Visitor or volunteering as a mentor). This activity should also be considered as a ‘public duty’, empowering employees across all sectors to arrange ‘reasonable time off’ in agreement with their employer.
10. At a national level, the Care Leaver Covenant should be renamed, refocused and expanded to detail a comprehensive set of commitments from the state towards all care-experienced people – more akin to the Armed Forces Covenant. The Covenant should cover education, healthcare, employment, financial assistance, housing and other areas, and should be overseen by the existing cross-ministerial Care Leaver Covenant Board. Care-experienced people should be included within positive action approaches for recruitment and prioritisation for public and other services.

Addressing stigma and its impacts

11. A national public awareness campaign should be launched, co-designed with care-experienced people, to combat pervasive stigma and boost understanding and empathy. National and local government should support this by providing grants for local community projects to celebrate Care Experienced History Month and Care Day.
12. A media pledge around the reporting and representation of care experience should be established alongside guidelines and resources which offer practical advice on covering issues in the care system responsibly and considerately. The IPSO Editors’ Code of Practice should be amended to include direction around reporting on the care system and care-experienced people.
13. Children’s homes managers, foster care agencies and other placement providers should be required to help improve community understanding of children in care, care leavers and the care system in the neighbourhood(s) where their provision is based.
14. Professionals in children’s services and all frontline roles across wider public services, including teachers, healthcare staff and the police, should receive training co-designed by care-experienced young people to reduce stigma and prejudicial behaviour. This should be a mandatory part of all training and qualification routes.
15. A toolkit should be developed which supports professionals to audit their policies and processes, to identify and correct any potentially stigmatising or discriminatory language, decision-making or practice which negatively impacts care-experienced people.

Reforming the care system

1. The current ‘leaving care’ system needs to be reimagined to reduce the cliff-edges of support and community disconnection typically experienced by young adults at ages 18, 21 and 25. This should guarantee a core level of support into adulthood regardless of where someone is living.
2. Government should commit to providing sustainable and sufficient funding for local authority children’s services and to deliver early family help and universal youth services. This needs to be a long-term settlement and clear funding formula that supports local authorities to plan properly.
3. A national strategy for children’s residential care needs to be developed which includes the provision of capital funding to boost regulated sufficiency and ensure there are enough options of the right type and in the right places to keep more children and young people close to the communities which matter to them.

4. A national recruitment, skills and retention plan for the children's social care workforce, including foster carers should be developed which addresses current shortages, reduces churn, provides better career progression and improves the consistency of relationships for children in care and care leavers.
5. Serious reform, including a consideration additional of primary legislation and binding targets, is required to reduce the number of children being placed outside of their local area. Existing commissioning and procurement practices should be properly scrutinised and new safeguards develop to tackle this issue properly.

People

This section explores what the Inquiry heard about identity, belonging and stigma. We heard that care-experienced young people aren't given enough space to understand who they are and navigate their intersectional identities when in and leaving care, something needed before strong community connections can be made. There are some but not enough opportunities for children in care and care leavers to meet other care-experienced people in safe and supportive community spaces – where they want to do so. Too often, care-experienced young people face stigma and prejudice from their peers, from professionals in children's social care as well as other settings, and from the wider public in employment and in everyday experiences – intensified by irresponsible and damaging reporting in the press and representations of care experience in the media.

Identity and belonging

“Identity’ is about who we are beyond stigma or stereotypes that care-experienced young people may face. It incorporates our feelings, desires, personality and hopes for the future. There is no set meaning to ‘identity’ as it means something different for each of us. Having groups to attend with other young people, support with our hopes for the future, and space to reflect are all key in deciding who we are and how we want to exist in the world.”

Evidence received from Photo Voice

Although children in care and care leavers share a common experience of care, each individual is unique. Personal characteristics and experiences can be both uniting and dividing, interpreted in their own ways at different times by individuals as part of an understanding of their own identities. Although statutory care planning¹ and other guidance² for professionals supporting care-experienced young people makes clear the importance of identity for children in care, the Inquiry heard consistently that too many approaches to support for care-experienced young people didn't respect this enough; they failed to recognise each person's own individual strengths, needs and ambitions, sometimes misunderstanding the impact of care experience in the formation of their self-defined identity.

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

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“It just makes us a little more special that we've gone through something that someone else hasn't. It makes me strong as a person. It kind of makes me different, but that doesn't really matter in my opinion because we're all different... It makes me who I am as a person.”

Young people's workshop

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

In the context of community connections, contributors to the Inquiry were 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. However, the policies and processes which make up 'the system' were seen to prevent this, instead favouring single group-level solutions.

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“Everyone has different experiences before care.”

Young people’s workshop

“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”

West Midlands evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“I’m not a whole system. I’m a person myself.”

Young people’s workshop

Navigating identity

The Inquiry heard from many contributors who reflected on the importance of having the time and space to understand your own (care-experienced) identity before feeling comfortable recognising the community connections which could be supportive. In a sense, you need to understand yourself before you can understand your relationship with others.

Understanding your own identity, and support to navigate this safely, is part of achieving good mental health and emotional wellbeing. It is estimated that almost half of children in care have a diagnosable mental health disorder³ compared to 11.2% of all 5 to 15 year olds⁴, and care leavers consistently report lower wellbeing compared to young people aged 16 to 24 in the general population⁵. The Inquiry heard consistently that the impacts of childhood trauma and lack of mental health support during young people’s time in and after leaving care reduced the capacity they had to develop their community connections, particularly in how they managed new relationships.

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

South West evidence session

“It’s the stuff which catches up with you later on which is particularly problematic. It’s hard to prescribe support if you don’t want professionals around because you know how it’s been with the stigma. It’s hard then to trust other professionals or let them into your life to fix the problem.”

London and South East evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

“When I was in my 20s I just wanted to get on with life, but then didn’t realise why relationships and work were difficult and was able to unpick it all.”

London and South East evidence

Rarely did those sharing evidence believe that the care system gave enough consideration to creating supportive spaces for young people to navigate this. Life story work was highlighted as a crucial piece of this jigsaw. However, practice at the minute was deemed too restrictive and time-limited, typically only offered to those younger children in more stable living situations despite its absence often acting as a contributing factor to placement or other difficulties. Contributors identified a gap in the provision of life story and other relevant work between adopted children and those in care.

Evidence shows that not knowing about your journey into care has a significant impact on identity development and can lead to feelings of insecurity and blame.⁶ During the South West evidence session, 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. The creative life story work of Blue Cabin was highlighted during the North East and Yorkshire & Humber evidence session 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.⁷

“Social workers shouldn’t act like they know your whole life. They don’t know what happens when they’re not there. It’s difficult when they act like they know your whole life story.”

Young people’s workshop

“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, it’s 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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

Intersectional identity

Identity formation is intersectional, and any care-experienced identity is interwoven with other important aspects of identity, including ethnicity, gender, religion, cultural background, age, sexuality and other personal characteristics or experiences. All these factors act to mediate care-experienced young people’s sense of belonging to and involvement with the communities which matter to them.



“Who Am I Allowed to Be?”

“When I first went into care aged 9 with my brothers, there was no one who looked like us. We were made to wear Indian clothes and eat Indian food which made us feel even worse than we already did. We just wanted to fit in. We were subjected to racist abuse and no one seemed to understand.

Don’t tell us what we should do to keep hold of our culture. Ask us. Leave the door open for us by suggesting activities and clubs that support our culture when we are ready.

Love and security come first, perhaps after that you can support us to think about where we might belong. The right family might not be from the same culture as us. Listen to us.

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Figure 2: Evidence from Photo Voice

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.”

Throughout the Inquiry’s evidence gathering and consistent with other explorations⁸, we heard of multiple examples of how the care system often failed to consider the multiplicity of factors which contributed to each individual’s identity across placement decisions, care planning, and ongoing everyday care and practice.

A care-experienced young person contributing to the London and South East evidence session spoke about the difficulties they had experienced in the clash between their own circumstances and the expectations of the Muslim community where they lived; some struggled to understand why they had left home at such a young age, why they were working or why they weren’t married, leading to assumptions they were a ‘troublemaker’.

“Coming from a black background and going into care as an African young lady, when I was at home there was a stigma that children in care are the reason, the cause, of why they’re in care. And then becoming that person, I had to realise, to learn, not to blame myself for the trauma I had experienced. It took so long for me not to blame myself for the things I had no control over.”

