



London and South East evidence session notes

Monday 10th May 2021, 4.30 – 6pm

The APPG held the second online evidence session of the [Spotlight Inquiry](#) in May, focussing on care and community connections in London and the South East.

We were delighted to welcome over 50 people with different personal and professional experiences of care to join the discussion, including care-experienced children, young people and adults, social care and voluntary sector professionals including Directors of Children’s Services, service managers and participation leads, local Councillors acting as lead members for children’s services and many others. Attendees had connections to areas across the regions including but not limited to Barnet, Bexley, Bracknell Forest, Croydon, East Sussex, Greenwich, Hampshire, Haringey, Isle of Wight, Kent, Kingston upon Thames, Lambeth, Lewisham, Merton, Milton Keynes, Portsmouth, Southwark, Surrey, Wandsworth and West Sussex. Also in attendance to observe the session were colleagues from the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care and Baroness Young of Hornsey.

Welcome and introductions

The session began with a welcome and introduction from Tim Loughton MP, Co-Vice-Chair of the APPG. Those joining early were asked to participate in a Mentimeter task exploring the question *What does the word ‘community’ mean to you?*

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



Spotlight on... Grandmentors

Christine and Chloe kindly offered an insight into the Grandmentors project as a mentor-mentee pair from Milton Keynes. The Grandmentors project, run by Volunteering Matters, provides a vital link to young people as they navigate life after care through older, world-wise volunteers from the local community: <https://volunteeringmatters.org.uk/project/grandmentors/>.

Christine shared some information about the project and its focus on providing a relationship which young people choose, in contrast to the adults often thrust upon them through professional

relationships in care: *“the difference with the Grandmentors project is that young people choose the person who they want to mentor them.”* Christine described her role as providing a grandparent-style relationship and providing the personal support to help someone make choices and be there at the end of the phone when needed. Christine also spoke about her motivation for signing up to the project after seeing an advert in a 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.

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 really positive experience. Chloe noted the different kind of relationship which this project provided compared to what she had experienced in care: *“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 said that the project had supported her to feel more confident and offer a new perspective, and noted it had given her an interest in volunteering too to help inspire others.

A conversation about care and community

Tim Loughton MP chaired an open discussion with attendees for one hour on the Inquiry’s theme of care and community, loosely framed around the four key questions below:

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

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

Negative stereotyping (from professionals)

Consistent with the first evidence session, a number of attendees highlighted the impact of negative stereotypes and stigma towards care-experienced people from professionals in their lives, including those within and outside of children’s social care.

“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.”

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.

“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.”

The Chair noted that many of those who care-experienced people had witnessed demonstrating a lack of empathy with children in care were the very people who should have the most understanding as social care and education professionals.

One attendee 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.

Negative stereotyping (from the wider community)

Other attendees noted similar attitudes demonstrated by other people in positions of power and the wider public which impacted on connections they were able to make within their community. In the example above, even despite gaining these qualifications independently, employers still continued to question the lack of other GCSEs which the attendee felt unable to explain as a result of the wider stigma around being in care. Others similarly shared difficulties of battling employer stereotypes:

"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."

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

Housing was highlighted as another area where stigma has material impact on care leavers. A participation worker shared their local authority's work 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.

One young attendee 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.

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

"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."

Instability

Many highlighted the disruptive impact which changing where you live in and after leaving 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. A social worker noted the importance of developing a system which allows these relationships to build even if a child is moved.

"...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."

“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.”

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

Instability in professional relationships was also highlighted as a barrier; 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.

“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, its not easy to trust when your so used to people leaving”

Long-term impacts of care

Some attendees spoke about the long-term impacts which experiences of trauma before and during care can have, and the way these can continue to impact on your ability to establish and develop community connections into adulthood. There can be a disconnect between when a problem is experienced and when support is offered, and how and who this support is offered by. Many attendees advocated for community-based support to better develop community relationships.

“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.”

“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.”

Identity and culture

The impact of someone’s ethnicity, gender, religion or other aspect of their identity or cultural background was raised as a crucial factor intersecting with how easy or difficult it can be to engage positively with wider communities, particularly outside of the care system.

