



North West evidence session notes

Friday 6 August 2021, 10 – 11.30am

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

We were delighted to welcome nearly 30 people with different personal and professional experiences of care to join the discussion, including care-experienced children, young people and adults, social care professionals including Heads of Service and participation leads, voluntary sector colleagues, local Councillors acting as lead members for children’s services, and many others. Attendees had connections to areas across the region including but not limited to Bury, Blackpool, Halton, Lancashire, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Trafford, Warrington and Wigan.

Welcome and introductions

The session began with a welcome and introduction from Kim Johnson, MP for Liverpool Riverside. Those joining early were asked to participate in a Mentimeter task exploring the question *What does the word ‘community’ mean to you?*

What does the word 'community' mean to you? Mentimeter



Spotlight on... Pure Insight

Sarah Sturmeay, Chief Executive, introduced Pure Insight – an organisation working with care-experienced young people aged 16-28 in Stockport, Cheshire East, Trafford, Salford and Warrington. Sarah shared the organisation’s values of belonging, integrity and courage and its core work based in community with army of volunteers.

Firstly, Sarah introduced their mentoring project – ‘Somebody just for me’ – which offers practical and emotional support focusing on an area of a young person’s life that’s important to them. Pure Insight recruit and train local volunteers from all backgrounds – some with lived experience of care – to commit for at least two years to 2-3 hours per week, although most mentoring relationships do turn into long-term connections beyond this. Mentors complete a 9-week training programme for reliability and consistency and are then matched with young person (with young people involved in

that process). The PI team offer out-of-hours support for mentors and mentees and join mentees together on closed social media sites to replicate the support networks that other people may have.

Additional ad-hoc support around the mentoring programme tackles small things which are ‘nipped in the bud’ to prevent bigger problems further down the line. Sarah offered examples of 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 home.

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

Attendees also heard of PI’s peer support offer, including 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.”

PI also work closely with care-experienced young parents through a dedicated parent worker who connects parents into their local area. As a new parent, some community groups can seem overwhelming, so the worker supports the integration of small groups of mums to other existing small groups, and coordinates a separate group of care-experienced mums who would prefer that.

“By linking into the local community we can help source furniture, things to make a house a home, source items for children and babies. When you put an ask out, because we’ve got such a huge network of volunteers, our office turns into a shop and we get very generous volunteers who will donate things.”

Parent angels are volunteers who want to support young parents, providing practical and emotional support for new parents to thrive with support from adults with a range of skills and experiences. As the only people visiting the homes of young care-experienced mums may be professionals such as health visitors and social workers, the volunteers are there for the mum – watching children whilst mum has a break, supporting with cooking etc.

During Christmas, the PI team would normally hold a Christmas dinner event for around 50 young people to build connections during a time which many experience as isolating, but moved to an outreach model during the pandemic, taking dinners, presents and company to those who may be without.

They also supported online connections during the pandemic, utilising social media to create daily live videos and deliver activity packs which kept young people and the children of young care-

experienced parents connected with their workers and mentors. This necessitated sourcing laptops and phones given the lack of digital connectivity for many.

Finally, Sarah shared further information about Pure Insight's [recently completed evaluation](#) of all of their services which looks at why their programmes are successful.

“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 local knowledge in a way they’ve not been able to anywhere else.”

A conversation about care and community

Kim Johnson MP chaired an open discussion with attendees on the Inquiry’s theme of care and community, loosely framed around the four key questions below:

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

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

Living ‘out of area’

The clearest message from attendees with a range of personal and practice experience with care was about how out of area placements as a child in care and experiences moving outside of your home local authority area as a care leaver present significant challenges for feeling connected within your local community. Disruptions to friendships, family relationships, education and employment, support services and other networks and groups all impact on a sense of belonging to a particular area or community.

“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’.”

Really good point! More needs to be done about not moving young people out of area. What must that do for someone’s sense of belonging.”

“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?”

“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.”

Some attendees spoke about the system challenges which contribute to this problem – including sufficiency, regulation, planning and privatisation – and shared their thoughts on potential solutions.

“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.”

“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.”

“Good sufficiency - choice and planning is essential. Private Providers are charging LA's 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.”

Leaving care

Attendees reflected on the differences in how the care system supports – and fails to support – those who are in care and those who have left care, and how different ages and stages of life impact on community connections.

“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.”

“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.”

Picking up the theme above around the challenges living outside of your ‘home’ local authority area, a care-experienced PhD student shared their experience feeling penalised for wanting to move elsewhere to pursue their next step in education; more needed to be done to encourage

“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.’”

“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.”

Lifetime relationships

Lifelong friendships with peers and trusted adults were seen as essential for a sense of safety, stability – and ultimately, love. These relationships could come in many forms, 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.

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

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

A colleague from Blackpool 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. Sarah from Pure Insight spoke about their own mentoring project and how many volunteers have no prior knowledge of the health and social care sector nor what a care leaver is, what their lives have been like or what their challenges may be, but are driven by a desire to help which the organisation supports through their training.

Others spoke about the impact Independent Visitors can have and the need to ensure children in care’s rights are known and upheld to give them this opportunity.

“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.”

“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.”

Public awareness and understanding of care and trauma

Some attendees raised the lack of awareness in the general population around the care system and more broadly the type and extent of adverse childhood experiences and other social issues happening within their own communities. Some advocated for training sessions or campaigns to boost knowledge and establish greater empathy.

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

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

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

“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.”

‘Othering’ and prejudice

A range of colleagues spoke of how people’s language and actions – even when well-intentioned – act to ‘other’ children in care and care leavers and disconnect them from the wider communities they belong to. Challenges from elected representatives and local residents to the opening of children’s homes was highlighted as a common example of prejudice, but the celebrating of care leavers who ‘do well’ and the hierarchy of ‘success’ this creates was also seen as problematic.

“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.”

A few attendees with professional experiences highlighted the use of common practice language in children’s social care as a contributing factor to this ‘othering’. One highlighted how children in their local authority challenged use of terms including ‘contact’ and ‘siblings’, preferring ‘family time’ and ‘brother and sisters’.

“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.”

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

Shared interests and experiences beyond care

Some attendees noted the importance of finding and nurturing young people’s hobbies and interests and using these as a way of building new connections for them within local or interest-based communities. Sarah from Pure Insight noted their success establishing closed social media groups around interests which the care leavers they support had, including creative writing or arts and crafts, and using volunteers to help support these conversations online.

“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."

Speech, language and communication

A speech and language therapist in attendance made a contribution around how different language and communication needs for individuals impact greatly on how able they may feel to establish social relationships and wider community connections – something not recognised enough within current support offers.

"There is a huge communication barrier. Research and my personal experience shows 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."

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

The final discussion allowed attendees to explore how the pandemic had impacted on community connections for care-experienced young people. Young care-experienced people took this opportunity to share their own experiences of lockdown and how this had impacted their lives, their relationships, and the support they had from their local authorities – and what this meant for feeling connected to the communities which mattered to them through care, family, friends and place.

"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..."

"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."

One young person spoke about their experience getting involved with their local authority's participation service during lockdown when activities moved to being 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."

A care-experienced young adult also shared the difficulties which the regional approach to lockdown rules created, particularly for those living out of area, and how this made keeping connected to their friends and those supporting them in particularly difficult to navigate.

“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.”

Thanks and close

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

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

Mentimeter