London and South East evidence session

“As a young adult, y’know, I feel that I’ve done quite well. I’m a

South West evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

“My local authority did try to help me integrate with others outside of care, but they didn’t think about my culture and stereotypes and how this can impact.”

Young people’s workshop

“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?”

South West evidence session

Care-experienced identity and communities

The Inquiry heard from many for whom their care experience was an important part of their identity, through which they found comfort, friendship, solidarity and belonging with others. Although acknowledging every person’s individual experiences and the diversity of the care-experienced community in its widest sense, many believed strongly in the value and potential of a group with shared understanding and unique strengths and assets – of unity in the face of challenge.

“There’s nobody who knows more about this world than I do.”

Young people’s workshop

“Care makes people more wise.”

Young people’s workshop

“I’d never knocked about with people who aren’t from the care system. It’s not anyone’s fault, it’s just my experience of life doesn’t relate to theirs. They said, ‘that’s literally a TV show’, and I’m like ‘no it’s not’.”

Young people’s workshop

“I think the care system is a community as a whole. We wouldn’t have the same experience but we’d have a similar one.”

Young people’s workshop

“There should be more emphasis on the care system as the community. Young people would benefit from this so much more. I’ve been there, bought the t-shirt, I can help. We were actually a community in ourselves.”

Young people’s workshop

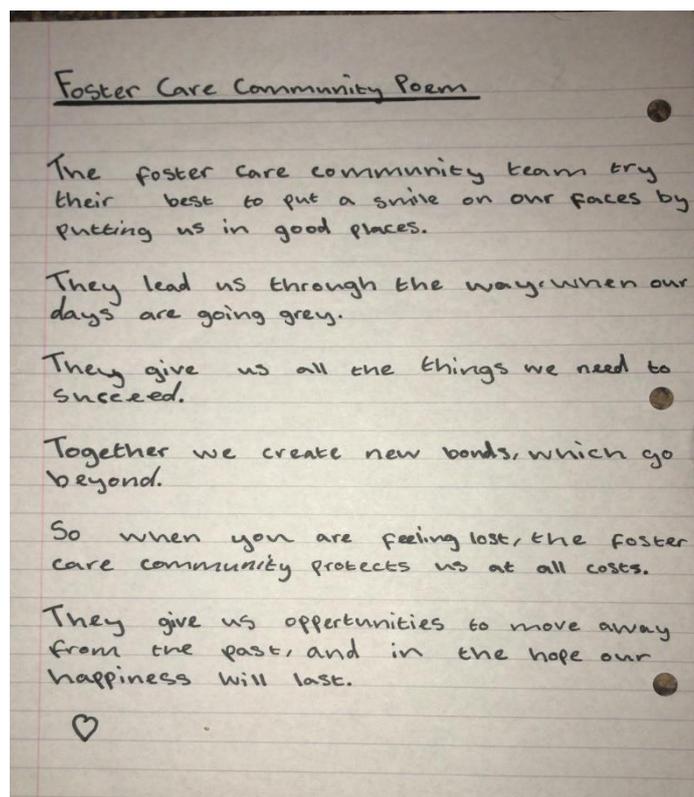


Figure 3: Evidence from Derbyshire children in care council

“Community is having people you struggle alongside.”

Young people’s workshop

Examples of how young people had engaged with others with care experience were plentiful and included a range of in-person and online spaces, including but not limited to following care-experienced creators on TikTok, joining discussions on Facebook groups such as ‘Care Leavers Rock’, utilising the community hashtag #CEP on Twitter, participating in debates on Discord channels for care leavers, joining activities for care-experienced learners at college or university, and building connections through online spaces such as Become’s Link-Ups⁹ and Reclaim Care’s monthly gatherings¹⁰. Often, these spaces only became known to young people once they had left care, and for some, were the first opportunities they’d really had to connect with other care-experienced people in a way which suited them.

Local authority participation structures such as children in care councils and care leaver forums were also popular care-experienced communities. Existing

literature has tended to focus on the effectiveness of these structures in delivering meaningful rights-based participation¹¹, but the Inquiry heard from many young people for whom their participation also enabled the building of lasting friendships, strong relationships with trusted adults, and connections to other communities via their engagement.

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“The Children in Care Council has improved my connections. Majority of local community don’t understand the care system. I’ve talked to a lot of people from other regions, and that’s become my community.”

Young people’s workshop

“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.”

South West evidence session

“Do you feel connected to a wider community of other children in care/care leavers? We feel connected to our local authority’s Children in Care Council and Care Leavers’ Council but no further than that. As we only really see a select few individuals that we see regularly at Children in Care Council and Care Leavers’ Council.”

Evidence from Derbyshire children in care council

“Proud that I’m helping... I didn’t do a lot before I joined the group. Since I joined I’ve done loads of things and it makes me feel proud.”

Young people’s workshop

“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.”

South West evidence session

“During Covid, the participation service moved online. As hard as it was, it kind of made it a bit easier as you were still seeing people even though you couldn’t physically be with them. That made it a lot easier and a lot better and helped build relationships within the participation community.”

North West evidence session

“It’s a second home. They feel like they’re family. It’s a fun and happy place.”

Young people’s workshop

The Inquiry heard that more could and should be done within and outside of the care system to support care-experienced young people to develop connections with others who have care experience – both inter-generationally as well as through spaces exclusively for younger people. Some felt the advice they received from the wider community was often more appropriate and useful than that from the professionals in their lives; others found solace in solidarity and used connections to campaign for change in the system; and some appreciated the ease at which friendships could flourish with this shared understanding.

However, as explored further in the next chapter, the Inquiry also heard consistently that some felt less comfortable holding care experience as a core part of their ‘outward’ identity and preferred opportunities to connect with wider communities, or were uncertain about the role of professionals and ‘the system’ in facilitating these connections; sometimes well-intentioned celebration of individuals and communities with care experience had the opposite effect and only served to reinforce stereotypes and stigma.

“There are limited opportunities for young people to share experiences and discuss challenges and expectations of the future with others in care. Young people surveyed expressed desire for such opportunities, where they can learn from older care leavers to help them understand what to expect for the next stage of care. They also want opportunities to exchange with other young people in care their own age, to feel they can speak to someone facing the same challenges and concerns as them.”

Evidence from Photo Voice

“Someone I can relate to but don’t want it forced upon me. I want to be able to make my own friends.”

Young people’s workshop

“Young people told us that they don’t often get opportunities to socialise with other children in care and that friends and teachers don’t accurately understand them due to prejudices about being in care.”

Evidence from A New Direction

“There should be befriending with care leavers who are a bit older, but not just ‘successful’ or ‘role model’ care leaver adults – ones who are realistic and relatable. Not just those who are graduates or have seen to have ‘succeeded’. The creation of role models can be well-meaning but often has opposite effect and can feel elitist.”

Young people's workshop

Spotlight on... Taking Hold of our Heritage, Leicestershire Cares

Leicestershire Cares is a charity working across Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland which supports children and young people, including those in and leaving care. In 2020-21, the organisation delivered the 'Taking Hold of our Heritage' project which worked alongside care-experienced young people to investigate the complex nature of the identity of care leavers, producing an archive of artefacts including oral histories, photography and photovoice. Young people explored 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.

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; 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.

"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... 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, Taking Hold of our Heritage Apprentice, East of England and East Midlands evidence session

The participatory media production model used in the project combined photography, spoken word, heritage crafts and art to make and create things, acting as a starting point for exploring memories and discussing heritage with themselves and others. Finding comfort and security to explore these themes amongst other care-experienced young people was a key benefit for those involved in the project.

"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... 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."

Casey, Taking Hold of our Heritage Apprentice, East of England and East Midlands evidence session

A physical book was the powerful output created at the end to showcase the individuals' work. [A PDF version and more information about the project can be found here.](#)

Stigma

Arguably the key discussion topic which featured across almost all regional evidence sessions and workshops held with care-experienced young people was stigma: the typically negative perceptions held towards care-experienced which manifested in both direct and indirect examples of discrimination and prejudice. Previous research suggests about 1 in 8 children young people in care aged 11 – 18 years feel adults do things which made them feel embarrassed about being in care.¹² This was seen as one of the greatest barriers to supporting young people's engagement with communities – particularly majority non-care-experienced ones – and in creating safe and supportive community environments for care-experienced young people to flourish.