“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.”

One attendee 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’.

Corporate parenting

Some attendees expressed discomfort with the phrase ‘corporate parent’ and the language used to describe how the state cares for and supports connections for children. Many had felt their own

experiences of care demonstrated extremely poor parenting and wanted their local authority to have considered a much wider view of their lives, including how to support them in establishing the community connections which last long into adulthood. One professional referred to this as acting as “corporate parents in a bubble”.

“I hate the term corporate parent, it doesn't really make sense”

“how does a corporate body give unconditional love”

“In Surrey we have a preferred terminology document for staff and workers which was created by young people in care and leaving care in Surrey. Their views on corporate parent were: Corporate Parent - The decision makers / managers / people who can help. “Don't refer to us as your child when you don't act like our parents”. “Do not use the phrase “our children”. Foster carers perspective –“we are more of the parent, we are there 24/7”

“A parent is someone you lean on, someone to go for advice. A parent is, regardless of whether you come out of the care system at age 25, you have somewhere to go back to. And I think there's often this fear from care leavers that, if I don't do well and succeed in whatever plans I've made for myself, where do I go back to? Who do I ask for support?”

Importance of community opportunities and spaces

Attendees also noted the importance of having specific opportunities and spaces where young people could exist as young people to socialise with others who they may not otherwise have the opportunity to meet. It was highlighted how beneficial it can be to have participation activities organised through the local authority and elsewhere for children in care to meet others who were care-experienced, but that the connections developed here could also support them to develop wider social connections too. Youth clubs as well as sports, leisure and other activity groups or classes were seen as key spaces for this to happen.

“It goes back to having mentorship, to having youth clubs, where there is integration between communities. Then it's not ‘you vs them’, it's all of us, because we all have an impact on our society.”

“Especially for young people living independently, where things are free and when things are in the community, it's really important for them to go to these things and connect with their community, but also because they can take along their care-experienced friends and those who aren't care-experienced and connect in that way.”

Impact of the pandemic

Finally, attendees touched on some of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly to note the importance of recognising the individual child or young person in how they have felt over the past year and not to make generalisations about ‘children in care’ or other cohorts.

“In some respects it stabilised the situation and made things easier for them because they didn't have as many competing pressures.”

“It would be good to take some learning from lockdown. One idea is that, when children move to new foster carers or a children's home, to allow and enable them to have some nurture time with their carers before they attend school. This would possibly help develop bonds and help them settle into their new homes. It may not be right for all children, but it

should be an option without there being pressure on them to start school immediately when they move.”

A few attendees raised the government advice around ‘vulnerable’ children attending school and how this did sometimes serve to further stigmatise and mark out children in care as different to others. This was particularly stark for children living in foster care with others who weren’t looked after: *“Why are they protecting me and not protecting them?”*

Thanks and key reflections from attendees

Tim Loughton 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?



The following table lists the 15 key reflections from attendees, each enclosed in a colored box:

That 80,000 children will have 80,000 different stories, wants and needs	That the system needs to change, the same problems keep arising for many years, someone needs to hold the local authorities to account!	That schools need to be more trauma informed
The voices of young people in care MUST be listened to	No post code lottery, mind your language, empower and believe in all looked after children and care leavers! Break down the stigma and barriers!	What is measured in terms of "success" measures that relate to children in care and care leavers need to focus on the positive impacts on YP lives not just punitive things i.e. behaviours measures - will be an incentive for cultural change
The difference in the offer to young people in different authorities has shocked me	Less of the corporate more of the parent.	Corporate parents are not parents
Need to end the postcode lottery around what services and support is available!	These conversations should be happening a lot more often, its so important that care experienced people have a national platform.	The OFSTED needs to be calibrated to measure.. love and effective relationships
Need to stop "outing" YP coming out of the care system continually - it is exhausting to live in public eye in this way	The vast differences that children experience and the need to share learning across England as to what works well for children in care and care leavers.	It seems to me that many children in foster care and children's homes still aren't being supported to learn age appropriate skills & have age appropriate experiences. If this is because of risk averseness we need to tackle that.