Stigma is not an abstract concept with insignificant impact; it manifests in both direct and indirect forms of prejudice which have very real and material consequences for the daily lives of care-experienced people – on their ability to live happy, fulfilled lives, find employment and housing, and live safely and comfortably in their local communities.

“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.”

West Midlands evidence session

“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...”

West Midlands evidence session

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

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

Broadly, experiences of stigma came through interactions with three groups – peers, professionals, and the public.

From peers

The Inquiry heard from some young people who had been supported to speak with their friends about being in care and who had found their non-care-experienced peers at school and elsewhere to be considerate and understanding. However, this wasn’t common. Consistent with previous research¹³, we found they were worried about what their friends might say and found they had misinformed views about care – often owing to a lack of understanding around what ‘care’ was and hostile views which had been shared by adults in their own lives.

“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.”

West Midlands evidence session

“The feelings I got when I opened up about being in care were like ‘I don’t think my mum and dad will like people in foster care’.”

Young people’s workshop

“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.”

South West evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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’.”

South West evidence session

“I was really open actually and I actually found out that one of my friends was in care too.”

Young people’s workshop

Some felt that more needed to be done to create safer and welcoming spaces in school by teaching children about what it meant to be in care, acknowledging that it was just one of many different ‘family’ structures for young people, and supporting both care-experienced young people and their friends with how to have comfortable conversations where they wanted to. Others acknowledged the difficult balance between offering children privacy and space, and the risk of drawing attention to them or their experiences, whilst boosting understanding and empathy amongst their peers.

“I want all kids treated the same, like the ones not in care.”

Young people’s workshop

“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.”

South West evidence session

“It’s just like having divorced parents. It’s not something totally different.”

Young people’s workshop

“I don’t know whether it makes them sad or not if they’re also in care.”

Young people’s workshop

From professionals

Young people are acutely aware of the stigma they face within children’s social care itself. Too often, the Inquiry heard about how negative perceptions from and poor experiences with adult professionals impacted on young people’s ability to trust them, leading to a lack of support with strengthening community connections. This was particularly harmful given the power dynamic inherent in relationships between care-experienced young people and professionals in the care system, and the supportive role they could and should have been playing in their lives. Coupled with the stigma they might experience from those in the wider community, this ‘double’ barrier made it particularly difficult for young people to have the self-esteem, confidence, and trusted relationships to share what support or help they might need.

“It’s just middle class people in social work. There are real class differences in the communities.”

Young people’s workshop

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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 through 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...”

West Midlands evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

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

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

The conditions and processes in social care and social work were often seen as amplifiers of stigma; the mechanics of how the system operates acted to both normalise and reinforce the prejudiced views of some professionals. This was particularly apparent in how the system treats care-experienced young parents, as has been highlighted elsewhere.¹⁴

“some organisations do automatic referrals if a parent is care experienced”

West Midlands evidence session

“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.”

West Midlands evidence session

“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”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“young person smokes cannabis... parents ground them... child in care smokes cannabis, referrals, meeting, recordings, therapy”

West Midlands evidence session

Contributors to the Inquiry suggested that better training needed to be provided – particularly that delivered by care-experienced people themselves – to challenge stereotypes in practice and identify areas where the system embeds discriminatory practice. It was seen to be vital for young people to find and develop relationships with a range of trusted adult professionals, not limited to immediate social workers or personal advisers but including advocates, Independent Reviewing Officers, and others.

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“The jobs of social workers and personal advisors is to lift them up and push them towards doing the things they don’t necessarily see for themselves.”

London and South East evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

Examples of stigma from professionals extended beyond just the social care system or local authority but included those working in schools, health, the police and elsewhere.

“[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...”

West Midlands evidence session

It’s important for communities to be understanding – that’s teachers, social workers, youth clubs – understanding of trauma-experienced children. It’s not that they can’t do it, they just don’t know how.”

London and South East evidence session

“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.”

West Midlands evidence session

School was identified as a particular space where this stigma played out most starkly for young people, with many battling low expectations and assumptions that they wouldn’t be capable of achieving in their exams. Young adults with care experience spoke about a lack of understanding from teachers and school staff who would assume they weren’t capable and expect them to be trouble; previous research found that 87% of teachers and school staff had heard at least one colleague express a negative generalisation about children in care¹⁵. One attendee during the London and South East evidence session shared their experience of living in a children’s home and being told at school that they weren’t going to be entered for GCSEs because it would be ‘setting them up to fail’. As a result of this, they had to spend their own time more recently completing online courses in Maths and English.

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

South West evidence session

“I was told I would never pass my GCSEs. I was told just to pick a random course from college that was easy to access and understand because my teachers thought I wouldn’t pass. Turns out I completely passed all of them and managed to go to uni and get myself a degree.”

London and South East evidence session

From the public

“Just because I have been in care does not mean I am any less successful than my peers who haven’t...”

Evidence from Derbyshire children in care council

Stigma is an everyday experience and not just found in specific groups or spaces; research into public attitudes to care in England¹⁶ and Scotland¹⁷ reveals a level of misunderstanding and discrimination amongst other positive views within the public. A key question for the Inquiry was how wider communities could be better supported to understand and respect their care-experienced members, and whilst there were fantastic examples of positive community interactions across the country, more needs to be done to educate and boost empathy amongst the broader public so they can be effective and supportive allies for their care-experienced family, friends, and colleagues.

A young attendee at the London and South East evidence session shared their experience of being told that parents of children at their youth centre had said they didn’t want their own children hanging around with someone in foster care.

Whilst they found they could challenge stereotypes and misunderstanding with their peers through dialogue, this was more difficult to challenge in parents.

“People are scared of what they don’t know. I’ve already seen that the community is not welcoming.”

Young people’s workshop

“It can be really hard trying to engage with people in the community when their parents don’t want you around them.”

London and South East evidence session

“People who are in care or left care are part of the community whether people like them or not.”

Young people’s workshop

“Children in care and those leaving care are simply not bad people, and if we were an effective community, they would know that they are the same people as we are, but have been denied some of those opportunities.” “We are continuing to make children in care ‘other’. We are continuing to make care leavers ‘other’, rather than just saying they are part of our community.”

North West evidence session

“It can be really hard trying to engage with people in the community when their parents don’t want you around them.”

London and South East evidence session

The pervasiveness of negative perceptions of care-experienced people is illustrated through the widespread hesitancy which many young people and adults shared towards disclosing their care experience to others – both for fear of judgement towards them and their families, as well as to avoid the ‘awkwardness’ which people have around care and stories of difficulty in childhood. Although very common, this wasn’t universal; some felt they were able to challenge stigma ‘head-on’ by confronting people’s misconceptions early.

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“it’s hard for care leavers to explain their situation to someone who has never been in this situation and is unknowledgeable. 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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“If it’s a person I trust and I know, then yes. But it depends on the person and how well I’d know them.”

Young people’s workshop

“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”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“It’s normally one of the first sentences which comes out of my mouth. People normally have negative connotations, but this gives people a better impression that the one the media puts out about us.”

Young people’s workshop

Contributors to the Inquiry shared how communities could make this process easier – by being proactive in welcoming care-experienced young people, learning about and highlighting the variety of different stories and care experiences, clearly articulating the benefit of and reasons for sharing personal stories, and celebrating their assets and contributions without this crossing into condescension or pity.

“Personally, I wouldn’t tell people I am care experienced unless it would benefit me in any way.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

Incidences of visible and direct stigma were often associated with children living in residential care. A registered social worker shared 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?”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

During the same session, a local Councillor spoke about work done within Leeds to combat the stigmatisation of children in residential care 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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

Employment was highlighted as key arena where experiences of harmful prejudice were commonplace as young people left care and looked to take their first steps into employment, as well as for older adults who continued to battle against personal misconceptions which harmed their career progression. Workplaces are often key communities in which young adults will find friendship, stability, and connection. Contributors to the Inquiry shared experiences of being looked upon unfavourably by employers and assumptions that all care leavers were ‘troublesome’ and drug users. The power dynamics involved often prevented challenge.

Similar stories emerged in other spaces too where stigma and power dynamics meet to create real material impacts for care-experienced people – including when accessing housing. A participation worker at the London and South East evidence session shared an example from their own local authority in attempts to break down misconceptions from lettings agency staff as part of their work to provide guarantor and deposit schemes, enabling better access to the private rental sector for care leavers.

“I went through 20 years of my professional career not talking about my care experience because I knew it would hold me back.”

London and the South East evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

“Care experienced young people tend to have a stigma or stereotype associated with their journey to success. I think the government needs to encourage employers to open minded to these young people and communities need to motivate young people to reach their goals.”

London and the South East evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session



Figure 4: Evidence from Derbyshire children in care council

Everyone needs to challenge that imo.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

Finally, the Inquiry heard consistently about how local and national media and press in its reporting, and the (mis)representation care-experienced characters in film and TV, typically served only to reinforce stereotypical views held by the public. Work on ‘framing’ in the Scottish context has identified specific narratives which the press and media are typically reliant upon, often acting to inhibit public understanding and support for reform.¹⁸

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.

“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”.

South West evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

Reducing stigma and its impacts

In identifying how to combat stigma and prejudice, the Inquiry heard consistently about the importance of a whole-community approach which didn't place the responsibility on care-experienced young people to disrupt and 'fix' this, but instead on all the individuals and institutions which may – unintentionally or not – contribute to the deepening of stereotypes within peer, professional and public understanding. Contributors were clear on the need to reconcile tensions in providing targeted visible support for care-experienced young people whilst recognising their common desire to be 'young people first' and not singled-out amongst their peers. Solutions included range in scope from national public awareness campaigns through to community education projects, individual training opportunities, and policy and practice approaches which enshrine specific rights and entitlements.

“We're thinking about the language that makes our children feel like others, because that then does have an impact within the community that we live and perpetuates that myth that they're different, that they're others, and it's therefore going to be a risk for you if you come into that community.”

North West evidence session

“it needs to be a community effort to make a difference with professionals and the wider community too!”

West Midlands evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“A whole community education approach would be wonderful, wouldn't it? If we could actually get people to understand the impact of trauma.”

North West evidence session

“It's everyone's responsibility to challenge perceptions and not just the care experienced young people's responsibility”

West Midlands evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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”

West Midlands evidence session

“If you look at the effort that’s gone in around hidden disabilities like autism to raise public awareness. It would be great to see a similar campaign run at a national level to increase public understanding and community’s understanding about care and care experience.”

North West evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“You need to raise awareness in local communities through training sessions”

North West evidence session

“training session led by and with care experienced young people”

North West evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

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

In early 2020, after both the Virtual School and care-experienced young people themselves had voiced a desire for more creative opportunities within education, the Children’s Involvement Team in Sheffield began collaborating with the local music hub to plan and deliver a series of in-person sessions for the Children in Care Council and Care Leavers Union. However, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted their plans and they soon moved to online creative writing sessions hosted on Zoom.

“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, Children’s Involvement Officer, North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

In October 2020, after lots of work over lockdown, an anthology of writing from care-experienced young people was produced – The Can In Can’t – in collaboration with Sheffield Libraries, Sheffield Virtual School, Hive South Yorkshire, Sheffield Music Hub, and Off the Shelf Festival of Words. The anthology’s writing explores the dreams, ambitions, and experiences of those in care, challenging stigma through imaginative and inventive explorations of the world.

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

Dom, artist and youth facilitator, North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

A thousand copies were printed and distributed to all young people in care in the Sheffield region. Some of the poems were printed and showcased 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. It puts passers-by into the shoes of someone with a different experience, offering an opportunity to develop empathy and understanding, and is a clear marker of the authority's wider commitments as a corporate parent.

“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.”

Tanya, Children’s Involvement Officer, North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

A copy of the anthology is available for a small administrative charge from clare.holdsworth@sheffield.gov.uk

Places

This section explores what the Inquiry heard about the role of place in determining community connections, exploring instability, out-of-area placements, opportunities to engage with wider communities outside of ‘care’, and corporate parenting. We heard that instability in where young people live, where they learn, and who supports them often serves to dislocate and disconnect them from the communities and relationships which matter most to them. Lifelong relationships often suffer the most, and this is particularly true for those living outside of their local area. The care system should place more emphasis on supporting young people’s understanding of their local area and helping them engage with peers and others through their interests. ‘Corporate parenting’ as it is currently understood and delivered often fails to appropriately deliver the relationship-building young people want and deserve.

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“We get upped and moved and we get no opportunity to get to know the local community... It feels that us care people don’t get a life.”

Young people’s workshop

Instability

Just over 1 in 10 children in care experienced multiple placement moves in 2018/19; this rate has remained largely unchanged since 2016.¹⁹ Having to move where you live multiple times is far too common an experience for young people in care today. Inevitably, this has a significant and detrimental impact on young people’s abilities to ‘put down roots’ and develop familiarity and comfort within a particular place, and to foster the meaningful relationships which can only come with time. The Inquiry heard consistently about the impact care can have on strengthening ties to people and places; stability is a condition which needs to be met before you have the time, space and capacity to invest in developing the connections with the communities which matter to you.

“It’s tiring to always be that young person that has a problem, that has to explain why you’re struggling. Trauma is not solved overnight. It’s not solved by moving someone from placement to placement. Every time a young person comes into a placement, they give that placement a chance. For whatever reason being moved unexpectedly makes you feel wrong.”

London and South East evidence session

“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.”

Evidence from Derbyshire children in care council

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

Particularly, contributors highlighted the impact that instability has on developing any kind of trusted relationship with professionals in the care system; young people often need someone to help them establish community connections, which is made more difficult when that person changes and trust needs to be rebuilt all over again. This lack of consistency in professional support comes as a symptom not only of multiple placement moves but is compounded by instability within the social care workforce too. During a young people’s workshop, those in attendance shared how many social workers they’d each had – the highest being 21.

“It can be really hard to trust professionals, I’ve had many social workers/ leaving care workers leave, I once had 4 social workers in 11 months, it’s not easy to trust when you’re so used to people leaving.”

London and South East evidence session

“Community can mean many different things including a foster family, children’s home staff, other looked after young people, school, or local sports teams and clubs. However, to fully establish connections and roots, a young person must be in a stable placement that gives them the time and consistency to develop meaningful relationships.”

Evidence from the Children’s Services Development Group

“...they lose the relationships and not just the place. People work very hard, and they work very hard to make relationships with their workers and folks in the community, and then they’re moved... and they lose the relationships they’ve built. It’s very tough to lose and make relationships.”

London and South East evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

Speech, language and communication needs were also identified as a key barrier which, when unsupported, could act to limit the development of important relationships and the community networks which flourish as a result. The lack of stability in professionals and physical location often made securing support for these needs very challenging or less effective.

“There is a huge communication barrier. Research and my personal experience show there are a really high number of care-experienced young people who have got unidentified and unsupported language and communication needs – so the skills you need to build relationships, to be understood, to have your needs met, to be in education. There’s a real lack of recognition of those difficulties and the needs go unsupported and often come out in behaviour which is misunderstood. We need to be considering how to support a young person’s communication skills so they can develop those social relationships and have the core skills to do that.”

North West evidence session

“In a recent study, 90% of care leavers had below average language ability, and 60% met criteria for having Developmental Language Disorder – a condition where children have problems understanding and/or using spoken language. None of these young people had previously been diagnosed with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).”

Evidence from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists

Lifelong friendships with peers and trusted adults were seen as essential for a sense of safety, stability – and ultimately, love. The Inquiry heard that these relationships come in many forms and in many contexts, some arising through the operation of the care system itself, others developing through the work of voluntary sector organisations and mentoring or befriending projects, and others organically through different shared experiences or connections within the community. They are friends from youth clubs, teachers from school, former carers from a children’s home, a neighbour, a church group coordinator, a reconnected cousin or grandparent, and others. Whilst the ‘origin stories’ for these relationships were varied, they all pointed towards stability – particularly in terms of place – as an essential component.

“All young people if they want to have a Friend for Life. Someone who is there for them forever!”

North West evidence session

“Having the support of quality carers can also be a key component of ensuring a young person has strong community connections and stability.”

Evidence from the Children’s Services Development Group

“We Need; Intergenerational friendships with a lifetime commitment so that Our Children know someone is there for them for life!”

North West evidence session

“The foundation of care should be stable, trusting relationships which support learning about love, parenting and positive relationships. In the focus groups women told us that this this stability and foundation-building felt particularly lacking or non-existent in the care system.”

Evidence from Pause

Several contributors highlighted local initiatives and projects which aimed to foster long-term community connections for care-experienced young people. For example, a Blackpool colleague shared information about their ‘Friend for Life’ project which matches children in care aged 10-12 with volunteer adults, aiming to be a consistent and reliable presence in a child’s life even if they move around. Others rightly raised the lack of awareness and uptake of Independent Visitors within care, highlighting the unique qualities and position they could hold within the life of a child in care.

“They have the legal right to independent visitor who performs a role very similar to that of a mentor or befriender. What I’m very aware of is that whilst every child in care has that legal right, a very tiny percentage are aware of that right, and awareness amongst social care teams is also pretty bleak. At the moment, nationally less than 4% of children and young people in care receive the services of an independent visitor and that for me is such a tiny number... It is the independent nature of that role which is so critical and of such value to young people in care. It’s definitely a great way to improve connectivity to local community as well.”

North West evidence session

“IV role is important for consistency and continuity particularly when the young person is experiencing a lot of changes in their life e.g. placement moves, school moves. The IV is sometimes the only adult in that young person’s life who they are having a long-term relationship with.”

Evidence from the National Independent Visitors Network

“The issue with Independent visitor low figures is nobody is following up and enforcing that this happens. The Independent care review could make this a target in their recommendations.”

North West evidence session

Spotlight on... Grandmentors by Volunteering Matters

Volunteering Matters is a UK charity which brings people together to overcome some of society’s most complex issues through the power of volunteering. Their Grandmentors project sees older volunteers use their lifetime of skills and experience to support young people leaving the care system through a mentor-mentee relationship. The programme currently runs in 11 locations across England recruits trained volunteers over the age of 50 from a wide range of backgrounds, forging trusting and positive relationships that support, challenge and empower mentees to unlock their own skills and shape their own futures.

During the London and South East evidence session, Christine – a volunteer mentor – and Chloe – a care-experienced mentee – shared their perspectives on the programme and its impact. Christine noted her motivation for signing up to the project after seeing an advert in the local newspaper, and her shock that so many young people leaving care were expected to go without the same support her own children had received at that age.

The project focuses on providing a relationship which young people choose, in contrast to the other adults often thrust upon them through professional relationships in care. The grandparent-style relationship provides personal support to help young adults make choices and be there ‘at the end of the phone’ when needed.

“The difference with the Grandmentors project is that young people choose the person who they want to mentor them.”

Christine, Grandmentors volunteer mentor, London and the South East evidence session

Chloe spoke about her early experience on the project meeting Christine in a café and not being sure what to expect, but soon finding it to be a positive experience. Chloe noted the different kind of relationship which this project provided compared to what she had experienced in care and said that the project had supported her to feel more confident and offer a new perspective, noting it had too given her an interest in volunteering too to help inspire others.

“[In the care system] You get given all these different people... it goes very much in a ‘here, there and everywhere’ order in what person you get, what time period and what stage you’re at.”

Chloe, Grandmentors mentee, London and the South East evidence session

[Further information about the Grandmentors project can be found here.](#)

Living out of area

A fifth of children in care live more than 20 miles from home, rising to nearly two-fifths for those in secure units, children’s homes or semi-independent accommodation²⁰. Previous work from the Children’s Commissioner²¹ and the APPG for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults²² has highlighted the detrimental impacts which out-of-area placements can sometimes have. The Inquiry heard consistently about how experiences moving outside of your home area presented significant challenges for feeling connected to the communities which mattered to you, or to any local community. Disruptions to friendships, family relationships, education and employment, support services and other networks and groups all impact on a sense of belonging. Such experiences were not just limited to those placed out of area when in care but also extended to those who had left care and found themselves with little support to develop support networks in their new home area, wherever that might be.

“Young people in care quite often get moved around quite a lot, and quite often they’re getting moved to miles away from home. I get it – not every foster family or children’s home is going to be round the corner, but when you’ve got young people in Lancashire being told there’s no beds in Lancashire and you might be moving to Cheshire at best, it’s going to be very hard for them to maintain the friendships in Lancashire, and then make new friends in Cheshire, especially if they’re being told ‘we might be moving you back to Lancashire when a bed opens’.”

North West evidence session

“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”

West Midlands evidence session

“We need you to help us keep our family relationships overcoming barriers like distance or Covid.”

Evidence from Somerset Care Councils

“If you think about a sense of belonging, for most of us it’s the people we belong to and the people that are around us and this constant moving around – just how do you make those bonds?”

North West evidence session

“I grew up in residential placements across the whole of the North East of England. I don’t have just one community.”

Young people’s workshop

“When I first moved, I moved to somewhere quite a way away and they were trying to find a way to move me closer to where my mates were, and so it was like as much as I wanted to make friends, at the same time I didn’t want to in case I was told ‘right pack your bags you’re moving closer again’... Not everyone can necessarily afford to travel see their friends in other areas and if the carers and the people around them aren’t willing to help them get there, the young person is essentially stuck.”

South West evidence session

“I think there’s a huge disservice to care leavers when they move out of local authorities. I’ve lived in Liverpool for five years, but I’ve never managed to connect with Liverpool social services. That means I’ve missed out on loads of stuff about my local deal even though Liverpool and my home authority both agree on the same things. Both agree on free council tax, but because I’m living outside of my area, I’m not entitled to those things. It’s admittedly only been in the last year that I’ve made proper friends here. There was no support to say, ‘we’ll help you get involved with the area you’re living in and what sort of things we can do to connect you there’.”

North West evidence session

Such Contributors pointed to many of the systemic reasons driving the increase in reliance on out-of-area placements, including poor commissioning practices, a lack of national oversight in understanding geographical patterns of provision, growing privatisation which removes local control over what and where placement options are, and a rapidly changing nature of who the care system looks after – predominantly older children and teenagers. A Head of Service attending the West Midlands evidence session 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 and the impact this had on children’s local connections to important places and people.

All were supportive of efforts to enable more young people to remain closer to home by boosting local capacity of the right type in the areas it’s needed the most, but some noted that a local placement wouldn’t always be the right option in every case, and it was important to ensure young people could develop strong local connections in new areas if they were indeed moved further from home. Young people highlighted the role of both peer and professional support in getting young people integrated into their new local areas if they were placed out of area.

“More needs to be done about not moving young people out of area. What must that do for someone's sense of belonging.”

North West evidence session

“They should get a tour of the community with other young people that might've been there for a longer time - people to speak and relate to – to see the leisure centres, job centre, places of interest. To let them know what's available, but with people who have gone through what you're getting through.”

Young people's workshop

“Community is so important to care leavers. It's our family, it's our love, it's our identity. We need to do more to help that young person connect to that area, so that when they move there, there's something waiting for them, there's someone to show them around the city, to help them get into groups aligned with their interests.”

North West evidence session

“I had an IV for 1-year quite a long time ago when I first moved to London. She showed me the city. I wanted to work with children, so she helped me volunteer with the Scouts and build my self-confidence.”

Evidence from the National Independent Visitors Network

“There are notable regional disparities in the sufficiency of places in children's homes, meaning that some children and young people are placed outside of their home area. In line with other professionals, CSDG believes, where possible, children and young people should be cared for close to their homes, but there are circumstances where out of area placements are necessary. For example, the complexity of the needs of many young people our members support cannot always be met in provision located near to their homes, and it is not viable to offer such provision in every local authority area. Additionally, for some young people, it is beneficial to be away from their home area where they may have had traumatic experiences or have been negatively influenced by their peers.”

Evidence from the Children's Services Development Group

Opportunities beyond the care system

A consistent message which was wrapped up within discussions of identity and stigma was the importance of understanding local opportunities to pursue interests and hobbies, particularly to establish community links with other young people and adults that weren't all about 'care'. These opportunities were critical to developing new friendships and to promote positive health and wellbeing, but contributors offered a mixed picture about how well the care system supported with these connections. Too often, they were seen as 'nice-to-haves' rather than crucial elements which dictated wider experiences of care.

“There wasn't enough done by social services to help me connect with the LGBT community. It was quite isolating in care. I found a youth group myself; they didn't find it for me. I had to develop those community links myself. I had to go and do it myself. It was the only way I could meet people I had a common interest and experience with.”

Young people's workshop

“It's about finding opportunities and spaces for young people to come together, perhaps with volunteers who may have some lived experience too. Anywhere for people to connect and make friends and develop a sense of belonging. What we're trying to do is tap into people's interests... if you capture what people are interested in, you'll have things in common, you'll have things to talk about, and you'll be able to retain some of those friendships.”

North West evidence session

“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”.

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“They closed all the youth clubs where I live and there’s nowhere else to go.... Young people in care don’t have the information, they need more info on what’s in the local area. Young people not aware of community.”

Young people’s workshop



Figure 5: Evidence from Derbyshire children in care council

The Inquiry 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, in workplaces, or through sports teams. During the East of England and East Midlands evidence session, 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. Creative opportunities through arts and cultural providers were also seen to be an under-utilised resource for supporting community connections for care-experienced people.

“I don't go to Youth Clubs, but Scouts is a place I go to since I learn stuff and the camps have helped me interact with the people in the group.”

Young people’s workshop

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“My social worker helped me to find groups. They put you more out into the community, they get you to meet people”

Young people’s workshop

“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”

South West evidence session

“Life will be tough at times. We need to have good mental health so we can thrive, so we need people who support us and help us feel safe, people who motivate us and people who help us do the things we enjoy... And finally, we need our freedom to do things other young people our age do.”

Evidence from the Somerset Care Councils

“We think young people would feel more connected to communities if they were able to take part in more cultural enrichment opportunities that are specifically planned and tailored to suit care-experienced young people. In order to build up connections or a sense of community, activities also need to be sustained and ongoing over a period of time with the same group of adults and artists.”

Evidence from A New Direction

“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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

During the South West evidence session, a Director of Children’s Services shared a positive programme ran in Bristol alongside health colleagues to deliver personal budgets for young people, allowing them the autonomy to determine how and what interests or opportunities they might want to pursue. 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.”

South West evidence session

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’. This could be done sensitively: a care-experienced young person at the South West evidence session 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.

“A mix of opportunities which are not always related to our care-experience. We have other identities too.”

Evidence from Photo Voice

“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.”

South West evidence session

“If anything, they decide to put on activities that other foster people can go on. It would be with other foster people... we do want friends outside the foster world too.”

Young people’s workshop

“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 don't feel picked on for being in care."

South West evidence session

"The sessions supported this group to express themselves through cultural, creative and arts activities. The themes of the workshop were mostly not explicitly connected to being in care, apart from the Become workshop, instead focusing on their interests, what important messages they wanted to express to implement change, considering identity and overcoming challenges. Conversations about being in care then arose organically through these shared cultural experiences, in breaktimes, or the shared lunch meal."

Evidence from A New Direction

In order to ensure young people were supported to develop wider community connections, contributors offered a range of suggestions for how the care system and communities outside of the care system could enable this – through stronger professional support and planning processes in care which explored young people's hobbies and interests in greater detail, to boosting universal youth services, and tackling some of the other contextual barriers which might impact on young people's ability to participate, including travel costs or geographical distance.

"provide us with different opportunities from 16 upwards"

South West evidence session

"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."

Evidence from Derbyshire children in care council

"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."

South West evidence session

"All local authorities should develop additional initiatives to support care leavers, and be given central government funding to do this, such as offering funding for driving lessons, subsidised public transport, or membership to a gym, sports, or other club. These are all measures that would remove barriers to education, employment, and positive mental wellbeing – as well as providing means for young people to build or sustain connections with their local communities."

Evidence from the Children's Services Development Group

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

South West evidence session

"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."

South West evidence session

Spotlight on... Pure Insight

Pure Insight is an organisation working with care-experienced young people aged 16-28 in Stockport, Cheshire East, Trafford, Salford and Warrington. Its work supports young people leaving care to thrive through community-based volunteer mentoring programmes, counselling and wellbeing services, peer support projects and more based on its organisational values of belonging, integrity and courage.

Pure Insight's mentoring programme offers practical and emotional support to care leavers, focusing on an area of a young person's life that's important to them. Local volunteers from all backgrounds, including some with experience of care, commit for at least two years to 2-3 hours per week, although most mentoring relationships turn into long-term connections which last beyond this. Mentors complete a 9-week training programme for reliability and consistency and are matched with a young person. The staff team offer out-of-hours support for mentor and mentees and join mentees together on closed social media sites to replicate the support networks that others may have. Examples of additional ad-hoc support have included a small team of mentors tackling an overgrown garden for a young care-experienced mum, providing her and her child with a new garden space for play, and a mentor helping a young person to lay flooring in their new home.

“By linking local volunteers together in your local community, everyone's got loads of skills, talent, local knowledge.”

Sarah Sturmeay, Chief Executive of Pure Insight, North West evidence session

Pure Insight's peer support offer includes a drop-in café which young people can attend on a weekly basis for a shared safe space, access to hot meals, and support from guests (e.g. a Looked After Children Nurse) and the PI team. There is an allotment space where young people come together with teams of volunteers to grow vegetables and fruit, supporting belonging to the friendly allotment community. Other peer support projects involve adult lived experience volunteers taking young people out on beach trips and outdoor activities such as walking, kayaking and wild camping, helping them to make friends and develop new social connections.

“This sounds just like nice days out but they're really life changing things because people are making friends, they're finding connections, they're stretching themselves, they're learning transferable skills, and they're also have the opportunity to spend time with older people with lived experience who can share really aspirational stuff about how your life can change.”

Sarah Sturmeay, Chief Executive of Pure Insight, North West evidence session

Other services include a dedicated parent worker who connects care-experienced young parents together and volunteers who provide support young parents in their homes – particularly important when the only others visiting may be professionals such as health visitors and social workers. Parent work also includes support to help support young families to deescalate from child protection plans and legal proceedings. The PI team also hold an annual Christmas Day event for up to 50 young care leavers who would otherwise be alone and continue to use social media to deliver videos and activity packs which have kept young people connected during the pandemic.

“It is about getting people together in the local community with young people to decide ‘how can we make a difference and what does that look like for everybody?’. You're not just enriching the young person's life; you're enriching the lives of all these volunteers too who have got something to offer back. They can use their life experiences and local knowledge in a way they've not been able to anywhere else.”

Sarah Sturmeay, Chief Executive of Pure Insight, North West evidence session

The PI team also offer support on a consultancy basis to help local authorities improve their offer to young care leavers through coproduction. **For more information about any of Pure Insight's work please visit the [Pure Insight website](#).**

Corporate parenting

A key topic explored in terms of place-based support was the role of the local authority as a corporate parent, and what was understood by ‘corporate parenting’ in its widest sense. Statutory guidance published by the Department for Education in 2018 provides information to local authorities and relevant partners on the application of seven corporate parenting principles which they must have regard to when exercising their functions in relation to children in care and care leavers.²³ The Inquiry heard a range of what could be considered examples of leading or emerging practice in corporate parenting which brought the seven principles outlined within government guidance to life to support community connections for young people. These elements illustrated the breath of some local authorities’ vision and responsibility towards their children in care and care leavers, embedded across the culture of the authority and understood across the whole council and its elected members.

However, some questions – and even tensions – emerged during the Inquiry’s evidence gathering around exactly what corporate parenting should and could look and feel like, and the role of the local authority in coordinating versus delivering particular aspects of corporate parenting practice alongside other public bodies and the private sector.

“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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“In Blackpool we call our children in care ‘our children’.”

North West evidence session

Many contributors argued rightly that good corporate parenting practice needed to go beyond just children’s social care services; it was seen as something which had to be understood and developed across all local authority services and priorities. During the North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session, Leeds was highlighted as an area which had done this well alongside its commitments as part of the UNICEF Child Friendly Cities Initiative²⁴.

“The local authority has an enabling and empowering role.”

South West evidence session

“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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

“There are local areas who recognise their role as a Corporate Grandparent and are clear what support families need from them – but this seems to be isolated good practice rather than the norm in the system.”

Evidence from Pause

“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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

Others were also clear that corporate parenting needed to be done in partnership with other organisations beyond the local authority. Many contributors shared how they supported businesses and other sectors to participate in a corporate parenting 'offer' to boost community integration. One lead member during the South West evidence session 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."* 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, noting how *"through that some amazing connections were made in the community – relationships with volunteers, intergenerational work – that is continuing well beyond lockdown"*, and it even led to some young people pursuing successful work in hospitality and catering. Other professionals working in children's social care shared success working in partnership with the Care Leaver Covenant or embedding corporate parenting action within procurement practices.

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

South West evidence session

"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."

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

"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."

South West evidence session

"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."

South West evidence session

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 showcasing the brilliant skills and strengths held by young people leaving care to employers. For example, during the South West evidence session, 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."

South West evidence session

At the North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session, a colleague from Hull shared how ongoing work within their own local authority had resulted in the establishment of a new board and employment opportunities for 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 unlock 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. A South Tyneside colleague shared how their 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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

“They’re still your parent and still your corporate parent. They should be employing young people as sessional workers and doing drop-in things. They should embrace and look at stuff like that.”

Young people’s workshop

“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.”

South West evidence session

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

South West evidence session

Lots of the opportunities shared with the Inquiry that demonstrated local authorities’ welcome commitments to corporate parenting clearly served to strengthen young people’s connections to the communities in and beyond care with mattered to them. However, there were obvious differences when comparing young people’s contributions around what they felt was most important to them and what they wanted most from their local authorities, and the interpretations of what was considered leading corporate parenting practice by predominantly professional contributors.

Whilst the latter focussed largely (but not exclusively) on tangible or more visible markers of ‘success’ with clear outcomes around employment, access to services, or participation in education, children and young people spoke more about lifelong relationships to their friends and family, an understanding the area they were living in, a sense of belonging and safety in their local community, and having a say in the decisions made about their lives. Corporate parenting was often experienced by young people as a ‘service’ – an offer aligned more to the ‘corporate’ than the ‘parenting’.

System

This section explores the wider ‘system’ factors which underpin and contribute to the issues explored above, including the abrupt transition and community disconnection experienced by young adults when leaving care, and how a pervasive ‘risk’ framing within culture and practice and a lack of early family help within children’s social care contribute to underdeveloped community links for care-experienced young people. It also looks at the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on young people’s experiences, identifying the role of communities during this time and what it has told us about the importance of digital connectivity.

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

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

The challenges outlined in the previous chapters around young people’s engagement with people and places and the often poor experiences they have cannot be disentangled from wider structural issues within the care system; they are often symptoms of wider systemic challenges rather than isolated problems with solutions that exist in a vacuum. In this sense, developing stronger community connections for young people in care and supporting communities to better understand and respect them cannot and won’t be delivered without accompanying reform to the operation of the care system.

The Inquiry heard consistently from those with professional experiences primarily about the structural ‘blockers’ in the care system and how these resulted to poor experiences for young people – particularly difficulties in finding a stable placement in an area which suited them best. Regulation, funding, commissioning and planning were all identified as needing reform, particularly in the context of cuts to local authority budgets and wider public services, and the strong evidenced links between poverty, deprivation and child welfare intervention.²⁵

“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 impacted their ability to develop community connections.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“I'm a HOS. Completely agree. I really want YP to stay in their local area - it feels like an uphill battle sometimes. The system - sufficiency - resources - Ofsted regulations really don't help. It needs a complete overhaul. Please let children's services work more flexibly and let's hope the new semi-independent accommodation regulations don't make this worse. We want good care for our children, but we need the flexibility to meet individual needs.”

North West evidence session

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

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“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?”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“Great points about placement but one way of addressing this is to ensure that their needs are assessed at the outset and an appropriate placement - not the cheapest option is selected in the first place.”

North West evidence session

“Trauma informed commissioning would go a long way to addressing the issues related to stability and reducing moves.”

London and South East evidence session

“Good sufficiency - choice and planning is essential. Private Providers are charging LAs between 5 -10k a week for placements - it really isn't cheap. The Government need to step in and stop providers making a profit out of vulnerable children. LA's can then use their budgets more effectively to plug some of the gaps you have mentioned.”

North West evidence session

Leaving care

“I'm nearly 27 and I don't feel like I'm part of my community at all.”

Young people's workshop

Contributors to the Inquiry regularly spoke of the transition from being 'in care' to being a 'care leaver' and the typically detrimental effect this shift, a fundamental and system-wide feature of care. For many, the abrupt drop-off in support was experienced as a cliff-edge not just in terms of support from children's services, but in connections to the communities which mattered to them. Government has delivered several programmes to enhance support for care leavers following its 2016 *Keep on Caring* strategy, including establishing the Care Leaver Covenant and the ministerial Care Leaver Covenant Board²⁶, but evidence shows a steep drop in wellbeing experienced by young adults when they leave care²⁷ and a lack of support for maintaining relationships with previous carers and other significant people²⁸.

During the West Midlands evidence session, 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 then pushed out of care from age 16. Given the increasing tendency for young people to enter the care system later in their childhood, it's less likely the care system will have been able to support strong community links, placing more emphasis on the role of leaving care support services.

“They always promoted doing things when you're younger in care, but that really drops off at age 18. It really tails off and you don't get the support. I was placed in an unfamiliar area after leaving care. I was really isolated but there's such a limited choice about where you go to live.”

Young people's workshop

“Maintenance of relationships and support at this critical time can be vital in helping young people to stay connected to their local community and ease the transition into adulthood and independent living in a way that many of their non-looked after peers take for granted.”

Evidence from Children's Services Development Group

“I've barely been able to speak anyone. I haven't met my YPA yet and I'm moving in next week. I've been thrown in the deep end for no reason. Even last year with Covid my social worker would meet me every month to make sure I'm doing okay.”

Young people's workshop

“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.”

North East evidence session

“For many of the women we spoke to their leaving care support and services didn't meet their needs or prepare them for adulthood. They felt “dropped from the system” with no support or help and struggled into adulthood.”

Evidence from Pause

“When you’re in care, you’re kind of in a bit of a bubble – you’ve got to have a risk assessment to go and stay at a friend’s and stuff like that – but when you hit that magical age where social services may not really want to know anymore at 18 and you’re on that care cliff, everything’s just let go, but you’ve not had the chance to transition into the community and develop those connections and those relationships which are really important for care leavers.”

North West evidence session

The leaving care period was highlighted as a crucial point at which young adults’ connections to communities can be particularly fragile and need supporting by the care system. After a huge amount of turbulence in care, the isolation experienced by many who recently leave care can be especially jarring, with the lack of previous support for developing community connections and lifelong relationships ‘catching up’. Some highlighted particularly the difficulties experienced in trying to search for community links they may have once had in or before care but had since lost. Few felt the care system was able to both support young people to return to family and ‘home’ communities where they wanted to, but also respect and strengthen 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. It was common for many to 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.

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“From my experience and my family’s experience, you’re in care you feel isolated, you feel alone and you have all that trauma to deal with, and really, you just want family, you just want relationships, and when you’re free, you’re off looking... as you grow older you reflect back and you were really just looking for a sense of community, a sense of love, and it’s that thing which makes people vulnerable.”

North West evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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.”

London and South East evidence session

“It is 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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

A range of solutions were proposed through the Inquiry’s evidence-gathering in how to combat the specific challenges faced by care leavers, or better, to eradicate the likelihood of those challenges arising in the first place. Suggestions varied from small tweaks to the operation of the current system which promoted stronger joined up working between different

services through to establishing new entitlements and offers, as well as additional support for lessening the severity of the shift experienced by many in their transition to more independent living. Some highlighted too the cliff-edge for those who hit age 25 and lose their statutory right to support from leaving care teams; in many ways this age-based approach mirrored the difficulties of their younger counterparts at age 18.

“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!”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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, admitably 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”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“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’.”

South West evidence session

“The age cut off needs to be looked at. Community links go way beyond 25. Often you’re not in a place to develop them at the time.”

Young people’s workshop

Spotlight on... Carefree Cornwall

Carefree Cornwall is an independent Cornish charity set up in 2005 by a group of six young people and a youth worker. They work with young people aged 11-25 who are in and leaving care, aiming to give young people the chance to do things for themselves and others.

The organisation focuses 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 also delivers a significant proportion of Cornwall Council’s leaving care personal advisor service.

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

Mari Eggins, Chief Executive at Carefree Cornwall, South West evidence session

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. During the South West evidence session, Duncan – a youth worker at Carefree – 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.”

Duncan Williams, Youth Worker at Carefree Cornwall, South West evidence session

The opportunities offered by Carefree are structured within its ‘participation triangle’, engaging with young people in a way and at an intensity which suits them, including a biannual newsletter, one-off outdoor and sports activities, regular creative writing and arts projects, additional support at times of transition, an annual care leavers celebration event, and 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. Some young people also receive training as peer mentors:

“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.”

Lottie, peer mentor for Carefree Cornwall, South West evidence session

For more information, please visit the [Carefree Cornwall website](#).

Risk

The Inquiry heard from those with both personal and professional experiences with the care system who felt as though the dominant ‘risk’ framing within the operation of the care system acted to inhibit support for young people to develop connections with communities important to them. Some social care professionals noted that this often resulted from misinterpretations of guidance and risk-averse approaches which didn’t take enough consideration of young people’s experiences and relationships.

Examples included young people being excluded from photos because of poorly understood safeguarding concerns. At the West Midlands evidence session, care-experienced people shared their experiences being pulled away from group photos at school or as part of community sports clubs or events, many of whom who weren’t provided with an explanation by their carer or worker at the time as to why. Inevitably this again acted as a marker of difference and established barriers for new peer relationships and belonging to wider communities. Other examples included staying at friend’s houses and restrictions around physical contact with professionals in care settings.

“So there needs to be more listening to the yp and taking their feelings and views into account re photographs”

West Midlands evidence session

“Let people be in family photos and in school photos on a trip.”

Young people’s workshop

“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!!”

West Midlands evidence session

“Oh my god this!!! No hugging is so damaging! I spent almost 2 years not being allowed to hug staff”

West Midlands evidence session

“I can't have a sleepover at my friend's house because she lives close to my mum and dad.”

Young people's workshop

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

West Midlands evidence session

Family help

Some contributors to the Inquiry drew attention to the importance of good early family help which may act to ultimately stop children from entering the care system and potentially fracturing relationships and community links, as well as how children and their birth families can be better supported within the care system to maintain and strengthen important connections. However, too often, many felt the care system in its efforts to protect children unwittingly pitted different people or groups against each other; its focus on assessing and managing risk could be antagonistic to fostering supportive communities which included children and young people, birth families, foster carers, and social work and other professionals.

“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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

“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.”

West Midlands evidence session

“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... ”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

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

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

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

South West evidence session

“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”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic

“We used to go to Flamingo Land and engage with our workers more. Since Covid, they don’t want to know us anymore. We need the funding. We can’t make ourselves look appealing with just the basics.”

Young people’s workshop

A key aim for the Inquiry was to understand the impact of the pandemic on young people’s experiences of care and community links, as to identify some of the lessons or learnings around what could (or does not) work to foster better community connections and understanding.

Consistent with what has been reported elsewhere²⁹, the Inquiry heard that many young people – and predominantly young adults who had left care³⁰ – had experienced increased isolation and loneliness during periods of national lockdown. Some had seen poor support from their local authorities around both emotional wellbeing and the practical difficulties which arose because of the processing of financial support, or shop closures and food shortages, for example. Particularly evident was the disruption to both formal and informal time with family and friends and the significant impact this had on mental health. At the East of England and East Midlands evidence session, 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 where they were physically living. During the West Midlands evidence session, a participation lead noted a recent meeting they had hosted 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.

“the pandemic has highlighted how isolated Care Leavers actually are.”

West Midlands evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

“I know within myself I just felt isolated because obviously in care homes especially there were staff walking round with masks and social distancing. It just didn’t feel like home... Even just needing a hug or to sit next to someone and have a chat, it was just so degrading in a way. It was like I had a disease or something...”

North West evidence session

“At the start of the pandemic, I kept getting letters telling me that I couldn’t go outside. I was waiting for food parcels which didn’t have anything I wanted to eat. I had to be honest with my local authority and tell them that we’re human beings.”

Young people’s workshop

“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.”

West Midlands evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

“I’ve had to isolate twice – once I had covid and once my partner had covid, and I don’t think my local authority even knows. There’s not that continuing conversation. If somebody does get covid, there’s no help there. Who’s going to get your food shopping if you’re out of area?... I was out of area and somebody just rings up every six weeks. I actually ended up having to get my random neighbour to drop me off some milk and stuff like that. These are the key things that as our parents, as corporate parents, they should be providing. They should know if we’ve got covid.”

North West evidence session

“I haven’t seen half of my siblings in like a year... a year and a half because of Covid.”

Young people’s workshop

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“I didn’t have contact through the whole pandemic so for like a year cause I had a fear that if I was to go on contact I could catch it and I could spread it to other people or even just the fact knowing if I was to go on contact I had to go back to my room and isolate, so that was me in my room for two weeks with no communication, no contact with any of the staff. I know that that scared me a lot. I probably should have done my contact but I kept myself at home which made my mental health worse because I wasn’t seeing my family because of the risks of seeing my family.”

North West evidence session

The experiences above weren’t universal: some young people shared examples of good support they had received which responded well to the challenges posed by the pandemic. During the West Midlands evidence session, a young person shared how they had felt really supported by their social worker throughout the course of the pandemic and credited them with keeping their wellbeing strong despite everything going on. One care-experienced young adult at the South West evidence session spoke of her experience becoming pregnant at the start of the pandemic and seeing much more support from their Personal Advisor than they would have likely seen otherwise due to online and telephone contact, particularly given they were living outside of their local authority area.

Many contributors with professional experience shared examples of how their practice pivoted to using online and digital tools for engagement – often with mixed results. Some highlighted 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, previously private, space, which may have been associated with a ‘care’ identity beforehand. 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. At the East of England and East Midlands evidence session, one attendee 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 also 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.”

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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.”

South West evidence session

“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.”

Evidence from Derbyshire children in care council

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

“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!”

West Midlands evidence session

“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.”

East of England and East Midlands evidence session

Ultimately, experiences maintaining community links for care-experienced young people through the pandemic were often determined by access to digital devices and connections. Practical access to working laptops or tablets/phones and consistent internet connections were crucial elements for continuing existing relationships and developing belonging with new online communities. During the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, the Government launched its ‘Get help with technology’ scheme which supported care-experienced young people to access laptops, tablets and 4G wireless routers to assist with accessing education and maintain contact with key professionals and their friends.³¹ Unfortunately, experiences securing such items through the scheme or elsewhere were mixed.

“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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

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

West Midlands evidence session

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

South West evidence session

“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.”

North East and Yorkshire & the Humber evidence session

Conclusion

This inquiry took on a difficult topic. ‘Community’ is such an intangible thing. So crucial to our lives but also something that generally occurs naturally and is hard to engineer. This presents a real challenge to Parliamentarians, Ministers, and local authorities – how to design legislation, policies, systems and support that help children in care and care leavers to genuinely feel a part of, and able to participate in, the communities that matter most to them.

However, as this report demonstrates, the experiences, ideas and wishes of children in care, care leavers, and those who work most closely with them are extremely instructive. The result is 15 recommendations for simple changes that could be made to help shift the dial when it comes to community. On its own, each individual recommendation may not make very much difference, but collectively it is the view of this APPG that they could make a meaningful difference to the lives of many children in care and care leavers.

The report could not come at a more important time during this Parliament. In a matter of weeks, the Independent Review into Children’s Social Care will report on its findings and recommendations to Government and as Parliamentarians we are tasked with scrutinising its work and holding the Government to account to ensure that the subsequent reform package it brings forward is an ambitious attempt to improve the care system for everyone.

By ensuring the reforms have a focus on the people and places that matter most to children in care and care leavers, that they tackle stigma and leave the wider system better able facilitate the community connections that children in care and care leavers want and need parliamentarians can make a real difference in this round of reform. We must also not shy away from some of the big issues identifies in our final five recommendations – the workforce, provision of placements, support for care leavers, funding, and the challenging issue of out of area placements – working together to build cross-party consensus and find real solutions to these longstanding challenges.

As members of this All Party Parliamentary Group we would like to thank every young person who supported this inquiry. We will do our very best to represent your voices in the weeks ahead and work hard to ensure that the reforms that follow make positive and tangible changes for you and for future generations of children and young people in care.

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